

Norms and Values in an Imperfect World: Migration ethics and non-ideal conditions

NoVaMigra PhD and PostDoc Spring School, 25 – 27 May 2021

Online via Zoom

Call for Applications

Debates in migration ethics have long been accompanied by a call to drop abstract ideals and take into account real-world facts and constraints. While this picks up a general concern in practical philosophy about the degree to which normative theory should be grounded in existing practices and political realities, it seems like migration has been an especially prominent field for non-ideal theory. This is partly due to the practical urgency questions of migration have had recently. But, among other things, it may also have to do with the fact that normative positions widely shared in the academic discourse – for example, on the justifiability of borders (Abizadeh 2008, Bertram 2018, Carens 2013) – often seem to be fundamentally at odds with mainstream public opinion.

Although there is near consensus in the debate that migration ethicists should concern themselves with real world conditions to some extent, there is less unanimity about just what the real world *is* for the purposes of migration ethics. As Joseph Carens remarked, it may be fair to say that “people sometimes disagree more about what the real world is [...] than they do about what a just world would look like” (2013, 305). This seems all the more true in a world where right-wing movements have popularized the idea of ‘alternative facts’ in public discourse.

Indeed, conceptions of what we should understand as non-ideal circumstances vary widely in the philosophical discourse – both generally (see, among others, Valentini 2012) and in migration ethics more specifically. In debates on international cooperation on forced migration, non-ideal theory has been invoked to deal with scenarios of states’ non-compliance in a responsibility-sharing scheme (Hoesch 2018, Miller 2013, Owen 2016). But it may also serve as a wider comment on the hopes we may hold in realizing migration justice, and how we should organize our practical aims accordingly.

A number of theorists have held that, while we should sketch out our long-term aims by painting a broad picture of migration justice, we should be weary of the possibility of backlash when we adopt this picture as a more immediate guide for action. Open borders, Carens notes, is not a policy proposal (2013, 229). But how should we understand the idea of feasibility in times of deep political polarization? And what does a concern with feasibility suggest for the role of theorists in and outside of public discourse?

Yet others understand realism not as a concern about the feasibility of our ideals, but about taking the ubiquity of disagreement and conflict in social life as starting points for devising normative criteria in the first place (Williams 2005, Sleat 2016). This is often reflected in a heightened emphasis on questions of legitimacy and the justification of state coercion. In migration ethics, a number of recent works (Bertram 2018, Brock 2020, Owen 2020) have put legitimacy at the centre of broader theories of migration justice, arguing that a state’s internal legitimacy is conditional upon how it deals with migration. But there is still room for debate on why legitimacy should be a central value in a theory of migration in the first place – is its advantage that it does better at grounding duties in the real world than more ambitious accounts of justice?

Finally, some theorists have sought to embed migration ethics in a wider account of the global social processes connected to migration movements, and how these have shifted historically and as a result of political struggles. Here, theory is not concerned with the feasibility of an abstract ideal, but – on the contrary – with criticizing our theoretical categories for their lack of grasp of the dynamic and deeply politicized nature of real-world social processes. This perspective includes critiques of “methodological nationalism” (Sager 2014) in the political theory of migration, but also a recent debate about the role colonialism as a historical injustice should play in migration ethics (Finlayson 2020; Jaggar 2020; Mayblin and Turner 2020). Though conceptually distinct from non-ideal and realist accounts of migration ethics, these critical accounts also concern themselves with mediating theory and real-world processes – so that the question arises how they might relate.

NoVaMigra’s PhD and Post-Doc Workshop intends to take stock and debate the merits of different conceptions of non-ideal conditions in migration ethics. We aim to give junior scholars the opportunity to present their work to peers in **1-hour discussion sessions**, asking each participant to either submit a (working) paper before the workshop *or* to prepare a comment on another participant’s paper. As sketched above, we invite a wide reading of “non-ideal conditions” for the purposes of an open, interdisciplinary debate.

Peer-to-peer debate will be supplemented by discussions of papers and works in progress by senior scholars in the field, including **Eszter Kollar** (Leuven) and **Leila Hadj-Abdou** (Vienna), **David Owen** (Southampton) and **Andreas Niederberger** (Duisburg-Essen).

We invite submissions from all related academic fields, including political and moral philosophy, political theory and political science, migration studies, sociology and legal theory.

Possible topics include:

- Migration ethics and feasibility: Does a normative theory of migration need to be politically feasible, and what would that mean?
- Migration ethics and political legitimacy: What do we gain from taking legitimacy, rather than justice, as the central value in a normative theory of migration?
- De-colonial perspectives on migration ethics: In what respect should colonial legacy figure in a normative theory of migration?
- Migration ethics and international law: International migration law has evolved considerably in recent decades – to what extent should non-ideal theories in migration ethics take that into account?
- Migration ethics and securitization: Do changing technologies and practices of border security pose new questions to migration ethics?
- Migration ethics and mixed migration: Should we keep up the distinction between refugees and other immigrants?
- Methodological debates: Is the distinction between non-ideal and ideal theory helpful at all in the migration context? Or should we drop these concepts and think about real-world circumstances in different terms?

To apply for participation, please send an e-mail to [therese.herrmann\[at\]uni-due.de](mailto:therese.herrmann[at]uni-due.de), specifying your interest in the field and indicating whether you would like to **submit a paper** or **prepare a comment**. For papers, please send an abstract of **300 words**. Application is possible until **28 Mar 2021**.

To enable peer to peer discussion, participants are asked to submit their (draft) papers in mid-May and to join in discussions for the duration of the Spring School.

