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  
3. 22 January: The nature of choice

4. 29 January: Kantian accounts of practical reason
   • J. David Velleman, “The Possibility of Practical Reason”, *Ethics* 106, no. 4 (July 1996): 694–726. [https://doi.org/10.1086/233669](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](https://doi.org/10.1080/13869790903067683)

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](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](https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511498497)

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

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](https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198785934.001.0001)
10. 19 March: The “non-akrasia” requirement

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](https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199672165.001.0001)

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

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](https://doi.org/10.26556/jesp.v1i1.1)

14. 16 April: The Newcomb problem

15. 23 April: Incommensurability
   • Ruth Chang, “The possibility of parity”, *Ethics* 112, no. 4 (2002): 659-688. [https://doi.org/10.1086/339673](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. 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.

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National Suicide Prevention Lifeline – 1 (800) 273-8255
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Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention Services (RSVP) – (213) 740-4900 – 24/7 on call
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Sexual Assault Resource Center
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