

Kant's System of Duties: Graduate Seminar (MT 2024)

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This seminar will focus on the system of duties that Kant presents in his late work of moral and political philosophy, the *Metaphysics of Morals*. We will consider broad topics such as the normative standing of Kant's political philosophy and the dependence of some of our ethical duties on political institutions, in addition to looking at the content of specific duties in the Kantian system. Following two classes in which we will speak about some of the central themes of the *Metaphysics of Morals*, the duties we will look at are:

- (1) the prohibition on servility,
- (2) our duties to the destitute,
- (3) the duty of self-improvement in the context of biomedical enhancements, and
- (4) the duty of gratitude.

The topics of the last two meetings will be up for discussion.

This class is primarily for students on the BPhil. As such, no prior knowledge of Kant will be presupposed. However, if you have never encountered Kant's moral philosophy, I recommend reading the following prior to the first meeting:

- Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Sections I & II
- Reath, "Kant's Moral Philosophy", *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Ethics*
- O'Neill, "Kantian Ethics", *A Companion to Ethics*

Those with more advanced knowledge of Kant are welcome to attend, but are reminded that the discussion will remain at a level accessible to those coming at the material for the first time.

Each meeting will start with a structured discussion of the primary texts. This will be followed by a short (10 minutes *max.*) student presentation on the piece of secondary literature assigned in the core reading. We will then have a more open discussion of the textual and philosophical questions raised by the secondary literature.

Weeks 1 & 2 - Right and Ethics in the *Metaphysics of Morals*

The first two weeks will serve as an orientation to Kant's *Metaphysics of Morals*. We will look at the distinction between Right and Virtue, and begin to examine the thorny question of how these two domains of morality relate to each other. For those who are unfamiliar with it, this will also be an opportunity to get acquainted with some of the basic features of Kantian morality.

Core reading:

- Kant, Introduction to the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Introduction to the Doctrine of Right, and Introduction to the Doctrine of Virtue
- Wood "The Final Form of Kant's Practical Philosophy"
- Willaschek "Which Imperatives for Right? On the Non-Prescriptive Character of Juridical Laws in Kant's *Metaphysics of Morals*"

In weeks 3-6 we will discuss the different kinds of duties in Kant's moral system. As we will see, each duty is either a duty of right or a duty of virtue, either perfect or imperfect, and either owed to oneself or owed to others.

Week 3 - Duties of right to others

In this week we will look at duties of right to others. This will continue the discussion of the way in which Kant's political philosophy differs from and complements his ethics. We will focus on the duties we owe to the destitute, which raise a puzzle for Kant's political philosophy. Kant claims that all duties of right to others are negative and perfect, but duties of aid are usually considered positive and imperfect. How can there be duties of right to aid those in need?

Core reading:

- Kant, Doctrine of Right, §§1-9, §15, §§41-44, General Remark C (6:326-6328)
- Allais, "What Properly Belongs to Me: Kant on Giving to Beggars"

Week 4 - Duties of right to oneself

Given the way that Kant conceives of duties of right, it is puzzling that there are any duties of right to oneself. In this week, we try to get a clearer sense of what such duties might involve and ask what such duties add to our moral thinking more generally. We illustrate duties of right to oneself with the prohibition on servility.

Core reading:

- Kant, Doctrine of Right, Division of the Doctrine of Right A (6:236-37)
- Kant, Doctrine of Virtue, §§1-18
- Hill, "Servility and Self-Respect"

Week 5 - Duties of virtue to ourselves

Do we owe it to ourselves to seek to improve our physical capacities and our moral dispositions? Kant thinks we do, and we examine that claim in this class. We also ask whether the Kantian requirement to perfect one's talents is compatible with available and possible forms of biomedical enhancement. Would we contribute to satisfying the duty by, for example, biomedically stopping ourselves from feeling envy?

Core reading:

- Kant, Doctrine of Virtue, §§19-22
- Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 4:421-424, 4:428-431
- Chance, "Kant and the Enhancement Debate: Imperfect Duties and Perfecting Ourselves"

Week 6 - Duties of virtue to others

In this week we consider our imperfect duties to others. We will look at Kant's distinction between duties of love and duties of respect, and ask how the latter fit into his broader moral framework. We will also take a close look at the duty of gratitude. We will consider why it is so important for Kant, and how it relates to the previous duties we have looked at.

Core reading:

- Kant, Doctrine of Virtue §§23-44
- Herman, *The Moral Habitat*, chapter 2

Weeks 7 & 8 - Up for discussion

We will decide what to speak about in the last two classes in the seminar itself. Some possibilities for topics include:

- Any duties that we didn't have time to look at, such as:
 - the duty to adopt others' ends as your own (sympathy)
 - the duty to leave the state of nature
 - cosmopolitan duties, such as the duty to admit refugees
 - duties of right to non-state peoples
 - duties arising due to historic injustices
- The question of whether and why perfect duties always trump imperfect duties
- The demandingness of Kantian morality (as opposed, for example, to utilitarianism)
- Kant on race and/or gender and the scope of his moral theory
- Any other topics proposed by students in the class.