Tutorial on Preferences, Rationality, and Politics

Instructor: Alexander Prescott-Couch
Office hours: Friday 12-2 in Emerson 102

Brief Overview: The concept of “preference” plays an important role in a variety of philosophical contexts. The logical structure of preferences are considered central to rationality, satisfying preferences is thought important for well-being, and democratic decision-making is sometimes interpreted as a problem of preference aggregation. This course will consider how “preferences” are to be understood in these and other contexts. We will start by going over the basics of utility theory. Are the basic axioms of utility theory plausible? Can the theory account for the role of principles and commitments in practical reasoning? Are preferences rationally criticizable? If so, on what grounds? How does utility maximization relate to self-interest and the picture of “economic man”? We then consider what role others’ preferences should play in our decisions about how to treat them. Should we take other people’s preferences seriously even if we believe they are immoral or irrational? Last, we consider approaches to democracy that understand collective decision-making as a form of preference-aggregation. Is such a view of democracy plausible?

Students interested in this course should purchase Gerald Gaus’ On Philosophy, Politics, and Economics from Amazon (or elsewhere) before class starts (we will need it for week 2).

Appointments: If you’d like to discuss any of the course material and cannot make my office hours, don’t hesitate to send me an email to set up an appointment.

Requirements:
• One short paper (1250 words)
• One longer paper (2000 words) due at the end of reading period
• Each student must post a question or comment on the discussion blog for each meeting.

Grading:
• Short paper: 20%
• Long paper: 50%
• Attendance and participation: 30%
• Late papers will be penalized a half-letter grade per day. Extensions may be granted depending on the circumstances of the case

Readings: With the exception of Gaus’s On Philosophy, Politics, and Economics, the readings will be available online. However, you must bring a hard copy to class.
**Semester Plan**

**Week 1 (Feb 2):** Introduction, discussion of instrumental rationality
- Gerald Gaus, *On Philosophy, Politics, and Economics*, Introduction & Chapter 1

*Preferences and Rationality*

**Week 2 (Feb 9):** Utility theory, the “logic” of preferences, and the relation of preference to choice

**Week 3 (Feb 16):** Principles and preferences

**Week 4 (Feb 23):** Preferences, desires, and well being
- Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, chapter 3 (especially section 3)

**Week 5 (March 1):** Others’ preferences
- Harsanyi, “Cardinal Utility in Welfare Economics and in the Theory of Risk-Taking” and “Can the Maximin Principle Serve as a Basis for Morality?” (only sections 7-10)
- Scanlon, “Preferences and Urgency” (in *The Difficulty of Tolerance*)

**Week 6 (March 8):** Preferences and Incommensurability
- Broome, *Ethics Out of Economics*, chapter 9 (“Incommensurable Values”)

**Week 7 (March 15):** No class (Spring Break)

*Political Philosophy*
Week 8 (March 22): Efficiency, Pareto Optimality, and the Market


Paper 1 due

Week 9 (March 29): Preferences and Value: Cost-Benefit Analysis


Week 10 (April 5): Collective choice and preferences


Week 11 (April 12): Social choice theory vs. Deliberative democracy

- Jon Elster, “The Market and the Forum” (in *Debates in Contemporary Political Philosophy*)

Week 12 (April 19): Deliberative Democracy

- Joshau Cohen, “Deliberation and Democratic Legitimacy” (in *Debates in Contemporary Political Philosophy*)

Week 13 (April 26): Wrap-up on deliberative democracy; Discussion of Final papers

May 3: Long Paper due