

Visions of Freedom: Choice, Politics, and Society

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Fall 2022

Monday 7:00PM-8:30PM

LOCATION: Crowell G Common Room

Course Description:

Do we ever make truly autonomous choices? What kind of factors go into the decisions we make? Is there a “right way” to go about deciding where to go to college, whom to marry, or which cat is cuter? How can we model others’ decisions? How do we figure out what a group of people want? Is “group choice” even possible? Are there reasons to doubt our autonomy of choice? How do societies (and companies) influence individual choice? How do our personal choices affect society?

We hope you will walk away from this course with a better understanding of the economic, political, and philosophical underpinnings of choice, how groups can (and can’t) make choices together, and how communities balance personal choice and societal obligation.

Outline:

We begin with the most common model of choice: Rational Choice Theory. We consider the requirements and implications of the theory, and explore how emotions relate to rationality. Taking this foundation of individual choice, we make an interlude to examine public choice theory before arriving at the big questions. What guides our choices over time; what religions, moral philosophies, or other frameworks do we use to understand and analyze our choices?

Having completed an overview of choice, we dive into insights from psychology and neuroscience which challenge the traditional ideal of autonomous, rational decision making. This study will include cognitive biases and the effects of environment and available information on choice.

Finally, we look at what to *do* with this information, exploring the potential for journalism to help us make better choices and considering the impact propaganda has on group choice. We then return to questions of public choice with an eye to the effect of individual choices on societal problems. We close by breaking out of the paradigm to examine non-Western attitudes towards choice, both individual and collective.

Objectives:

- To understand and investigate the various models used to describe individual choice, decision making, and moral reasoning
- To investigate the challenges and critiques of common models of individual and group choice, and how information affects the ability to make rational and independent decisions
- To understand how various frameworks and mechanisms of individual choice affect the functioning of political systems, and how these political systems affect individual decision-making
- To enhance students' ability to move between historical case studies and philosophical argumentation to analyze various theories on choice

Required Texts:

Required texts are listed in the day-by-day breakdown. Instructors will provide digital copies of all assigned texts via Sakai and students should bring copies (digital or paper) to class each week.

Course Requirements:

- 1) A grade of satisfactory in this course requires satisfactory completion of all assignments of this course, including written and oral assignments, attendance, and active participation in the course.
- 2) Students are required to attend at least 11 of 13 classes to receive a passing grade.
- 3) No laptops, phones, or other electronic devices are permitted during class unless being used for accessing course materials for reference.

Grading:

40% - Participation

Satisfactory participation includes completing the readings before class, attending class, answering questions during each class, and providing thoughtful contributions to each discussion.

25% - Written Assignment Part One

Each student must choose a week in which to write a 500-750 word analytical paper in relation to the week's topic, using one of the week's prompts (or a self-generated essay prompt with instructor approval) due by the class meeting time. Students will present their analysis and discuss their chosen topic at the start of class. At least two scholarly sources must be used in this paper, at least one of which must come from the chosen week's readings.

35% - Final Written Assignment

Each student must write a 1500 word analytical paper due at 11:59 on **December 12th** via Sakai. The paper will be an extension of the preliminary written assignment, taking into account any instructor feedback. At least three scholarly sources must be used, including at least two from the syllabus and one outside source.¹

Course Schedule

August 29, Week 0: How the Class Works and Who We Are

[Dedicated] to the brave barefoot woman, whose name I don't know but whose rational arguments saved me from being sliced by a mob of angry men with machetes.

-Hans Rosling

- Review the syllabus, attendance policy, grading policy, discussion expectations.
- Sign up for topic weeks for the preliminary essays.
- Motivate course content and discuss general course outline.
- Guide students to each choose a learning objective for the semester (i.e. improve logical reasoning, better understand views with which the student disagrees, participate more in class)

Get to know you questions:

1. Name, year, and three ways that you make choices.
2. How do we choose in groups? Activity.
3. Why did you choose / how are you choosing your schedule for this semester?

¹ Note: If a student wishes to change their topic from their preliminary paper to their final topic, or if they wish to use a different essay prompt from those provided for their preliminary essay, instructor approval is required at least one week **in advance**.

Module 1: Models of Choice

September 5, Week 1: Modeling Choice (58 pages)

It seems easy to accept that rationality involves many features that cannot be summarized in terms of some straightforward formula, such as binary consistency. But this recognition does not immediately lead to alternative characterizations that might be regarded as satisfactory, even though the inadequacies of the traditional assumptions of rational behavior standardly used in economic theory have become hard to deny.

-Amartya Sen

Reflection Questions/Essay Prompts:

1. Reflect upon the above quote. What is required for us to adopt Rational Choice Theory? Is Rational Choice Theory either necessary or sufficient for someone to be thinking “rationally”? Is rationally intrinsically/extrinsically desirable? Is this a good model for behavior, and if so, under what conditions? When and how does Rational Choice Theory fail?

Readings:

1. Steven L. Green: Rational Choice Theory: An Overview (p. 1-24, 24 pgs.)
2. Gerasimos Santas: Plato on Goodness and Rationality (19 pgs.)
3. Jon Elster: The Nature and Scope of Rational Choice (15 pages)

September 12, Week 2: Decision Theory and Utility (66 pages) (Professor Gillespie Visits)

The mathematical challenge of finding the greatest good can expand the heart.
Empathy opens the mind to suffering, and math keeps it open.”

-Derek Thompson

Reflection Questions/Essay Prompts:

1. How do Newcomb’s and the St. Petersburg paradoxes break our understanding of utility? Should we rethink utility based on these paradoxes? Why or why not?
2. Why (or why not) do we need to quantize utility in order to make decisions? Are there some instances in which Game Theory/Expected Utility is not as useful as one might think? Are there instances in which it does much better than “randomly looking for gold,” as Cotton-Barratt might put it?

Readings:

1. Alex Bellos: Newcomb's problem divides philosophers: Which side are you on? (3 pages)
2. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: St. Petersburg Paradox (7 pages)
3. Owen Cotton-Barratt: Prospecting for Gold (38 pages with pictures, video lecture available)
4. Steven Tadelis: A short introduction to Game Theory (p.3-13, 11 pages)
5. Jonathan Levin and Paul Milgrom: Introduction to Choice Theory (1-3, 22-25, 7 pages)
 - a. Note: You are invited to read the rest of the article, but it gets rather technical and is thus optional.

September 19, Week 3: Emotion, Choice, and Cooperation (68 pages)

The marriage problem is [better] solved by moral sentiments than by awkward formal contracts. The best insurance ... is a strong bond of love.

-Robert Frank, 1988

Reflection Questions/Essay Prompts:

1. How can we view emotions as contributing to (or even hindering) cooperation? What kinds of problems of social organization can emotions solve (be specific)? Are there other emotions (or uses of emotions) you would add to Frank's list? To what extent are choices impacted by emotion? Is it necessarily a bad thing if emotions have a large role in choice? Today, in our modern world (which may be different from the one for which these emotive responses were adapted), would it be better for individuals to strictly follow RCT rather than utilizing emotions, or are emotions still useful?

Readings:

1. Robert Frank: *Passions Within Reason: The Strategic Role of the Emotions* (Ch 1-3, pp. 1-68)
 - Ch. 1. Beyond Self-Interest
 - Ch. 2. The Altruism Paradox
 - Ch. 3. A Theory of Moral Sentiments (content warning: feel free to skip pg 43 and page 44 paragraphs 1-2, start instead at "In his 1979...")

September 26, Week 4: Public Choice: Voting (50 pages)

It's not the voting that's democracy; it's the counting.

- Tom Stoppard

Reflection Questions/Essay Prompts:

1. Should everyone vote? Defend or criticize Brennan’s “Polluting the Polls.” Consider drawing additional insight from material from the Huemer in this task. If you choose to defend, please present some concerns one might have with Brennan’s view, and then demonstrate why they are not valid.
2. What is your evaluation of quadratic voting *as a practical measure*, in relation to the information presented in Munger & Munger Chapter 3? Is there a different voting mechanism that you think makes more sense? You are welcome to draw on insights from Huemer and Brennan. Essentially, could quadratic voting (or the system of your choice) be applied in presidential elections? Town council elections? Referendums? College club elections? Are there any special concerns that arise in certain contexts?

Readings:

1. Michael Huemer: “Why People Are Irrational About Politics” (12 pages)
2. Dambisa Moyo: “Make Voting Mandatory in the US” (4 pages)
3. Jason Brennan: “Polluting the Polls: When Citizens Should Not Vote” (12 pages)
4. Munger & Munger: *Choosing in Groups* (Chapter 3, Choosing in Groups: An Intuitive Presentation) (18 pages)
5. Shaan Ray: “What is Quadratic Voting?” (4 pages)

**October 3, Week 5: Organizing Principles of Choice: What Matters? (50 pages)
(Professor Gillespie Visits)**

I worked myself so hard that I turned a person this [messed] up into this [champion] right here; not off of reading a book off a theorist, [but] off of going to work on myself and saying: “I don’t know how to do this, but I know that to get over there to that side, I gotta grind myself into a fine power.”

And that did it.

-David Goggins

Reflection Questions/Essay Prompts:

1. What would you say is Goggins’ driving principle? Is it moral, religious, or is it something else? Are the choices in his life consistent with this principle, i.e., going through his life story, can most of his actions be explained by it? Does Goggins seem to have achieved his goal? What, if anything, does this imply for the efficacy of his choice framework, and other possible frameworks? Would he have been better off spraying roaches his whole life? Why? Feel free to bring in comparisons and information from the other readings this week.
2. Choose religion or morality. How does it operate as an organizing principle of one’s life? Does it determine goals? For what kinds of decisions does it come into play (major life choices like marriage and career, lifestyle choices like diet and sleep, instantaneous choices (like how to respond to an offensive comment in conversation), etc.)? What does

this indicate about the usefulness of this organizing principle for informing choice? Also consider: how successful is a life that adheres to it throughout? Is it a good life? Is it a life you would want to live?

Readings:

1. Gwen Bradford & Simon Keller: "Well-Being and Achievement" in *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Well-Being* (10 pages)
2. Manuel Velasquez et al: "A Framework for Ethical Decision Making" (4 pages)
3. Bonnie Powell: "What Role does Religion Play in Your Life?" (3 pages)
4. David Goggins & Tom Bilyeu: "Become A Savage & Live On Your Own Terms"
<https://youtu.be/dIM7E8e9JKY> (53:34) (33 pages)

Module 2: Challenges to Choice

October 17, Week 6: Cognitive Biases and Heuristic (50 pages)

Each of your brains creates its own myth about the universe.
-Abhijit Naskar

Reflection Questions/Essay Prompts:

1. Choose a public issue. Characterize popular opinions on the topic. Then, examine the extent to which the opinions are influenced by cognitive biases as laid out in the Bensen and Kahneman readings, and to what extent these opinions can be seen as a result of rational reasoning. Can any of the disagreement on the topic be explained by cognitive biases? Is there any way these biases make it easier to compromise?

Readings:

1. Benson: "Cognitive Bias Cheat Sheet" (11 pages)
2. Larrick & Soll "The MPG Illusion" (3 pages)
3. Kahneman: Availability, Emotion, and Risk, in *Thinking Fast and Slow* (36 pages)

October 24, Week 7: Science of Choice (72 pages)

This is the essence of intuitive heuristics: when faced with a difficult question, we often answer an easier one instead, usually without noticing the substitution.
-Daniel Kahneman

Reflection Questions/Essay Prompts:

1. How much choice is truly up to you? What implications do the presence or absence of external factors that influence the way we interact with the world have on the agency of our decisions? Give specific examples.

Readings:

1. McLeod, "Nature vs. Nurture in Psychology" (4 pages)
1. Schwartz, "The Effects of the Environment on Decision Making" (20 pages)
2. Kahneman, "Thinking Fast and Slow" (48 pages)

October 31, Week 8: Information, Choice, and Cognition (51 pages)

In many areas, ordinary consumers are novices, interacting in a world inhabited by experienced professionals trying to sell them things.

-Richard H. Thaler

Reflection Questions/Essay Prompts:

1. How do the various marketing techniques in the world affect our attention? Give specific examples. What deeper implications does this hold for the way we interact with the world? Does it affect decisions beyond the economic realm?
2. Consider preference satisfaction. Many people would consider it normatively desirable, and even a component of a good society, that individuals can act freely to satisfy their desires. Does this change if our preferences are largely shaped by marketing, rather than being formed through some other method? Does it matter if our desires are curated by corporations? On a personal level, should we attempt to avoid the influence of marketing? On a societal level, should steps be taken to mitigate the effects of marketing?
3. Have you personally felt a time when color or design has impacted your perception of something? How can you use color theory and implicit effects to convey a meaning in your life?

Readings:

1. The Conversation, "The Decoy Effect" (5 pages)
2. St. Clair, Kassia, "The Secret Lives of Color" - Introduction (10 pages)
3. Pellegrini et al. "Room Color and Aggression in A Criminal Detention Holding Cell: A Test of the "Tranquilizing Pink" Hypothesis" (8 pages)
4. Center for Humane Technology (7 pages)
5. Sunstein and Thaler, "Liberatarian Paternalism" (16 pages)
6. Uncapher, "Media Multitasking and Cognitive, Psychological, Neural, and Learning Differences" (5 pages)

Module 3: Choices and Society

November 7, Week 9: Choices, Information, Journalism, and Politics (56 pages) (Professor Gillespie Visits)

Information is a source of learning. But unless it is organized, processed, and available to the right people in a format for decision making, it is a burden, not a benefit.

- William G. Pollard

November

Reflection Questions/Essay Prompts:

1. What is the importance of information in a functional democracy? How can misinformation and disinformation harm democracy? Which of the solutions presented by West seem most encouraging to you? What are some issues you can see with these solutions?
2. What are the means of addressing the death of local news in America? Is rising control by news conglomerates over local news really as problematic as these authors claim? Can you think of cases where national coordination is more beneficial? Does the rise of social media reduce the ability of local news to influence individuals?

Readings:

1. Chang, Alvin: "Sinclair's takeover of local news, in one striking map" (5 pages)
2. Godfrey, Elaine: "What We Lost When Gannett Came to Town" (15 pages)
3. AtlanticLive: When Misinformation Goes Viral: The Role of Journalism in Combating Misinformation (15 pages) (video option 18:30)
4. West, Darrel: "How to combat fake news and disinformation" (21 pages)

November 14, Week 10: This is Your Brain on Propaganda (64 pages)

The greatest triumphs of propaganda have been accomplished, not by doing something, but by refraining from doing. 'Great is the truth', but still greater... is silence about truth.

-Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*

Reflection Questions/Essay Prompts:

1. How does propaganda hijack our ability to choose? By what mechanisms does it accomplish this, and by what mechanisms do people attempt to make choices unaffected by propaganda? Does propaganda pose a threat to a worldview that posits individuals as

rational decision-makers, and if so, is it an existential one? Is there a way to practice skeptical rationality that makes one immune to propaganda?

2. Is the traditional view of propaganda outdated? In your essay, contrast the 20th century conception of propaganda with the post-internet understanding of propaganda that Paul et. al. and Anderson et. al. develop in their papers? How and why do these types of propaganda function differently, and how can individuals respond to the newer types of propaganda? What uncertainties are there regarding our understanding of the new generation of propaganda? In what direction do you think post-internet propaganda is headed?

Readings:

1. Carlo M. Horz: Propaganda and Skepticism (16 pages)
2. Christopher Paul and Miriam Matthews: The Russian “Firehose of Falsehood” Propaganda Model (16 pages)
3. Janna Anderson and Lee Rainie: The Future of Truth and Misinformation Online (p.1-32, 32 pages)

November 21, Week 11: Individual Choice and Collective Problems (59 pages)

Therein is the tragedy. Each man is locked into a system that compels him to increase his herd without limit -- in a world that is limited. Ruin is the destination toward which all men rush, each pursuing his own best interest in a society that believes in the freedom of the commons.

-Garrett Hardin, “Tragedy of the Commons”

Reflection Questions/Essay Prompts:

1. Is the tragedy of the commons intractible? Do you agree with Hardin² that there is no technical solution, and does Sinnott-Armstrong appear to share Harding’s conclusion that we need to extend our morality to solve these problems? If so, how does this extension of morality intersect/conflict with individual autonomy of choice?
2. Is Sinnott-Armstrong’s response in line with your modals? With most Duke students? With most Americans? Do Gray’s conclusions about the actions of the participants in the Zimbardo Prison Experiment pose a conflict to the model of individual responses to collective problems that Harding and Sinnott-Armstrong propose, and if so, how? What can these examples lead us to believe about the interplay between individual choice and collective problems in the modern world?

Readings:

² Note that the “population problem” that Hardin’s 1968 article is based on is not actually one such collective action problem, but that his logic still can apply to collective action problems (see Sinnott-Armstrong).

1. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong: It's not *my* Fault: Global Warming and Individual Moral Obligations (24 pages)
2. Garrett Hardin: The Tragedy of the Commons (7 pages)
3. Matto Mildenerger: The Tragedy of *The Tragedy of the Commons* (8 pages)
4. Peter Gray: Why Zimbardo's Prison Experiment isn't in my Textbook (20 pages)

November 28, Week 12: Non-Western Approaches to Collective Choice (56 pages)

When people say, 'Oh, ask the people!' it's childish rubbish ... They say people can think for themselves? Do you honestly believe that the chap who can't pass primary six knows the consequences of his choice when he answers a question viscerally on language, culture and religion? ... we would starve, we would have race riots. We would disintegrate.

-Lee Kuan Yew, 1998

Reflection Questions/Essay Prompts:

1. Choose two of the three: Rational Choice Theory, Situationism and Modern Confucianism (Ruism), and compare and contrast how these theories approach collective decision making and individuals' roles in making such decisions. In what contexts do these models differ, where do they succeed and/or fail and why? How have these differences affected the societies in which they have been dominant?
2. What does the Chinese Coronavirus response and Lee Kuan Yew's views on "Asian Values" have to tell us about the success of Confucian/Ruist responses to collective problems. To what extent are the Chinese response to COVID-19 and the Singapore Miracle evidence of the merits of such a philosophy? Should individualistic, western nations seek to adopt these cultural/moral values, and if so, how?

Readings:

1. Myeong-Seok Kim: Choice, Freedom, and Responsibility in Ancient Chinese Confucianism (23 pages)
2. Readings on China and Covid, and East Asian Authoritarianism (18 pages total)
 - a. Ralph Jennings How Cultural Differences Help Asian Countries Beat COVID-19, While US Struggles (3 pages)
 - b. Wu Zurong: A cultural perspective on COVID-19 (4 pages)
 - c. Alex Cukierman: Why is COVID-19 incidence in authoritarian China so much lower than in the democratic US: Effectiveness of collective action or Chinese cover-up? (4 pages)

- d. Fareed Zakaria: Culture is Destiny, A conversation with Lee Kuan Yew (7 pages)
 - i. Read up to, but not including, the “Back to Basics” section on p. 114
 3. Sarkissian, Hagop: Minor Tweaks, Major Payoffs: The Problems and Promise of Situationism in Moral Philosophy (15 pages)

December 5, Week 13:

Mandatory in-class workshop for final papers.