Conference abstracts
The Ethics of Inefficacy, June 2025

Maike Albertzart, Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz

Individual Inefficacy, Collective Efficacy and Joint Ability

You are not causing global warming, but we are. You cannot alleviate world poverty or curtail anti-democratic political parties, but we can. There are numerous cases in which individual inefficacy exists against a backdrop of collective efficacy. This chapter distinguishes between different kinds of collective efficacy and argues that collective efficacy is not sufficient for joint ability. Not all cases of collective efficacy are cases of joint ability. I offer an analysis of joint ability which explains the difference between joint ability cases and other cases of collective causal potentiality. I argue that the distinction between joint ability cases and cases of mere collective efficacy is crucial for determining our individual moral duties in individual inefficacy cases. What I am obliged to do in cases of individual inefficacy depends on what we can do. In particular, it depends on whether our collective efficacy is the manifestation of a joint ability or not.

Dmitry Ananiev, Bielefeld University

Kantian Imperfect Duties and Collective Harm Cases

It has recently been suggested that the inefficacy problem can be addressed by appealing to Kantian imperfect duties, that is, duties to adopt and promote obligatory ends. The general idea is that an agent who participates in collective harm cases fails to appropriately commit to the obligatory end of others' happiness. Albertzart (2019) offers the most developed proposal of this kind to date. This chapter argues against such proposals. I argue that there are two general reasons why those who act in collectively harmful ways need not fail to maintain a proper commitment to others' happiness. One is that agents have latitude when fulfilling imperfect duties, and this latitude permits them to ignore some cases of collective harm. The other is that even though one's commitment to others' happiness requires contributing to preventing some collective harms, this is generally compatible with not refraining from acts that are collectively harmful. The upshot is that while Kantian imperfect duties guide conduct in ways that lead to preventing some collective harms, they do not offer a way of condemning individual actions in collective harm cases and thus do not serve as a basis for solving the inefficacy problem.

Henrik Andersson & Jakob Werkmäster, Lund University

The inefficacy problem and why we should not be surprised that there are no non-threshold cases

Navigating in a normative landscape that includes threshold cases of collective harms is hard and the existence of non-threshold cases exist would make matters even worse. We argue that there are no non-threshold cases. This rejection has, however, the disadvantage that one must claim that there are thresholds where one would be surprised to find them. Our contribution to the debate on the inefficacy problem is to provide an error-theory as to why one makes the faulty judgement that there are non-threshold cases. By referring to vagueness and by introducing the notion of "resilience" we show how it is easy to mistake threshold cases with non-treshold cases and that the rejection of non-treshold cases is not as hard to accept as others have argued it is. Furthermore, our account not only shows that there are no non-treshold cases, it also shows why individuals have a reason to act otherwise in cases of collective harm.

Zach Barnett, University of Notre Dame

Is There an Inefficacy Problem?

The inefficacy problem is said to arise in cases where (i) a morally significant outcome depends, causally, on the behavior of a group and (ii) the outcome does not depend, causally, on the behavior of any of its members. Although some have expressed skepticism about the possibility of such cases, the widely accepted view within moral philosophy seems to be that such cases are indeed possible and that they give rise to vexing philosophical questions – many explored in this volume. This chapter argues against this prevailing view. First, it is argued that the so-called inefficacy problem does not arise in a fully precise world. It is then argued that the inefficacy problem cannot arise entirely out of vagueness.

Gunnar Björnsson, Stockholm University

Instrumental Reasons Without Difference-Making

Justin Snedegar has recently argued that reasons for an action are always reasons to perform that action rather than some alternatives to it. Given plausible assumptions about instrumental reasons, this contrastivist view of reasons seems to imply that we have instrumental reason for an action relative to an end only if the action promotes that end to a greater extent than do its alternatives. We would thus lack instrumental reason to contribute to a collective end unless we can make a difference to it. In this chapter, however, I argue that Snedegar's contrastivism fails to accommodate reasons guiding our most pervasive kind of instrumental action. In its place, I propose an account that promises to explain both the data motivating contrastivism and the data that undermines it. On this account, we might have instrumental reasons to contribute to a collective end in the absence of difference-making.

Mark Budolfson, University of Texas at Austin

Continued Inefficacy

Recently, some philosophers have offered a new generation of replies to the inefficacy objection to consequentialism, suggesting that while the previous generation of Singer/Norcross/Kagan arguments were indeed problematic, nonetheless there is a way of vindicating many of their conclusions. These replies factor into two types: either they provide additional arguments that actions are almost always efficacious to some important degree (as in Isaacs, Lerner, and Russell), or they argue for a version of consequentialism in which subjects' subjective belief-states are of fundamental importance in a way that makes actual facts about inefficacy irrelevant to the most fundamental consequentialist analysis of their reasons for action (as in Hedden). I argue that the latter sort of argument should be a non-starter by a consequentialists's own lights, and that the former sort of argument essentially restates the intuition about how consumer markets work that is behind the original Singer/Norcross/Kagan arguments using a (helpful) formal model of how a market could work and generate efficacy. I then provide a few alternative models of how specific consumer markets could work that if true would tend to support the inefficacy objection, and I argue that these and other inefficacy models are likely to better approximate reality in more cases than the reply assumes.

James Christensen, University of Essex

Trading with Tyrants

Politicians who permit trade with tyrants sometimes defend their actions by appealing to the inconsequence defence. They claim that, in many cases, when they – as representatives of a particular state, S – permit their corporations to engage in a particular act of trading, T, with an oppressive regime, O, the victims of O will not be made any worse off than they would have been had S not permitted its corporations to engage in T. This, they claim, is because, in many cases, had S not permitted its corporations to engage in T, another state would nevertheless have permitted its corporations to engage in an act of trading comparable to T. This chapter answers the inconsequence defence on its own terms. I show how, even in the envisaged circumstances, trading with tyrants often will make victims worse off. I show that some of the mechanisms through which trading can make victims worse off are rather subtle, and that philosophical analysis of those mechanisms can bear ample fruit. Indeed, I show that bringing those mechanisms into focus reveals not only that the inconsequence defence fails to vindicate trading with tyrants, but that the inconsequence defence is in fact self-defeating.

Annalisa Costella, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

The Problem of Self-defeat: The Emperor's New Clothes? Collective Action Problems and Self-defeating Behaviours

It seems an intuitive – and prima facie compelling – assumption that collective action problems and self-defeating behaviors are relevantly alike. As such, it has been argued that solutions to one problem can be fruitfully applied to its intra- or interpersonal, analogue. In noticing that some solutions to one problem fail to transfer to the other, this article suggests that the similar structure of collective action problems and self-defeating behaviors does not warrant that the two problems can be treated as relevantly alike. In fact, or so this article argues, structural equivalence entails normative equivalence only if the solution to the problem does not crucially depend on the metaphysics of the individual(s) at stake in the problem. This analysis has broader implications for understanding what factors determine that two problems are relevantly alike in a way that helps our normative theorizing.

Mattias Gunnemyr, University of Gothenburg

Collective Harms and The Strength of Reasons

The inefficacy argument says that no one has an outcome-related reason to act in a certain way if this does not make any difference to the outcome. Glover (1975), Nefsky (2017), and others disagree and argue that you might have such reasons. This raises the question of how weighty they are. Against Glover, Parfit (1984) argues, in essence, that such reasons have no weight. When in competition with the tiniest reason to do something else that could make a difference for the better, such reasons always lose. The objection generalizes to the other approaches. Against this, I suggest the strength of such reasons is a function of the badness of the outcome and the difference in security the act would make to the outcome in the relevant possibility horizon, and propose they might be weighty enough to outweigh other reasons. I also show where Parfit's argument goes astray and explain why it might seem compelling.

Frank Hindriks, University of Groningen

The Problem of Collective Harm: Contractualism versus Consequentialism

The problem of collective harm concerns harmful outcomes that require contributions from several individual agents. The challenge is to determine whether, when and why it is impermissible to perform an action that contributes to such a harm. Solutions differ along three dimensions: individualist/collectivist, a universal/qualified principle, and Kantian/consequentialist/contractualist. The Threshold Probability Account that I defend is individualist, qualified and contractualist. I compare it to a consequentialist solution. Both require that the probability that the collective harm materializes due to the contribution of an agent should remain low enough for it to still be morally acceptable. However, in contrast to consequentialism, contractualism does not rely on interpersonal aggregation. I argue that, because of this, the contractualist account offers a more attractive solution to the problem of small probabilities as compared to the consequentialist account.

Säde Hormio, University of Helsinki

Contributing enough: Acting in the absence of a relevant difference

According to Singer's famous argument, we ought to donate the money spent on non-essential things towards providing life-saving aid. He draws an analogy between spending money on pleasures and choosing not to easily rescue a child drowning in a pond. Nefsky and Tenenbaum (2024) argue that to refute the pond analogy, we need to recognize a mistake in an auxiliary assumption in Singer's argument, namely that by donating money, you save a life. This is because in cases involving collective action, your difference-making potential is not the same as it is in direct rescue cases. While their argument on the collective nature of the duty is convincing, a further claim fails. This further claim is that in situations where there is a particular person in need of aid, the content of the duty is relevantly different from when you are donating money. This paper argues that instead of particularity of people, the key to the difference of a duty to

help is a position of being able to due to moral luck. Through an appropriate focus on our social positions and values, we can get a clearer picture about contributing enough.

Holly Lawford-Smith & William Tuckwell, University of Melbourne

Lifestyle Politics

Carol Hanisch wrote "One of the first things we discover in these groups is that personal problems are political problems. There are no personal solutions at this time. There is only collective action for a collective solution." Perhaps a woman had been struggling with a husband failing to contribute to the work of the household, and had diagnosed the problem as existing within their relationship and for her to address. Coming together with other women to discuss these apparent personal problems could reveal that they were political, that men were not making a fair contribution to the running of their households. The revelation provokes the reframing of domestic labour as a political issue that needs a collective solution. But suppose a sole woman decides to go on housework strike. Is she making a contribution to a collective solution, or is she ignoring Hanisch's warning? This problem generalises to many different types of individual and inefficacious actions that would be contributions to collective solutions if enough other people did them too. This chapter discusses how we can take the insight that there are no personal solutions to political problems seriously, while also giving credit to people trying to make collective action happen.

Joakim Sandberg, University of Gothenburg

Why Inefficacy Matters: In Defense of Comprehensive Consequentialism

Most people think that I ought to reduce my emissions of greenhouse gases in order to avoid contributing to climate harms. The inefficacy problem is the observation that no single individual action – like me taking my car to work – makes a difference to the occurrence of climate harms. Philosophers typically treat this as a theoretical challenge and seek to explain why it remains wrong for me to take my car. On this view, it seems, the inefficacy problem does not have any practical implications. This chapter argues that a more plausible response is that inefficacy is irrelevant in some ways, but very important in others. While it does not remove our reason to care about the harm in question, it should prompt us to reevaluate what we can do to influence its occurrence. It is argued that only a comprehensive form of consequentialism can explain the nuances of how inefficacy matters.

Carolina Sartorio, Rutgers University

The structure of outcome responsibility: Lessons for the ethics of inefficacy

According to causal approaches to the problem of collective harms, our individual contributions can make us morally responsible for those harms even when they don't make a significant difference to them, because, and to the extent that, they can causally contribute to their occurrence. The paper argues that these approaches are subject to a serious concern arising from the nature of outcome responsibility. It first motivates an account of outcome responsibility—one according to which an agent's blameworthiness for an outcome is grounded in the agent's blameworthiness for the relevant antecedent behavior. It then argues that this account helps uncover a serious flaw in causal approaches to the problem of collective harms.

Tessa Supèr, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

Inefficacy Induced Temptation

In everyday life, we often find ourselves faced with the inefficacy paradox: situations in which a large set of actions leads to an undesirable outcome, but each singular action within that set is inefficacious for the outcome. Since each action is inefficacious, it has proven difficult to justify why agents ought to refrain from the "trivial" actions that together cause an unwanted outcome. Several authors have presented the inefficacy paradox as a type of temptation problem. In this chapter, I challenge Michael Bratman's view that this type of temptation problem can be resolved through his model of self-governance. I aim to show that there is an

alternative interpretation of the temptation scenario that Bratman is interested in, which sheds light on the fact that his model cannot adequately accommodate "inefficacy induced temptation."

Jan Willem Wieland, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

Wasted Effort and Double Universalization. Or: Why Go Non-Instrumental?

Why should we participate in collective action if it is a waste of effort? For example, why change our lifestyles to combat climate change? My claims are three-fold: (1) Instrumental analyses are insufficient. Either they don't provide reasons to act, or they don't explain why we should waste our efforts. (2) We need *two* universalization steps to solve the problem (not previously distinguished in the literature). (3) Finally, Nefsky's challenges (superfluity, disconnect) can also be addressed.