

PHIL 3592: Special Topic: Western Philosophy

Kant's Ethics & Kantian Ethics

Instructor: Hon-Lam Li

TA: Roger Lee

Readings and References for the course:

(A) Books:

(Note: **** means must buy; ** means should buy; no asterisk means can buy.)

**** Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, ed. and translated by Allen Wood.

*** Immanuel Kant, *Practical Philosophy* (ed. by Allen Wood). (Bookstore)

Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*.

Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*.

Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*.

**** Allen Wood, *Kantian Ethics*. (Bookstore)

**** T. M. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*.

** T. M. Scanlon, *Moral Dimensions*.

**Sally Sedgwick, *Kant's Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals: An Introduction*. (Bookstore)

**Barbara Herman, *The Practice of Moral Judgment*.

**Onora O'Neill, *Constructions of Reason*.

**Christine Korsgaard, *Creating the Kingdom of Ends*.

**Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*.

John Rawls, *Lecture on the History of Moral Philosophy*.

Jens Timmermann, *Kant's Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals: A Commentary*. (Bookstore)

Paul Guyer, Kant's *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*.

Henry Allison, *Kant's Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals: A Commentary*.

Thomas Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism*.

** Thomas Nagel, *Mortal Questions*.

** Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*.

** Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*.

** Bernard Williams, *Moral Luck*.

** Frances Kamm, *Intricate Ethics*.

(A) Articles:

T. M. Scanlon, "Contractualism and Utilitarianism," Section I-III, in Stephen Darwall, Allan Gibbard, and Peter Railton, eds., *Moral Discourse and Practice*, pp. 267-278.

T. M. Scanlon, "The Aims and Authority of Moral Theory," *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies* (Spring 1992), pp. 1-23.

T. M. Scanlon, "How I am not a Kantian," in Derek Parfit, *On What does Matter*, Vol. 2.

G. E. M. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," in Roger Crisp & Michael Slote, eds., *Virtue Ethics*, pp. 26-44, esp. 27-28.

Philippa Foot, "Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives," *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 81, No. 3. [Jul., 1972], pp. 305-316.

Gilbert Harman, "Moral Relativism Defended," *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 84, No. 1. (Jan., 1975), pp. 3-22.

Michael Stocker, "The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories," *Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 73, No. 14, (Aug. 12, 1976), pp. 453-466; also in Roger Crisp and Michael Slote, eds., *Virtue Ethics*.

Japa Pallikkathayil, "Deriving Morality from Politics: Rethinking the Formula of Humanity," *Ethics*, Vol. 121, No. 1 (October 2010), pp. 116-147.

Requirements:

Mid-term Paper: 40%

Final Paper: 30%

Tutorial: 30% (You must pass this requirement of tutorial in order to pass the course.)

You will be required to do weekly contribution (oral and/or written) every week for tutorial. In order to pass the course, you cannot fail tutorial contribution for more than twice.

Introduction to the Course: Kant's Ethics & Kantian Ethics

1. Two types of ethical theory:

- (a) confirms/explains our ethical view;
- (b) revolutionizes our ethical view.

Kantian Ethics belongs to (a).
Act-Utilitarianism belongs to (b).
(Rule-Utilitarianism belongs to (a).)

For Kant, both a (Kantian) philosopher and a common person know what is right and what is wrong.

The difference is that the former knows something deeper--i.e., knows why something is wrong, whereas a common person may not.

2. Kant is a religious person. He is a believer of a type of Christianity: Pietism.

Yet which view would Kant subscribe to:

(a) Murder is wrong, because God says so.

On this view, God's saying that murder is wrong, explains why murder is wrong.

This is the Command Theory, according to which something is morally wrong because God says so.

Had God (counter-factually) said that murder is right, then murder would have been right.

If this view is correct, then it would be true to say (with Dostoyevsky): "If God did not exist, everything would be permitted."

Or

(b) God says that murder is wrong, because murder is indeed wrong.

Murder's being wrong, explains why Gods says that murder is wrong.

So had there been no God, murder would still be wrong.

If this view is correct, then it would be right to deny Dostoyevsky's view that "if God did not exist, everything would be permitted."

On this view, murder's wrongness is not explained by God's saying that it is wrong.

Murder's wrongness will be explained by some further property or relation or reason or whatever. (E.g.: Murdering Jones is wrong because Jones' valuable experience--his life--is cut short for no justifiable reason. Not the same if Jone is suffering from terminal cancer and he wants to die.)

Kant firmly belongs to (b).

Kant famously says that if God had asked him to sacrifice his son (just as God had asked Abraham to sacrifice his, according to the Bible), he (Kant) would not know that it is the voice of God. Kant's is more certain about morality than the voice of God.

3. Kant's ethics vs. Kantian ethics

Kant's ethics:

Is Kant's ethics mainly contained in *Groundwork for (of) the Metaphysics of Morals*?

While the *Groundwork* is widely taken to be one of the most important work of ethics ever written, increasingly Kantian scholars subscribe to the view that in order to understand the *Groundwork*, one has to know what Kant says in the later work, *Metaphysics of Morals*.

The Metaphysics of Morals is divided into 2 parts: **The Doctrine of Right** (which deals with duties enforceable by law, e.g., the duty not to murder), and the **Doctrine of Virtue** (which is concerned with unenforceable duties, e.g., the duties of benevolence, beneficence and practical love).

Commentators note that while we would expect the *Groundwork* to devote equal space to the Doctrine of Right and the Doctrine of Virtue, oddly, it says almost nothing about the role of the supreme principle of morality in determining whether or not an action is in conformity with right (Sally Sedgwick, *Kant's Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals: An Introduction*, p. 8. For an explanation, see Allen Wood, "The Final Form of Kant's Practical Philosophy," in Mark Timmons, ed., *Kant's Metaphysics of Morals*, ed., pp. 6-7).

The *Groundwork* is a foundational work for the *Metaphysics of Morals*.

Just as physics has both an *a priori* necessary (metaphysical) component, as well as an *a posteriori* empirical component, so the same is true of ethics.

Ethics has an *a priori* necessary (metaphysical) component--which is the foundation of morality (the Supreme Principle of Morality)--as well as an *a posteriori* empirical component.

The *Groundwork* is strictly restricted to the *a priori* necessary component.

This way of looking at ethics is by no means self-evident. Why does Kant do so?

There were important philosophers who hold that morality has to do with happiness, or pleasure, or desire for happiness or pleasure.

Aristotle famously holds that the end of human beings is *eudaimonia*, or happiness in the objective sense.

Another view-- a la Hobbes and the utilitarians--goes as follows:
Human beings as a matter of fact prefer pleasure and avoid pain (Psychological hedonism).
They should seek pleasure and avoid pain (Ethical hedonism).

These views--including Aristotle's--are grounded on a claim of human nature. That is, human nature is such and such. Therefore, human beings ought to be such and such.

Kant's view is diametrically opposed to these views.

Kant holds that unless morality is grounded on something that is necessarily true, morality cannot be binding on everyone. (This is because what if someone does not have the preference of pleasure over pain. Would morality be optional for him then?) Yet, we hold that morality is not optional, but binding on every human being. So the grounding--or the *Groundwork*--of morality must be on something that is necessary, or *a priori*. Thus, such grounding cannot be on human nature.

Kant believes that there are rational beings on other planets. He thinks that ethics would also be binding on them--regardless of their nature, as long as they are rational.

4. Kant holds that human beings have dignity because they are rational. They have dignity equally, which are worthy of our respect. (For Kant, non-human animals and things have no dignity, but only price.)

Human beings' practical rationality consists in their ability of self-determination. They are self-determined if they can reason and submit to reason. Insofar as human beings can submit themselves to reason and act according to reason, they rise above their animal, empirical nature. (For Kant, human beings have both a rational part and also an animal part.)

Human beings can transcend their empirical nature. On Kant's view, if human beings can reason and submit themselves to reason, they are self-determined and hence free.

5. Kant agrees that there is a world of empirical causality. We can say that Smith committed a crime because of his psychological state and his upbringing, etc. etc. Smith was caused empirically to commit this crime.

But Kant also insists there is a world free from empirical causality. This is the world of noumena. Kant seems to say that we can **infer** that the world of causality of freedom--in which there is uncaused agency which causes actions, etc.--is within this realm.

This is an extremely important project for Kant. For his aim (or one of his aims) in the *Groundwork* is to establish that human beings are free insofar as they are self-determined. Already in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (The First Critique), Kant was struggling with the problem of freedom and determinism. He thinks that there can be human freedom within a world that is completely causally determined. For (according to him) there is another world--the world of noumena. We do not know anything about this world, according to him, but we can make inferences about what is going on in this world. So one inference is this:

(1) If morality is possible, it must be presupposed that we are free. (Or: If we cannot presuppose that we are free, then morality would not make sense.)

(2) Morality makes sense.

(Conclusion) We must presuppose that we are free.

Kant calls this freedom “transcendental” freedom--a freedom that transcend empirical causality--a freedom that allows us to make sense of morality.

The term “transcendental” in Kant has to do with going beyond human experience. Thus, Kant’s argument that there must be a God who will make this world more just by rewarding and punishing in an afterlife (given this world is so unjust) is a transcendental argument.

6. Kant is supposed to have offered us the three (or five) formulations of the Categorical Imperative. According to countless moral philosophers in the Anglophone world, these are formulae by which we can come to decide whether an act is morally permissible or not. According to a common (mis)conception, Kant is employing the 3 (or 5) versions of the Categorical Imperative as ways to arrive at a solution to ethical issues. For example, it is often thought that Universalizing one’s maxim parallels a utilitarian’s using the formula of maximizing utility. On this view, both are supposed to generate ethical conclusions. More important, it is often thought that these formulae can be applied more or less mechanically.

For example, the otherwise excellent Onora O’Neill argues:

We cannot universalize the maxim: “I want to be a slave-master” because, when universalized, this maxim becomes the universalized form “Everyone wants to be a slave master” which is logically impossible, because no one would be a slave, and hence no one can be a slave master. If a certain maxim cannot be universalized, then the type of action covered by the maxim would be rendered impermissible.

However, O’Neill’s view proves too much:

Try to universalize “I want to be a philosophy professor.” The universalized form becomes “everyone wants to be a philosophy professor” but there will be no philosophy student.

Hence no one can be a philosophy professor. Hence, it would be morally impermissible to be a philosophy professor.

So this interpretation of Kant is very likely to be mistaken.

7. Increasingly, Kantian scholars hold that we will come to a different view of what Kant is doing in the *Groundwork*, if we also read the *Metaphysics of Morals*.

(a) The *Groundwork* is concerned with what we now call meta-ethics: the nature of ethics. It is not concerned with ethics itself.

(b) The view held by Scanlon is this: The three (or 5) versions of Categorical Imperative are not meant to apply to concrete cases directly to generate solutions. They are what Scanlon calls **meta-ethical** views.

What is a meta-ethical view?

On Scanlon's view, a meta-ethical view is a Second-order view that tells us about the nature of ethics. Philosophical Utilitarianism says that the subject matter of ethics is well-being. If this is accepted as correct, then some version of Normative Utilitarianism (or First-order view of Utilitarianism) would seem inevitable, and the only question is which version of utilitarianism to adopt.

So even though Philosophical Utilitarianism does not purport to directly determine the answer of an ethical issue, it has great influence over which version of Normative Ethics to adopt.

The same is true of the Command Theory, for instance. If the Command Theory is a Meta-ethical (or 2nd order) Theory, then accepting it would limit one's choice of Normative (or 1st order) Ethical Theories. If one accepts the Command Theory, one would be well advised to study the Bible (or the Koran)--depending on which God one believes in--in order to find out the Normative Ethical Theory.

If one accepts Kant's Meta-ethical Theory--the Categorical Imperative (according to Scanlon)--then we can expect the following:

- (1) The Categorical Imperative by itself would not directly help us to decide what to do in a particular practical ethical case (e.g., abortion, or whether pre-marital sex is permissible). Rather, according to Scanlon, we need to discover plausible ethical principles as middle-level principles--principles which no one could reasonably reject. (There is obviously lots of room for reasonable persons to argue and even to disagree with each other. This is the 1st-order level.) Whether a particular action is permissible or not would depend on whether it is disallowed by any principle which no one could reasonably reject.
- (2) According to Allen Wood, we need to interpret the meaning of the Categorical Imperative (the Supreme Principle) before we know whether a particular action is rendered impermissible by the CI or not.
- (3) In any case, it looks as though Kant's ethics is much more like Aristotelian ethics *in this respect*. Because whereas Aristotle stresses "practical wisdom," Kant emphasize the

importance of “practical judgment.” O’Neill now acknowledges that, for Kant, there does not exist an algorithm by which ethical solutions can be obtained.

(4) If this is correct, then, the view popular in 1980s that Utilitarianism and Kantian ethics are rule-based ethics, whereas Aristotelian ethics is not, is unfounded. The correct view must be that only Act-U is rule-based, whereas Kantian ethics, and even Rule-U, together with Aristotelian ethics, are all non-rule-based ethics. (The reason why Rule-U is not rule-based, according to Wood, is that practical judgment is necessary in seeking which rule to try to adhere to. This process of selecting rules cannot be done mechanically.)

8. We will also study important contemporary ethical theories that owe themselves (at least in part) to Kant. One important example is: T. M. Scanlon. Another is: Thomas Nagel. Possibly, we will also read Frances Kamm.