

C.S. (Topics in) Philosophy of Social Science -- Periode 3, 2004

“VOLUNTARY CONSTRAINTS AND RATIONAL ACTION”

Tuesdays 1-3 (Trans 1 B) and Thursdays, 11-1 (Bestuursgebouw 195)

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One feature of human behavior that is particularly difficult to explain is why people impose constraints on themselves: we give away cigarettes to reduce our smoking, and we make “appointments” with ourselves to exercise; we establish legal systems that punish us when we drive as fast as we want, and we make contracts that are costly to break. The question is, Why would people restrict themselves from being able to do what they expect they will want to do in the future? One good answer to this question, it turns out, is that it allows people to be much more effective than they otherwise would be in reaching their goals. And so, if one thinks of freedom as a

matter of being able to do what one really wants, our freedom, it seems, is maximized by giving up freedom – by binding ourselves.

But this gives rise to even more questions, such as, “When various commitment mechanisms or constraints affect us, can we really claim that the action is our own accomplishment as agents?” and, “Why do we accept the authority of those self-imposed constraints when they go against our current preferences?” This seminar will focus on the rationality (and irrationality) of several forms of self-imposed or voluntary constraint, as they are relevant to practical reasoning and the explanation of human action.

Requirements for the course

1. **Regular, active, and well-prepared participation.** The readings are not long. I expect you to come to class with two or three written questions or comments dealing with the issues raised in the reading for the relevant class or with issues of interpretation. Discussion will be in English, although there may be some small-group discussions in Dutch. The quality of the participation can tip the balance of your grade for the course.
2. **Class presentation (25%).** Each participant will do one presentation of approximately 10 minutes. The presentation will be evaluated primarily on how well the presenter explains (and leads discussion on) the arguments that could be given for and against two or three central controversial claims that are made in the relevant text. Note: it is unacceptable to simply summarize the text.
3. **Final paper (75%).** This is due on Tuesday, April 13 and should be 3000-4000 words in length. It will be evaluated on the basis of quality of argument, strength of counterarguments addressed, understanding of the relevant texts, clarity of writing, and independence of thought. In late March, I will be meeting individually with each of you to discuss the paper. Your paper should address as a *research problem* in the area of the course. It may be in Dutch or English.

SCHEDULE OF READINGS

Feb 3: Introduction, overview of the course; preview of Harry Frankfurt
Feb 5: Harry Frankfurt, "Rationality and the Unthinkable," in <i>The Importance of What We Care About</i> (Cambridge UP, 1988), 177-190.
Feb 10: Harry Frankfurt, "On Caring," in <i>Necessity, Volition, and Love</i> (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 155-180.
Feb 12: Gary Watson, "Volitional Necessities," (w/reply from Frankfurt)
Feb 17: Richard Moran, "Frankfurt on Identification: Ambiguities of Activity in Mental Life" (w/reply from Frankfurt)
Feb 19: Michael Bratman, "Intentions and Person Policies," <i>Philosophical Perspectives</i> 3
Feb 24: Gerald Dworkin, "Is More Choice Always Better than Less?"
Feb 26: Jon Elster, "Ulysses Revisited: How and Why People Bind Themselves," in <i>Ulysses Unbound: Studies in Rationality, Precommitment, and Constraints</i> (Cambridge UP, 2000); sec. 1.1-1.4
March 2: Jon Elster, "Ulysses Revisited" sec. 1.5-1.8 and "Coda"
March 4: Jon Elster, "Rationality and the Emotions," <i>The Economic Journal</i> 106 (1996): 1386-97
March 9: George Ainslie, <i>Breakdown of Will</i> (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), ch. 1-3, pp. 1-47.
March 11: Ainslie, <i>Breakdown of Will</i> , ch. 4-5, pp. 48-89.
March 16: Ainslie, <i>Breakdown of Will</i> , ch. 6 & 7, pp.90-140.
March 18: Ainslie, <i>Breakdown of Will</i> , ch. 9, pp. 143-60.
March 23: Velleman, <i>Practical Reflection</i> , ch. 8 ("Into the Future") http://www-personal.umich.edu/~velleman/Practical_Reflection/index.html
March 25: David Gauthier, "Reason and Maximization," <i>Canadian Journal of Philosophy</i> 4 (1975), 411-33.
March 30: Joseph Heath, "Rational Choice with Deontic Constraint," <i>Canadian Journal of Philosophy</i> (2001).
April 1: Robert Brandom, "Freedom and Constraint by Norms," <i>American Philosophical Quarterly</i> 16 (1979) 187-96.
April 6: Discussion of paper drafts in class
April 8: Final wrap-up discussion

Readings will be available either in the Administrative (for copying) or electronically. You are encouraged to purchase Ainslie's book.