

Topics in Moral Philosophy: Kantian Ethics and its Critics

Course Description

The key aim of the seminar is to understand and discuss ideas that are integral to a Kantian outlook in ethics. We are not trying to cover all of Kant's writings in practical philosophy, and the focus of the class is not exegetical. Rather, we shall be interested in ideas that are central to Kant's ethics in such a way that, if one were to reject these ideas, one could not be a 'Kantian'. Next to Kant, we are reading some contemporary Kantian authors, and ethicists who engage critically with Kantian ethics.

Some of the questions we cover are: What is rationalism in ethics? What is morality? What role, if any, do empirical considerations have in Kantian ethics? In which way is the idea that human beings have dignity (rather than some other kind of value) at the heart of the Kantian outlook? What is so special about the 'moral should'? What is duty? What does it mean to speak about the moral law? Are there duties to oneself? Can happiness be a final end?

There are no doubt many questions regarding Kantian ethics that we won't cover, in particular, questions regarding aspects of Kantian ethics that figure less prominently in contemporary Kantian approaches, exegetical questions, questions concerning the development of Kant's thought, and so on. Put most crudely, the guiding question of the seminar is: What would it, most fundamentally, mean to be a Kantian in ethics, and what would it mean to reject the Kantian outlook?

In order to lay the ground for these discussions, we first need to survey the options—or some of the options—in normative ethics. The central ideas of Kantian ethics will become more clearly visible when we think about them in the context of consequentialist ethics and virtue ethics. The first few weeks of the semester shall be devoted to a kind of advanced survey: we read texts that have recently influenced discussions in consequentialist ethics and virtue ethics, and try to see where these theories most strongly disagree with the Kantian outlook in ethics.

Armed with this background, we then approach Kantian ethics by focusing on specific questions. Each section of the class engages with one such question (or a set of questions). Discussion will be based on selections from Kant and recent contributions to debates in ethics.

Outline of Readings and Topics

Week 1: Introduction to Kantian Ethics

Groundwork, Section I.

Weeks 2 and 3: Introduction to Utilitarianism/Consequentialism

Peter Railton, "Alienation, Consequentialism, and the Demands of Morality"; Shelly Kagan, *The Limits of Morality* (Part I); Bernard Williams, "A Critique of Utilitarianism" and "Utilitarianism and moral self-indulgence."

Weeks 4 and 5: Introduction to Virtue Ethics

G.E.M. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy"; Philippa Foot, "Virtues and Vices" and "Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives"; Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* Book I;

Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Chapter 10 (London: Fontana, 1985); John McDowell, "Virtue and Reason."

Week 6: What is duty?—Duty, law, morality

Kant, *Groundwork*, Sections I and II; *Metaphysics of Morals*, General Introduction [218-221]; Introduction to the *Doctrine of Right* [239-242]; Christine Korsgaard, "Kant's analysis of obligation: The argument of *Groundwork* I"; David Velleman, "A Brief Introduction to Kantian Ethics."

Week 7: Why metaphysics of morals? What is the role of empirical considerations in Kantian ethics?

Kant, *Groundwork*, Preface; Kant, *Lectures on Ethics* (selections); Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (selections); Barbara Herman, *Moral Literacy*, Chapter 1 ("Making Room for Character").

Week 8: Dignity and respect

Kant, selections from *Doctrine of Right*; Velleman, "Love as Moral Emotion"; [a forthcoming paper will be added here].

Week 9: A System of Duties—duties to ourselves and duties to others

Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals* (selections from *The Doctrine of Right* and *The Doctrine of Virtue*); Thomas Hill, "Kant on Imperfect Duty and Supererogation"; Katja Vogt "Duties to Others"; Barbara Herman, *Moral Literacy*, Chapter 9 ("The Scope of Moral Requirement"); Jens Timmermann, "Good but not Required."

Week 10: Freedom

Kant, *Groundwork*, Section III; Christine Korsgaard, "Morality as Freedom"; Onora O'Neill, "Reason and Autonomy in *Grundlegung* III"; Dieter Henrich, "The Deduction of the Moral Law: The Reasons for the Obscurity of the Final Section of Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*."

Week 11: Happiness and final ends

Kant, *Groundwork* Section I; Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals* (selections); Aristotle, NE I; Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love*, Section III.

Weeks 12 and 13: What is rationalism in ethics?

Kant, *Groundwork*, Preface, Section I and Section III; Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love*, Sections I and II; David Velleman, "The Reasons of Love"; Christine Korsgaard, "Responsibility and Relationships" and selections from *The Sources of Normativity*.

Requirements for E-credit

Papers

Option 1: Term paper.

Option 2: Three short essays during the semester, each on a topic we discuss in class.

In class participation

It is key to successful participation that you conscientiously do the reading prior to each class. You should come to class ready to discuss the readings. Each student should be prepared to sum up what she/he found interesting in at least one of the assigned readings.

Requirements for R-credit

In class participation (see above)

Readings

Kant's *Metaphysics of Morals* (Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy, ed. M. Gregor) is ordered at Bookculture (formerly Labyrinth; Broadway and 112th street, entrance on 112th street). You can use any edition of the *Groundwork* (I shall comment a bit on translations at the beginning of the semester). More books will be ordered at Bookculture at the beginning of the semester, and some readings will be available through Butler Library (Reserves). At times, I shall add some readings from commentaries on Kant's works. In particular, we shall once in a while consult Jens Timmermann's new commentary on the *Groundwork* (Cambridge, 2007).