

The Nature of Practical Reason

In this class we are going to consider the role that *thinking* plays in human life: in our day-to-day dealings with things and with each other as well as in our conception of what we live for. This has always been a central topic of philosophy in both the East and the West, and the class will pay attention to the most important traditions in this area.

Western conceptions have for a long time been dominated by the teaching of Aristotle, who treats practical thinking as a function of reason distinct from any kind of theory: orientation towards particular aims and, beyond these, towards a worthwhile life are intrinsic to it, and of its essence; practical reason is not merely the application of theoretical reason to matters practical; its teleology - inherent direction at an overall end of acting - determines the structure in which it leads from aim-conceptions to their implementation.

This understanding of the nature of practical reason has been challenged by modern philosophy, most famously by David Hume. According to him, to think practically is merely the application of theoretical judgments to the question: What should I do if - or given that - my purpose is such-and-such? This position implies that, in practical thinking, *truth* consists in nothing but appropriateness of means to *whatever* ends.

For the Aristotelian tradition, by contrast, such truth requires also that the ends themselves be defensible; and they are defensible only to the extent that they form part of a good life. It follows that, in this tradition the question of practical rationality is inseparable from ethical questions, and that the theory of the nature of human acting overlaps with moral philosophy. The aim of the class is to investigate whether such an understanding of practical reason can be given a shape in which it is plausible and defensible in the face of objections.