

Risky Ethics

Week 1: Ex-Ante Pareto

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Topic Overview.

Decision theorists and economists commonly make use of the notion of ‘Pareto superiority’. This concept has been usefully extended to decision-making under risk through ‘ex-ante Pareto’. In a series of articles, Anna Mahtani has shown that ex-ante Pareto superiority is currently not well-defined (2017; 2020). She argues that the concept ought to be given up or defined in a manner which significantly weakens the ex-ante Pareto principle.

The Pareto Principle.

1. What is Pareto superiority? What is the Pareto principle?
2. What makes the Pareto principle compelling?

Ex-ante Pareto.

3. What is the current definition of ex-ante Pareto superiority? What is an example of ex-ante Pareto superiority? What is the ex-ante Pareto principle?
4. What might ex-post Pareto superiority be? How does it compare to ex-ante Pareto superiority?

The Opaque Identity Problem.

5. How does Mahtani show that ex-ante Pareto superiority is currently not well-defined?

6. Why does it matter if ex-ante Pareto superiority is not well-defined?

7. Mahtani sets up the Opaque Identity Problem with reference to epistemic and objective risk. What is this distinction? Is it important for the problem?

Attempts to Complete the Definition.

8. Mahtani's first proposed means of completing the definition is to fix a particular set of special designators. What sets of designators does she discuss, and what problems do they face? Are there any general problems with fixing a set of special designators?

9. Mahtani's second proposed means of completing the definition is what she calls the 'subvaluationist reading' (2020: 2083). Under this reading, what is the definition of ex-ante Pareto superiority? What problems does it face?

10. Mahtani's third, and favoured, means of completing the definition is what she calls the 'supervaluationist reading' (2020: 2083). Under this reading, what is the definition of ex-ante Pareto superiority? What are some features of this reading? Is ex-ante Pareto still a useful concept under this reading?

Responses to the Opaque Identity Problem.

11. What do Gustafsson and Kowalczyk mean by "a method of trans-world identification"? (forthcoming: 4).

12. What is their proposed solution to the Opaque Identity Problem?