

Altruism, Egoism and Rationality: Course Calendar

Please note that the short assignments listed below are NOT all compulsory! See 'Grading and Assignments' above for details.

September 4th

SHORT ASSIGNMENT: Is it rational to be moral? Forget what I said in class. Just work out a position that strikes you as plausible and argue for it. In the course of your argument you should try to be clear about how you understand the terms "rational" and "moral". If you're at a loss about what to write, you might proceed as follow: Indicate in the first part of your assignment how you understand the term "rational" and "moral", and then, on that basis attempt to answer the question. Finally, try to think of a good counter-argument to your position, and explain why the counter-argument doesn't succeed.

No reading for this assignment.

September 9th

READING: E.O. Wilson. 'Altruism.' (*To be handed out in class.*)

SHORT ASSIGNMENT: Wilson distinguishes between "pure, hard-core" and "soft-core" altruism. What are the main differences between these forms of altruism, according to Wilson? Why does Wilson call his estimate of the "relative proportions of hard-core and soft-core altruism in human behavior" (p. 157) optimistic? What makes hard-core altruism seem so dangerous to Wilson?

September 11th

READING: Sober, Elliott. 'Evolutionary Altruism, Psychological Egoism, and Morality: Disentangling the Phenotypes.' (*To be handed out in class*)

SHORT ASSIGNMENT: Write on one of the following:

- a) Sober distinguishes between two different kinds of altruism, psychological and

evolutionary. What are the differences between these two kinds of altruism?

b) Sober thinks that morality should not be confused with altruism, whether psychological or evolutionary. Why?

September 16th

No Readings or assignments today. Start reading ahead for Hobbes, though.

September 18th

No Readings or assignments today. Start reading ahead for Hobbes, though.

DEADLINE: This is the deadline for your first appointment with me regarding a term paper topic.

September 23rd

READING: Hobbes. Selections. (*On Electronic Reserve*)

SHORT ASSIGNMENT: According to Hobbes, what are the chief characteristics of men which ensure that the lives of men in a state of nature will be "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short"? Explain why Hobbes thinks that these characteristics, taken together with other features of a state of nature, would produce such an intolerable result.

September 25th

READING: Axelrod. *The Evolution of Cooperation*, p. 3 to p. 69.

SHORT ASSIGNMENT: Summarize Axelrod's tournament and *its most important* results. If you were redesigning the tournament to make it more realistic, what features would you add or change?

September 30th

READING: Brink. 'Rational Egoism, Self and Others.' (*esp. 339-349*) (*On Electronic Reserve*)

SHORT ASSIGNMENT: What is "strategic egoism," as Brink understands it? Brink offers

several arguments against strategic egoism. Pick one or two arguments; explain and assess them.

October 2nd

READING: Brink. 'Rational Egoism, Self and Others.' (*esp. 349 to the end*)

SHORT ASSIGNMENT: Answer one of the following:

a) What does it mean to say that X's good is a *part* of Y's (where X and Y are either temporal parts of the same person or different people), according to Brink? (See especially 349-351 and 369) How does Brink use the metaphor of parthood to defend his version of neo-Aristotelian rational egoism? Do you find his line of argument convincing? (Note: Brink's argument is long and complicated. I'm only looking for the main idea here, not the details.)

b) Brink contrasts a "subjective egoist justification of morality" with an "objective egoist justification". What is the main difference between subjective and objective versions of egoism? Why does Brink drop the subjective version in favor of the objective version?

October 7th

READING: Brink. 'Rational Egoism, Self and Others.' (*esp. 349 to the end*)

SHORT ASSIGNMENT: In Section 7, Brink establishes his "base case" for extending egoist concern for others. In subsequent sections (Sections 8, 9, 10), he extends his account to an expanding circle of other selves. Outline Brink's strategy for expanding this concern beyond his "base case" through these various stages. (Note: Again, Brink's argument is complicated, and some of the details are quite difficult. You don't need to go into all these details. I'm mainly interested in seeing that you've got the general drift of the argument.)

October 9th

READING: Brink. 'Rational Egoism, Self and Others.' (*esp. sections 11, 12, 13*)

SHORT ASSIGNMENT: In Sections 11, 12, and 13 of his paper, Brink responds to a few objections to his neo-Aristotelian rational egoism. Pick one, and explain the objection along

with Brink's response.

October 16th

READING: Whiting. 'Impersonal Friends.' (*esp. Section 4*) (*On Electronic Reserve*)

SHORT ASSIGNMENT: In Section 4 (pages 9 and 10) of her paper, Whiting criticizes Brink's way of understanding the notion that X's good can be a "part" of Y's good. What is her criticism of Brink? (Note: This is a difficult assignment, but also a very rewarding one.)

October 21st

READING: Whiting. 'Impersonal Friends.'

SHORT ASSIGNMENT: On p. 12, Whiting quotes Vlastos' claim that Plato fails to account for the fact that we have concern for individuals *qua* individuals [i.e. in so far as they are individuals], rather than simply *qua* virtuous. Vlastos thinks Aristotle's account of friendship suffers from the same flaw. Whiting thinks that Vlastos is "essentially right" about the substance of Aristotle's view, but she disagrees with Vlastos about whether Aristotle's view is mistaken. What is her reason for resisting Vlastos' assessment of Aristotle's position?

October 23rd

READING: Whiting. 'Impersonal Friends.'

SHORT ASSIGNMENT: Write on one of the following:

a) Whiting quotes Ramsey on p. 16 on the relationship between self-love and judgements of value. Why does Whiting think that Ramsey is mistaken?

b) ". . . for differential concern may be pragmatically justified without being intrinsically justified" (p. 23). What contrast is Whiting getting at here? What problem is she trying to address? How does the distinction help her address it?

Date: _____

READING: Butler. *Sermon I.*

SHORT ASSIGNMENT: Butler thinks that the alleged conflict between self-interest and morality is often exaggerated. Why does he think this? What do you think? Why?

Date: _____

READING: Butler. *Preface*, p. 13, paragraph 12 to p. 18, paragraph 29, *Sermon II*, *Sermon III*.

SHORT ASSIGNMENT: "Appetites, passions, affections, and the principle of reflection, considered merely as the several parts of our inward nature, do not at all give us an idea of the system or constitution of this nature, because the constitution is formed by somewhat not yet taken into consideration, namely, by the relations which these several parts have to each other; the chief of which is the authority of reflection or conscience" (Butler, p. 14). Explain what Butler means. Be sure to consider how Butler develops and defends this point in the readings.

Date: _____

READING: Butler. *Preface* p. 18, paragraph 35 to p. 23; *Sermon IV*.

SHORT ASSIGNMENT: "That all particular appetites and passions are toward *external things themselves*, distinct from the *pleasure arising from them*, is manifested from hence—that there could not be this pleasure were it not for that prior suitableness between the object and the passion; there could be no enjoyment or delight from one thing more than another, from eating food more than from swallowing a stone, if there were not an affection or appetite to one thing more than another" (p. 47). Explain.

Date: _____

READING: Copp. 'The Ring of Gyges.' (*On Electronic Reserve*)

SHORT ASSIGNMENT: What does Copp mean by the "unity of practical reason"? Why is he skeptical about the unity of practical reason?

Date: _____

READING: Hume. *Selection*. (*On Electronic Reserve*)

SHORT ASSIGNMENT: "Since morals, therefore, have an influence on the actions and affections, it follows, that they cannot be deriv'd from reason; and that because reason alone, as we have already prov'd, can never have any such influence. Morals excite passions, and produce or prevent actions. Reason of itself is utterly impotent in this particular. The rules of morality, therefore, are not conclusions of our reason" (Hume, *Selection*, p. 457). What does Hume mean here? How does he defend his position?

Date: _____

READING: Williams. 'Internal and External Reasons.' (*On Electronic Reserve*)

ASSIGNMENT: What is the difference between internal and external reasons, as Williams understands it? Why does Williams think that external reasons don't exist? Why does Williams think this matters?

Date: _____

READING: Quinn. 'Rationality and the Human Good.' (*On Electronic Reserve*)

SHORT ASSIGNMENT: Write on one of the following:

a) What is the neo-Humean conception of rationality (as Quinn uses the term)? Why does Quinn reject it?

b) Compare Quinn's position with Copp's scepticism about the unity of practical reason. Does Quinn have a convincing reply to Copp?

Date: _____

READING: Plato. *Laches*.

SHORT ASSIGNMENT: Shortly after September 11th, Susan Sontag (writing in the *New Yorker*) and Bill Maher (speaking on his show, *Politically Incorrect*), averred that whatever else the terrorists were, they were at least courageous. What might Socrates and Nicias say to

Sontag and Mawr? What do you think?

READING: Plato. *Laches*.

SHORT ASSIGNMENT: Socrates seems to think that courage has some special relationship with the other virtues, especially wisdom (as Nicias reminds him at 194d). This connection seems to place some important restrictions on what is to count as courageous behavior. Quinn thinks that rationality is "the authoritative perfection of man *qua* agent". And this seems to place some important restrictions on any plausible account of practical rationality. Compare the two positions.

Date: _____

READING: Kagan. 'The Limits of Well-Being' (*On Electronic Reserve*)

SHORT ASSIGNMENT: Kagan is interested in a dispute about the limits of well-being. He gives a rough overview of the debate as follows: "first there is an attempt to push the limits of well-being outward, moving from a narrow to a broader conception; then comes the claim that the resulting notion is too broad, and so we must retreat to a narrower conception after all" (p. 169). Trace this dialect as Kagan develops it. What are the main considerations pushing in either direction?

Date: _____

READING: Rawls. *Selection*. (*On Electronic Reserve*)

SHORT ASSIGNMENT: What are Rawls' principles of justice? How does he derive them?

Date: _____

READING: Rawls. *Selection*. (*On Electronic Reserve*)

SHORT ASSIGNMENT: Rawls distinguishes between a) a derivation of the principles of justice and b) an account of *why* people would have an interest in these principles. What roles do self-interest and rationality play in a) and b)?

Date: _____

READING: Kennan. *'Morality and Foreign Policy' (On Electronic Reserve)*

SHORT ASSIGNMENT: Kennan takes a fairly strong line against a robust role for moral considerations in American foreign policy deliberations. Choose one of the following to write on:

a) Kennan argues early on in his paper that "the functions, commitments, and moral obligations of governments are not the same as those of the individual" (p. 270). What reasons does Kennan give to support his position? How good are his reasons?

b) Kennan says at one point: "Interventions on moral principle can be formally defensible only if the practices against which they are directed are seriously injurious to our interests, rather than just our sensibilities" (p. 273). What is the difference between interests and sensibilities, according to Kennan? What are his reasons for sharply distinguishing them? If we have deeply felt moral convictions, why can't these count as interests?

c) Later in his essay Kennon does allow *some* moral considerations *some* relevance in foreign policy decision making (see p. 276). But "some of the strongest imperatives of moral conduct should be of a negative rather than a positive nature." (p. 276). What is the difference between "negative" and "positive" here? Kennan's further remarks on p. 278 seem to impose some moral restrictions on foreign policy. Are Kennan's remarks consistent with the rest of his position?

Date: _____

READING: Power. *Selection. (To be handed out in class)*

SHORT ASSIGNMENT: How might Power respond to Kennan about the relevance of moral considerations to American foreign policy? After reading both Kennan and Power, what is your own view about the relevance of moral considerations to American foreign policy?