

Rationality and Action

Spring 2015

Course Description

In this course, we're going to learn about making good decisions. Our semester will be divided into three main sections. First, we'll focus on decision making. Topics covered in this section will include game theory and rational choice. Second, we'll turn to the good. Here, we'll try to figure out what the good is and whether the good connects with our reasons for action. Finally, we'll think about special difficulties that arise when we're confronted with hard choices and major life decisions.

Texts

There is no textbook for this class. All readings will be posted on the class website. Be sure to check the website frequently. Readings fall into three categories: compulsory, recommended, and enthusiast. The categories are what they sound like they are. For each compulsory reading, I will post excerpts to read, questions to keep in mind while reading, and occasional explanatory notes that will make the readings easier to understand.

Preparing for Class

Our goal for class time is to *do* philosophy. We want to critically engage with the material, think about the strengths, weaknesses, and implications of arguments, and, hopefully, contribute our own original points. In order to do this efficiently, we'll need to be familiar with the material. I select the readings to get arguments and ideas on the table. I keep the readings short (no more than 25 pages per class) so that you have more time to think about what you've read, and give you instructions for the compulsory readings to flag some points and questions that are worth your thoughtful attention. *Do the readings before the class for which they are assigned.* That way, we'll be able to use more of our time for doing philosophy (which is where all the fun is anyway). Finally—and this should be self-evident—in order to do philosophy in class, you need to be physically *and* mentally present. Make sure you attend class and prepared to participate.

Requirements

Participation (20%)

Your participation will be assessed in two ways:

- (i) *Discussion*- I expect everyone to contribute to class discussions since we, as a class, really do benefit when we hear from each person. Contributions can range from answering questions to asking provocative ones. Typically, students are eager to participate, which is why we will implement a card system. Everyone will have color-coded cards with their names on them. The color will represent the order in which I call on people. I will collect your card when I call on you.

This system will enable me to keep track of who talks and give everyone a chance to participate equally. As a general rule, I will expect to have 1-2 cards from everyone each class. In the unlikely event that not everyone is participating, I may resort to calling on people.

(ii) *Activities*- Activities will range broadly and may consist of anything from quizzes to games to writing. Some activities will be done individually and others will be done in groups. Grading will be primarily pass/fail. In general, making a good-faith effort is all that is required for passing.

Note that in order to participate in discussions and activities, you must attend class.

Exams 1-3 (20% each)

The three exams are scheduled for February 16, March 24, and TBD. *These exams cover the material from the readings and class.* They are closed book, short answer, and multiple choice. The exams will test not only your comprehension of the material, but also your ability to think analytically and apply what you have learned.

Writing Project (20%)

Over the course of the semester, we'll do various small writing exercises that culminate in a final paper of no more than 10 pages. It's hard to write a good philosophy paper, which is why we'll work on it in stages. I'll give further information and instructions as the semester progresses. The final paper will be due April 26, and we will have a discussion day dedicated to sharing what we've written.

Schedule and Readings*

***Schedule and readings are subject to change.**

Important Note: Do the readings before the class for which they are assigned. (C) denotes a compulsory reading, (R) denotes a recommended reading, and (E) denotes a reading for enthusiasts.

Date	Topic	Readings and Deadlines
Week 1	Introduction and Syllabus Sec. 1 Decision Making Prisoner's Dilemma	Syllabus (C) "Why students using laptops in class learn less" (R) SEP article on the Prisoner's Dilemma , Intro and §1 (C), §2-20 (E)
Week 2	Prisoner's Dilemma Coordination Problems	Dawkins, "Nice Guys Finish First" (C) Axelrod, "The Emergence of Cooperation Among Egoists" (E) Friedman, "A Positive Account of Property Rights" (R) Schelling, <i>Micromotives and Macrobehavior</i> (E)

Week 3	Social Coordination Arrow's Theorem Decision Procedures	Guinier, " <i>Tyranny of the Majority: Fundamental Fairness in Representative Democracy</i> " (R) Nozick, "Newcomb's Problem and Two Principles of Choice" (R)
Week 4	Intro to Probability Credences	Hacking, <i>An Introduction to Probability and Inductive Logic</i> (R) Hajek, "Dutch Book Arguments" (E)
Week 5	Conditionalization Catch Up/Review	Khan Academy, Calculating Conditional Probability (C) Elga, "Self-locating Belief and the Sleeping Beauty Problem" (E) Bayes, "An essay towards solving a problem in the doctrine of chance" (E)
Week 6	Exam 1 Sec. 2 The Good Intro to Reasons	Williams, <i>Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy</i> (C) SEP, "Reasons for Action: Internal vs. External" (R)
Week 7	Reasons Internalism vs. Externalism	McDowell, "Might There Be External Reasons?" (C) Parfit, <i>Reasons and Persons</i> (C)
Week 8	Intrinsic Goods Economic Policies	Ross, "What things are good?" (C) Cooter & Ulen, <i>Law & Economics</i> (C) Dworkin, "Is Wealth a Value?" (R)
Week 9	Spring Break	Practicum: Make good decisions :)
Week 10	Realism about the Good	Mackie, <i>Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong</i> (C) Oddie, <i>Value, Reality, and Desire</i> , Ch. 1 (R) Oddie, <i>Value, Reality, and Desire</i> , Ch. 2 (C)
Week 11	Catch up/Review Exam 2	
Week 12	Sec. 3 Hard Life Choices Faith	Pascal, <i>Pensees</i> (C) Hajek, "Waging war on Pascal's Wager" (E) Buchak, "Can it be rational to have faith?" (C)
Week 13	Incommensurability Voluntarist Reasons	Huemer, "Lexical Priority and the Problem of Risk" (C) Chang, TED talk (C) Chang, "Are Hard Choices Cases of Incomparability?" (R)

Week 14	Commitment Transformative Experience	Chang, "Commitment, Reasons, and the Will" (C) Paul, "What to expect when you're expecting" (C) Paul, Transformative Experience (R)
Week 15	Transformative Experience Catch Up/Review	Dougherty, Horowitz, and Sliwa "Expecting the unexpected" (C) Harman, "Transformative experience and the reliance on moral testimony" (E) Chang, "Transformative Choices" (E)
Week 16	Paper Discussion	Final Writing Project Due
Final Exam	Exam 3	