

RYAN PRESTON

Curriculum Vitae

Department of Philosophy
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
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EDUCATION

- New York University, Doctoral Program in Philosophy, Ph.D. expected 2007
- Rice University, B.A. in Philosophy, 2000 (*summa cum laude*)

EMPLOYMENT

- Assistant Professor, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, starting 2008

AREAS OF SPECIALIZATION

- Moral Philosophy, Philosophy of Religion

AREAS OF COMPETENCE

- Medical Ethics, Political Philosophy

ACADEMIC HONORS

- 2007 – 2008: Faculty Fellowship, Edmond J. Safra Foundation Center for Ethics, Harvard University
- 2006 – 2007: Science and Religion Fellowship, NYU and Mellon Foundation
- 2000 – 2005: MacCracken Fellowship, NYU
full graduate fellowship
- 2000 – 2005: Dean's Fellowship, NYU
- 2000: Jacob K. Javits Fellowship (Declined)
- 2000: Ford Foundation Pre-Doctoral Fellowship (Declined)
- 2000: Phi Beta Kappa
- 1998, 1999: Tsanoff Prize, Rice University
awarded for best undergraduate essay in philosophy
- 1996 – 2000: Premedical Scholar, Rice University and Baylor College of Medicine
joint admission to Rice University and Baylor College of Medicine
- 1996 – 2000: Presidential Scholarship, Rice University
full tuition scholarship

PRESENTATIONS

- “Civic Trust and the Problem of Self-Defense”
UNC Chapel Hill, February 2007
Cornell University, February 2007
University of Notre Dame, February 2007
UCLA, February 2007
UC San Diego, January 2007
University of Utah, January 2007
Harvard University, January 2007
MIT, January 2007

TEACHING

Honors

- Nominated for Outstanding Undergraduate Teaching Award, NYU, 2007
- Outstanding Undergraduate Teaching Award, NYU, 2005

Experience

- The Nature of Values (metaethics): NYU, Spring 2007
- Philosophy of Religion: NYU, Fall 2006, Fall 2005
- Medical Ethics: NYU, Spring 2006
- Life and Death: NYU, Summer, 2003
- Ethics: NYU, Summer 2002; Center for Talented Youth, Summer 2001

ACADEMIC SERVICE

- 2005 – 2006: Philosophy Department Curriculum Committee, NYU
- 2001 – 2006: Reviewer, Columbia/NYU Graduate Student Philosophy Conference
- 2004 – 2005: Philosophy Department Colloquia Committee, NYU
- 2004: Organizer, Mala Kamm Memorial Lecture in Value Theory, NYU
- 2002 – 2003: Philosophy Department Curriculum Committee, NYU
- 2002: Organizer, Mala Kamm Memorial Lecture in Value Theory, NYU
- 2001: Organizer, Ethics Colloquia, NYU School of Law

REFERENCES

- Thomas Nagel, University Professor, New York University
- Derek Parfit, Senior Research Fellow, All Souls College, Oxford
- William Ruddick, Professor of Philosophy, New York University (teaching)
- Sharon Street, Assistant Professor of Philosophy, New York University
- Larry Temkin, Professor of Philosophy, Rutgers University

DISSERTATION SUMMARY

Civic Trust: On the Foundations of Moral Rights

It seems clear that people have a moral right not to be treated in certain ways. For instance, one has a right not to be tortured or killed. But it is not clear what the source of these rights could be. On closer inspection, the conviction that we should not violate people's rights can look like a form of rule worship, with no underlying justification. By highlighting (1) the moral importance of a certain form of trustworthiness and (2) the connection between observing people's rights and being trustworthy, my dissertation provides a novel rationale for the right not to be harmed.

The claim that people have a right not to be harmed has two main implications: First, agents ought to observe a *constraint* against harming people, a principle that prohibits agents from harming people in certain ways, even when this is the only way to prevent even greater evils. For instance, this constraint prohibits doctors from harvesting someone's organs without her consent, even if this is the only way to save five patients who need transplants. Second, agents who violate the constraint against doing harm ought to *compensate* their victims. The main task for my account is to provide rationales for both claims, and to explain whether and how they are related.

There have been attempts to make sense of moral rights, but these accounts are, at best, substantially incomplete. The most common approach is a form of consequentialism which states that people ought to observe the principles whose general acceptance would produce the best results, and that these principles include prohibitions against violating certain rights. The consequentialist approach captures part of the justification for rights, but our reason to refrain from violating people's rights does not seem to depend entirely, or even primarily, on the social benefits we thereby produce. If rights have a rationale, that rationale has an important, non-consequentialist component.

There have also been attempts to give rights a non-consequentialist foundation. Recent examples include the contractualist approach and the inviolability account. On the contractualist approach, people have rights because certain hypothetical agents would agree to confer these rights on everyone. On the inviolability account, the fact that people have rights is somehow explained by the fact that they have a certain desirable moral status, the status of inviolability, just in case they have rights. In the **Introduction**, I present unanswered challenges to the familiar, non-consequentialist accounts, and I argue that, if we hope to provide an adequate rationale for moral rights, we must appeal to novel considerations.

I aim to provide such considerations by appealing to claims about the nature and significance of trust, a topic under-discussed in moral philosophy. In **Chapter 1**, I provide a rationale for constraints against harm by appealing to two claims: (1) People sometimes have sufficient reason to promote their own projects, rather than promote the greater good. For instance, an aspiring philosopher has sufficient reason to become an academic, even if she could do more good by becoming an investment banker and giving her income to famine relief instead. I

defend this claim in Chapter 2. (2) Insofar as an agent observes moral requirements, she lives in harmony with people and avoids estrangement from them. This claim is almost universally accepted, in some form or other.

My argument runs as follows: First, I argue that an agent lives in harmony with people and avoids estrangement from them only if she is worthy of a form of trust that I call *civic trust*. Second, I argue that, provided that people have sufficient reason to promote their own projects, an agent is worthy of people's civic trust only if she observes certain constraints against harming them. It follows that, since observing moral requirements involves living in harmony with people, these requirements must include certain constraints against harm. In short, once we understand the relation between observing constraints and being trustworthy, we can show that the conviction that there are constraints against harm is neither illusory nor mysterious. Rather, it follows from a deeply plausible claim about the sorts of projects that people have reason to promote, together with an equally plausible conception of moral requirements.

In **Chapter 2**, I defend the view that people sometimes have sufficient reason to promote their own aims, rather than promote the good. I argue that a theory of practical reason must adopt this view in order to accommodate both of the following claims: (1) An agent's character largely determines how she acts. (2) An agent has sufficient reason to care so much about her children, friends and so on that she cannot bring herself to maltreat them in certain ways. So, a theory according to which people are always rationally required to produce the best outcome does not just make counter-intuitive claims about the acts that people have reason to perform. It also has implausible implications about the nature of human agency, or about the types of people we have reason to be.

Like any account of constraints against harm, my account faces the following challenge: Agents seem permitted to harm people in self-defense, even in certain cases in which the attacker is not blameworthy for the attack. For instance, imagine that someone blamelessly mistakes Jones for a mugger and tries to punch him in the face. If the only way for Jones to avoid getting punched is to punch his attacker first, he seems permitted to do so. So an account of constraints against harm must explain why constraints do not prohibit agents from doing harm to people, including blameless people, in self-defense. I address this challenge in **Chapter 3**. My account provides a rationale for a prohibition only if observing that prohibition is necessary for being worthy of civic trust. To show that my account accommodates the permission to harm both culpable and blameless attackers in self-defense, I argue that an agent can observe this permission and still be worthy of such trust.

In **Chapter 4**, I turn to the task of providing a rationale for the requirement to compensate one's victims when one violates the constraint against doing harm. I argue that, if an agent is at all likely to violate this constraint, whether culpably or blamelessly, she is estranged from people in much the way one is estranged from people when one is unworthy of civic trust. She can minimize this estrangement only by observing a requirement to compensate her victims when she violates the constraint against harming them. So the view that observing moral requirements involves living in harmony with people and avoiding estrangement from them not

only provides a rationale for constraints against harm, it provides a rationale for this requirement as well.