

Introduction to Kant's Ethics

QUARTER YEAR

Instructor information

Instructor: Laurenz Ramsauer
Email: lramsau@uchicago.edu
Office hours: TBA

Course description

Few (if any) texts in the history of western philosophy have influenced subsequent attempts to think about morality as well as our common ethical vocabulary as much as Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. In this course, we will carefully study Kant's *Groundwork* in order to understand its lasting insight, its philosophical appeal, as well as its limitations and shortfalls. This course will be of interest to students interested in moral philosophy, as well as to students interested in the history of moral and political thought. This course will also provide an important background for students wishing to study Kant's larger practical philosophy and those interested in advanced work on Kant.

Texts

All texts will be made available online.

Course requirements

- Thoughtful participation in discussion: 20%
- A 10 minute in-class presentation: 30%
- Final 10–15-pages essay: 50% (due Month/Day)

Assessment

Thoughtful participation in discussion means that you regularly attend class and come prepared to each meeting ready to discuss the material. This not merely involves articulating your own point of view but also the ability to take in what others are saying and to genuinely engage with it. An excellent in-class presentation conveys the content of the reading concisely without overly simplifying, is presented clearly, raises interesting questions and/or criticism, and connects the reading with previous course material. You can find a short guide on how to write a good philosophy paper [here](#), and you can find the rubrics for the assessment of your oral presentation and essay [here](#) and [here](#) respectively. You can also find a brief guide on using AI tools in philosophy papers [here](#).

Accommodation for Students with Disabilities

If you need accommodation, please inform me as soon as possible. All discussions will remain confidential.

Schedule

Week 1: Introduction

Month/Day. Why study Kant's ethics?

GMS preface

What is Enlightenment?

Month/Day. A good will

GMS I

Optional: Marcia Baron, 'Acting from Duty'

Optional: Jens Timmermann, 'Acting from Duty'

Week 2: Reason and law

Month/Day. Laws and representation

Kant, *KrV* (excerpt)

Optional: Béatrice Longuenesse, 'Kant on Causality'

Month/Day. Kant's conception of obligation

GMS II (4:406-420)

Optional: Christine Korsgaard, 'Kant's Analysis of Obligation'

Week 3: The form of practical reason

Month/Day. Universality

GMS II (4:421-424)

Optional: Onora O'Neill, 'Consistency in Action'

Optional: Ido Geiger, 'What is the Use of the Universal Law Formula of the Categorical Imperative?'

Month/Day. Humanity

GMS II (4:424-450)

Optional: Christine Korsgaard, 'Kant's Formula of Humanity'

Optional: Jens Timmermann, 'Value Without Regress'

Week 4: The form of practical reason II

Month/Day. Autonomy

GMS II (4:430-450)

Optional: Karl Ameriks, 'Vindicating Autonomy'

Month/Day. Just one formula?

GMS II (4:421-450)

Optional: Stephen Engstrom, 'The Categorical Imperative'

Week 5: Metaethical interpretations

Month/Day. Constructivist interpretations

John Rawls, 'Kantian Constructivism in Moral Theory' (excerpt)

Kyla Ebels-Duggan, 'Kantian Ethics' (excerpt)

Optional: Jeremy Schwartz, 'Was Kant a 'Kantian Constructivist?'

Month/Day. Realist and Constitutivist interpretations

Pauline Kleingeld and Marcus Willaschek, 'Autonomy Without Paradox'

Oliver Sensen, 'Kant's Constitutivism'

Week 6: Freedom and morality

Month/Day. Kant's reciprocity thesis

GMS III (4:446-453)

G.A. Cohen, 'The German Idea of Freedom'

Optional: Henry Allison, 'Kant's Reciprocity Thesis'

Month/Day. Freedom and Idealism

GMS III

Optional: Sergio Tenenbaum, 'The Idea of Freedom and Moral Cognition in

Groundwork III'

Week 7: Freedom, motivation and evil

Month/Day. Freedom and evil

Rel (excerpts)

KpV (excerpts)

Optional: Paul Formosa, 'Kant on the Radical Evil of Human Nature'

Month/Day. Freedom and motivation

GMS (excerpts)

KpV (excerpts)

KU (excerpts)

Optional: Anastasia Berg, 'Kant on Moral Respect'

Week 8: The postulates of practical reason

Month/Day. The dialectic of pure practical reason

KpV (5:108-148)

Optional: Pauline Kleingeld, 'The Conative Character of Reason in Kant's Philosophy'

Month/Day. Kant's notion of the highest good

KpV (5:107-5:121)

Optional: Stephen Engstrom, 'The Concept of the Highest Good in Kant's Moral Theory'

Week 9: Kant's ethics and Kant's racism

Month/Day. Kant: a secret inegalitarian?

Handwritten notes (excerpts)

Charles Mills, 'Kant's Untermenschen'

Month/Day. Kant: a bad Kantian?

Lucy Allais, 'Kant's Racism'

Optional: Pauline Kleingeld, 'Kant's Second Thoughts on Race'

Week 10: Hegel's 'empty-formalism' charge

Month/Day. Hegel's empty formalism charge

Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (excerpts)

Month/Day. Summary

No required reading

Academic Integrity

Academic work is an author's original contribution and properly cites all sources used (such as articles, books, interviews, films, podcasts etc.). This matters for both epistemic and moral reasons. For epistemic reasons, it is crucial that academic work can be double-checked by academic peers, so readers must be able to easily identify all sources an author relied on. For moral reasons, it is crucial that other authors receive the credit they deserve.* Feel free to consult with me before completing your assignments if you should have any concerns about the correct way to reference the work of others. The consequence of plagiarism will be a failing grade. In the unfortunate event that a student is suspected of plagiarism, I also have to follow the university's official guidelines for responding to academic misconduct.

Climate and Inclusion

Philosophy involves the ability to formulate your own and carefully attending to others' arguments, both in writing and in conversation. Even when philosophers disagree, this is not an

* For instance, these academic integrity and climate statements are modelled after Tyler Zimmer's syllabus on Philosophy of Economics (2022).

adversarial activity: philosophy can only be done well as a collective activity with the shared end of furthering our mutual understanding. This requires that all of us be prepared to listen carefully and seriously to what others have to say, no matter how strongly we may disagree. Creating such an inclusive environment matters not merely for moral reasons, but for epistemic reasons too. If some groups are left feeling unwelcome and their perspectives left unheard, we seriously impair our collective ability to make progress in knowledge. It is therefore my goal as an instructor to create an environment where everyone feels respected and welcome. I encourage you to reach out to me if you have suggestions for promoting a welcoming and open academic environment, and I will give them serious consideration. If there are any circumstances that make you feel uncomfortable in our classroom, please let me know. All discussion will remain confidential.