

Faculty of Philosophy
James Martin Advanced Research Seminar Programme (TT09)

Venue: James Martin 21st Century School, Seminar Room 1, Old Indian Institute, Broad Street

Date: 8th Week ~ Wednesday 17 June, 3.00 – 5.00 pm

Speaker: Gerard Vong (Faculty of Philosophy, University of Oxford)

Title: "Weighing up Weighted Lottery Approaches to the Number Problem"

Abstract:

One of the most pressing issues in both ethics and economics is how we ought to distribute scarce, indivisible resources. This paper discusses a particularly difficult variant of this problem, namely when all potential beneficiaries of the resource each have a qualitatively equal claim on an equal benefit from the resource, and argues for a new conclusion. Many prominent moral and economic theories, both utilitarian and non-utilitarian, mistakenly claim that in such cases, you ought to give the benefit to as many people as possible. I will argue that acting in this way does not appropriately satisfy people's claims and for this reason is morally objectionable and unfair. This is primarily because by focusing on ex post benefit distributions and ignoring ex ante chances of receiving the benefit such procedures objectionably fail to give any but the largest groups of potential beneficiaries any chance of benefiting. This paper will evaluate different methods of distributing ex ante chances of benefiting, with a particular focus on weighted lottery approaches that sometimes give claimants unequal chances of benefiting. I will argue that all lottery procedures in the literature are inadequate and on this basis will propose a new lottery I call the composition sensitive lottery, so called because it is sensitive to the composition of groups of potential beneficiaries in ways that others are not. Time permitting, I will defend my lottery in particular and lottery approaches in general from their most prominent objections as well as outline some practical implications for this research.