Welcome! These are the notes from Week 8's Philosophy Presentation!

Disclaimers

1—These are complicated issues, so do your own reading and take everything I say with a grain of salt!

2—Remember that philosophical arguments aren't well-suited for every debate you ever do. Some debates might be purely about philosophy, but the vast majority of debates that you'll do in your debate career are *not* exclusively designed to be philosophical debates. Thus, in a majority of rounds you do, be cautious when you choose to deploy principle/morality-based arguments—after all, these arguments tend to have a very high burden of proof and tend to be quite difficult to win on! TL;DR—if you're debating a motion about, say, sanctions, don't choose to open PM by rhetorically asking whether our existence is real or whether we're living in a simulation

3—Morality is grounded in intuition—or, at least, *philosophical arguments in debate rounds* are best proven when they're shown to align with our existing moral intuitions. There's a reason why dissertations on morality are hundreds or thousands of pages long: *it's kinda hard to make compelling principled claims without, at some point, appealing to baseline moral values that we all just kinda believe in, maybe even if there's not a clear reason for why we believe them*. For instance, almost every debate you'll ever do will operate under the tacit assumption that pain is bad and pleasure is good—but philosophically, it's not inherently obvious that these two assumptions are *a priori* correct! As a consequence of this, it's quite useful to analogize moral arguments to situations where our existing moral intuitions seem to favor the argument you're attempting to make

For instance, if you're debating a motion about whether governments should have policies of conscription and choose to run an argument about the inherent immorality of conscription, it's quite helpful to *analogize* your moral claim to other instances where your argument is clearly intuitive—for instance, perhaps you could point to the fact that most people find the deliberate bombing of civilian centers during conflicts to be immora, even if it expedites the end of those conflicts, and then draw parallels between conscription (using civilians to accomplish a utilitarian, military objective) and that analogy (which *also* involves using civilians to accomplish a utilitarian, military objective)

None of this is to say that moral arguments should just be a series of *is-ought* assertions about how the world currently works—but rather, it's just to say that moral arguments are easiest to swallow/digest as a judge when they're shown to be quite compatible with the way we already understand morality!

4—Good philosophical arguments should be grounded and couched in *non-technical language*. It's hard to really convince a judge to care about an argument that's taglined "this policy instrumentalizes people illegitimately," but it's *much easier* to convince a judge to care about an argument that's taglined "this is a fundamental violation of people's right to dignity and freedom." Sure, sometimes you'll sound a bit dramatic, but (in my personal opinion) people tend to overestimate how much the average judge really cares about abstract philosophical jargon-y terms

1—Normative Ethics

There's two big fields of ethics that come up in debate: (1) there's meta-ethics, which interrogates the *nature* of ethics/morality—for instance, a meta-ethicist might ask questions like "what even *is* morality?" and the like—and (2) there's normative ethics (which I'm lumping together with the field of *applied ethics*), which comes up more frequently in debate. Normative ethicists focus on actual issues of morality, like what is right and what is wrong. These notes will *predominantly* focus on normative ethics, with a bit of meta-ethical thought sprinkled in here and there…

But before moving forward, what even *is* morality? For our purposes, morality is the concept of "right" vs "wrong." In other words, what's the morally correct thing to do? And perhaps more importantly—what's the not morally correct thing to do?

There's two dominant strains of ethical thought that attempt to answer this that come up frequently in debate:

1—Deontology posits that morality is intrinsic: actions possess innate moral character. Immanuel Kant is the most famous example of a deontologist

2—Utilitarianism posits that morality is extrinsic: the consequence of an action determines the moral character of an action. John Stuart Mills and Jeremy Bentham are famous examples of utilitarian thinkers

The question that frequently comes up in debate is: "how can we justify one moral system over the other?"

Here's some ways to *defend utilitarianism:*

1—Ontological/deontological claims are often grounded in utilitarianism—for instance, we say things like "you shouldn't lie!" because we believe the world would be a better place if people didn't lie!

2—An understanding of deontological morality is definitionally unattainable: either, no objective moral framework exists—in which case deontology is null—or such a framework does exist, in which case we would still be epistemically incapable of accessing/identifying that framework!

3—Deontological conceptions of morality are inherently uncertain given that we can never know which system is morally preferable, whereas utilitarian conceptions of morality are grounded in pleasure and pain, which are the only factors in moral calculus we know to be certain!

4—Many systems of deontology are implicitly contingent on the existence of a free and autonomous human will—but that's quite unlikely given physical and neuronal determinism, whereas utilitarianism is a universal system of morality that can apply irrespective of our capacity for agency/autonomy

5—Actions are instrumentally valuable in the pursuit of utile outcomes: for instance, we give people autonomy because it allows them to pursue their own definition of the good life, which in turn means that we recognize the value of autonomy only because it acts instrumentally to acquire good outcomes!

Here's some ways to *defend deontology:*

1—Intuitively, we oppose the concept that consequences are the only relevant criteria in moral discourse: as a society, we reject the notion that humans are just bags of utility-maximizing chemicals. We're not numbers on a "utility spreadsheet," where we can just add up and subtract pleasure and pain to come to the optimal moral outcomes. Humans possess intrinsic moral features, like dignity!, that necessitate a non-consequence-driven approach to morality! Consequentialism is a horrible metric because it can very easily ignore these features and justify terrible outcomes, like slavery or colonialism!

2—Consequences are inherently uncertain: it's entirely possible for you to do something with the very best of intentions, yet end up causing harm. There's an infinite number of factors—many of them uncontrollable—that may play a role in shaping the outcome of an action, whereas the intent of an action is morally sacrosanct because there's no uncertainty involved, there's no speculation involved

3—Inevitably, even the most consequential system of moral thought collapses into deontology. Why? Because every consequence-based moral claim is tacitly underpinned by some deontological premise that can't be explained exclusively through consequences. Why do some utilitarians, for instance, disregard the pain of animals, while others place a great emphasis on animal rights? Why do we even place value on pleasure and pain in the very first instance? These subjective questions, which are necessary for any consequential moral calculation, derive their answers from deontological foundations, which suggests that resolving the deontological questions surrounding an action come logically prior to resolving the consequential questions surrounding an action

2—Deontology, Explored

There's a few very common deontological issues that come up in debate: (1) agency/autonomy, (2) instrumentalization, (3) self defense, (4) act-omission distinction, (5) special relations and obligations, and (6) rights. Let's get cracking!

1—Agency: we'll cover this in the next section, so stay tuned for more on this in a bit!

2—Instrumentalization: the idea here is quite simply—don't use someone as a means to an end. In other words, don't just "use" someone to get some good outcome—because even if you could get a good outcome, that doesn't mean it's fair for you to use them in that way! This sounds simple enough… but why is it actually so wrong to instrumentalize people?

1—Through intuition, we come to this conclusion all the time! For instance, we tend to agree it would be wrong to manipulate someone into doing something that was good for you!

2—Through analysis, we can come to this conclusion in a few ways:

1—Consider human dignity: it's wrong to use someone as a means to an end because it ignores the intrinsic value of that person! People are moral agents with meaning and value: it's wrong to co-opt that moral agent simply for utilitarian gain! We aren't meant to be servants of consequentialism!

2—Consider individuality: different people find value in different things, and we recognize that individuals are the only source of intrinsic morality! Given this, it's wrong to use someone else to fulfill your conception of utility, given that they have a different set of preferences and moral values!

3—Consider objectification: in principle, we cannot permit people to be treated as mere objects, since it robs them of their intrinsic moral worth as a person!

Here's a thought experiment to illustrate what instrumentalization might potentially look like, and why we reject it! One morning, you wake up in a hospital bed, with IVs and needles and a whole array of medical equipment all over you. Confused, you ask the doctor, "what happened to me? I never came to the hospital!" The doctor explains that the most famous and successful debater in the history of the world—loved and adored by millions—has been gravely injured in a terrible, life-threatening post-RFD fight with a burly judge who provided a poor rationale for his adjudication. Desperate to keep him alive, other debaters around the world canvassed all available medical records, and found that you, and you alone, have the necessary bodily features needed to keep him alive; subsequently, they kidnapped you, and brought you, in your sleep, to the hospital without your permission. The doctor further explains that you've been hooked up via the IVs and needles and medical equipment to the debater, who is now reliant on your body to stay alive. Whether you choose to remain plugged in or choose to unplug yourself, you will survive, but if you do choose to unplug yourself, the debater will die. Is it morally permissible to unplug yourself from the debater? Is it morally allowable to force you to remain plugged in?

3—Self defense: tThe idea behind self defense as a deontological principle is quite simple—when people are under threat, they have the moral right to use violence in response, even when that violence might potentially result in net-harmful outcomes! Why does such a right exist?

1—Through intuition, we recognize the importance of self-defense, which is why we enshrine legal protections for self defense!

2—Through analysis, we recognize that people have rights—and when those rights are threatened, you have a right to act in defense of those rights, even if it necessitates trampling over the rights of your aggressor, since they made a choice to forfeit their rights when they tried to prioritize their own interests above yours!

Claims to self-defense can operate on two levels:

1—Individuals can claim a right to self defense—that is, individual people, when in threat, have a justified claim to self defense!

2—Communities can also claim a degree of self defense—for instance, when a group is oppressed, they have a justified claim to acting violently!

4—Act-Omission Distinction: this little gem of an argument can be quite useful in philosophy rounds where moral wrongs incurred through negligence/inaction are involved! Most conventional systems of deontology discuss the moral nature of actions, but very often, choosing not to act ("inaction") also carries moral weight! The question, though, is how much moral

weight does inaction carry—and what's the relative difference between the morality of action and the morality of inaction? This question is answered (at least partially) by the act-omission distinction, which posits that choosing to do something bad is morally worse than choosing to let something bad happen or choosing to not do something good

Why do we acknowledge this? Because choosing to do something means that you intended to cause some outcome, whereas inaction carries a less intense degree of intent—maybe something bad happens, but you didn't *will* that to happen through your own choice!

But on the flip side, maybe there isn't a distinction between action and inaction! Why might we acknowledge this? Because choosing to not act… is counterintuitively… itself a form of action! This is closely tied to the idea of positive vs negative rights and duties. The premise of this is as follows: moral niceties are distinct from moral obligations—that is, you have duties to not do harm, but you don't necessarily have duties to affirmatively do good; donating to charity is morally kind, but not obligatory!

5—Special Relations: one of the strongest moral "trump cards" arises when we consider the special obligations or the special relations that individuals have. What does that mean? We presume—correctly, of course—that all people have equal moral weight. But in reality, we don't behave fully in accordance with that principle, and centrally, that's because we recognize that we have specific obligations to the people around us that we don't necessarily have to people who are farther away from us—not just in terms of physical space (i.e. distance), but more-so in terms of moral proximity! For instance, if you have to choose between helping a close friend or helping a stranger, you'd probably opt to help your friend, since you take on/assume specific moral duties as their friend! This is closely tied to the concept of reciprocity: we ought to do onto others as we would have them do unto us!

But the concept of "special relations" extends past moral proximity—we also have special relations and special duties based on the societal role we fill! For instance, a doctor has a special relationship with a patient that a random person on the street does not! For instance, a politician has duties to act in certain ways that an arbitrarily-selected person does not!

What this suggests is that moral duties can vary based on the nature of our relationships!

6—Rights: hang on, what are rights? They are principled "goods" (like freedom from violence, a right to free speech, etc) that are innate to the human condition. We are entitled to them not because a government says so, but because they are inseparable from what it means to be a rational, moral agent. Where do rights come from? Some philosophers might say that rights come from some "higher power" or "higher being," like a God of some sorts. Other philosophers might say that rights flow from our dignity and our humanity—perhaps we're just innately entitled to certain things! But in debate, there's four dominant ways to argue for rights:

1—Intuitionism: overwhelmingly, society recognizes the value and importance of rights, which is why we codify rights into legal documents (e.g. the Constitution or the UDHR)

2—Practicality: perhaps there's no abstract, universal moral reason we protect rights… but nonetheless, we still recognize that protecting human rights makes society better off!

An extension of this: people care about rights, even if you as a parliamentary debater don't! Therefore, giving—and revoking—rights has very real socio-political implications

3—Agency: each person has a different understanding of what constitutes a "good life," and that means that our claim to rights flows from our right to act upon our subjective (and differing!) preferences

4—Derivation from Personhood: we have ownership of our own bodies and our own identities, and that means that rights flow as an extension of our bodily sovereignty! We should be able to control what we do, what we say, what we have access to, insofar as that constrains our identity and body!

When you're making the case for a particular right (e.g. right to be forgotten, right to secede via referendum), it's often helpful to (1) analogize this "new" right to the rights people already have, and explain how this right is a natural extension of the moral claims that individuals already have, and (2) analytically explain why such a right exists and why that right matters!

When you're making the case to prioritize one set of rights over another…

1—Explain why existing moral intuition is already on the side of the rights trade-off you're proposing!

2—Explain why the right you're favoring is a more important or more facilitative right than the right you're deprioritizing

3—Explain why people forfeit rights under certain circumstances, thus allowing you to "trade off" that right for some other, utile outcome (or some other right!)

3—Utilitarianism, Explored

A few common issues that arise around utilitarianism…

1—Future Generations: it's worth remembering that for as many people exist today, there will be many more people in the future—and that's true, even given declining birth rates, because human populations naturally multiply over the course of time, which means that the total number of people in the future exceeds the number of people within the current slice of time. This has important applications for weighing up different utilitarian claims: that is, if our goal is simply to maximize utility, focusing on the future is probably most important—since after all, there will be far more people in the future than in the present! Additionally, people in the future will probably have, to some extent, a lower baseline quality of life than we do—given the existence of global threats like climate change, etc! This can be *particularly useful* when weighing arguments about climate change!

The flip side to this? AKA, how do you argue on the side of protecting current generations even at the expense of future generations?

1—Existential uncertainty—we know, for sure, that people today exist. We know their pain and pleasure is real, is valid, is certain. But people living in the future? That's a very speculative group to be basing decisions off of! Who knows what could happen, what could

change—heck, who knows if earth will even exist in fifty years, we could all have been killed by an asteroid!

2—Temporal localization—simply, we're better equipped to solve the problems of today than the problems of the future! We know what problems we're currently facing and we have a much greater capacity to solve them—whereas, improving outcomes for people in the future is far harder and probably much more resource-intensive!

3—Instrumentalization—yes, sure, this is a deontological argument, but think about it! Given resource constraints, every time we choose to prioritize future generations, we're causing some form of direct or indirect harm to people currently alive, which means we're using them as de facto instruments to pursue some "noble future" for far-off generations!

2—Marginal Utility: trivially, not all "happiness" is valued equally—for instance, being made slightly happier when you're having a really good day just isn't as meaningful as being made slightly happier when you're having a really bad day! Think about this like food, in a way: when you're hungry, those first few bites taste a lot better than those last few bites! Relating to this is the law of diminishing marginal utility: each additional "good thing" feels less good than the last one! This can be quite useful to invoke when weighing—it's why we consider benefits to the poor to be more important than benefits to the rich!

An interesting application of this is in individual-focused debates (e.g. THP fame to anonymity) in which one side champions the benefits of wealth:

Pro-wealth: (1) over time, your preferences change—and having extra money is the best way to ensure you can pursue those varying/shifting preferences; (2) money affords you hedonistic pleasures, like vacations, luxuries, etc; (3) even if additional money isn't that nice, a lack of money induces stress, worry, and anxiety that can strain your relationships and cause you real pain; (4) having money allows you to support those you love and those who surround you; (5) money is good to have in times of unexpected crisis/shock, like a job loss, recession, or natural disaster!

Anti-wealth: (1) the returns of wealth are diminishing; (2) hedonistic pleasures aren't meaningful once you become accustomed to them; (3) more money only makes you benchmark your wealth relative to others and feel comparatively inferior; (4) most people find primary value not in material goods, but rather in relationships; (5) having money often means you doubt if people's love for you is genuine!

3—Utility Calculation/Computation: this isn't a "principle" of utilitarianism as much as an approach to consequence-based weighing. However, whenever you have competing arguments that offer competing utilitarian justifications (e.g. "this causes economic harm" versus "this advances the cause of social equality"), you can (implicitly) think about the weigh-up between those two claims by asking "which of these arguments yields a higher degree of utility, i.e. benefit?"

To answer that question, there's three primary factors to consider:

1—Longevity—how long ("timeframe") will a benefit/impact last for?

2—Intensity—how large ("magnitude") is a benefit/impact in terms of scope?

3—Certainty—how likely (“probability”) is a benefit/impact to happen?

Obviously, this isn’t how debate works, but if you could quantify the longevity, intensity, and certainty of an argument, you could almost think of quantifying impacts very concretely, and then comparing the “quantitative significance” of different arguments

IMPACT = (Longevity) x (Intensity) x (Certainty)

Now, clearly, this isn’t practical because we can’t actually quantify arguments so cleanly—but the idea behind this principle is quite meaningful! Whenever you’re weighing between different consequences/impacts, you can think about these three metrics when figuring out how to weigh arguments!

4—Consent and Agency

In general, there’s two ways of thinking about rights and obligations:

1—Positive rights impose positive duties—that is, an obligation to do something. I am entitled to some action from you. I am entitled to public education. I have a right to trial by jury.

2—Negative rights impose negative duties—that is, an obligation to not do something. You can’t interfere with me. You can’t stop me. You can’t intervene in my life.

Agency is tied to both—that is, your ability to be free is, to some extent, dependent both on others not being able to interfere with your life, and on the state (or others!) affirmatively providing things to you

At the root of this is the concept that humans are rational, moral agents capable of making rational, moral choices. But given that we’re all different, we all have a different set of preferences—in other words, different sets of things that make us happy. Maybe you like chocolate and I like vanilla. Maybe you like Model UN and I like debate. The point is, different people have a different, subjective understanding of what will make them happy—and being free, and having agency over our own lives, is what allows us to pursue our differing conceptions of the “good life”

Framed in this way, the concept of autonomy—freedom, agency, choice, whatever word you want to use—seems to be a consequential value, right? It seems as if we value autonomy because it allows us to make decisions that make us happy… which seemingly indicates that autonomy is only valuable as an instrument to make us better off… at which point, surely we can “trade” autonomy off for other, immeasurable values that also make us happy, right? In other words, if autonomy is only good because it lets us be happy, couldn’t we limit autonomy as long as it makes us happy?

But we struggle with this at an intuitive level: for the most part, we seem to reject the premise that an “un-free but happy” person is living a “good life.” Here’s a thought experiment to illustrate that: in the 1998 movie “The Truman Show” focuses on the life of Truman Burbank, an entirely normal person existing in an entirely bizarre world. Truman lives in a massive television set that’s designed to appear fully real and fully normal. Everyone that surrounds him is a performer, and every aspect of Truman’s life—from the food he eats, to the weather overhead, to the people he interacts with—is pre-set and pre-determined, while Truman’s life is

televised to the world. Truman lives a highly contented life: all his needs are endlessly met, his relationships are fulfilling, and his physical safety is never in jeopardy. Yet, Truman knows none of this: from his perspective, he is living a fully normal life. No one informs that the city, people, and experiences around him are all manufactured. Assuming that Truman finds his life exceptionally fulfilling, is this a moral arrangement? Most of us would answer a resounding and unwavering *no!*

This suggests that we value autonomy not exclusively as an instrument to make us happier, but rather as something which possesses intrinsic moral value… but *why?* There's two very common reasons (given in debate, that is) why we place intrinsic value on autonomy, regardless of the utility we may derive from that autonomy:

1—Even if maximizing autonomy doesn't always equate to better outcomes, autonomy is morally more significant than utility because it is our autonomous capacity to assign utile-value to things that allows us to access any utility in the first place, which means that the process of assigning utility (which may only happen when we are free!) is the only intrinsic moral good!

2—Absent a very compelling reason (e.g. third-party harm) to intervene and limit choice, people should have maximal control over their own lives. We own our bodies, and we have a fundamental claim to bodily autonomy—we are the ones who live in our own bodies, and we interact with our own bodies and identities at all moments in time with a high degree of proximity, Given this, people ought to be entitled to autonomous control over what they do to and with themselves—even if, from some "normative" or "objective" perspective, we disagree with the outcomes of their actions!

3—Even if we adopted a consequence-driven moral framework, autonomy would still be the best way to maximize utilitarian outcomes because each person's happiness is derived from a different set of subjective preferences that only they have knowledge of

The notion that people have ownership over their own bodies is not particularly controversial within the debating realm—and you can weaponize that and use it to your advantage! How? Control over one's body has a few interesting implications in debate:

1—People are (often) allowed to do things with their own bodies that might be harmful to themselves. Examples? Consuming alcohol, enlisting in the military, etc.

2—In general, we require a very high bar to be met to justify state interventions against bodily autonomy—in other words, we generally require a relatively good justification to limit what you can do with your own body! Examples? Physically hurting another person (e.g. murder, assault)

3—There's lots of societal norms that recognize that sovereignty over your body extends into the future—even after you're dead, in many instances! Examples? Organ donation, legal protection for wills, etc.

Although we generally place a high degree of value on letting people use their bodies as they desire, the state does often intervene and limit people's autonomy. Under what circumstances do they do so, and why are those interventions/limitations morally permissible?

1—Protecting others from harm: given that all people have equal moral worth, if my autonomy interferes with your autonomy, there's no morally good reason to prefer my autonomy over your autonomy! Famous saying: "my right to swing my fist ends where your nose begins"

2—Protecting yourself from future harm: more controversially, the state often adopts a paternalistic stance and intervenes to limit you from damaging your own body. For instance, we require you to wear a seatbelt when you drive!

3—Protecting yourself from harms you cannot foresee/consent into: it's not just that the state protects you from yourself, the state also imposes restrictions in instances where you may not understand what you're getting into! For instance, that's why we ban companies from providing consumers with incorrect/misleading information—we want to protect people from things they cannot consent to!

Related to this, let's explore the *consequential justification* for agency. In short, we think of "utility" (à la utilitarianism) like pleasure, or joy, or happiness—but what exactly brings us those things? Three broad ways of thinking about utility:

1—Hedonistic utility—perhaps happiness really just is, like, serotonin floating in our brain, and utility can just be defined as (pleasure) — (pain)

2—Subjective preferences—perhaps utility flows from subjective sources that vary by person. Some people derive meaning from their culture or religion, while others might derive meaning from sports or art

3—Objective preferences—perhaps there are some things that objectively bring everyone some degree of happiness, like food, water, relationships, education, etc.

Given that people often have subjective preferences, the value of maximizing people's autonomy comes from the fact that they are better able to pursue their own, subjective preferences. AKA: different people place value on different things—but the benefit/value of being free and owning your own decisions is that you are able to do the things that bring you happiness! This is quite useful in debate, because it suggests that there may possibly be inherent (or at least utile) value in choice maximization—i.e., absent a really good reason to eliminate [some thing] from the world, we're probably better off with [some thing] since it means that people can make the decisions best-suited for their own needs, desires, and preferences!

A few other related things…

1—Free Will: most of what we've discussed so far presumes that humans are actually so-called "rational moral agents" capable of making autonomous moral decisions… but is that really true? Determinism says that all actions in the universe are caused by external factors—everything is strictly "determined" by an infinitely preordained universe, over which we have no control. Inversely, indeterminism says that the universe isn't pre-determined, but rather defined by chaotic randomness, and at best, outcomes are probabilistic, but rarely (maybe never?) predetermined

Why might the world lack free will, and be relatively deterministic?

1—Neuronal Determinism: human decisions, biologically, are simply the outcome of a series of chemical and synaptical processes over which we have no control

2—Environmental Conditioning: even if we had some way to control our neurons, human decisions are based off all of our past experiences, memories, interactions, relationships, etc., which means that at no point in time could we truly be said to be "free"

3—Hard Determinism: perhaps determinism truly is correct, and every action in the world is actually preordained!

4—Burden of Proof: see Bertrand Russell's teapot—the burden of proof lies with those seeking to prove the existence of free will, rather than the other way around!

In partial opposition to this, compatibilism says that the universe operates with law-like order, and the past does, indeed, determine the universe's future, but our actions can still be free, because even if everything is determined, actions can be made ("determined") from within, even if the outcome of that action was always, inevitably, going to happen. So, even within the confines of determinism, there may be some compatibility between "hard determinism" (AKA: the world's actions are pre-destined to happen) and "soft determinism" or "compatibilism" (AKA: the world's actions are pre-destined to happen but a free human will can still exist!)

2—Moral Responsibility: the question of moral culpability is—under what circumstances can we assign you reward/punishment for your actions? The dominant belief most people share is that your action must meet (at least) two criteria to be deemed "worthy" of punishment:

1—Was your action morally wrong? Trivially, if you did nothing wrong, then you probably shouldn't be punished for it…

2—Could you have done otherwise? Intuitively, if you had no other option, then can we really say that you were morally responsible, since you didn't have any alternative?

Premise #1 is overwhelmingly accepted—for instance, no one seriously thinks we should punish innocents—but Premise #2 is where things get a bit tricky…

1—Most obviously, if determinism is true, can we ever really be said to be "culpable" or "responsible" for our deeds? If everything is predetermined, were there really alternatives out there?

2—Even if we put aside the issue of determinism, there's still the problem of how society influences us: after all, we are the products of our environments! Our background influences us—so what happens when people are simply put into scenarios where they're more likely to commit immoral acts? For instance, when someone is severely mentally ill, do we consider them to be as responsible as someone who isn't mentally ill?

3—As we explored previously, compatibilism makes the debate surrounding determinism a bit tricky: is it possible for people to be responsible, even if their actions were inevitable?

3—Moral Desert: the concept of Moral desert asks a simple question—why do we deserve the shit we have? In other words, under what circumstances are we deserving of something? There's lots of reasons to believe that we don't necessarily "deserve" the things we're given in life. What are those reasons?

1—Determinism—if we never had control over how we acted, can we really say that we "deserve" things more than others?

2—Inherited privileges—some of us grow up rich, others grow up poor. Some receive a better education, while others receive a worse education. Perhaps, then, the things we have—tangible or intangible—aren't necessarily things we "deserve," given how arbitrary our possession of those things often is!

3—Even if someone behaves wrongly, does that necessarily mean they should suffer? Perhaps not—after all, consequences can't always be clearly attributed to intent, given stochastic randomness!

4—Moral Luck: remember that scene from the beginning? That's (kinda) what moral luck is—the idea that circumstances are often quite arbitrary, and even though the same moral offense was (or was going to be) committed, some agents simply get "lucky." Why does this phenomenon of "moral luck" happen? RANDOMNESS! We can't predict with absolute certainty the outcomes of actions—and inevitably, that means that INTENTIONS often don't match OUTCOMES. This presents a series of very real problems for how we adjudicate morality, particularly in the context of courts/law—specifically, what do we do when there's morally arbitrary outcomes, but morally symmetric intentions? But, what does that look like? Suppose you have a neighbor, Tom, who you hate with all your guts. In fact, you hate Tom so much that, one day, you devise a plan to kill Tom: you will host a neighborhood barbeque, and when you serve food, you will sneak a lethal dose of cyanide into Tom's plate (and only Tom's plate, no one else). You spend weeks preparing and, on the night of the barbeque, carry out your murderous deed flawlessly, ensuring that Tom's burger is laced with a deadly dose of cyanide. The next morning, to your shock, you see Tom, alive, walking around the neighborhood, whistling like he always does (screw you, Tom!) and acting fully normally. You rush up to Tom and ask "Tom, why didn't the cyanide in your burger last night kill you?" Tom looks confused, then replies that he's been immune to cyanide his entire life, and then calls the cops on you. You subsequently are charged with attempted murder, which carries half the sentence that a "successful" murder charge would carry. Should your punishment reflect that your attempt to kill Tom failed? You can make an argument either way!

5—Political Philosophy

1—Social Contract… is a stupid argument (in my humble opinion!) to make. Why is that? At no point do you really ever consent to that contract! Here are some more interesting objections to the supposed "social contract"

2—State Power Principle: the lottery of birth means that you cannot control where you are born, and that means you cannot consent to the state into which you are born. Why's that a problem? Because governments ("states") are given a monopoly on violence—they're given a monopoly on force. *No one except for the state* is allowed to commit murder, or steal money, or lock people up! And beyond that, it's not just that the government exerts coercive and violent influence over you, it's that the coercive and violent mechanisms of the state actively limit what

you can and cannot do! They regulate what behavior is allowed, they control what sorts of things you can participate in, and they shape and mold the way you understand the world!

This means that states fundamentally *fuck us all over*, and the question becomes: how can states "pay us back" for the damage they've caused? What's the *best way* for states to *mitigate* the harm they inevitably cause?

To answer that question—"what does a state owe its citizens"—let's quickly deal with a thorny side-issue of repairing past injustice: reparations are the way we provide redress for past injustice—they're how we atone for sins we've already committed. But what is the right form of reparation? How do we assess the degree of recompense that must be provided? Reparations must be *directly proportionate* to the wrong committed—that is, the redress provided must (approximately) match the intensity of the harm that was inflicted!

And in the context of the state, what harms are we trying to *repair for?* There are, broadly, two: (1) The state takes away our freedom and our agency. In the absence of a state (i.e. the "state of nature"), we would be free to do whatever we pleased. The state robs us of that agency. (2) The state weaponizes its coercive and forceful monopoly on violence over us, even though (due to the birth lottery) we cannot, in a meaningful way, directly consent to that violence

Therefore, for state reparations to be salient, we need to restore agency to people (that is, we need to give them choice and autonomy!) and we need to give people control over the state's violent and forceful authority! The implication of this? People are morally entitled to have the ability to influence the state by voting for the candidate/policy of their choice!

Beyond the state power principle, there's a few other major ways to go about *justifying* democracy:

1—Policy is fundamentally subjective, and there's no objectively correct policy agenda for the government to pursue. Therefore, we should defer to the aggregated opinions/preferences of the citizenry to make these inherently subjective decisions!

2—Democracy allows for the best-possible representation of public interests, and even if that's not a principled good, it's quite certainly a practical good!

3—Even if democracy doesn't produce optimal outcomes, it minimizes the worst-possible outcomes ("minimax") because elected politicians might not do the best things, but they seldom do the most atrocious things!

On the flip side, from a principled perspective, there's a few ways to deal with this "state power principle" and defeat it:

1—In many instances, we recognize that democracy just isn't the most important factor. If democracy truly was the optimal system for governance, we might as well just have direct referenda for every legislative issue that arose—but we don't do that! If democracy was an overriding "trump" card even versus pragmatism, we wouldn't outsource important issues, like central banking, to unelected technocrats, like central bankers. Just based on existing moral intuition, then, democracy isn't always overruling relative to consequential considerations!

2—The degree of "democratic control" that any one individual possesses tends to be small—even in the swingiest of swing states, margins still tend to be quite large! Given that, the individual-level right to vote is somewhat meaningless, even if voting on aggregate has value Relatedly, there's also lots of other reasons that you don't have lots of control over the state, even under a democracy—for instance, politicians frequently break promises, lobbying is widespread, voter suppression is common, etc!

3—Perhaps the "democratic right to vote" is, indeed, a principled right—but democracy isn't the only principle in town! The average person cares far more about economic security, access to healthcare, good education for their children, and high-quality public infrastructure/services than they care about an abstract right to vote. Most people vote to make things better—so why not just make things better and skip democracy, if democracy is just an impediment to good outcomes?

3—How can you justify redistributive measures from a principled perspective?

1—Redistribution does, to some extent, serve a utilitarian purpose: given that the returns of wealth and privilege are decreasing and marginal, the world is simply better off when the very well off have their wealth redistributed to the least well-off!

2—Redistribution isn't just charity—redistribution serves an important moral role, in the sense that it (tries to) repair (for) the inequalities that run rampant in society! Given that some people benefit enormously from the existence of power structures and hierarchy, society has a duty (enforced by the state) to compensate those who are disadvantaged by those rigid social structures and institutions!

3—In many ways, the advantages that give some people an ability to profit are arbitrary. Things like your access to education, or how socially well-networked you are, are largely beyond your control—they're arbitrary, and it's unfair that some people benefit from them, while others are harmed. But it's also about intrinsic traits—some people, for instance, are just born innately smarter than others, but is it really fair that those "innately smart" people have a better shot in life? After all, it's not like they did anything to receive their intelligent-based advantage—they just got lucky in the genetic lottery! Given this, it's fair for the state to intervene and redistribute wealth/opportunity, such that we make sure everyone has a basic social safety net that isn't dependent on arbitrary factors!

4—Political Libertarianism: in a huge number of debates (i.e., basically any THW ban/THW legalize-type debate), there's almost always a libertarian side involved—so if you want to be a good debater, find a way to make yourself pretend like you think taxation is theft, and anything the government gets its dirty paws ahold of automatically goes to the burning hell of corruption and inefficiency! What are the classic arguments against state intervention into our lives?

1—Individual autonomy—we have a right to control our own destinies and a right to manage our own bodies, and the state shouldn't interfere in that!

2—Reparative principle—we never consented to the state's monopoly of force, so why does the state have any right to say what we can and cannot do?

3—Epistemics—only we know what will bring us fulfillment and meaning in life, so the state should be as non-aggressive (that is, non-interventionist) as possible!

Sure, we (read: me) might not agree with libertarianism *personally*, but it's probably the most frequently-recurring philosophical argument in debate-land!