

**PHIL 501: Seminar in Recent Philosophy**  
**Spring Semester 2019**

**Practical Reason and Rational Choice**

Instructor: Ralph Wedgwood  
Tuesdays, 5 – 7.20 pm  
MHP 102

**Course overview**

This course will study the topic of *practical reason* and *rational choice*. We shall start by investigating the debate between broadly Kantian, neo-Humean, and Aristotelian conceptions of practical reason; with both the neo-Humean and Aristotelian conceptions, we shall study versions of these theories that draw on the resources of contemporary formal decision theory. Then we shall move on to exploring whether an understanding of this debate sheds light on some of the problems that arise for these formal approaches to decision theory.

All of the assigned readings will be made available on the course Blackboard site.

**Work required**

Besides attending class, doing the assigned reading, and participating in class discussions, students who are taking the course for credit should write one term paper, on a subject of their choice, which they should choose in consultation with me. The first draft of the term paper will be due by the end of the semester; the final draft a couple of weeks later.

**Schedule of topics and readings**

**1. 8 January – Introduction: How to theorize about rational choice and practical reason**

**2. 15 January: Rational choice – the very idea**

- Kieran Setiya, *Reasons without Rationalism* (Princeton University Press, 2007), Introduction and Part I (pp. 1–67). <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/socal/detail.action?docID=445544>
- Garrett Cullity and Berys Gaut, “Introduction”, in Cullity and Gaut, ed., *Ethics and Practical Reason* (Oxford University Press, 1997).

### 3. 22 January: The nature of choice

- Kieran Setiya, *Reasons without Rationalism* (Princeton University Press, 2007), Part II and Conclusion (pp. 68–120). <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/socal/detail.action?docID=445544>
- Al Mele, “Goal-Directed Action: Teleological Explanations, Causal Theories, and Deviance”, *Philosophical Perspectives* 14 (2000): 279–300. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2676133>

### 4. 29 January: Kantian accounts of practical reason

- Christine M. Korsgaard, “The Activity of Reason”, *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 83 (2): 23–43. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25656201>
- J. David Velleman, “The Possibility of Practical Reason”, *Ethics* 106, no. 4 (July 1996): 694–726. <https://doi.org/10.1086/233669>

### 5. 5 February: Critics of constructivism

- David Enoch, “Can there be a global, interesting, coherent constructivism about practical reason?”, *Philosophical Explorations* 12, no. 3 (2009): 319–339. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13869790903067683>
- Ralph Wedgwood, “Choosing Rationally and Choosing Correctly”, in Sarah Stroud and Christine Tappolet, ed. *Weakness of Will and Practical Irrationality* (Oxford University Press, 2003), 201–229. <https://doi.org/10.1093/0199257361.003.0009>

### 6. 12 February: Decision theory as a form of neo-Humeanism

- José Luis Bermúdez, *Decision Theory and Rationality* (Oxford University Press, 2009), Introduction, and Chaps. 1 and 2 (pp. 1 – 76). <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199548026.001.0001>

### 7. 19 February: Formal decision theory

- James M. Joyce, *The Foundations of Causal Decision Theory* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), Chaps. 1 and 2 (pp. 8–77). <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511498497>

### 8. 26 February: What are “preferences” if they are measurable by a “utility” function?

- Ralph Wedgwood, “Must rational intentions maximize utility?” *Philosophical Explorations* 20, sup. 2 (2017): 73–92. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13869795.2017.1356352>
- Daniel M. Hausman, *Preference, Value, Choice, and Welfare* (Cambridge University Press, 2012): 1–57. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/socal/detail.action?docID=833492>

### 9. 5 March: How do reasons for action fit into this picture?

- Justin Snedegar, *Contrastive Reasons* (Oxford University Press, 2017), Chaps. 1–2 and 4 (pp. 1–44 and 63–90). <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198785934.001.0001>

#### 10. 19 March: The “non-akrasia” requirement

- John Broome, *Rationality through Reasoning* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), Chaps. 9 and 16. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118609088>
- Ralph Wedgwood, “Akrasia and Uncertainty”, *Organon F* 20, no. 4, ed. Julian Fink (2013): 483–505. <http://www.klemens.sav.sk/fiusav/organon/?q=en/akrasia-and-uncertainty>

#### 11. 26 March: Attitudes towards risk

- Lara Buchak, *Rationality and Risk* (Oxford University Press, 2013), chaps. 1–2 (pp. 10–81). <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199672165.001.0001>
- John Broome, “Rationality and the sure-thing principle”, in Gay Meeks, ed., *Thoughtful economic man* (Cambridge University Press, 1991): 74–104.

#### 12. 2 April: Finitism and infinitism, and their problems

- Frank Arntzenius, Adam Elga, and John Hawthorne, “Bayesianism, Infinite Decisions, and Binding”. *Mind* 113, no. 450 (2004): 251–283. <https://doi.org/10.1093/mind/113.450.251>
- Ralph Wedgwood, “The Predicament of Choice”, in Russ Shafer-Landau, ed., *Oxford Studies in Metaethics*, Vol. 12 (Oxford University Press, 2017): 294–313.

#### 13. 9 April: What is “instrumental rationality”?

- Joseph Raz, “The Myth of Instrumental Rationality”, *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* 1, no. 1 (2005): 28pp. <https://doi.org/10.26556/jesp.v1i1.1>
- Ralph Wedgwood, “Instrumental Rationality”, *Oxford Studies in Metaethics*, ed. Russ Shafer-Landau, vol. 6 (2011): 280–309.

#### 14. 16 April: The Newcomb problem

- Ralph Wedgwood, “Gandalf’s Solution to the Newcomb Problem”, *Synthese* 190, no. 14 (2013): 2643–2675. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s11229-011-9900-1>
- Rachael Briggs, “Decision-theoretic paradoxes as voting paradoxes”, *Philosophical Review* 119, no. 1 (2010): 1–30. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1215/00318108-2009-024>

#### 15. 23 April: Incommensurability

- Caspar Hare, “Take the sugar”, *Analysis* 70, no. 2 (2010): 237–247. <https://doi.org/10.1093/analys/anp174>
- Ruth Chang, “The possibility of parity”, *Ethics* 112, no. 4 (2002): 659–688. <https://doi.org/10.1086/339673>

## Statement on Academic Conduct and Support Systems

### Academic Conduct:

Plagiarism – presenting someone else’s ideas as your own, either verbatim or recast in your own words – is a serious academic offense with serious consequences. Please familiarize yourself with the discussion of plagiarism in *SCampus* in Part B, Section 11, “Behavior Violating University Standards” [policy.usc.edu/scampus-part-b](http://policy.usc.edu/scampus-part-b). Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable. See additional information in *SCampus* and university policies on scientific misconduct, <http://policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct>.

### Support Systems:

*Student Counseling Services (SCS)* – [\(213\) 740-7711](tel:(213)740-7711) – 24/7 on call

Free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, stress fitness workshops, and crisis intervention. [engemannshc.usc.edu/counseling](http://engemannshc.usc.edu/counseling)

*National Suicide Prevention Lifeline* – [1 \(800\) 273-8255](tel:18002738255)

Provides free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. [www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org](http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org)

*Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention Services (RSVP)* – [\(213\) 740-4900](tel:(213)740-4900) – 24/7 on call

Free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender-based harm. [engemannshc.usc.edu/rsvp](http://engemannshc.usc.edu/rsvp)

*Sexual Assault Resource Center*

For more information about how to get help or help a survivor, rights, reporting options, and additional resources, visit the website: [sarc.usc.edu](http://sarc.usc.edu)

*Office of Equity and Diversity (OED)/Title IX Compliance* – [\(213\) 740-5086](tel:(213)740-5086)

Works with faculty, staff, visitors, applicants, and students around issues of protected class. [equity.usc.edu](http://equity.usc.edu)

*Bias Assessment Response and Support*

Incidents of bias, hate crimes and microaggressions need to be reported allowing for appropriate investigation and response. [studentaffairs.usc.edu/bias-assessment-response-support](http://studentaffairs.usc.edu/bias-assessment-response-support)

*The Office of Disability Services and Programs*

Provides certification for students with disabilities and helps arrange relevant accommodations. [dsp.usc.edu](http://dsp.usc.edu)

*Student Support and Advocacy* – [\(213\) 821-4710](tel:(213)821-4710)

Assists students and families in resolving complex issues adversely affecting their success as a student EX: personal, financial, and academic. [studentaffairs.usc.edu/ssa](http://studentaffairs.usc.edu/ssa)

*Diversity at USC*

Information on events, programs and training, the Diversity Task Force (including representatives for each school), chronology, participation, and various resources for students. [diversity.usc.edu](http://diversity.usc.edu)

*USC Emergency Information*

Provides safety and other updates, including ways in which instruction will be continued if an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible. [emergency.usc.edu](http://emergency.usc.edu)

*USC Department of Public Safety* – UPC: [\(213\) 740-4321](tel:(213)740-4321) – HSC: [\(323\) 442-1000](tel:(323)442-1000) – 24-hour emergency or to report a crime.

Provides overall safety to USC community. [dps.usc.edu](http://dps.usc.edu)