

Introducing the *Metaphysics of Morals*

Kant BPhil Seminar, MT 2024: weeks 1 & 2

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1 The Very Big Picture

The *Metaphysics of Morals* is Kant's mature work of moral philosophy.

The Doctrine of Right treats Kant's legal and political philosophy.

The central concern of Kant's legal and political philosophy is with articulating the conditions under which we are all (equally) externally free; that is, independent from the will of other agents.

The Doctrine of Virtue treats Kant's ethics and account of character.

The central concern of Kant's ethics is with articulating the conditions under which we are internally free; that is, independent from our inclinations.

Jointly, they articulate Kant's vision of moral agency for embodied, rational beings. It is a kind of agency that is embedded in social and political institutions, and that is sensitive to the different ways in which we impact each other as we live our lives.

'Independence' does not mean 'isolated completely from', but rather 'not being determined by'.

2 What is the project of the *Metaphysics of Morals*?

The aim of the *Groundwork* is to identify and establish the supreme principle of morality.

Parts I & II: Identify what a supreme principle of morality requires, if there is one.

Part III: Establishes the validity of such a principle by demonstrating that there are beings to whom it applies: us (finite, rational beings).

But the *Metaphysics of Morals* aims to:

1. To outline a priori moral principles ...

We know from the *Groundwork* that moral principles must be a priori (they must be necessary and universal):

- They must apply without exception.
- They must apply to all rational beings (including rational aliens and holy beings).

"Everyone must grant that a law, if it is to hold morally, that is, as a ground of an obligation, must carry with it absolute necessity [...]; therefore, the ground of obligation here must not be sought in the nature of the human being or in the circumstances of the world in which he is placed, but a priori simply in concepts of pure reason" (4:389).

- The nature of the human being and the circumstances of the world (as well as all other empirical facts) are contingent and so cannot provide the ground of a moral law.

"The present groundwork is, however, nothing more than the search for and establishment of the *supreme principle of morality*, which constitutes by itself a business that in its purpose is complete and to be kept apart from every other moral investigation" (4:392).

FUL — Act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law (4:421).

FH — So act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means (4:429).

EA — Act in accordance with the maxims of a member giving universal laws for a merely possible kingdom of ends (4:439).

Moral laws "hold as laws only insofar as they can be *seen* to have an *a priori* basis and to be necessary. Indeed, concepts and judgements about ourselves and our deeds and omissions signify nothing moral if what they contain can be learned merely from experience. And should anyone let himself be led astray into making something from that source into a moral principle, he would run the risk of the grossest and more pernicious errors" (6:215).

- Kant’s aim (again in the *Groundwork*) is not to defend his conception of morality from the moral sceptic. Kant takes himself to be asking about the necessary conditions for the validity of our commonly held moral beliefs. Moral laws can only have the properties Kant thinks we all agree they have if they are grounded in reason.

2. ... apply those to contingent features of human life ...

A few examples,

- The boundedness of the earth’s surface,
- Our disposition towards self-flattery,
- The contingent fact that the world is divided up into sovereign states,
- The fact of our various kinds of dependence on others,
- (Controversially, but important for Kant) Differences between men and women, and differences between different races

Kant wants to know what morality has to say about our duties given empirical facts like these.

“But this will in no way detract from the purity of these principles or cast doubt on their a priori source. – This is to say, in effect, that a metaphysics of morals cannot be based upon anthropology but can still be applied to it” (6:217).

Question to keep in mind: What is empirical and what is a priori in the text?

3. ... and in doing so outline a system of duties for human beings.

Kant’s examples in the *Groundwork*:

1. Suicide for the sake of self-love
2. Making a lying promise when in need of money
3. Failing to give up comfort to cultivate talents that might make one useful
4. Failing to help those in need when one has the means to do so

Kant is not giving the final say on his system of duties: “It must be noted here that I reserve the division of duties entirely for a future *Metaphysics of Morals*, so that the division here stands only as one adopted at my discretion (for the sake of arranging my examples)” (4:421n)

Kant’s system of duties in the *Metaphysics of Morals* is generated by 3 exhaustive and exclusive distinctions:

- Right/virtue
- Perfect/imperfect
- Duty to oneself/duty to others

Some questions we will address in the course:

- How does Kant conceptualise each category of duty?
- Are his distinctions consistent and plausible throughout the *Metaphysics of Morals*?
- What does each category add to our thinking about morality (i.e., why these categories)?

“a metaphysics of morals cannot dispense with principles of application, and we shall often have to take as our object the particular *nature* of human beings, which is cognised only by experience, in order to *show* in it what can be inferred from universal moral principles” (6:217).

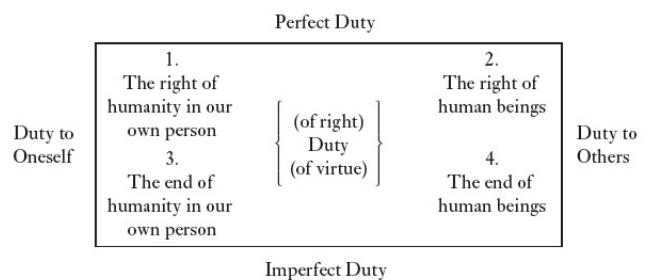
“that right which belongs to the system outlined a priori will go into the text, while rights taken from particular cases of experience will be put into remarks, which will sometimes be extensive; for otherwise it would be hard to distinguish what is metaphysics here from what is empirical application of rights” (6:205-06).

These examples correspond to:

- (a) perfect duties to self
- (b) perfect duties to others
- (c) imperfect duties to self, and
- (d) imperfect duties to others.

“These examples are not meant to be the basis of a complete normative theory, but rather have the more limited aim of showing that the abstract principle just stated does support some familiar duties and maps onto the distinction between perfect and imperfect duties” (Reath, 2015, 450).

“Metaphysics [...] is a science in which the first, most fundamental principles pertaining to a particular employment of a mental faculty are set forth systematically, and thereby ordered according to a particular scheme, thus constituting a *system*, rather than a mere aggregate” (Timmons, 2021).



3 Right and Virtue

The main division of the *Metaphysics of Morals* is between the Doctrine of Right and the Doctrine of Virtue.

Question: How does Kant draw the distinction between them?

1. On the basis of whether they require legality or morality.

LEGALITY requires that one's action conform to the moral law (acting merely in accordance with duty).

MORALITY requires that one acts from respect for the moral law (acting from duty).

- The *Groundwork* shopkeeper's actions have legality but not morality.

2. On the basis of whether "external" (i.e., coercive) lawgiving is possible for them.

"In all lawgiving [...] there are two elements: **first**, a *law*, which represents an action that is to be done as *objectively* necessary, that is, which makes the action a duty; and **second**, an incentive, which connects a ground for determining choice to this action *subjectively* with the representation of the law. [...]"

That lawgiving which makes an action a duty and also makes this duty the incentive is *ethical*. But that lawgiving which does not include the incentive of duty in the law and so administers an incentive other than the idea of duty itself is *juridical*" (6:218-19).

3. On the basis of whether the obligation corresponding to them is 'wide' or 'narrow'.

WIDE DUTIES require maxims of action.

NARROW DUTIES require specific actions (or omissions).

Are these distinctions consistent?

1 & 2 indicate that ethics is about the incentives for action.

Since morality requires we act from duty, but no one can coerce us to act from duty, morality is not coercible.

Only duties of right, which do not require any specific motive, are candidates for external lawgiving. **Question for week 4:** Does Kant mean that it is possible to coerce the fulfilment of duties of right, or that it is possible *and* permissible to do so?

Where does 3 fit? The distinction between maxims and specific actions is not the same as the distinction between different incentives.

3.1 Right

Basic question of Right: what is required for a system of equal external freedom?

The central features of Right:

1. Individual rights correspond to duties in others.

"In contrast to laws of nature...laws of freedom are called moral laws. As directed merely to external actions and their conformity to law they are called juridical laws; but if they also require that they (the laws) themselves be the determining grounds of actions, they are ethical laws..." (6:214).

"The conformity of an action with the law of duty is its *legality* [...]; the conformity of the maxim of an action with a law is the morality [...] of the action" (6:225).

"All duties are either duties of right, that is, duties for which external lawgiving is possible, or duties of virtue, for which external lawgiving is not possible" (6:239).

"Ethical duties are of wide obligation, whereas duties of right are of narrow obligation" (6:390).

"An *end* is an object of the choice (of a rational being), through the representation of which choice is determined to an action to bring this object about. – Now, I can indeed be constrained by others to perform *actions* that are directed as means to an end, but I can never be constrained by others to *have an end*: only I myself can *make* something my end" (6:381).

2. Right concerns the external and practical relation of one person to another. It's about what we do that has some impact on other's action and the world, not our motivations or beliefs or wishes other 'internal' states or actions.
3. Right excludes considerations of need. You do not have a right to something just because you need it.
4. It concerns the form of our choice, not the objects we choose. The question is not: does this interfere with you getting what you want? But rather, does this interfere with your entitlement to be independent from me?

Right is not about protecting some value or attribute that we can speak about aside from our relation to others. It is about protecting our freedom from the wrongful interference of others. External freedom is moralised.

Universal principle of right (UPR): "Any action is right if it can coexist with everyone's freedom in accordance with a universal law, or if on its maxim the freedom of choice of each can coexist with everyone's freedom in accordance with a universal law" (6:230).

The innate right to freedom: "Freedom (independence from being constrained by another's choice), insofar as it can coexist with the freedom of every other in accordance with a universal law" (6:237).

Right is intrinsically connected to the possibility of coercion:

"when it is said that a creditor has a right to require his debtor to pay his debt, this does not mean that he can remind the debtor that his reason itself puts him under obligation to perform this; it means, instead, that coercion which constrains everyone to pay his debts can coexist with the freedom of everyone, including that of debtors, in accordance with a universal external law. Right and authorisation to use coercion therefore mean one and the same thing" (6:232; 6:379).

3.2 Virtue

Basic question of virtue: are there any ends that it is a duty for us to adopt?

The supreme principle of the Doctrine of Virtue is: "act in accordance with a maxim of *ends* that is can be a universal law for everyone to have" (6:395).

1. There must be ends of virtue:
 - i All actions have ends.
 - ii If all ends were ends of inclination, all our actions would aim at what we contingently desire.
 - iii Moral action cannot be rooted in what we contingently desire.
 - iv So, if virtue did not have its own ends, there could be no moral action.
2. There are two necessary ends:
 - i The happiness of others
 - ii One's own perfection

Questions:

1. Why aren't our own happiness and the perfection of others ends of virtue for Kant?
2. How does the supreme principle of the Doctrine of Virtue relate to the Categorical Imperative?
3. Can we fulfil a duty of virtue without acting from duty?

"The concept of right, insofar as it is related to an obligation corresponding to it (i.e., the moral concept of right), has to do, *first*, only with the external and indeed practical relation of one person to another, insofar as their actions, as deeds, can have (direct or indirect) influence on each other. But, *second* it does not signify the relation of one's choice to the mere *wish* (hence also to the mere need) of the other, as in actions of beneficence or callousness, but only a relation to the other's *choice*. *Third*, in this reciprocal relation of choice no account at all is taken of the *matter* of choice, that is, of the end each has in mind with the object he wants [...]. All that is in question is the *form* in the relation of choice on the part of both, insofar as choice is regarded merely as *free*, and whether the action of one can be united with the freedom of the other in accordance with a universal law" (6:320).

We have to distinguish between:

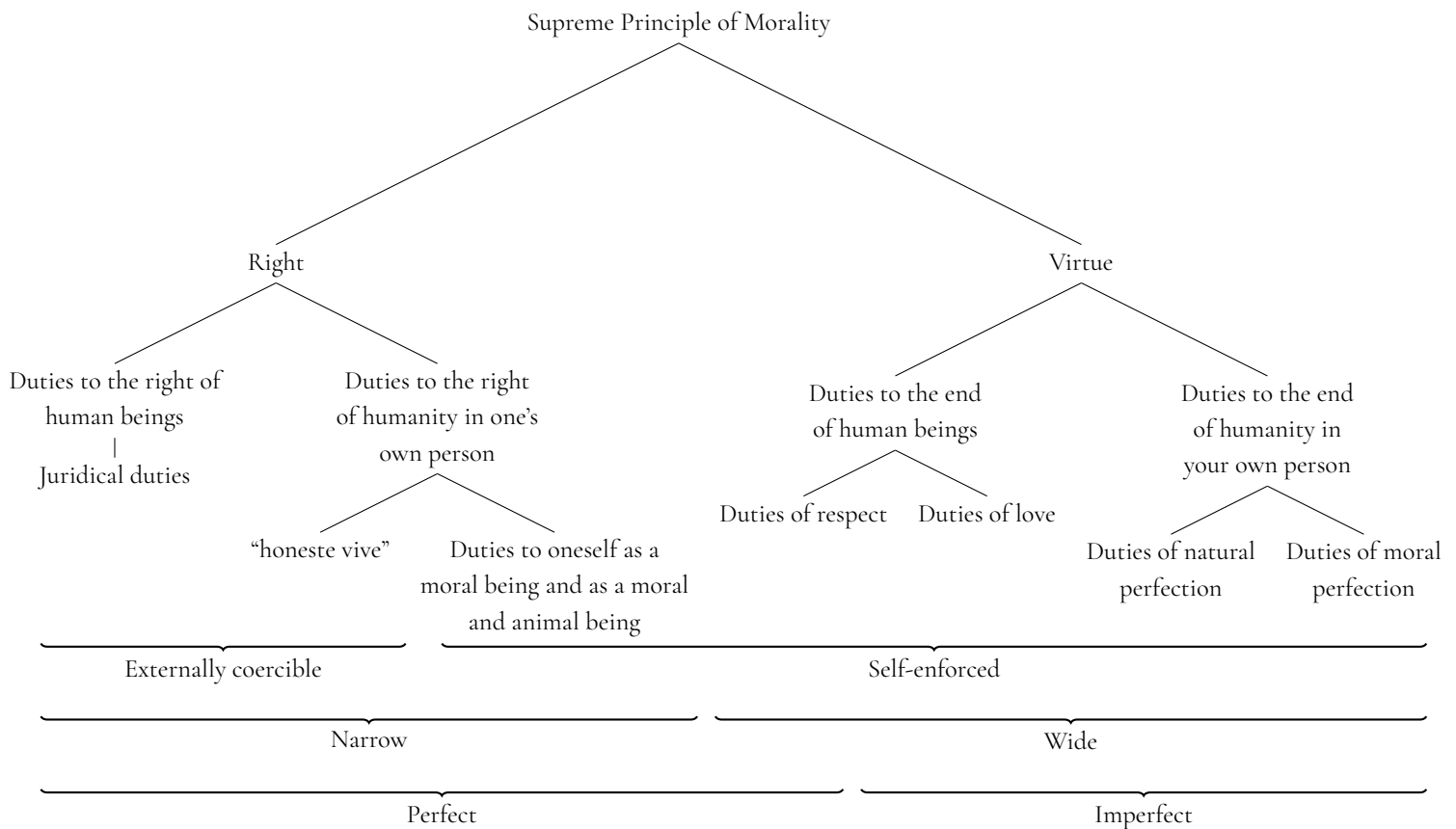
ETHICAL OBLIGATION: the requirement to do what the moral law requires from duty.

DUTIES OF VIRTUE: duties to adopt the necessary ends of morality in one's action.

VIRTUOUS DISPOSITION: the character trait of resolving to act from duty.

"For since sensible inclinations of human beings tempt them to ends (the matter of choice) that can be contrary to duty, lawgiving reason can in turn check their influence only by a moral end set up against the ends of inclination, an end that must therefore be given a priori, independently of inclinations" (6:380-81).

4 Overview of Kant's system of duties (subject to revision!)



Questions about this:

1. Where is the duty not to lie on this framework?
2. Do we have duty of virtue not to kill others or is it solely a duty of right (does that matter)?
3. How do the UPR and the principle of virtue relate to the Categorical Imperative (the supreme principle of morality)?

5 References and suggestions for additional reading

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