

# **POLSCI 431S/PSY 326S: Reason and Passion in Politics**

**Meetings:** T/TR 3:05-4:20 in Gross Hall 111  
**Instructor:** Chris Johnston  
**Contact:** [cdj19@duke.edu](mailto:cdj19@duke.edu), 294J Gross Hall  
**Office hours:** I don't hold a single time for office hours, but I am always happy to meet with you! The best way is to set up an appointment by email. If you are in Gross Hall, you can stop by my office – if I am free, I am happy to chat.

## **Course Description**

“Nothing is more usual in philosophy, and even in common life, than to talk of the combat of passion and reason, to give the preference to reason, and assert that men are only so far virtuous as they conform themselves to its dictates. Every rational creature, it is said, is obliged to regulate his actions by reason; and if any other motive or principle challenge the direction of his conduct, he ought to oppose it, till it be entirely subdued, or at least brought to a conformity with that superior principle.” David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (2.3.3)

“Emotions are thus thought to be a kind of brute reflex, very often at odds with our rationality. The primitive part of your brain wants you to tell your boss he's an idiot, but your deliberative side knows that doing so would get you fired, so you restrain yourself. This kind of internal battle between emotion and reason is one of the great narratives of Western civilization. It helps define you as human. Without rationality, you are merely an emotional beast.” – Lisa Feldman Barrett, *How Emotions are Made* (p. xi)

Though separated by nearly three centuries, David Hume and Lisa Feldman Barrett see a similar theme running through much of philosophy and folk psychology: the combat of reason and passion (or emotion) for control of human thought and action, and the superiority of the former for judgment and decision making. Indeed, a common claim is that rationality requires suppression of the passions. We will explore this narrative in depth, with a special focus on topics related to political judgment and decision making. By the end of the course, I hope you will have achieved a deeper understanding of “the passions,” how they relate to the concepts of “reason” and “rationality,” and the variety of ways in which the passions contribute to political behavior, for both good and ill. We are unlikely to settle any of these long-standing debates, but I hope you will come to believe that the theoretical and empirical study of such things is a worthwhile and interesting endeavor.

## **Required Books**

You should purchase the books listed below as soon as possible. You should feel free to purchase any format you wish (hard or softcover, print or digital), and shop around for the best price. Most should be available, used, on Amazon for relatively cheap.

- Banaji, Mahzarin R., and Anthony G. Greenwald. 2016. *Blindspot: Hidden Biases of Good People*. Bantam.
- Haidt, Jonathan. 2012. *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion*. Vintage.
- Simler, Kevin, and Robin Hanson. 2018. *The Elephant in the Brain: Hidden Motives in Everyday Life*. Oxford.
- Frank, Robert H. 1988. *Passions Within Reason: The Strategic Role of the Emotions*. W.W. Norton & Co.
- Feldman Barrett, 2017. *How Emotions are Made: The Secret Life of the Brain*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Callard, Agnes. 2020. *On Anger*. Boston Review.

## Course Work and Grading

### Required Readings

While not formally part of your grade (because I cannot verify), you are expected to come to class having carefully read each text assigned for that day (as listed in the schedule below). Careful and timely reading is also essential to written reflections, class participation, and performance on exams.

### Reading Reflections (20%)

For each class, you will write an approximately 250-word (about 2 paragraphs, or 10 sentences) reflection on a topic of my choosing. You do *not* need to answer every question I pose in each assignment. Rather, you can choose to focus on the question or questions that are most interesting to you. These are short assignments, so you need to focus your thoughts to say something interesting and coherent.

You must upload a copy to the relevant assignment on Canvas *and* bring a hard copy to class with you and turn it in to me at the end of class (this will document attendance). I will often ask students to summarize their reflections and/or put you into small groups to discuss these together. As long as you are putting good-faith effort into these, you will receive full credit. I will *not* give detailed comments or fine-grained grades for quality, but I *will* assess your work to make sure you are taking the assignment seriously (1=acceptable, 0.5=not acceptable, 0=late/missing). I will allow you to drop two of these assignments (this will also serve as an allowance for two unexcused absences from class).

### Attendance and Class Participation (10% each)

This is an upper-level seminar and I expect everyone to participate regularly in class discussions. Use your reading reflections as an easy way to prepare comments for class. This way, you don't have to come up with something to say on the spot.

### **Homework Assignments (15%)**

In most weeks, you will complete short, hopefully enjoyable, homework assignments to reinforce the required readings and to increase engagement with the ideas and research we discuss in class. There are no letter grades associated with these assignments – I will simply record whether you did or did not complete the assignment on time (1=on time, 0.5=late, 0=missing). Again, these are very simple and short tasks – homework is basically free points on your final grade, so don't forget!

### **Exams (15% each)**

You will take two, in-class, exams during the semester. These exams will consist of essays. You will be given some choice over the questions you answer, but you will need to be prepared on all topics. The first exam will cover the first part of the course; the second exam will cover the second part (i.e., the second exam is *not* cumulative).

### **Debates (15%)**

In lieu of a final exam, we will have three debates, all of which will take place during our scheduled final exam time. You will be assigned to one of six groups in three pairs. Each pair will debate a question arising from class topics, with one group on the pro side and one on the con. All members of each group will receive the same grade. In addition to their work on preparation for the debate, each member should serve in at least one of the roles available for the live debate (e.g., opening statement, closing statement, etc.). Members of the four other debating pairs will serve as judges for each debate. Winning teams will receive eternal glory (and a small prize). I will provide snacks and refreshments for everyone.

## **Canvas**

All communication for this course will operate through Canvas. All assignments are listed by week in the course Modules section. You will turn in all assignments through the course Assignments section. You should verify that you are receiving emails through Canvas, and that you know how to upload materials to Assignments. Your course grades can be found in the "Grades" section.

## **Duke Community Standard**

All students must adhere to the Duke Community Standard (DCS). Duke University has high expectations for students' scholarship and conduct. In accepting admission, students subscribe to and are governed by the rules and regulations of the university, which are outlined in the Duke Community Standard. Regardless of course delivery format, it is the responsibility of all students to understand and follow all Duke policies, including academic integrity (e.g., completing one's own work, following proper citation of sources, adhering to guidance around group work

projects, and more). Ignoring these requirements is a violation of the Duke Community Standard. Any questions or concerns regarding academic integrity can be directed to the Office of Student Conduct and Community Standards at [conduct@duke.edu](mailto:conduct@duke.edu).

## Academic Accommodations

If you are a student with a disability and need accommodations for this class, it is your responsibility to register with the Student Disability Access Office (SDAO) and provide them with documentation of your disability. SDAO will work with you to determine what accommodations are appropriate for your situation. Please note that accommodations are not retroactive and disability accommodations cannot be provided until a Faculty Accommodation Letter has been given to me. Please contact SDAO for more information: [sdao@duke.edu](mailto:sdao@duke.edu) or [access.duke.edu](http://access.duke.edu).

## Final Grades

Final numeric grades are translated into final letter grades using the following scheme:

A+ 97-100	B+ 87-89	C+ 77-79	D+ 67-69	F <60
A 93-96	B 83-86	C 73-76	D 63-66	
A- 90-92	B- 80-82	C- 70-72	D- 60-62	

## Missed Course Work Policy

Standard Duke policies on missed course work apply. Missed course work is officially accommodated in three circumstances: (1) Illness or other extraordinary personal circumstance, (2) Religious observance, and (3) Varsity athletic participation.

**Short-term illness** will be accommodated by means of the short-term illness incapacitation form (see [here](#)). This form cannot be used for the debates on our scheduled exam day. **Long-term medical issues and/or extraordinary personal circumstances** are handled in consultation with the relevant academic dean. If the latter applies to you, please speak with your dean and we will work together to accommodate you. Missed work related to **religious observance** will be accommodated by means of the religious observance notification form (see [here](#)), which must be submitted no later than one week prior to the date of the holiday. Missed work due to participation in out-of-town **varsity athletic competition** is accommodated by means of the notification of varsity athletic participation form (see [here](#)), which must be submitted no later than one week prior to the date of the participation.

## Class Discussion

Adapted from [Duke Learning Innovation](#), here are some ways each of us can contribute to making class discussions engaging and educational, while treating each other with respect:

- Allow everyone a chance to speak.
- Listen respectfully and actively.
- Criticize ideas, not individuals.
- Commit to learning from those with whom you disagree.
- Avoid inflammatory language.
- Avoid assumptions about others, especially based on their perceived social group.

I will try *my* best to embody and foster these values. Please tell me if you think I have fallen short in any way – I will always be open to, and appreciative of, such criticism.

# Schedule

## Key

- Reading assignment
- Reading reflection questions
- Homework assignment

## Part 1: Affect, Automaticity, Motivation

### Week 1: Introduction, rationality

1/11: Introduction and syllabus

1/16: Reason and rationality

- Scanlon, 17-33
- Elster, *Explaining Social Behavior*, 235-253
- What does it mean to be "rational"; what distinguishes rationality from irrationality?  
What does it mean to be rational in one's political attitudes and behavior (e.g., voting, policy support, protest, etc.)?
- [Take the "How Rational are You, Really?" Quiz](#)

1/18: Incentives and rationality in politics

- Brennan and Lomasky, "The Logic of Electoral Choice"
- What are the implications of "decisiveness" for the rationality of political behavior and for public policy? Is lack of decisiveness a problem for democracy? If not, why not? If so, are there ways to mitigate the problem?

### Week 2: Affect and decision making

1/23: Reasons and desires

- Tiberius, Chapter 4
- Scanlon, 33-64
- Imagine that a person, call him Bob, commits an act that many people think is wrong, like assaulting a random stranger. It made Bob very happy to hurt this person, and he has no desire to respect other people's well-being – he just doesn't care about other people at all. To what extent does Bob nonetheless have a normative reason to refrain from assaulting this stranger? To what extent can third party observers legitimately claim that Bob has done something wrong, is worthy of sanction, and should feel remorse?
- Complete Vote Choice Experiment – Part 1

1/25: Affect and value

- *Descartes' Error*: Chapters 1, 3
- Neuroeconomics of affect and decision making
  - How intelligent are our "gut feelings" about political objects, like candidates, policies, and parties? How important is it that we be able to articulate good reasons for our political decisions?
- Complete Vote Choice Experiment – Part 2

### **Week 3: Implicit biases**

1/30: Implicit vs explicit

- *Blindspot*: Preface and Chapters 1-4
  - Are implicit attitudes more "real" than explicit ones? Or is it the reverse? Does it even make sense to speak of someone's "real" or "true" feeling about something or someone?
- Complete 2 IATs at Project Implicit

2/1: The IAT

- *Blindspot*: Chapters 5-8
- Singal, "[Psychology's Favorite Tool...](#)"
  - What is your overall assessment of the value of the IAT? As a research tool? As a practical tool for individuals, groups, organizations?

### **Week 4: Moral judgment and decision making**

2/6: Intuition in moral judgment

- *The Righteous Mind*, Introduction and Part 1
  - What function (if any) does moral judgment serve for individuals and for human societies? Does reasoning cause our moral and political judgments? Or do we reason only to justify our intuitions? To what extent do people develop and change, politically and morally, over the course of their lives?
- Take the Moral Dilemmas survey

2/8: Biases in moral intuitions

- Tiberius, Chapter 11
- deBoer, "[The Effective Altruism Shell Game 2.0](#)"
- Chappell, "[Doing Good Effectively is Unusual](#)"
  - How should we think about "effective altruism"? As a concept? As a loosely affiliated movement or group of people? What does it get right and what does it get wrong? What is your overall assessment of its value?

## **Week 5: Morality and politics**

2/13: Moral foundations theory

- *The Righteous Mind*, Chapters 5-6
- Where do human moral intuitions come from and what is the role of evolution and biology in human morality? Do you think there is "more to morality than harm and fairness" with respect to morality in human societies? Or can human morality be reduced to one or both of these?
- Complete the Moral Foundations Questionnaire

2/15: Left and right moralities?

- *The Righteous Mind*, Chapters 7-8
- To what extent is the left-right political divide in the US defined by differences in morality and the importance of different moral considerations? Is Haidt's perspective a good way to understand political conflict and polarization in this country? Across the world more generally?

## **Week 6/7: Hidden motives**

2/20: Hidden motives...

- *The Elephant in the Brain*: Introduction and Part 1
- Reflect on the core thesis of the book, as articulated in the Introduction section "The Core Idea," and give your own assessment of this thesis and the authors' argument in favor of it.

2/22: ...in everyday life

- *The Elephant in the Brain*: Chapters 7, 9, 12, 16, & 17
- Choose one of the topics from the assigned chapters for today, and evaluate the authors' argument for hidden motives in that area. Do you agree or disagree with them? Why?

2/27: Politically motivated reasoning

- Kahan, "Climate-Science Communication and the Measurement Problem"
- What are the primary incentives (costs and benefits) that drive political thought and behavior for the average citizen? What are we measuring when we measure political opinions on surveys and what is their value?
- Take the Political Bias Test



## **Part 2: The Nature of Emotions**

### **Week 7/8: Emotions and rationality**

2/29:

- *Alchemies of the Mind*: Chapters IV.1 and IV.2
- What is an "emotion"? What defines it as a thing distinct from other psychological concepts? What role do emotions play in human life?

3/5

- *Alchemies of the Mind*: Chapters IV.3
- In what ways do emotions such as anger, fear, and sadness help us to be rational? In what ways do they interfere with rationality?

### **3/7: MIDTERM EXAM**

### **Week 9: SPRING BREAK**

### **Week 10: Emotions and strategic interaction**

3/19

- *Passions within Reason*: Chapters 1-3
- What do you think of Frank's argument: is the function of emotions to solve commitment problems? Are moral emotions more helpful for individuals than societies? Or is it the other way around? What are the costs to emotional systems that, once "fired", are difficult to stop?

3/21

- *Passions within Reason*: Chapters 4-7
- How easy is it to deceive others about the emotions we are experiencing? How easy is it to feign prosocial motives? Are some people better at this than others? And with what implications?
- Complete the Mind in the Eyes Task

## **Week 11: Emotions and culture**

3/26

- *How Emotions are Made*, Chapters 1-4
- Are there "basic" or universal emotions? What *is* universal in human emotion (if anything)? How big of an impact does culture have on emotional experience and expression?
- Take the Emotion Definition Survey

3/28

- *How Emotions are Made*, Chapters 5, 7, 8, 11
- To what extent, and in what ways, does a "basic emotions" view shape our moral, political, and legal judgments and institutions? Is this for good or ill? Would a perspective like that of Feldman Barrett improve these norms and institutions?

## **Part 3: Emotions in Social and Political Life**

## **Week 12: Anger**

4/2

- *On Anger*: pages 9-28 ("On Anger"), 31-34 ("Choosing Violence"), 40-45 ("Anger and the Politics of the Oppressed"), 56-60 ("How Anger Goes Wrong"), 112-131 ("Victim Anger and Its Costs")
- Pick one of the chapters/sections for today and critically evaluate the author's argument.
- Complete the Cooperation Game

4/4

- Groenendyk and Banks, "Emotional Rescue," pages 359-364
- Fehr and Gächter, "Altruistic Punishment in Humans"
- How important is anger to the success of political movements? What are the costs of anger in political movements?

## **Week 13: Anxiety and fear**

4/9

- *The Sentimental Citizen*, Chapter 6 ("The Uses of Anxiety")
- *Anxious Politics*, Chapter 1 ("Anxiety in Democratic Life")
- What is anxiety? How does it relate to "fear"? How does it relate to "uncertainty"? Is anxiety, properly understood, something that fosters or hinders democracy?

4/11

- *Fear: The History of a Political Idea*, Chapters 1 (“Fear”) and 3 (“Anxiety”)
- Reflect on and evaluate Robin's argument regarding fear, summarized well in the final paragraph of Chapter 1.

#### **Week 14: Empathy**

4/16

- *Seeing Us in Them*, Chapter 2
- Is empathy at the heart of concern for others, especially those who are different from you? How important is empathy in a diverse society? How is empathy different from other, related concepts, like sympathy or compassion?

4/18

- Watch Bloom’s “Against Empathy”
- Reflect on and evaluate Bloom's argument against empathy.

**4/23: ENDTERM EXAM**

**5/1 (7:00-10:00 PM): CLASS DEBATES**