

Rationality and Action

PHIL 20443 01

3:30–4:45 Tuesday and Thursday, DeBartolo 120

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Course Description: Sherlock Holmes is considered by many to be a paragon of rationality. He almost always takes the evidence of the case and correctly infers who committed the crime. Yet he often acts unreasonably: he regularly skips breakfast, he occasionally uses cocaine, and he sometimes breaks the law. So someone can be a perfectly rational *thinker* without being a perfectly rational *actor*.

In this course we will focus on the sense of rationality associated with action, *practical rationality*. We will approach the topic in four discrete units. In the first unit we will focus on issues concerning *decision theory*, the study of how best to satisfy preferences. In the second unit we will consider more *robust* conceptions of practical rationality. Then, in the third unit, we will consider some cases where it seems like we systematically act *deficiently*. Finally, in the fourth unit we will discuss particularly *hard choices* concerning what to do.

Ultimately, students can expect to become better actors. Along the way, students should expect to develop the skill to critically engage with the material, hone their ability to articulate and defend their own beliefs, and apply those beliefs to real-world situations. These three more concrete goals will be measured by students' participation, short weekly writing tasks, four unit quizzes, and one medium-length paper on a topic of their own choice. Students will be guided on each of these tasks.

Texts: There is no textbook for this class. I will provide all material on the course website. Each class day will have three levels of material: Required, Recommended, and Rapturous. Unless otherwise noted, I expect you to have worked through the required material enough so as to constructively discuss it in class. Recommended material is for those would like additional insight into the material or further historical background. I encourage students who might write their paper on that day's topic to work through the rapturous material.

Grade Distribution:

Write-ups	15%
Quests	40%
Paper	30%
Attendance & Participation	15%

Letter Grade Distribution: In this course I will use the following scale:

>= 93.00	A	73.00 - 76.99	C
90.00 - 92.99	A-	70.00 - 72.99	C-
87.00 - 89.99	B+	67.00 - 69.99	D+
83.00 - 86.99	B	63.00 - 66.99	D
80.00 - 82.99	B-	60.00 - 62.99	D-
77.00 - 79.99	C+	<= 59.99	F

Honor Code:

Students are responsible for compliance with the University's honor code at all times. Notre Dame has extensive guidelines on the honor code. Additionally, the philosophy department has a document explaining how Notre Dame's honor code applies to writing philosophy papers. Links to both of these can be found on the course website.

I take academic integrity very seriously. Cheating of any kind will be reported, will result in a failing grade on the assignment, and might lead to even stronger penalties. Any particular questions about the honor code should be directed to me.

Accessibility:

Notre Dame and I are committed to making this course accessible to all students. Any student who has (or thinks they may have) a disability, or who have questions about disability, are invited to talk to me or to contact the Office of Disability Services for a confidential discussion in the Sara Bea Learning Center for Students with Disabilities, or by phone at 574-631-7157. All information given to Disability Services is confidential and is shared only with your consent. Students who believe they may need an accommodation for this course should contact the Office of Disability Services at their earliest opportunity to ensure there is time to complete the process before accommodations are actually needed. Additional information about Disability Services and the process for requesting accommodations can be found at disabilityservices.nd.edu.

Further, there are other support services available on campus. I especially encourage students to take advantage of the Writing Center.

Assignments:

Attendance & Participation: Philosophy is an activity that we do, and active participation in philosophy is the best way to learn to do philosophy. Each student is expected to interact with me and with other students inside and outside of class. It's important to note, though, that active participation is more than just being vocal; it requires carefully thinking through issues and engaging with peers, often by listening to, supporting, clarifying, or justifying their comments. Doing philosophy is not just about expressing your own ideas, but is just as much about engaging with the ideas of others. Metaphorically speaking, the ideal philosophical discussion is less like a tennis match

and more like a volleyball game. Students will be graded on the extent to which they follow this model of active participation.

Because participation requires attendance, students who have more than two unexcused absence will have points deducted from this portion of the overall grade.

Weekly Writing: Writing regularly is a great habit. Roughly once a week, students will submit a brief written assignment. These assignments can take many forms, but will always be under a page of writing. Possible assignments include: clearly state the main thesis of a reading; illustrate a key concept with an example from your own life; state whether or not you agree with a claim discussed in class and explain why or why not. The weekly writing assignments will be graded on an Acceptable/Unacceptable scale. The proportion of submissions that are Acceptable to those that are Unacceptable will determine this portion's contribution to the overall grade.

Quests: There will be four written exams that are not quite like your typical test – let's call them “quests”. Each quest covers one of the main units of the course and is worth 10% of students' overall grade. They will ask students to analyze three provided cases using the concepts and tools developed within that unit. For each case students will be asked to (1) explain the presented scenario using that unit's key concepts, (2) articulate a potential explanation for the individual's decision, (3) state what the student would have done in that circumstance, and (4) justify that hypothetical action.

Paper: Students will write one paper (≈ 7 pages) for this course on a topic of their choice. We will treat the writing of this paper as a weeks-long project and not as an overnight binge. Accordingly, students are expected to meet with me one-on-one to discuss their topic and will also be asked to develop rough drafts at least a week in advance to exchange with their peers. Altogether this assignment is worth 30% of students' overall grade, broken down as: 5% for the consulting process, 5% for the peer review process, and 20% for the final paper itself.

The paper will be due the day after the final exam, i.e. by **Tuesday, May 8, 11:59PM EST**. Late papers will be deducted two-thirds of a grade for each day late (A to B+, B+ to B-, etc.).

Schedule				
Date	Topic	Required Reading	Recommended Reading	Rapturous Reading
Tuesday, Jan 16	Introductions	Syllabus	SEP article on voting methods: Section 2	
Unit 1 - Decision Theory				
Thursday, Jan 18	Neo-Humeanism	Hubin, "Irrational Desires" (Focus on Sections I and II.B)	Smith, "The Humean Theory of Motivation"	Hume, A Treatise of Human Understanding: Section 2.3.3
Tuesday, Jan 23	Expected Utility Theory	Philosophy Bites Podcast episode on Decision Theory	SEP article on decision theory: Section 3	Jeffrey, "The Logic of Decision Defended"
Thursday, Jan 25	Structural Constraints on Preferences and Money Pumps	Dougherty, "A Deluxe Money Pump" (Focus on Section 1)	Anna Mahtani Interview on Rules of Probability	Hansson, "Money-pumps, Self-torturers, and the Demons of Real Life"
Tuesday, Jan 30	Newcomb's Problem	Newcomb's Paradox: Sainsbury, 69--82	Horwich, "Decision Theory in Light of Newcomb's Problem"	A Guardian article on Newcomb's Problem!
Thursday, Feb 1	More Decision Theory Puzzles!	St. Petersburg's Paradox: Clark, 217--220	Kavka, "The Toxin Puzzle"	Jackson, Menzies, and Oppy, "The Two Envelope `Paradox'"
Tuesday, Feb 6	Risky Decisions	Buchak, "Why high-risk, non-expected-utility-maximising gambles can be rational and beneficial: the case of HIV cure studies"	Briggs, "Costs of Abandoning the Sure-Thing Principle"	Buchak, "Revisiting Risk and Rationality", especially Sections 4 and 5
Thursday, Feb 8	Risky Decisions cont'd	Philosophy Talk Podcast with Lara Buchak on Risk		
Tuesday, Feb 13	Quest #1 - Decision Theory			
Bonus Material (not to be covered in class)	Non-hedonic Value	Goldstein, "Happiness: the Role of Non-Hedonic Criteria in Its Evaluation"	Parfit, Reasons and Persons: 3--7	Bottan and Perez-Truglia, "Deconstructing the Hedonic Treadmill: Is Happiness Autoregressive?"
Unit 2 - Robust Rationality				
Thursday, Feb 15	External Reasons	McDowell, "`Might There Be External Reasons?"	Williams, "Internal and External Reasons"	https://www.philosophytalk.org/blog/risk-and-rationality
Tuesday, Feb 20	Moral Reasons	Foot, "`Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives" (I've annotated this pdf for you.)	Clark, "Kantian Morals and Humean Motives"	Maibom, "The Mad, the Bad, and the Psychopath"
Thursday, Feb 22	Good Advice (with special guest Ting Lau!)	Wiland, "Good Advice and Rational Action"	Sedley, "Is Aristotle's Teleology Anthropocentric?"	The Partially Examined Life podcast episode on Aristotle's Nichomachean Ethics
Tuesday, Feb 27	Acting within a Tradition	Scheffler, "The Normativity of Tradition"	Commentary by William FitzPatrick on	Seipel, "In Defense of the Rationality of Tradition"
Thursday, Mar 1	Alief and Rationality	Gendler, "Alief in Action (and Reaction)"	Discussion Between Tamar Gendler and Can Moral Philosophy learn from Psych	Mandelbaum, "Against Alief"
Tuesday, Mar 6	Coordination and Group Preferences	PBS video on voting procedures and preference aggregation	Coleman and Ferejohn, "Democracy and Social Choice"	Brams and Fishburn, "Voting Procedures"
Thursday, Mar 8	Quest #2- Robust Rationality			
Tuesday, Mar 13	Spring Break	No Class!		
Thursday, Mar 15	Spring Break	No Class!		

Unit 3 - Deficient Actions				
Tuesday, Mar 20	Akrasia	Philosophy Now article on akrasia	Audi, "Weakness of Will and Rational Action"	McKinnon and Doucet, "This Paper Took Too Long to Write"
Thursday, Mar 22	Endowment Effect (and Cognitive Biases)	Kahneman: Thinking, Fast and Slow (Chapter on the Endowment Effect)	Heuristics, Biases, and Environmental Health Risk Analysis	
Tuesday Mar 27	Near Bias	Frederick et al., "Time Discounting and Time Preference: A Critical Review", Sections: 1, 2, 7, 8	Sections: 3, 4	Sections: 5, 6
Thursday, Mar 29	Future Bias	Dougherty, "On Whether to Prefer Pain to Pass"	Greene and Sullivan, "Against Time Bias"	Harman, "'I'll Be Glad I Did It' Reasoning and the Significance of Future Desires"
Tuesday, Apr 3	Implicit Biases	Kang TED Talk, "Immaculate Perception?"	New York Magazine article on implicit bias	Kirwan Institute, State of the Science: Implicit Bias Review 2016
Thursday, Apr 5	Combating Bias	Marcus Aurelius' Meditations (skim)	Sun et al., "Calm and Smart? A Selective Review of Meditation Effects on Decision Making"	Machery blog post, "What is an attitude?"
Tuesday, Apr 10	Quest #3 - Deficient Actions			
Unit 4 - Hard Choices				
Bonus Material (not to be covered in class)	Buridan's Ass	A hilarious YouTube video	Kvanvig, "Religious Pluralism and the Buridan's Ass Paradox"	
Thursday, Apr 12	Incommensurability and Incomparability	Chang TED Talk, "How to Make Hard Choices"	Chang, "Value Incomparability and Incommensurability"	
Tuesday, Apr 17	Transformative Experiences	Paul, "What You Can't Expect When You're Expecting" (Sections 1--5)	Sections: 6, 7	McKinnon, "Trans*formative Experiences"
Thursday, Apr 19	The Afterlife	Sullivan, "The Lazarus Question"	Ribeiro, "The Problem of Heaven"	
Tuesday, Apr 24	Pascal's Wager (with special guest Liz Jackson!)	Wireless Philosophy episode on Pascal's Wager (by Prof. Rinard)	Pascal, "The Wager"	Hajek, "Waging War on Pascal's Wager"
Thursday, Apr 26	Moral Sainthood	Woolf, "Moral Saints"		
Tuesday, May 1	Quest #4 - Hard Choices			
"Final Exam"	Paper Peer Review	Monday, May 7, 10:30--12:30		
Paper Due		Email to me by: Tuesday, May 8, 11:59pm EST		