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978-1-107-03631-4 - Kant's Lectures on Ethics: A Critical Guide

Edited by Lara Denis and Oliver Sensen

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## Introduction

*Lara Denis and Oliver Sensen*

### 1 The importance of Kant's lecture notes

Anyone interested in Kant's moral philosophy will find his *Lectures on Ethics* to be an invaluable resource. This is for several reasons (similarly Naragon 2010a):

First, in the *Lectures* Kant treats the same topics of his published writings more elaborately and in a more accessible manner: he uses more examples to explain his points, and uses a more colloquial language. Second, Kant also addresses topics which are not covered in his other works, and the *Lectures* help to correct a picture of Kant as a purely abstract thinker. Kant did not only talk about a priori principles, but was a keen observer of all aspects of human life; he even tells his students how to make polenta! Third, the *Lectures* help to reconstruct the development of Kant's views on moral philosophy. The different sets of notes which are preserved are from different stages of his career; reading them in comparison with one another indicates where his views have changed over time.<sup>1</sup> One can see Kant grapple, for instance, with the problem of what moral obligation is, and which role feelings and God play in its solution. Fourth, the notes also help to enlighten the context for Kant's moral philosophy. For more or less thirty years, from the early 1760s to 1794, Kant used the same two textbooks for his lectures on moral philosophy: Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten's (1714–1762) *Initia philosophiae practicae primae* (*Introduction to Practical First Philosophy*), and *Ethica philosophica* (*Philosophical Ethics*).<sup>2</sup> These textbooks were the background against which Kant developed his vocabulary, questions and positions. Kant's *Lectures* therefore enlighten the context in which Kant wrote.

<sup>1</sup> Kant lectured from 1755–1796 (cf. Stark 2004b, 380–385). A list of when Kant gave which lecture can be found in Arnoldt 1909, 173ff, as well as Naragon 2010b.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Lehmann 1979, 1047; Schneewind 1997a, xix–xxv; and Stark 2004b, 388f. Both of Baumgarten's works are reprinted in the Kant's Academy edition, the *Initia* with the notes Kant wrote in the margins (cf. AA 19:5–91), as well as the second and third edition of the *Ethica* (cf. AA 27:733–1015).

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By contrast, there are doubts about the reliability of the lecture notes as an accurate statement of Kant's views. For one, the notes are handwritten by students. The grammar, fluency, as well as the dates by which some of them are signed suggests that they were mostly written at home after the lecture, and are not a stenographic direct recording of what Kant said.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, it is not always clear who wrote a particular transcript in the first place. For instance, there is a group of thirteen sets of notes – they include, among others, the notes with the names of Collins, Kaehler, Brauer, Kutzner, Mrongovius I<sup>4</sup> – which are in large parts so identical that most likely one has copied the text from another set years later.<sup>5</sup> Werner Stark has argued that Kaehler is the most reliable representative of Kant's lecture of this group, but even this would not mean that Kaehler was the original note taker.<sup>6</sup> An additional problem is that the lecture notes contain obvious mistakes. Some words or passages clearly do not belong there. The reader who relies on an English translation might be subjected to further challenges in getting at Kant's precise meaning.<sup>7</sup>

Another problem is that is unclear how carefully Kant scripted his ethics lectures. Scholars still debate whether Kant spoke extemporaneously or read from a prepared booklet. One of his students, Reinhold Bernhard Jachmann, reported that Kant lectured with considerable spontaneity, often merely referring to notes he had written in the margins of the textbook,<sup>8</sup> or from an outline on a small piece of paper (cf. Jachmann 1993, 116f). However, for lectures in other disciplines Kant had prepared a little booklet that contained his lectures. Although there is some indication that he might have used a prepared booklet for his lectures in moral philosophy as well, we do not have such a booklet for Kant's lectures on ethics (cf. Stark 2004b, 389–391; cf. also Lehmann 1979, 1040, note 9).<sup>9</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Cf. AA 25:lxii–lxxiv; Lehmann 1979, 1050; Stark 2004b 392, 400f.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Menzer used the latter three for his 1924 edition of Kant's lectures, which was later translated into English by Louis Infield.

<sup>5</sup> On this see Lehmann 1979, 1041; Stark 2004b, 392–401; Menzer 1924b, 325 and Krauß 1926.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Stark 2004b, 392–401. For a brief response to Stark's claim, see Schneewind's foreword to this volume.

<sup>7</sup> Jens Timmermann gives a first list of mistakes and translation problems for Mrongovius II in his contribution to the volume.

<sup>8</sup> As Werner Stark indicates, it is unlikely that Kant merely read his notes in the margins during the lectures, as the amount of notes regarding Baumgarten's *Initia* (around fifty-five thousand words) is much longer than the corresponding part in the lectures (around thirty-three thousand words), cf. Stark 2004b, 397, note 80.

<sup>9</sup> For an account of Kant as a lecturer, see Jachmann 1993, 116–120; Stark 1995; Schneewind 1997a; and Kuehn 2001, 105–110, 125, 129–134, 158–163, 204–218.

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So by themselves the *Lectures on Ethics* are not an indubitable statement of Kant's views. But if one keeps these problems in mind, they are uniquely valuable for a complete understanding of his moral philosophy.

## 2 A critical guide to the *Lectures on Ethics*

The aim of the present volume is to present a Critical Guide to the notes on Kant's lectures on moral philosophy. The ambition is not to provide a full and comprehensive commentary, but to address topics and questions of strong interest to readers with expertise in Kant's ethical and political thought. The volume seeks to enrich readers' understanding of Kant's moral philosophy and its development by shedding much merited – and much needed – light on his *Lectures on Ethics*. The Guide comments on the texts as they are available in the Cambridge Edition of Kant's *Lectures on Ethics*, edited by Peter Heath and J.B. Schneewind, which contain a representative selection of the lectures available.<sup>10</sup> The volume presents an English translation of the four sets of notes described below:

From the time before Kant became a professor in 1770, the Heath and Schneewind volume presents lecture notes by Johann Gottfried Herder. Herder studied under Kant between the summer of 1762 and November 1764. His notes on moral philosophy – lecture notes by Herder are the only ones we have from the time before 1770 (cf. Stark 2004b, 375f) – record a lecture during that period, but it is still debated when exactly that lecture occurred (cf. Schwaiger 2000, 180–183). Unlike the other set of notes, the Herder transcript was probably directly written down during Kant's class. These notes are elliptical, however, in that they seem to focus only on issues in which Herder was interested (cf. Lehmann 1979, 1046, 1048). Nonetheless, the notes provide an important window into an early stage of Kant's moral thought.

The second set of notes in the Heath and Schneewind volume were written by Georg Ludwig Collins in 1784–1785.<sup>11</sup> This is the semester in which Collins started his studies in Königsberg. Yet given the near identity with the earlier set of lectures, such as the ones by Kaehler or Brauer, the Collins notes are most likely a copy of another set. This contention is supported by the fact that the second set of Mrongovius

<sup>10</sup> Currently one can trace about twenty-five sets of notes on Kant's lectures on moral philosophy, cf. Stark 2004b, 376–379, and Naragon 2014.

<sup>11</sup> On Collins see Lehmann 1979, 1050f. Collins and his father, a friend of Kant's, are mentioned in one of Kant's letters (cf. AA 12:179).

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notes also seems to be from the same semester, but while the Mrongovius notes are close in content to the *Groundwork*, the Collins notes contain important differences.<sup>12</sup>

Notes by Christoph Coelestin Mrongovius are the third set translated in the Heath and Schneewind volume. Mrongovius started his studies in Königsberg in March 1781 (cf. Lehmann 1979, 1052), and there are actually two sets of notes that carry his name. The first set, Mrongovius I, is part of the group that also contain the Collins and Kaehler notes. These notes are reprinted in volume 27 of the Academy edition (cf. AA 27:1395–1581). The ones that are translated in the Heath and Schneewind volume are the second set of Mrongovius notes (cf. AA 29:597–642). These notes are of particular interest since they seem to record Kant's lectures from the winter semester 1784–1785, the time when Kant had finished writing the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), his first major work on moral philosophy of the critical period.

Finally, the Heath and Schneewind volume contains the notes by Johann Friedrich Vigilantius in translation. The Vigilantius transcript records Kant's lectures from 1793–1794, in between the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), and the *Metaphysics of Morals* (1797), from the time of Kant's *Religion* (1793). The Vigilantius notes are so important because they present Kant's mature views on moral philosophy by a reliable source. Vigilantius was a government official at the time, part of Kant's social circle, his legal advisor, and present at Kant's death (cf. Lehmann 1979, 1045f). The original notes were lost at the end of World War II. The ones we have now go back to a copy of them from the nineteenth century (cf. Stark 2004b, 386 n. 46).<sup>13</sup>

### 3 Chapter overview

In order to shed light on Kant's *Lectures on Ethics*, the present volume has three parts: The first part contains one essay on Kant's relation to Baumgarten's philosophy, as well as one chapter each on the different sets of notes translated in the Heath and Schneewind volume: Herder, Collins, Mrongovius II, and Vigilantius. The chapters of the second part comment on topics of Kant's introductory sections of the *Lectures* as well as the parts that corresponds to Baumgarten's *Initia*, while the contributions to the

<sup>12</sup> On this, see the contributions by Timmermann and Kuehn in this volume.

<sup>13</sup> Another distinct set of lecture notes that is not in the Heath and Schneewind volume are the Powalski notes. These notes are somewhat cryptic, and hard to date. They might be written down near the end of the 1770s, but their content might date from before the Collins and Kaehler notes. On the Powalski notes, see Lehmann 1979, 1043f, and Schwaiger 2000, 185–188.

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third part comment on topics Kant discusses in response to Baumgarten's *Ethica*.

Chapter 1, "Kant's Lectures on Ethics and Baumgarten's Moral Philosophy" demonstrates how Kant's ethical thought, as reflected in his lectures, responds to Baumgarten's works on moral philosophy. Stefano Bacin argues that Kant chose Baumgarten's textbooks for his classes for genuinely philosophical reasons. Kant's thorough discussion of Baumgarten's views, through a sort of critical dialogue, provided Kant with important clues for developing an original position, even if mostly in opposition to Baumgarten. Bacin illustrates this complex role of Kant's "author" with a few significant examples. These examples serve also to highlight some original aspects of Baumgarten's position in comparison to Wolff's, Bacin argues: First, Baumgarten's focus on obligation – and his treatment of perfection and virtue as secondary concepts – highlights what Kant holds to be the crucial problem in moral philosophy. Kant does not, however, regard Baumgarten's account of obligation as providing a satisfying solution. Second, Baumgarten's sharply theistic foundation of morality is rejected by Kant. Indeed, according to Bacin, in the sections of the lectures where Kant, apparently not commenting on Baumgarten, presents first elements of his own position on the moral law, he is actually giving a critical discussion of Baumgarten's theistic thesis. Third, Kant rejects several significant aspects of Baumgarten's division of ethical duties, thereby revealing profound differences between his conceptions of morality and Baumgarten's.

Chapter 2, "Herder: Religion and Moral Motivation," is especially concerned with the Herder notes and Kant's contemporaneous ethical thought. Patrick Frierson provides an account of religion's role in Kant's early ethics, particularly the roles it plays in moral motivation. According to this reading, Kant insists already in the 1760s that religion cannot provide the primary moral motive, long before developing his doctrine of "respect for the moral law" as *the* moral motive. But during this period, religious motives play roles in genuinely moral motivation. Frierson argues that on Kant's view religion adds *direct* quasi-moral motives, enriching virtue with piety and thereby completing one's moral perfection. On this account, religion also provides very important "*mediately* motivating grounds" that are "preparatory to ethics" (H 27:14). It can humble sensuous motives (particularly those born of luxury) through resignation to the divine will, and it can alleviate moral despair (born of moral weakness) with the assurance that God can aid our moral endeavors. There are dangers of religion, Frierson notes, including the tendency toward religious laziness that leads to moral complacency,

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religious fanaticisms that replace genuine morality with specious demands, and an overly speculative religion that undermines religion's practical benefits. According to this reading, however, Kant in the Herder lectures sees religion as an important part of moral life.

Manfred Kuehn's Chapter 3, "Collins: Kant's Proto-Critical Position," examines the Collins lecture notes in order to ascertain how Kant's moral thought, as reflected in these notes, is related to Baumgarten's textbooks, Kant's other published lectures, Kant's reflections, and – most important – Kant's mature work. Essentially, Kuehn seeks to show how the Collins lecture notes shed light on Kant's philosophical development, as well as his moral philosophy in general. Kuehn begins by discussing the provenance of the Collins lecture notes, comparing this set of notes with others from roughly the same period, and presenting some controversies concerning the editing and publishing of the notes. Observing that Kant divided the lectures represented by the Collins notes sharply between the part based on Baumgarten's *Initia* and the part based on Baumgarten's *Ethica*, Kuehn divides his philosophical exploration of these notes along similar lines. He first considers "ethics," with a view to identifying some general features of Kant's ethical outlook and discerning how much it changed over the years. He subsequently turns his attention to "universal practical philosophy" and its relation to the categorical imperative. Although Kuehn is cautious about this, he suggests that the part of the Collins lecture notes dealing with "universal practical philosophy" corresponds roughly to what Kant later tackles in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* and the *Critique of Practical Reason*, and the part treating "ethics" proper corresponds roughly to the subject matter of the *Doctrine of Virtue*. Thus, Kuehn finds much to elucidate the development and mature form of Kant's foundational moral thought in the *Initia*-based part of the lecture, and much to elucidate the development and mature form of Kant's ethics, narrowly construed, in the *Ethica*-based part of the lecture.

In Chapter 4, "Mrongovius II: A Supplement to the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*," Jens Timmermann shows several ways in which reading the Moral Mrongovius II lecture notes can help us understand the ethical theory of the *Groundwork*. Moral Mrongovius II is a record of lectures on moral philosophy Kant gave in the winter of 1784–1785, when the *Groundwork* was being prepared for publication by the publisher. Some themes – for example, the good will, moral worth, hypothetical and categorical imperatives – closely mirror Kant's discussion in the published book. Other themes – such as Kant's thoughts on ancient philosophy, the highest good, the philosophy of law, and the nature of punishment – resurface

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only much later, if they resurface at all. Also, there are cases in which Mrongovius II sheds light on controversial topics in Kantian ethics, for instance the workings of the categorical imperative as a formal principle and the reassuring role of religion. Through a careful analysis, Timmermann elucidates these topics.

Robert Louden's Chapter 5, "Vigilantius: Morality for Humans," contends that Vigilantius's *Notes on the Lectures of Mr. Kant on the Metaphysics of Morals* deserve a special place in Kant's presentations of his ethical theory. In the Vigilantius notes, Louden argues, Kant employs a conception of the metaphysics of morals that takes human beings as its proper object. While this human perspective is also detectable in other mature works such as the *Metaphysics of Morals* (1797) and *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (1793), it is etched much more sharply in Vigilantius. After presenting an opening argument for the importance of Vigilantius, Louden proceeds to a very brief comparison of the structures of Vigilantius and the later *Metaphysics of Morals*, offering some hypotheses for the unexpected differences between the two texts. He then turns to a more detailed examination of some key themes that Kant discusses in the opening and concluding sections of Vigilantius. In both cases, Louden draws attention to the refreshingly empirical, impure perspective of the text, while also pointing out that (at least in the case of his argument for moral faith) Kant's anthropological orientation may have inadvertently opened up a path that he himself could not endorse.

The next five chapters, constituting Part II, concern a variety of preliminary and foundational topics that Kant mainly discussed early in his courses on moral philosophy, as an introduction to the lectures as well as in relation to Baumgarten's *Initia*: the highest good, the history of ethics, obligation, permissive laws, and imputation. Chapters 6 and 7 offer insights, grounded in the lectures, into Kant's views of previous ethical systems, particularly those of antiquity. Chapter 8 analyzes Kant's conception of obligation, and its relation to freedom and the moral law, as presented in the lectures on ethics. Through careful interpretation of the Vigilantius notes, the lectures from Kant's most mature period, Chapters 9 and 10 tackle questions that bear importantly on Kant's theory of right.

In Chapter 6, "Ancient Insights in Kant's Conception of the Highest Good," Stephen Engstrom draws on student records of Kant's lectures on moral philosophy in order to show that Kant's acknowledgment in his later writings of the value of happiness, and of the importance of its inclusion in a virtuous life, expresses in its essentials an understanding of morality and happiness that was firmly in place well before the publication of the



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*Groundwork*. In those early years, and in the *Groundwork*, too, Kant not only took the highest good to include happiness as an integral component, but also followed the ancient Greeks in making the question of what the highest good consists in the starting point of his moral philosophy; Kant even saw his own answer to that question as agreeing with the general answer given by the ancients themselves, Engstrom notes. Far from regarding morality and happiness as fundamentally opposed, Kant held then even in those early years that in the highest good the good will and virtue are internally related to happiness, constituting not only the sole condition under which happiness is good, but also the sole cause through which the good of happiness can be attained.

According to Allen W. Wood's Chapter 7, "Kant's History of Ethics," Kant's basic conception of reason is historical – contrary to a common reading of Kant's philosophy. Moreover, on this reading, Kant had an interesting theory about the history of ethics, though it was presented mainly in his lectures on ethics, and not in his published writings. Kant then held that ancient ethics was an ethics of ideals, while modern ethics is an ethics of principles. In Kant's view, Wood notes, the crucial juncture in the history of ethics was Christianity, which involved the insight that human beings can never attain to the ethical ideal, but should instead govern their actions as best they can through rational principles.

In Chapter 8, "Moral Obligation and Free Will," Oliver Sensen argues that the lectures reveal obligation to be one of Kant's central moral concepts. While the term "obligation" hardly appears in Kant's published writings, Sensen first demonstrates how the problem of obligation occupied Kant from his very first publication on moral philosophy, and how he saw the categorical imperative as its solution. Sensen then analyzes Kant's conception of obligation as a making necessary of an action by the moral law. While obligation has an accompanying effect on feeling, the core element of obligation is that the moral law declares an action to be morally necessary. In the next section Sensen demonstrates the significance of obligation in that Kant rules out all alternative theories to his own because they cannot account for obligation and yield heteronomy. While this leaves open the possibility that there is no morality or obligation, in his final section Sensen analyzes Kant's argument that freedom guarantees the existence of unconditional obligation.

The permissive law is a topic of intense interest and debate within the secondary literature on Kant's philosophy of right. Disagreement concerns what the permissive law is, whether there is more than one type of permissive law in Kant's works, whether Kant abandoned one meaning of



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permissive law in favor of another over time, and when exactly one needs a permissive law at all. Chapter 9, “The Elusive Story of Kant’s Permissive Laws,” by B. Sharon Byrd, begins with the logic of obligations and permissions and continues with Kant’s works and the three permissive laws in Kant’s writings. It examines Kant’s statements in the *Vigilantius* lecture notes and expands on that discussion to include all of Kant’s examples of permissive laws relating to legally relevant actions. Byrd argues that there are exactly three types of permissive laws and that Kant’s works contain examples of these, and no more than these, three types. Any other interpretation of a permissive law within the domain of legally relevant actions exceeds the logic of obligations and permissions, a logic with which Kant was familiar.

In Chapter 10, “On the Logic of Imputation in the *Vigilantius* Lecture Notes,” Joachim Hruschka places Kant’s ideas on imputation in their historical context. Kant takes concepts from Pufendorf, Christian Wolff, Achenwall, Baumgarten, and others of his time and places them into a system. The concept of the *causa libera* (free cause) and the distinction between *imputatio facti* (imputation of the deed) and *imputatio legis* (imputation of the law) are decisive in this system. Hruschka also discusses the reasons for excluding imputation on both of these levels. The chapter concludes with the question of why Kant did not include the distinction between *imputatio facti* and *imputatio legis* in the *Doctrine of Right*.

The chapters in Part III mostly address topics in ethics proper, which Kant lectured on later in the semester, in relation to Baumgarten’s *Ethica*: the nature and basis of different classes of duties, proper self-esteem, virtue and self-mastery, love, and the devilish vices. Chapter 11 shows how all classes of duties, as explicated within the *Vigilantius* notes, can be understood as derived from the concept of freedom. Chapters 12 and 13 highlight what the lectures on ethics reveal about attitudes and attributes essential for morality generally and fulfillment of duties to oneself especially: proper self-esteem, love of honor, self-mastery, autocracy, and virtue. Chapters 14 and 15 concern love and vices contrary to our duties of love toward other human beings as depicted in Kant’s lectures on ethics. Significantly, these last two chapters present Kant’s views of self-regarding aspects of morality as crucial to his views of its other-regarding aspects. Chapter 14 elucidates Kant’s views on love of others by appeal to his views on love of self. Chapter 15 explicates the devilish vices in relation to self-esteem and love of honor.

In Chapter 11, “Freedom, Ends, and the Derivation of Duties in the *Vigilantius* Notes,” Paul Guyer asks whether and to what degree Kant’s *Vigilantius* description of perfect duties to oneself as “flow[ing] strictly,

unconditionally and negatively from the concept of freedom" (V 27:601) is true of all duties within Kant's system. Kant's statements that the greatest self-consistent use of freedom is the fundamental principle of morality (e.g., C 27:346) might lead one to think it is true of all duties. Yet other statements suggest otherwise. For instance, in the *Vigilantius* lecture notes Kant says that in the case of duties of virtue, "[a]part from the freedom of the action, there is . . . another principle present, which in itself is enlarging, in that, while freedom is restricted by the determination according to law, it is here, on the contrary, enlarged by the matter or end thereof" (V 27:543). Particularly in light of Kant's derivation of duties of virtue in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, it would be natural to read this passage as saying that duties of virtue depend not only on freedom, but, in addition, on ends, such as the happiness of others. Guyer offers an interpretation of the preceding passage according to which it says that while negative duties to both others and oneself are duties to avoid the restriction of freedom, the principle of positive duties to others as well as to oneself is that of the expansion of freedom; thus all classes of duty can in fact be derived from the concept of freedom combined with some basic facts about the human condition that bear on the realization of freedom.

Chapter 12, "Proper Self-Esteem and Duties to Oneself," by Lara Denis, draws on the Collins and *Vigilantius* lecture notes as well as the *Doctrine of Virtue* to explore relations between proper self-esteem – a morally correct way of valuing oneself – and duties to oneself. Denis first teases apart several interconnected referents of "*Selbstschätzung*." She describes moral forms of each, explaining some links between them and duties to oneself, and portraying these moral forms of *Selbstschätzung* as distinct, interrelated elements of proper self-esteem. Denis then shifts her focus to duties to oneself. After sketching the accounts of duties to oneself offered in Collins, *Vigilantius*, and the *Doctrine of Virtue*, Denis shows that within all three, duties to oneself are depicted as acts through which the moral attitude of self-esteem is expressed. Finally, Denis considers the bearing of the relation between duties to oneself and proper self-esteem to the primacy of duties to oneself. She suggests that attending to this relation enhances our appreciation of the primacy of these duties. Moreover, Denis contends that we should understand Kant's most provocative, even troubling, claims that those who violate duties to oneself make themselves worthless and contemptible as attempts to convey the primacy of duties to oneself by appealing to the self-esteem of his audience.

Kant's theory of virtue has yet to receive the systematic interpretation that has been granted to his moral theory in his most widely read ethical