Advanced Topics in Ethics: Reasons, Values, and Acting for a Reason

Ruth Chang & Derek Parfit with visits by Peter Railton and Michael Smith
Thursdays 1:10-4:10 except week right after Spring Break – class meets on a Tuesday
Davison Hall, Seminar Room
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This course examines select topics about the normative from action theory, value theory, the philosophy of practical reason, and metaethics. Among the topics we will discuss are what it is to act for a reason, how to solve the ‘regress problem’ in acting for a reason, whether desires (and beliefs) can be rational or irrational, objectivist vs. subjectivist views about practical reasons, the nature of values, non-cognitivism, quasi-realism, expressivism, and the metaphysics of normativity. The subtext of our discussion of these topics are the questions: Can the naturalist about normativity deliver plausible and attractive accounts of 1) action for a reason, 2) values, such as beauty and moral goodness, and 3) reasons for action?, and if not, then what are plausible nonnaturalist accounts of rational action, values, and practical reasons?

Peter Railton will be visiting the course for two weeks; Michael Smith will be visiting for one week; and Derek Parfit will be co-running the course with me for the final six weeks. The readings and syllabus for the course can be found here.

http://fas-philosophy.rutgers.edu/chang/

Tentative Plan (subject to change as we go):

PART I: DESIRES, BELIEFS, AND ACTING FOR A REASON

Week 1: January 22: Introduction: Reasons, Values, and Acting for a Reason
Reading: Parfit, Ch 1
Velleman, ‘What Happens When Someone Acts?’

Week 2: January 29: Responding to Reasons
Reading: Railton, ‘Engaging Reason: The Problem of Regress’
Railton, ‘Practical Competence and Fluent Agency’

Week 3: Feb 5: Desires, Well-Being, and Rationality
Reading: Railton, “Kant meets Aristotle where Reason meets Appetite”
Railton, “Well-being, Happiness, and Inequality”
Well-being, Happiness, and Inequality Graphs

Week 4: Feb 12 (Peter Railton visits): Belief and Rationality
Reading: Railton, “Rational Desire and Rationality in Desire”

Week 5: Feb 19 (Peter Railton visits): Desire, Rationality, and Acting for a Reason
Reading: Railton, “Rational Desire and Rationality in Desire”

PART II: REASONS AND VALUES

Week 6: Feb 26: Objective and Subjective Accounts of Reasons
Reading: Parfit, Chs 2-3 (see link the Parfit, Excerpts from On What Matters below)
Chang, “Can Desires Provide Reasons for Action?”

Week 7: Mar 5: A Naturalist Account of Value
Background Reading: Railton, ‘Moral Realism’ and ‘Aesthetic Value, Moral Value, and the Ambitions of Naturalism’
Reading: Railton, ‘Aesthetic Value as a Tertiary Quality’

Week 8: March 12: (Michael Smith visits) Beyond the Error Theory
Background reading: Mackie, Ch 1 Inventing Right and Wrong (in Xerox Room)
Reading: Michael Smith, ‘Beyond the Error Theory’ at
http://www.princeton.edu/~msmith/mypapers/Beyond%20the%20Error%20Theory.pdf

Spring Break

PART III: NORMATIVE NONNATURALISM

All readings from Parfit, On What Matters, excerpts, linked here.

Week 9: TUESDAY CLASS March 24 (Parfit): Subjectivism and Analytical Naturalism
Reading: Parfit, Chs 4, 24

Week 10: April 2 (Parfit): NonAnalytical Naturalism
Reading: Parfit, Chs 25-26

Week 11: April 9 (Parfit): The Triviality Objection
Reading: Parfit, Chs 26-27

Week 12: April 16 (Parfit): Noncognitivism, Normativity, and Truth
Reading: Parfit, Chs 27-28

Week 13: April 23 (Parfit): Arguments against Nonnaturalist Normative Realism
Reading: Parfit, Chs 29 -30

Week 14: April 30 (Parfit) Arguments against Nonnaturalist Normative Realism
Reading: Parfit, Chs 29-30