Diversifying Syllabi 2018 Text Summary and Teaching Tips

SECTION ONE: to be completed by presenter (1-2 pages max.)

Article/Essay Title: "A Better World"
Author: Ryan Preston-Roedder

Readability: Moderate

Thesis:
The better world argument, though seems to be an obvious non-starter, can be valid in moral theory when properly understood. The author develops and defends a version of the argument resting on the view that the correct moral theory cannot exhibit a certain form of self-defeat. He also identifies two applications of this kind of argument.

Key Definitions:

- **The better world argument:** is an argument of the following form: it would be better if a certain moral theory were true, therefore we have reason to believe that the theory is true.
- **Self-defeating:** a moral theory is self-defeating if the moral aims it assigns us will be worse achieved if everyone follows its principles.

Brief Summary:

I.   Introduction:

A number of moral philosophers have found persuasive that if the truth of a moral theory would, by itself, "make for a better world" than the truth of its rivals, this gives us some reason to believe that the theory is, in fact, true. Some argue that only certain instances of this form of argument are valid, provided that we accept a metaethical view according to which moral facts are determined by the right sort of procedure. A contractualist would adopt a principle because it would be better if that principle is true. A person who believes that moral facts depend on God's view would treat a certain fact to be true because he/she believes God would think it would be better if that fact was true. Preston defends a form of the better world argument, which many reject, that does not depend on this kind of metaethical view but depends on the view that morality cannot exhibit a certain type of self-defeat.

II. The better world argument:

Preston started by discussing Parfit's argument that Common-Sense Morality is collectively self-defeating. This argument treats the fact that a moral theory is self-defeating in a certain respect as an objection to the theory. Parfit's argument is based on the case of a poor fishing village where people live on fishing separately, and the lake's store of fish has declined due to overfishing. According to Common-Sense Morality, which assigns each fisher the aim to promote the flourishing of his/her own children, fishers should fish as much as they can keep their children well fed. But by doing so the lake will be depleted and everyone will end up being malnourished and thus worse off. In other words, by following the principles of this moral

theory, the aim the moral theory assigns will end up being worse achieved. This constitutes an objection to this moral theory.

The argument Preston develops and defends is analogous to Parfit's in a sense that morality cannot be self-defeating in a certain respect. But Preston's argument concerns a form of self-defeat that differs from the one Parfit describes. Preston's argument relies on the claim that morality assigns us the moral aim that bringing about a better world in some respect. The argument concerns about the truth of moral theories would be better in that respect than their rivals.

Preston describes two possible applications of the better world argument to show the kind of self-defeat that he wants to present. The first is among Common-Sense Morality and its rivals. Common-Sense Morality permits us to pursue our own goal, if this theory was true we will have what Slote calls "moral autonomy". On the contrary, Act Consequentialism assigns us an ultimate goal to which all our actions must contribute. If the second theory was true, we will all be deprived of moral autonomy. In the situation where we value moral autonomy heavily, Act Consequentialism would be self-defeating.

The second application is about moral dilemmas. This application concerns whether and how certain kinds of conflicts among moral principles may be permissibly resolved. A famous example of moral dilemma is that of Satre's student who had to choose between going to England to join the Free French Forces and staying in the Nazi occupied France to take care of his mother. In this case, the student has equal obligation to both. There are two kinds of theory on what a person should do facing such dilemmas. The first kind suggests that a person ought to act in accord with one obligation but is permitted to act in accord with either. The second kind suggests that a person ought to act in accord with each even though one cannot act in accord with both at the same time. In other words, whatever choice they make they cannot avoid committing serious moral wrongness. It may be that we would all be better off if moral dilemmas could not occur. In that case, the first theory according to which one is permitted to take either obligation would make for a better world than any of its rival theories.

The difference between the form of self-defeat Parfit concerns and the form Preston concerns lies in the route by which they theory's principles undermine its aims. When a theory is self-defeating in Parfit's sense, it is mediated by our action. By contrast, when a theory is self-defeating in Preston's sense, it undermines the moral aims it assigns us directly.

III. Does it prove too much?

One serious objection to the better world argument Preston identifies is that this argument proves too much. The first part of the objection is that this form of argument clearly fails when dealing with non-moral statements. Because there simply isn't any analogous to the features of morality in the empirical world. Even when dealing with moral statements, there are also instances of the better world argument that won't be valid. For example, pain is bad for us, but the truth of a moral theory according to which pain is not bad for us won't give us any reason to believe this moral theory is true. That is because such a moral theory arbitrarily assigns greater value to pain than it seems on reflection. In other words, such a moral theory enables us to make favorable judgments about pain, which is apparently evil, only by violating moral language. The truth of such a theory would not give us any reason to believe in it, nor would it give us grounds for objecting its rivals.

IV. Conclusion:

The better world argument may seem puzzling if not obviously wrong at first glance, it can be formulated in a way that makes sense. This form of argument rests on the deeply plausible view that the correct moral theory cannot be self-defeating. A main insight of the better world argument is that the truth of certain moral principles would undermine our moral aims in a more direct way, quite apart from the actions and attitudes of the people who followed those principles.

Article/Essay Title: "A Better World"
Author: Ryan Preston-Roedder

Possible Applications:

Upper level ethics
Meta-ethics
Moral psychology (especially if focusing on evolutionary theory and our moral intuitions)

Note: Not recommended for use in Introduction to Ethics, as it requires too much background

Complimentary Texts/Resources:

- Sharon Street – "The Darwinian Dilemma"
- An accessible summary of act consequentialism
- Onora O'Neill – "A Simplified Account of Kant's Ethics"
- Shafer-Landau – *Whatever Happened to Good and Evil*

Possible Class Activities:

- YouTube has a ton of engaging videos that explain act consequentialism
- Julia Driver with Wireless Philosophy has a good act consequentialism video
- Have the students pull the argument paragraph by paragraph
- Challenge students to identify when one can apply the criteria and when one cannot
- Ask students to identify self-defeating cases