

PHIL 2214: Rationality

Spring 2021

Class meeting: Mondays 4:30–7pm

“Classroom”: https://canvas.pitt.edu/courses/87616/external_tools/322

“Office”: <https://pitt.zoom.us/j/4971426138>

Kevin Dorst

kevindorst@pitt.edu

Office hours: Wed 3–5pm; by appointment

Class Description: How rational are people? Answering this question requires combining both descriptive and normative methods: we need to know what psychological results tell us about how people reason, as well as what epistemological and ethical theories tell us about how people *should* reason. So we’ll approach the topic by focusing on the philosophical underpinnings of the contemporary empirical literature in behavioral economics and psychology, much of which claims to demonstrate human irrationality. The goal will be to develop fluency with philosophical theories of rationality, as well as to see how those theories bear on the interpretation of empirical results. This will include both big-picture questions about whether and how psychological research can demonstrate human irrationality, as well as detailed questions about how to interpret the evidence relating to particular apparent biases—such as motivated reasoning, hindsight bias, confirmation bias, self-deception, and so on.

Readings: All readings will be made available on Canvas in the “Files” section:

<https://canvas.pitt.edu/courses/87616/files>

Grading: Your grade will be determined by paper(s) (70%), a presentation (15%), and participation (15%).

Paper(s) (70%): You can choose (no later than March 29) to write either (1) two conference-length (3000-4000 words) papers throughout the term, or (2) one full-length term paper (8000-10,000 words).

Option (1): Two conference-length papers. The goal here is to get practice writing papers that can be submitted to conferences, and to have at least one such paper ready to go by the end of the term.

· First paper: **30%**; due **March 29**.

· Second paper: **40%**; *draft* due **May 5**; to be revised and turned in for a final grade over the summer (latest: August 23). (Aim for the June 1 APA deadline!)

Keep an eye on conference CFPs here: <https://philevents.org/>. The APA takes 3,000-word submissions three times a year: February 15 (Eastern); June 1 (Central); September 1 (Pacific): <https://www.apaonline.org/page/importantdates>.

(**Be aware**, if you take this option: you need to have three 8–10k papers to cross the Pitt Masters hurdle.)

Option (2): Full term paper. Standard 8–10k-word term paper. A *draft* must be turned in by **May 5**, to be revised with the final version turned in over the summer (latest: August 23).

Presentation (15%): I’ll ask you to lead discussion of one of the papers we’re going to cover in the course. Construct a handout to lead us through the main points of the

paper, raising questions/concerns/objections for class discussion along the way. Your presentation should cover half of one session—approximately 1–1.25 hours. Though I strongly recommend doing it on your own (learning how to present is one of the main goals of grad school!), you may also team up and do a joint presentation with someone. The point is to practice—afterwards we’ll have a brief, private “post-op” on things that went well and ways to improve.

Participation (15%). Please do all the readings beforehand and come to class prepared to discuss and raise questions. If you find yourself hesitant to speak up in class, an alternative is to shoot me questions about the reading beforehand, and/or schedule meetings or come to office hours to discuss.

Course Policies:

Class recordings. Course meetings will be recorded via zoom.

Academic Integrity. You know the drill: <https://www.provost.pitt.edu/faculty/academic-integrity-freedom/academic-integrity-guidelines>

Disability Accommodations. If there’s any issue to touch base about, let me know! Disability Resources and Services: <https://www.diversity.pitt.edu/disability-access/disability-resources-and-services>; also 412-648-7890.

Schedule

I. Foundations

1/25: (Ir)rationality?

- Tversky and Kahneman 1974, ‘Judgment Under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases.’ *Science* 185 (4157): 1124–1131
- Cohen, L. J. 1981, ‘Can Human Irrationality be Experimentally Demonstrated?’ *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 4 (3): 317–331.
- Stich, Stephen, 1985. ‘Could Man be an Irrational Animal?’ *Synthese* 64: 115–135.
(**Focus on §5.**)

2/1: Rational Analysis

- Anderson, John 1990, *The Adaptive Character of Thought*, Chapters 1 and 6.

II. Tools

2/8: Probability

- Titelbaum 2020, *Fundamentals of Bayesian Epistemology*, Chapters 2 and 3.
(Chapter 1 optional.)

2/15: Decision Theory

- Thoma 2019, ‘Decision Theory’ in *The Open Handbook of Formal Epistemology*

2/22: Models and Precision

- Easwaran 2020, ‘Numerical Confidence’

- Schoenfeld 2012, ‘Chilling out on epistemic rationality’

III. Down to Business

3/1: Hindsight Bias and Motivated Ignorance

- Hedden 2019, ‘Hindsight Bias is Not a Bias’
- Bright and Kinney 2020, ‘Risk Aversion and Elite-Group Ignorance’

3/8: Motivated Reasoning

- Ulrike and Harris 2014, ‘What does it mean to be biased? Motivated Reasoning and Rationality’

3/15: Confirmation Bias I

- Whittlestone 2017, ‘When is Confirmation a Bias?’
 - *Optional:* Her blog post about writing a dissertation—and changing her mind about—confirmation bias: [‘Reflections on Confirmation bias’](#)
- O’Connor and Weatherall 2018, ‘Scientific Polarization’
 - *Optional:* Weisberg 2020, [‘Mistrust and Polarization’](#) and [‘How Scientific is Scientific Polarization?’](#)

3/22: Confirmation Bias II

- Kelly 2008, ‘Disagreement, Dogmatism, and Belief Polarization’
- McWilliams 2019, ‘Evidentialism and Belief Polarization’

3/29: Bias and Self-Deception

PAPER 1 DUE

- Mandelbaum 2018, ‘Troubles with Bayesianism’
- Gendler 2007, ‘Self-Deception as Pretense’

4/5: Sunk Costs and the Status Quo

- Kelly 2004, ‘Sunk costs, rationality, and acting for the sake of the past’
- Nebel 2015, ‘Status quo bias, rationality, and conservatism about value’

4/12: Grit and Scarcity

- Morton 2017, ‘Reasoning Under Scarcity’
- Morton and Paul 2020, ‘Grit’

4/19: Moral Judgment and Emotion

- Haidt 2001, ‘The Emotional Dog and its Rational Tail: A Social Intuitionist Approach to Moral Judgment’
- Railton 2014, ‘The Affective Dog and its Rational Tale: Intuition and Attunement’