

# Ethics and Practical Reason

Rutgers University  
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**Instructor:** Amir Saemi ([saemi.amir@gmail.com](mailto:saemi.amir@gmail.com))

Office Hours: MW 12:30-1 (with appointment)

**Course Description:** This course is a study of the central ethical question “why be moral?” by looking into the literature on practical reason. We will study four major approaches to the central question. The first approach is the Humean approach which wants to put the basis of the morality in our psychology. The second approach is Kantian approach according to which morality is a matter of rationality. The third approach is Platonism which holds moral reasons are sui generis facts independent of our psychology or rationality. We finish the course by looking briefly into Aristotelian approach which tries to tie morality with human action and human nature.

## Course Goals:

- Learn how to approach difficult theoretical problems in a careful and rigorous manner
- Learn to write in a way that clearly presents an argument, explicitly identifying its premises and outlining its logical structure
- Learn to grasp subtle distinctions, formulate general abstract principles, and apply these principles to specific cases

## Required Texts:

Eric Wiland, *Reasons*, Continuum Ethics Series (2012)

All other readings will be provided through Canvas.

**Course Requirements:** Your grade will be determined by your active participation in class (10%), two papers (70%), and four quizzes (20%).

**Grading Scale:** The grading scale for the course is as follows:

A = 89.5-100  
B+ = 84.5-89.49  
B = 79.5-84.49  
C+ = 74.5-79.49  
C = 69.5-74.49  
D = 59.5-69.49  
F = 0-59.49

**Active Participation (10%):** All students are expected to do the assigned reading and come to class *prepared*. Your attendance would not be very helpful to you if you are not prepared for the class. To show that you are prepared for the class, *for each class*, you have to bring *one question* from the reading to be discussed in the class. The question should be written in a piece of paper.

You *may not* submit your question by email *under any circumstances*. Attendance without turning in your question would count as an absence. Your question would not be graded. However, if I see that your question is not relevant to the reading, or that it is very sloppy, then you would miss the participation point for that class. You will be allowed two absences. Your participation grade will be adjusted downward by a third (e.g. A to A-, A- to B+, etc.) for each additional absence. If I notice that you are consistently late to lecture, or that you are distracting other students, or that you are being discourteous (e.g. you are using your cellphone for texting or shopping!), then your participation grade will be adjusted downward. Students absent for any of the reasons such as, religious observances, official university activities, documented illness, death of a family member or loved one, must inform me with official or verifiable written documentation before the fact. In case your absence is justified by proper documentation, you don't to submit any question.

**Two papers (90%).** Each paper consists of you writing a four to five page paper in response to a question given to you in the class. You have to hand in your papers two weeks after the prompt is given to you. Each paper counts for 35% of your final grade.

**Plagiarism and Academic Dishonesty:** *All* written work for the course must be your own. Be sure to cite any works you use, including web sites, books, and articles. Presenting *anyone* else's work as your own is considered plagiarism.

**Disabilities:** Rutgers University welcomes students with disabilities into all of the University's educational programs. In order to receive consideration for reasonable accommodations, a student with a disability must contact the appropriate disability services office at the campus where you are officially enrolled, participate in an intake interview, and provide documentation: <https://ods.rutgers.edu/students/documentation-guidelines>. If the documentation supports your request for reasonable accommodations, your campus's disability services office will provide you with a Letter of Accommodations. Please share this letter with your instructors and discuss the accommodations with them as early in your courses as possible. To begin this process, please complete the Registration form on the ODS web site at: <https://ods.rutgers.edu/students/registration-form>.

## TENTATIVE SCHEDULE

The following schedule is tentative and may be changed with prior notification from the instructor.

- Eric Wiland, *What is a reason*

### TOPIC 1: The Humean view

- David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Book II Section III)
- Bernard Williams, *Internal and external reasons*
- John McDowell, *Might there be external reasons?*
- Christine Korsgaard, *Skepticism about practical reason*
- Eric Wiland, *psychologism: desires*

### TOPIC 2: The Kantian View

- Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*
- Mill, *Utilitarianism* (chapter 4)
- Julia Markovitz, *Kant's arguments*
- Rae Langton, *Objective and Unconditioned Value*
- Julia Markovitz, *Kantian Internalism*

### TOPIC 3: The Platonic View

- Thomas Scanlon, *Reason Foundationalism*
- Eric Wiland, *Deontic, value-based and primitive accounts*
- Eric Wiland, *Hybrid Theories*

### TOPIC 4: The Aristotelian View

- Eric Wiland, *Anscombian views*
- Philippa Foot, *Virtue Ethics*