

Honours Seminar: Rationality and Morality

Convener: John Thrasher

Thursdays 2-4pm, Menzies Building, Room S109

Introduction

Although philosophers disagree about the exact nature of morality, they all tend to agree that whatever else morality is, it should be importantly related to rationality—it should be rational to be moral. A conception of morality divorced from or opposed to reason would make humans, understood as rational creatures, fundamentally alienated from morality. Because of this, much of modern moral philosophy is concerned with showing that morality is intimately connected with some conception of rationality.

In various ways, philosophers have attempted to link rationality and morality by making morality a function of rationality. Understood properly, on this approach, morality is just a particular specification of what it is rational to do. Many ancient Greek philosophers developed (often very different) versions of this approach to linking morality and rationality including Aristotle, the Epicureans, and the Stoics. According to many of the Greek thinkers, the goal of all action is to live well and to live well involves virtue, which is a kind of rational excellence. To live virtuously and, thereby, to have a good life—what the Greeks called *eudaimonia* (εὐδαιμονία)—involves perfecting one’s practical rationality. In this way, ethics is unified with rationality at its core.

Later accounts of morality and ethics that moved away from Greek *eudaimonism* also tended to sever the direct link between morality and rationality. The Greek conception of morality is largely personal, with the individual directly concerned to live morally in order to live well. Over time, morality became more social and concerned the rules and principles that governed social as well as individual life. Morality and ethics transformed from a virtue based account of what it takes to live a good life to something more like a series of rules or principles that constrain individual action. The concept of *duty* and *obligation* become important for moral thinking. Later, these concepts are understood in terms of “reasons for action” and the link between morality and rationality is re-established, albeit in several different forms.

To understand the fundamental link between morality and rationality, we need to look at the challenge that moral scepticism poses to moral theory. As in epistemology, much of modern moral philosophy is an attempt to answer the sceptical challenge “why be moral?” This challenge can also be understood as a demand for the rational justification of a moral principle or rule. The Greeks had a simple answer to this question, namely that morality and the rational end of life aimed at the same thing: happiness or *eudaimonia*. For other moral theories that are not based in the common ultimate goal of happiness or well-being, the answer to this question is more complicated.

The most radical response to the sceptical challenge takes its modern inspiration from Thomas Hobbes. On this approach, the goal of a successful moral theory is to show that morality is justified on the basis of rationality understood as a sophisticated form of prudence. Inspired by Hobbes, many recent moral and political philosophers have continued this project drawing on the sophisticated tools of rational choice theory, game theory, and economics in the process. Many of these thinkers developed what are often called “contractarian” theories of morality and politics as a way to respond to the general sceptical concern about morality. In particular, David Gauthier developed a sophisticated contractarian moral theory that seeks to justify the constraints of social morality on the basis of how well those constraints help rational individuals pursue and realize their own goals more effectively.

Indeed, the main line of 20th century moral and political thought is an attempt to wrestle with the problem of how to justify moral constraints to rational individuals—how to reconcile morality with rationality. We see this project in the work of John Rawls and John Harsanyi and their respective attempts to justify morality through the use of rational choice in an original position. John Rawls, in *A Theory of Justice*, argued that the “theory of justice is a part, perhaps the most significant part, of the theory of rational choice.” In this seminar, we will look at how far some thinkers have taken this project. We will also look at an alternative approach to reconciling rationality.

Assessment

Assessment Task	Weight	Due
Essay Plan	Hurdle	No later than Seminar 8
Handout	20%	TBA
Final Essay	80%	22 October or 5 November

Handout

Students are required to submit a one page handout based on one of the assigned readings. There will be a signup spreadsheet on moodle where students can pick which reading they want to use for a handout. In addition to being marked, the handout will be used as an introduction to the reading during class. The student responsible for one of the readings on a given day will talk the class through the handout at the beginning of class as a way of starting discussion on the readings for that seminar. Each handout should summarize the main arguments of the text, identify how these arguments are related to the central concerns of the seminar or other readings, critically assess the reading if possible, and end with 2-3 questions for the seminar that the reading raises. Each handout should be no more than one page. Please bring a hard copy to the seminar and enough copies for the rest of the class.

Essay Plan

The main assessment exercise for this unit is a long final essay. In order to improve the quality of those essays, each student is required to submit a brief essay plan that identifies the thesis of the proposed paper, any supporting sub-arguments, and the intended references. The essay plan should be delivered *as a hard copy* to me in

person during a consultation in my office. There will be a link to schedule the consultation on moodle. This consultation should be scheduled no later than Seminar 8 and may be scheduled any time before that. If you decide to change your topic substantially after our consultation, you should briefly talk to me again, but you will not need to submit another essay plan. If, however, I deem the essay plan to be inadequate, I may ask you for a revision.

Final Essay

The final essay will be based on the topic from your essay plan of no more than 4,500 words. A more detailed rubric and tips on writing a good essay will be posted on moodle.

Readings

This seminar will make significant demands on you in terms of the reading. You will likely find many of them difficult. Some of the readings will require some background knowledge in the history of moral philosophy or, in some cases, economics—make note of anything that seems odd in the reading or that you don't immediately understand and I will discuss some of those issues in the seminar. If you are more comfortable emailing questions you have about the reading before class, that is fine too but I will not, for the most part, respond to the questions via email. Rather I will address them in class because it is likely more than one person had a similar question. Later in the seminar, many of the readings will presume some knowledge of game theory and economics. There are many excellent resources on the web that provide primers in game theory and basic economic concepts, but if these areas are new to you, I recommend Gerald Gaus's *On Politics, Philosophy, and Economics* and Ken Binmore's *Playing for Real - A Text on Game Theory*. I will try to find electronic versions of these texts to link on moodle, but you may want to buy them for your own reference.

I expect students to come to the seminar prepared to discuss the readings and to go beyond them. The readings are, in many ways, just a starting point for the discussion in the seminar but it will be impossible to probe some of the deeper issues that they raise if you are not already familiar with the readings. Doing philosophy well requires that you have a diverse range of ideas to draw on so that you can see problems in new ways and possibly find solutions or new ways of thinking that other may have missed. This requires a depth of knowledge that only comes from reading and understanding the great thinkers who have come before you. Mere cleverness is no substitute for insight that comes from deep reflection serious problems. In addition, while reading and writing are solitary pursuits, philosophy is also done collaboratively in the seminar room through discussion. I expect everyone to contribute to the discussion and to remain respectful throughout. You should not free ride on the contributions of others, but instead be prepared to contribute each seminar. All of this will require a good amount of work but I think you will find the rewards will be substantial.

Schedule

Seminar 1—The Moral and Rational Problem

Readings:

1. Kurt Baier—"Introduction" From *The Moral Point of View*
2. Kurt Baier—"Introduction" From *The Rational and Moral Order*

Seminar 2—Strategies of Reconciliation

Readings:

1. Gregory Kavka—"The Reconciliation Project"
2. David Gauthier—"Why Contractarianism?"
3. David Schmidtz—"Self-Interest, What's in it for Me?"

Seminar 3—Rationality and Morality

Readings:

1. Amartya Sen—"Choice, Orderings and Morality"
2. Kurt Baier—"Rationality and Morality"
3. Amartya Sen—"Rationality and Morality: A Reply"
4. John Harsanyi—"Rationality and Morality: A Reply"

Seminar 4—Gauthier's Hobbesian Moral Theory

Readings:

1. David Gauthier—"Thomas Hobbes: Moral Theorist"
2. David Gauthier—"Morality and Advantage"
3. Jean Hampton—"Two Faces of Contractarian Thought"

Seminar 5—Gauthier Continued

Readings:

1. David Gauthier—"Twenty-Five On"
2. David Gauthier—"Achieving Pareto-Optimality: Invisible Hands, Social Contracts, and Rational Deliberation"

Seminar 6— Instrumentalism and Morality

Readings:

1. Gerald Gaus—“The Failure of instrumentalism” from *The Order of Public Reason*
2. Michael Moehler—“The Scope of Instrumental Morality”

Seminar 7—Rational Choice and the Original Position I: John Rawls

Readings:

1. John Rawls—“Justice as Fairness”
2. John Rawls—Selection from *A Theory of Justice*
3. John Rawls—“Kantian Constructivism in Moral Theory”

Seminar 8— Rational Choice and the Original Position II: John Harsanyi

Readings:

1. John Harsanyi—“Bayesian Decision Theory and Utilitarian Ethics”
2. Gerald Gaus and John Thrasher—“Rational Choice and the Original Position: The (Many) Models of Rawls and Harsanyi”
3. David Gauthier—“Archimedean Position” From *Morals By Agreement*

Seminar 9—Rationalism and Pluralism

Readings:

1. Vernon Smith—“Constructivist and Ecological Forms of Rationality”
2. John Rawls—“The Independence of Moral Theory”
3. Gerald Gaus—“ On the Appropriate Mode of Justifying a Public Moral Constitution”