

The Making of Self-Interest

Morals and Motivations in Modern Social Thought

Overview

The concept of *self-interest* is both ubiquitous and elusive. We appeal to it regularly to justify our actions, expect it to guide our civic life, and treat it as an axiom in the science of human behavior. It is versatile enough to justify either altruism or selfishness, and we invoke it often to defend both individual autonomy and group solidarity. It is also a distinctly modern concept, inherited from a set of transformations in Renaissance and Enlightenment thought that continue to shape our shared social, political, and economic world.

This advanced course provides an exploration of the theories of human motivation that have shaped modern social thought, with a focus on the rise of interest-based accounts of human action. It is organized around Albert Hirschman's seminal monograph on early modern commercial thought, *The Passions and the Interests*. It begins with an exploration of humanist predecessors to the modern self-interest paradigm, continues with a discussion of Enlightenment theories of interest and self-love, and concludes with an evaluation of post-Enlightenment critics of modern commercial society.

As an interdisciplinary course grounded in intellectual history, this class draws from texts across the humanities and social sciences, integrating readings from moral philosophy, sociology, and political theory. Its chief objective is to familiarize students with the major theories of human motivations that have shaped modern social, economic, and political theory, equipping them to assess and critically appraise the interest-based justifications for human action that they may encounter in their future endeavors.

Structure

In the first unit, “**Charitable Commerce**,” we will explore the vision of love, friendship, and pleasure that shaped humanist writings on commerce. Students will examine Lorenzo Valla's retrieval of Epicurean accounts of friendship, as he articulated a theory of commerce that binds friends together via the mutual enjoyment of external goods. They will evaluate Desiderius Erasmus's argument that the state emerges from friendship and mutual exchange, as well as Jean Bodin's view of commerce as a “natural obligation” that arises from charity, aimed at the good of one's neighbor. Finally, they will examine Michel de Montaigne as a transitional figure, exploring his writings on friendship and the “three commerces” (*trois commerces*) in light of his conflicted account of human motivations.

In the second unit, “**Transformations**,” we will examine the accounts of interest and self-love that flourished in the French and Scottish Enlightenments. Through selections from the French moralists, students will grapple with the turn from neighbor-love to a “commerce of self-love” (*commerce d'amour-propre*) as a stable basis for social order. They will examine Bernard Mandeville's argument for the public utility of self-love, as well as Baron de Montesquieu's depiction of commerce as a duplicitous force that can gentle or corrode mores. The unit will conclude by drawing on earlier readings to evaluate the view of sympathy and self-interest developed in Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*.

In the final unit, “**Rival Interpretations**,” we will examine the contested legacy of self-interest in modern moral and political economy. This unit pairs classic texts by Max Weber and Joseph Schumpeter with writings from later twentieth-century social theory, challenging students to interrogate critically the views that they have encountered over the semester. Throughout the course, Hirschman's *The Passions and the Interests* will serve as a key secondary source, along with a body of literature that has clarified, extended, and revised his central thesis. The course will conclude with one of Hirschman's later works on the meaning of self-interest in contemporary commercial society.

Reading List

Week 1: Introduction: Self-Interest as a Paradigm

Albert Hirschman. *The Passions and the Interests*. Princeton, 1977. Pages 9–66 are required for week one. Please complete the remainder of the work on your own before week 6.

Albert Hirschman. “The Concept of Interest: From Euphemism to Tautology.” *The Essential Albert Hirschman*. Princeton, 2013. 195–213

Gary Becker. “The Economic Way of Looking at Behavior.” *Journal of Political Economy* 101:3 (1993): 385–409.

Unit I: Charitable Commerce

Week 2: Epicureanism and Stoicism

Lorenzo Valla. *On Pleasure*. Abaris Books, 1977. Books I & II. 48–227.*

Howard Jones. “The Humanist Debate” in *The Epicurean Tradition*. Routledge, 1989. 142–165.

Week 3: Epicureanism and Christianity

Lorenzo Valla. *On Pleasure*. Book III. 228–325.*

Desiderius Erasmus. “The Epicurean” in *Collected Works of Erasmus (CWE)*. Toronto, 1997. 40, 1070–1094.

Peter Bietenholz. “Erasmus, His Mistress Folly, and the Garden of Epicurus” in *Encounters with a Radical Erasmus*. Toronto, 2008. 109–140.

Week 4: Charitable Commerce

Desiderius Erasmus. *The Complaint of Peace* in *CWE* 27, 290–322.

Jean Bodin. *Response to the Paradoxes of Malestroit*. Thoemmes Press, 1997. 84–86.

Randall Lesaffer. “*Amicitia* in Renaissance Peace and Alliance Treaties.” *Journal of the History of International Law* 4 (2002): 77–99.

Week 5: Commercial Friendship

Michel de Montaigne. “On affectionate relationships,” “On the inconstancy of our actions,” and “On the three kinds of social intercourse,” in *The Complete Essays*. Penguin, 1987. 205–219, 373–380, 922–934.

Pierre Force. “Self-Interest as a First Principle” in *Self-Interest Before Adam Smith*. Cambridge, 2003. 7–47.

Unit II: Transformations

Week 6: The Commerce of *Amour-Propre*

Pierre Nicole. “On Charity and Self-Love” in *Moral Essays*. London: for R. Bentley and M. Magnes, 1680. III, 123–176.

François de la Rochefoucauld. “On Society” in *Collected Maxims and Other Reflections*. Oxford 2007. 194–199.†

* Parallel Latin-English edition.

† Parallel French-English edition.

David Singh Grewal. "The Political Theology of *Laissez-Faire*: From *Philia* to Self-Love in Commercial Society." *Political Theology* 17:5 (2016): 1–17.

Michael Moriarty. "Pierre Nicole: The Psychology of the Virtues" in *Disguised Vices: Theories of Virtue in Early Modern French Thought*. Oxford University Press, 2011. 241–252.

Week 7: Private Vices, Public Benefits

Bernard Mandeville. *The Fable of the Bees*. "The Grumbling Hive," "An Enquiry into the Origin of Moral Virtue," Remarks C, L, M, and N. Liberty Fund, 1988.

Daniel Luban. "Bernard Mandeville as Moralizer and Materialist." *History of European Ideas* 41:7 (2015): 831–857.

Week 8: Commerce, *Doux* and *Odieux*

Baron de Montesquieu. "Tale of the Troglodytes," in *Persian Letters*. Oxford, 2008. Letters 11–14.

———. *The Spirit of the Laws*. Cambridge, 1989. XX.1–8.

Anoush Fraser Terjanian. "*Doux Commerce, Commerce Odieux*" in *Commerce and Its Discontents in Eighteenth-Century French Political Thought*. Cambridge, 2012. 68–92.

Week 9: Sympathy and Self-Interest

Adam Smith. *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Liberty Fund, 1982. Parts I–IV, VI.I, and VII.II.

Istvan Hont. "Commercial Sociability: The Adam Smith Problem" in *Politics in Commercial Society: Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Adam Smith*. Harvard, 2015. 25–47.

Unit III: Rival Interpretations

Week 10: Self-Interest, Rationalization, and Capitalism

Max Weber. *Economy and Society*. Harvard, 2019. Chapter 1. 74–138.

Joseph Schumpeter. *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*. Routledge, 2010. Part II. 51–146.

Week 11: Gift Economies

Marcel Mauss. *The Gift*. Routledge, 1990. 1–107.

Week 12: Self-Interest and Economic Theory

James Buchanan and Gordon Tullock. "Politics and the Economic Nexus," "Individual Rationality in Social Choice," and "A Generalized Economic Theory of Constitutions" in *The Calculus of Consent*. 16–39, 63–84.

Amartya Sen. "Rational Fools: A Critique of the Behavioral Foundations of Economic Theory." *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 6:4 (1977): 317–344.

Week 13: Conclusion: *Homo Economicus* Reexamined

Albert Hirschman. "Rival Interpretations of Market Society." *Journal of Economic Literature* 20 (1982): 1463–1484.