

PY2103: Rationality and Action

Lectures: Tuesdays and Fridays, 3–4pm, Arts Lecture Theatre

Tutorials: Tuesday 1–2, Wednesday 11–12 and 12–1, Thursday 10–11 and 1–2, Friday 9–10 and 1–2, weeks 3–6 and 8–11. To sign up for a tutorial, login to MMS at <https://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/mms>

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Office hours: Tuesdays, 11–12, and by appointment in Edgecliffe B18

Description

This course will investigate the explanation and evaluation of human action. As social creatures, we frequently need to explain and predict what others do. We also need to be able to evaluate the actions of others, as moral or immoral, rational or irrational. We will discuss several interrelated notions, including rationality, action, explanation, motivation, and reasons. We will also explore the relationship between morality and rationality—for example, is it ever rational to act immorally? What if doing what we morally ought to do conflicts with other goals we have? Finally, we will look at some topics in practical irrationality—for example, can it ever be rational to prefer *A* to *B*, prefer *B* to *C*, but prefer *C* to *A*?

Learning Outcomes

By the end of the course, students will be familiar with the notions mentioned above, and with theories about how they are related to one another. This course should serve as a good basis for further study in different areas of philosophy, including ethics, philosophy of action, epistemology, and the theory of practical reasoning.

To achieve these outcomes, students should attend all lectures and tutorials, and come to both prepared to discuss the required readings.

Required Texts

- *Action*, by Rowland Stout, Acumen

Assessment

50% continuous assessment and 50% exam:

- *Continuous Assessment:* One 1,500 word essay, in response to one of the following prompts:
 - What is the difference, and the relationship, between citing a reason to explain an action and citing a reason to justify an action?
 - Are all normative reasons internal?
 - Is it irrational to act immorally?

This essay is due on Friday, 11 April, 2014

For full details of marking criteria for essays, see the [Philosophy Handbook for Undergraduates](#)

- *Exam*: One 90 minute exam, which will involve answering two essay questions

Tentative Schedule

The following schedule of readings and topics is subject to change. Lectures will be based on the texts and topics listed; tutorials will involve more in-depth discussion of the listed readings. The titles of many of the readings link to the articles. If you are not on the university network, you may have to login via Shibboleth. You can choose the University of St Andrews, and then login using your university username and password. If you have trouble accessing anything, please don't hesitate to email me. Articles or chapters that are not linked to here will be provided via MMS.

Some of the readings are quite long and difficult. I will try to call your attention to these as they come up. In these cases, you shouldn't be discouraged if you get a bit lost; just try to get the main ideas.

Week 1: Introduction

1. Stout, Chapter 1
2. Stout, Chapter 9
3. Recommended: Shpall and Wilson, '[Action](#)', *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*

Week 2: Action explanation

1. Stout, Chapter 2
2. Anscombe, '[Intention](#)'
3. Dancy, *Practical Reality*, Chapter 1, sections 1–4

Week 3: Causal theory of action

1. Stout, Chapter 4
2. Davidson, '[Actions, reasons, and causes](#)'

Week 4: Normative reasons

1. Parfit, *On What Matters*, Volume 1, Chapter 1
2. Alvarez, '[How many kinds of reasons?](#)'
3. Dancy, *Ethics Without Principles*, Chapter 3

Week 5: Motivation

1. Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book 2, Part III, Section 3, 'Of the influencing motives of the will'
2. Smith, *The Moral Problem*, [Chapter 4](#)
3. McDowell, '[Are moral requirements hypothetical imperatives?](#)'

Week 6: Reasons and desires

1. Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book 3, Part I, Section 1, ‘Moral distinctions not derived from reason’
2. Williams, ‘Internal and external reasons’
3. Korsgaard, ‘Skepticism about practical reason’

Week 7: Moral reasons and Humeanism

1. Foot, ‘Morality as a system of hypothetical imperatives’
2. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing right and wrong*, Chapter 1
3. Schroeder and Finlay, ‘Reasons for action: Internal vs. external’, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*

Week 8: Moral reasons and externalism

1. Quinn, ‘Putting rationality in its place’
2. Schroeder, ‘Weighting for a plausible Humean theory of reasons’
3. Parfit, *On What Matters*, Volume 1, Chapter 2
4. Shafer-Landau, ‘Moral reasons’

Week 9: Puzzles of rationality

1. Hansson, ‘Money pumps, self-torturers, and the demons of real life’
2. Rachels, ‘Counterexamples to the transitivity of *better than*’
3. Hare, ‘Take the sugar’
4. Kavka, ‘The toxin puzzle’

Week 10: Weakness of will

1. Tappolet, ‘Weakness of will’
2. Arpaly, ‘On acting rationally against one’s best judgment’

Week 11: Catch up and wrap up