

Altruism, Egoism and Rationality: Syllabus

Instructor: Christopher Young

Course website: <http://www.people.cornell.edu/pages/cmy5/classes.html>

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Available by appointment (just ask!)

Readings

Books

Axelrod, Robert. *The Evolution of Cooperation*

Butler, Joseph. *Five Sermons*

Plato. *Laches; and Charmides*

These books will be available at the campus store. You will need to buy all of them, but they are relatively inexpensive.

Articles

Some readings will be posted on the web on Course Reserve. We will talk in class about how to access them. Also, a few of the readings will be handed out in class. Please print off the readings and bring them to class when we discuss them. Since we may not get to all the readings, you might save time and paper by waiting a bit to see if you will need to print them out.

Course Description

What reasons do we have for caring about people other than ourselves? Are human beings even capable of genuine altruism? It is often assumed that it is rational to pursue our own interests. But is there more than one way to think about self-interest? How do assumptions about altruism and self-interest influence our views about other matters? This course considers these and other questions about altruism, egoism and rationality.

The course is divided into five main sections:

I. Introduction;

II. Altruism and Evolution;

III. Rational Egoism and the Justification of Morality;

- IV. Questioning Rational Egoism;
- V. Self-Interest and the National Interest.

I. Introduction.

We'll spend a class or two discussing what the course is about, what I expect from you, and the nature of the assignments. We'll also discuss writing in general, and how the course is intended to help you improve your writing.

II. Altruism and Evolution

We will begin by surveying some of the (alleged) implications of evolutionary theory for different views of altruism. We will see that among scholars who agree that humans are a product of evolution, there is still enormous disagreement about what this means for our understanding of human nature.

III. Rational Egoism and the Justification of Morality

We turn next to consider different ways of understanding the connection between rationality and morality. One very natural way to understand the question "Why be moral?" is to understand it in terms of a question about whether it is *rational* to be moral. And one very natural way to understand the question "Is it rational to be moral?" is to understand that question as a question about whether morality is in our self-interest. Obviously, strong intuitions about the connection between rationality and self-interest play an important role here behind the scenes, determining how we might understand the original question about morality, and so determining in part how we might go about answering it.

There is a venerable tradition in moral philosophy of asking the question "Why be moral?" in precisely this way. Within this tradition, there is quite a lot of dispute both about how to further understand this question, and also about how to answer it however it is understood. Nevertheless, philosophers who approach the question in this way are united at least in accepting a set of assumptions about rationality and self-interest that is sometimes called "rational egoism".

Rational egoism, as I will use the term, ascribes (at least) three crucial features to rationality:

i) Rationality is normative. That is, to call a course of action rational is to recommend carrying it out. If a course of action is rational, we have a decisive reason to do it.

ii) Rationality is connected to self-interest. A course of action is rational for an agent if and only if it advances that agent's interests.

iii) Rationality is independent of morality. To ask whether it is rational to be moral, we need a conception of rationality which is itself independent of morality. It is this feature which helps to explain why rationality is a useful standard to use in assessing morality.

Obviously, a great deal more remains to be said about each of these features of rationality. Nevertheless, listing these assumptions about rationality explicitly should make it easier to see why philosophers who are inclined to accept them are also inclined to interpret the question, "Why be moral?" in the way that I suggested above, as a question about whether morality is in our self-interest. If we want to know why we should do something (in this case, be moral), the suggestion is, we should look to whether it is rational (i); we can give content to our conception of rationality by appealing to self-interest (ii); and this way of addressing the issue will not be question-begging because in rationality we have a standard that is independent of morality (iii).

In this part of the class, then, we will look at a few philosophers who accept the challenge to justify morality along the lines suggested by rational egoism.

IV. Questioning Rational Egoism

Philosophy is not just about attempting to answer questions. It also involves reflecting critically on the questions that you've set yourself. The question "Why be moral?" asked in the way that rational egoism encourages is indeed an interesting one; and so are the various answers that have been given in response to it. Nevertheless, I have come to suspect that rational egoism is misconceived. In this section of the class we will explore a few considerations that might count against it.

Here, my suspicion that rational egoism is misconceived is exactly that: a suspicion. I am still working on these issues, and I'm very interested to hear what students will have to say about them.

V. Self-interest and the National Interest

Finally, we will briefly explore how assumptions and arguments about self-interest play out in a quite different context, at the level of states. When people offer and reject arguments about national interest, their arguments have quite a lot in common with the kinds of arguments that people offer and reject about self-interest. And if anything, these assumptions seem to have been even more deeply influential in thinking about international affairs than they have been in the history of ethics. In this final part of the course we will see how these assumptions about rationality and self-interest fare in this new context.

Grading and Assignments

You are expected to come to class having read the assigned material thoroughly. It is not enough to read the material once, even if you read it very carefully. You will find that many of an author's arguments are only clear on a second or third reading. You may also find it helpful to write a (very) brief summary of the reading to assure yourself that you've grasped its main points.

Course work consists of:

- I. a Term Paper, including a proposal and two major drafts (30% of your final grade);
- II. 5 Short Assignments (50% of your final grade);
- III. Peer-Review Reports (10% of your final grade);
- IV. Participation (10% of your final grade).

I. The Term Paper

Term Paper deadlines are as follows:

- First appointment with me to settle on a topic: Before Sept 18th.
- Proposal: Due October 2nd.
- First draft: Due October 28th.
- Second draft: Last day of Classes.

Your paper must not be late. Late papers (without a valid medical excuse) will be penalized. It is better to have handed in something imperfect than never to have handed in anything at all!

Your Term Paper Proposal should be about 4 pages. In it, you should outline your proposed project and indicate where you think the main work needs to be done.

We should meet at least 3 times in the semester: once to help you choose a topic, and then after I've seen the proposal and first draft. Of course, I am also available to meet other times.

In your term paper you should focus on developing your own views, expressing them clearly, and responding to possible objections to your view. This is not a research essay. I do not expect you to do huge amounts of reading. I would prefer, in fact, that you really struggle with the subject on your own, especially for the first draft. After that, I *may* recommend one or two short pieces to read and think about, but I want to avoid burdening you with too much reading before you've had the chance to think about your subject on your own.

There is no strict length requirement for your term paper. Obviously it needs to be long enough to reflect a lot of hard work and thought about your subject, but it needn't be a massive magnum opus that I have trouble carrying home. If you feel more comfortable with clear guidelines, aim for something around 15 pages.

Choice of a topic is (almost) entirely up to the student. There are, of course, a few constraints:

a) The topic should be relevant to the subject matter of the class, and will hopefully complement it in some way. If things go well, you will be able to use at least some of the readings for the class in your essay.

b) Although I would be happy to see you explore topics in your (likely, or possible) majors, I hope you will avoid too much overlap with other classes. Illumination from other classes is fine—recycling is not. We can discuss this further in our meetings.

c) I need to be able to help you fairly intensively with your assignment. So this puts some limit on what we can do.

I will hand out some suggestions about possible term paper topics, in case anyone is having trouble coming up with one.

II. Short Assignments

Students must choose at least 5 of the Short Assignments over the course of the term from the options available on the syllabus. Short Assignments **MUST** be handed in at the beginning of the class on the day on which they are due. They **CANNOT** be handed in late. In many cases, essays will be read aloud for the class, to provide the basis for a discussion.

The Short Assignments will either require you to explain an author's argument or to develop an argument of your own.

A few tips on writing the Short Assignments:

i) Remember, these are *short* assignments. You are not expected to cover a subject exhaustively. You should focus carefully on the question you have been asked to answer; a good deal of the thinking involved in the assignment comes in figuring out what you *don't* really need to say.

ii) The Short Assignments should be literate and carefully proof-read before you get to class. The Short Assignments in this class are not like rough diary entries in which you free associate about a topic.

iii) If you're trying to explicate an author, avoid quotation at all cost. I want to see you try to express ideas in your own words. In general, when students rely on quotations to explain an author's position, instructors marking their papers assume that they don't understand the author's position.

iv) Please don't bother with cover pages for your Short Assignments. You also don't need to provide full bibliographical information, since it will be obvious what you're citing. You should, however, try to cite liberally when you're paraphrasing an author.

IMPORTANT: Although you have considerable freedom to choose which Short Assignments you would like to do, there are a few requirements:

- You must pick at least two Short Assignments in September.
- You must pick at least one Short Assignment in October.

Please bring copies of your Short Assignment for the entire class, so that we can read along when you present it.

There is a strict limit on the length of the Short Assignments. They should *never* exceed 2 pages (12 point font, double spaced, with regular margins).

You should rewrite all your Short Assignments. Your grade for the Short Assignment will be based on consideration of both the original and the re-write. You may hand the re-writes in at any point during the term. Please hand in the original with your re-write.

III. Peer-Review Reports

You will be asked to mark the work of other students as part of your grade. We'll discuss details in class.

IV. Participation

You can get a decent participation grade (B-range) just by showing up and staying awake. You can get a good participation grade (A-range) by showing up, staying awake, and participating in class discussions. Unexplained (e.g., without a doctor's note) lateness or absence counts heavily against your participation grade and, if serious enough, will result in a C- or D-range grade.

A Few Statements Regarding University Policies

A Statement on University policies and regulations¹: “This instructor respects and upholds University policies and regulations pertaining to the observation of religious holidays; assistance available to the physically handicapped, visually and/or hearing impaired student; plagiarism; sexual harassment; and racial or ethnic discrimination. All students are advised to become familiar with the

¹ From: “A Jump Start for New Instructors of First-Year Writing Seminars,” p. 5.

respective University regulations and are encouraged to bring any questions or concerns to the attention of the instructor.”

A Statement about Plagiarism²: Plagiarism is the misrepresentation -intentional or not – of someone else’s work as one’s own. Students will be held responsible for plagiarism, including both deliberate plagiarism and the sort that results from sloppy work habits. Students should also be aware (and should warn fellow students considering plagiarism) that plagiarism is surprisingly easy to detect. Punishments vary but typically include failure in the course and a permanent mark in a student’s record.

I am always available to discuss your concerns about plagiarism. For more on plagiarism, see the sections in Cornell’s *Policy Notebook* on the ‘Code of Academic Integrity’ and ‘Acknowledging the Work of Others.’ The *Code of Academic Integrity* is available on the Web at:

<http://www.cornell.edu/UniversityFaculty/docs/mail.html>

There is a general ban in this class on all internet research (beyond, of course, using Course Reserve and the Library Web Site).

² Adapted from *ibid.* p. 5.