

SPC-CONC 98r: Rationality

Instructor: David Thorstad

Note: This syllabus has been updated to reflect the final list of readings chosen from among the optional and required readings

1. About this course

In this course, we will examine the nature of rationality. Questions covered include the purpose of a theory of rationality; Humean and Kantian theories of rationality; the relationship between theoretical and practical rationality; the role of rationality in psychology; rationality for group agents; and rationality in decision theory.

2. Course structure

2.1. Course meetings

Wednesdays, 9:45 AM, Sever 305

2.2. Assignments

I **Response papers:** Course meetings will be structured around discussion of a weekly response paper, submitted two days prior to the course meeting.

II **Midterm paper:** 6-8 pages. Draft due 3/4/20 Revision due 3/25/20.

III **Final paper:** 12-15 pages. Draft due 4/29/20. Revision due 5/16/20. [**Warning:** This deadline cannot be extended].

2.3. Assignment submission

I **Submitting assignments:** Any reasonable submission method (dropbox, Canvas, email, etc.) is acceptable. Canvas preferred.

II **Late assignments:** Ordinarily I don't accept late assignments. But I do understand that things can come up. Please talk to me if you think you'll need an extension.

3. Course policies

3.1. Grading

I **Response papers:** 20%

II **Midterm paper:** 30% (10% draft, 20% revision).

III **Final paper:** 50% (20% draft, 30% revision).

IV **Grade drop:** The point of this course is to allow you to make mistakes. You'll be able to drop one grade of your choosing (i.e. one response paper, or one paper draft or revision). The final paper revision may not be dropped.

Example: Dropping midterm paper draft: Revision counts for entirety of midterm paper grade (30% of total).

3.2. Accessibility

If you require any special arrangements, please don't hesitate to reach out. By university policy, requests for accommodation should be made through Accessibility Services.

4. Resources

I **Departmental writing fellow:** This is a philosophy PhD student who can meet with you to work on any piece of course-related writing. This year's writing fellow is Chandler Hatch. His website is

<https://projects.iq.harvard.edu/phil-dwf>.

II **Harvard college writing center:** Worth a visit, but when possible see the departmental writing fellow for philosophy-specific writing help.

<https://writingcenter.fas.harvard.edu/>

III **Guides to philosophical writing:** Long and medium-length guides by Elijah Chudnoff and short guide by Jim Pryor linked on website.

IV **Me!** Don't be shy about reaching out for help of any kind.

V **Departmental colloquia:** Highly recommended for a glimpse at what philosophy is like in the wild. Many Fridays, 3-5PM (Emerson 305). Schedule here.

<https://philosophy.fas.harvard.edu/calendar/upcoming>

5. Schedule

Schedule is subject to change due to presence of one floating week.

5.1. Roles for a theory of rationality

Guiding question: What is a theory of rationality supposed to do?

Prediction and interpretation

Week summary: Reviews approaches on which rationality aims to predict (Friedman) or interpret/explain (Davidson) behavior.

I Milton Friedman, “The methodology of positive economics”.

II Donald Davidson, “Radical interpretation”.

III David Lewis, “Radical interpretation”.

Normative assessment and pluralism

Week summary: Reviews approaches on which rationality aims to normatively assess agents (TBD), or has several incompatible roles which no one theory can play (Bermúdez).

I Niko Kolodny, “Why be rational?”.

II José Luis Bermúdez, *Decision theory and rationality*, Chs 2-3.

5.2. Hume vs Kant: Rationality and reason

Guiding question: What (if anything) is the relationship between rationality and reason(s).

Kant vs. Hume

Week summary: Reviews opposing Humean and Kantian conceptions of rationality and reason.

I Michael Smith, “Humean rationality”.

II Onora O’Neill, “Kant: rationality as practical reason”.

III Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the metaphysics of morals* (excerpts).

Reasons and rationality

Week summary: Do we have reason to be rational?

I Benjamin Kiesewetter, *The normativity of rationality*, Ch1 (“Introduction”) and Ch7 (“Rationality as responding correctly to reasons”).

5.3. Theoretical and practical rationality

Guiding question: What is the relationship between practical and theoretical rationality?

Audi on theoretical and practical rationality

Week summary: Read Audi on practical and theoretical rationality.

I Robert Audi, *The architecture of reason* Chs 1,3.

Collapsing the distinction?

Week summary: Review some heretical views which push against the practical/theoretical distinction.

- I Susanna Rinard, “Equal treatment for belief”
- II Stephen Stich, *The fragmentation of reason*, Ch6.

5.4. Rationality and psychology

Guiding question: How can empirical work in psychology inform theorizing about rationality?

5.5. Floating week: conceptual engineering

Week summary: Floating week inserted by student request to explore connections between rationality and conceptual engineering.

- I Herman Cappelen, *Fixing language* (excerpts).
- II Herman Cappelen, *Philosophy without intuitions* (excerpts).
- III Jonathan Jenkins Ichikawa, “Who needs intuitions? Two experimentalist critiques”.
- IV Herman Cappelen and David Plunkett, *A guided tour of conceptual engineering and conceptual ethics* (excerpts).

5.6. Can human irrationality be experimentally demonstrated?

Week summary: Review objections and replies to experimental attempts to demonstrate human irrationality.

- I LJ Cohen, “Can human irrationality be experimentally demonstrated?”.
- II Edward Stein, *Without good reason* Ch2 (“Competence”).

New conceptions of rationality

Week summary: Reviews two conceptions of rationality that arose out of psychological discussions.

- I Christopher Cherniak, “Minimal rationality”.
- II Herbert Simon, “Theories of bounded rationality”.

Collective rationality

Guiding question: Can groups be rational agents? What does rationality require of group agents?

Metaphysics of group agents

Week summary: Review two conceptions of what it means for groups to be agents which can be assessed as rational/irrational.

- I Christian List and Philip Pettit, *Group agency* (Preface and Ch1).
- II Alexander Bird, “When is there a group that knows? Distributed cognition, scientific knowledge, and the social epistemic subject”.

Judgment aggregation

[Omitted in favor of second floating week on option generation, in preparation for final paper].

5.7. Decision-theoretic rationality: what kind of expectations

Guiding question: What is the appropriate way to incorporate act/state dependence into decision theory?

Causal and evidential decision theory

Week summary: Look at foundational presentations of CDT and EDT.

- I James Joyce, *The foundations of causal decision theory* (Chs 4 + introduction, it’s hilarious).
- II David Lewis, “Causal decision theory”.

Problems and alternatives

Week summary: Review problems for CDT (optional: for EDT as well), and an alternative

- I Andy Egan, “Some counterexamples to causal decision theory”.
- II Yudkowski and Soares, “Functional decision theory”.
- III Wolfgang Schwarz, “On functional decision theory”.

5.8. Floating week: option generation

Week summary: Study conception of an option in decision theory in combination with psychological research on option generation.

- I Brian Hedden, “Options and subjective thought’.
- II Wolfgang Schwarz, “Objects of choice”.
- III Matthew Noah Smith, “Practical imagination and its limits”.

IV Paul Weirich, “A decision maker’s options”.

V Annemarie Kalis et al, “Why we should talk about option generation in decision-making research”.

VI Stuart Russell and Peter Norvig, *Artificial intelligence: A modern approach* (excerpts).