

Kant's Lectures on Ethics

Jens Timmermann and Michael Walschots

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Introduction

Kant lectured on moral philosophy fairly regularly over the course of his long, 40-year teaching career. Bearing a variety of different titles such as “Practical Philosophy”, “Ethics”, and “Universal Practical Philosophy and Ethics”, we have evidence that Kant offered a course on moral philosophy in at least 28 different semesters (of these we can prove that 19 actually took place, 9 others were advertised and there is good reason to think that they took place - see Arnoldt 1909). This means that Kant offered a course on ethics in approximately one third of every semester he taught. The student notes from these lectures have proved invaluable resources for gaining insight into Kant’s intellectual development, his opinion on issues not covered extensively in the published works, and his character as a university instructor, among many others things. From his lectures on ethics, 23 distinct sets of notes are thought to have existed at any one point in time, but many of these have since been lost or destroyed (see Naragon 2006). Only 14 sets of notes still exist, either as an original, a copy, a published version of a subsequently lost manuscript, or just a collection of fragments (ibid.). But each of these are not unique, distinct sets of notes. For example: of the 23 sets of known notes, 13 of them belong to the same group in the sense that they are thought to all be copies of one original set. In the end, we possess only five distinct sets of notes from Kant’s lectures on ethics, stemming from various periods of his life: Herder (1760s), Kaehler/Collins (1770s), Powalski (1782/3), Mrongovius (1784/5), and Vigilantius (1790s). In what follows, each of these sets of notes will be given their own brief discussion.

Before turning to the notes directly, it is important to note that Kant used the same two textbooks in all of his courses on moral philosophy (see Bacin 2015), namely Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten’s *Initia philosophiae practicae primae* (Elements of First Practical Philosophy, 1760 – a reprint can be found in AA 19:5-91) and *Ethica philosophica* (Philosophical Ethics, 1740 – a reprint of the second (1751) and third (1763) edition can be found in AA 27:733 - 1015). These texts are

important for understanding the student notes because they provide the outline for the topics covered in Kant's lectures. In general, Kant first discusses the topics of the *Initia*, which concerns foundational issues in practical philosophy, before moving on to the *Ethica*, which gives a more detailed treatment of ethical duties (see Bacin 2015). Kant often refers to an "author" in the students notes, which almost always refers to Baumgarten. Indeed, the notes can be considered as a commentary on Baumgarten's textbooks and readers should note that Kant is at times not explaining his own position, but rather that of the "author". At the very least, it should be kept in mind that the student notes often use Baumgarten as springboard for the discussions that take place.

Herder (AA 27:3-89)

Johann Gottfried Herder was a student in Königsberg between 1762 and 1764 (see Irmscher 1964, 7ff.) and his student notes from one of Kant's courses on ethics during this period (it is unclear which) have survived. One must use these notes very carefully; as J.B. Schneewind notes: "Partly because he may have allowed his own thoughts to interpret Kant's, Herder's notes are not altogether reliable. He worked them over at home, and he may have put words into Kant's mouth" (CELE:xiv). Gerhard Lehmann states further that "Herder – much too independent to be a mere "copier" – gives his particular diction and indeed also intellectual re-shaping to everything that was not immediately taken down in the lecture which is to say is noted in key words" (AA 28:1353). More specifically, Lehmann claims "we do not have the guarantee that the examples, possibly even the justifications, provided by him always originate from Kant" (AA 28:1354). Lehmann reassures us that "[n]othing is dispensable from Herder's records and transcriptions, not only because for this time (1762-4) aside from his published works (2:165-301) only few reflections ... are available, rather also because Herder's level is incomparably higher than that of other lecture participants" (AA 28:1354-5). The Herder notes are therefore a double-edged sword: on the one hand Herder was a great thinker in his own right, so what he might have copied down in Kant's lectures promises to be particularly illuminating, but on the other hand, because he was such a creative and independent thinker, it is very uncertain how much Kant we find in the notes, as opposed to what might be Herder's own thoughts.

As noted above, the Herder notes are especially valuable because they give us insight into a very early period in Kant's intellectual development, one about which we have very little other material. For example, these notes give us some insight into the way in which Kant conceives of

moral motivation at this early stage in his development - Kant does not yet hold his mature view of respect as the moral motive, rather he interestingly suggests that religion has a place in our being properly morally motivated (see Frierson 2015). Indeed, there are many discussions of God and religion throughout these notes (see e.g. MoHe, 27:17-3 [1762-4]). Kant also seems to suggest a role for feeling in moral motivation, as his discussions of moral feeling in these notes indicate (see MoHe, 27:4-5, 27:16), although it should be noted that Kant's conception of moral feeling continues to evolve over the course of his development. These notes also contain a discussion of religious tolerance and a distinction between moral and civil toleration (MoHe, 27:73-78). Other interesting topics include Kant's argument for the existence of a disinterested feeling of concern for others (see MoHe, 27:3-4, 27:74), as well as his discussion of love (see MoHe, 27:25ff., 27:54ff. and Grenberg 2015), the sexual impulse (MoHe, 27:4-50), and his definitions of various morally relevant concepts such as indifference (MoHe, 27:54), compassion (MoHe, 27:58), lying (MoHe, 27:59), and the feeling of shame (MoHe, 27:60). Readers of the Herder notes in the Cambridge translation should note that this translation is incomplete, and has left large parts of the original as printed in the Academy Edition untranslated. (For more on these notes see Frierson 2015, Grenberg 2015, Irmscher 1964)

Kaehler/Collins (Stark 2004/AA 27:243-471)

The second distinct set of notes stems from the 1770s, another period in Kant's intellectual development, about which we know very little. We know so little about this period because Kant published almost nothing, and is referred to as Kant's "silent decade" as a result. The student notes from this period are therefore extremely important for gaining insight into what sorts of changes were going through Kant's mind *after* his so called "Great Light" or "Platonic Turn" of the late 1760s (see Kuehn 1995), and during the lead up to the publication of the first *Critique* in 1781. As mentioned above, there are 13 distinct sets of notes from this period that stem from the same original. The Academy Edition reprints a set of notes found in 1967 authored by Georg Ludwig Collins¹ (see Menzer 1991). The Collins notes form the basis of Peter Heath's English translation in

¹ Many scholars have made the mistake of thinking that the Collins notes date from the mid-1780s rather than the 1770s. This is because Collins contains the year associated with when the copy was made, rather than the year when the original was produced, and on which the copy was based. Collins attended the Albertina University in 1784, and his notes contain the same date. However, the notes that Collins allegedly used in 1784 are a copy of a set of notes based on a much earlier course of lectures. All the notes belonging to the group of 13 are similar for this same reason. Readers

the Cambridge Edition of Kant's *Lectures on Ethics*. Even more recently, however, an additional set of notes was discovered bearing the name of Johann Friedrich Kaehler (see Stark 2004, 371ff.). Kaehler matriculated at the Albertina University in Königsberg on April 10th, 1772 and we have a record indicating that he attended Kant's lectures on metaphysics, moral philosophy, and anthropology in the winter semester of 1777/8 (Stark 1999, 75). The Kaehler notes are particularly important because, as Werner Stark has argued, they seem to be the best set from the group of 13 for a variety of reasons (see Stark 1999 and Naragon 2006). Kaehler is thus the most reliable set to use when trying to gain a picture of Kant's thought during the 1770s. Some argue that it is still permissible to use Collins, and therefore the Heath translation as well (see Schneewind 2015), but there seems to be no disputing the fact that one should use Kaehler if at all possible.

Among the important topics in these notes is Kaehler's discussion of the principle of morality (see K, 20 ff.), which is still in an underdeveloped form and not yet dubbed the categorical imperative. In these notes we also find the important distinction between the principle of adjudication and execution (see e.g. K, 21, 40), a distinction that is profoundly important for Kant's mature understanding of the relationship between moral judgement and moral motivation. At this point in his development Kant had still not discovered his doctrine of respect as the moral motive, nor does he claim that moral motivation has its source in reason. In fact, in these lecture notes Kant does not even make a clear distinction between reason and the understanding (compare e.g. K, 27 and 64). However, the theme of the relationship between intellect and feeling is still present throughout the notes. We also find familiar discussions of necessitation (K, 27ff.) and a distinction between kinds of imperatives (K, 28). Kaehler also discusses duties to oneself and duties to others, a distinction we find again later in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, although in Kaehler there is no mention of perfect and imperfect duties. Other important topics of note are Kaehler's construal of the duty of truthfulness as one to others, not to oneself (K, 323), as well as his discussion of the highest good (K, 9ff.), which makes an interesting point of comparison to Kant's discussion of the good will in the *Groundwork*. Noteworthy also is the section on "imputation" (K, 87-103). Something we find in Kaehler that is not in the published works is a brief discussion of the history of ethics (K, 9-20). (For more on these notes specifically see Kuehn 2015, Denis 2015, Baxley 2015, Grenberg 2015)

should keep this in mind if they notice the Collins (or even Kaehler) notes incorrectly described as being from the 1780s.

Powalski (AA 27:93-235)

Gottlieb Bernhard Powalski's lecture notes on practical philosophy are not easily dated, and they may represent a compilation from different sets of student notes. They seem to have been procured by Powalski after his time as a student at Königsberg in the late 1770s, when he was already rector in Mewe in West Prussia, and in all likelihood represent Kant's moral thought around 1782/83, during a curiously ambivalent period in the development of Kant's moral theory. The *Critique of Pure Reason*, which contains his system of transcendental idealism with all its implications for human freewill, had already been published. But Kant was not yet working on his mould-breaking publication on the ethics of autonomy, the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*.

Still, much in Powalski will be familiar to readers of the *Groundwork*, e.g. Kant's overall theory of value. Goodness in general is equated with universal rational approval. Only the good will is absolutely good. Happiness is good only if the subject is worthy of it (see MoP, 27:134). Powalski is familiar with the distinction between action from duty and action from inclination that merely coincides with duty (e.g. MoP, 27:225). Only the former is morally good. Accordingly, Powalski repeatedly emphasises the need for a special moral incentive (e.g. MoP, 27:166). But in sharp contrast to the *Groundwork*, we are not told what it is, how it arises or how it is meant to operate. The incentive of 'respect for the law' is absent. In fact, Powalski's Kant seems to be thinking mostly of concrete moral laws (e.g. the prohibition of disloyalty or breach of trust, cf. MoP, 27:145), rather than an all-powerful single moral principle. We only occasionally catch a glimpse of a formal law on its way to being the supreme principle of morality, e.g. in the guise of the thesis that it is not "right" to let those in need perish because "it cannot be made a universal rule" (MoP, 27:141).

Moreover, as in Kaehler/Collins, there is no indication in Powalski that moral principles derive their authority from the autonomy of the will. God is still the legislator of moral laws. He does not devise their content, which is grounded in pure reason, but he makes an objective law obligatory by providing the incentive structure that enables agents to act morally. Without the hope that moral purity will be rewarded, moral judgement would be motivationally inert and moral rules would deserve "approval and applause" but not obligate us (MoP, 27:146). Radical selflessness is dismissed as "fantastical" (MoP, 27:165).

Kant thus separates the laws of moral assessment from the mechanism that enables us to act accordingly. As in Kaehler/Collins, the principle of adjudication is distinct from the principle of execution. Much later, in the MM of 1797, he famously distinguishes between the adjudicative and

elective functions of the will: between *Wille* and *Willkür* (MM, 6:226/CEPP:380). But he did not draw this distinction in response to Carl Leonhard Reinhold's challenge in the 1790s. It is there in Powalski's manuscript: we have "a twofold will": first, "a will of the understanding, necessitated by many practical laws" and, secondly, "an animal will, and there we are not, it is true, necessitated by stimuli, but we are still impelled by them" (MoP, 27:123). The human will is internally divided: "*Willkür*", Powalski tells us, "is distinct from *Wille*. *Willkür* is the kind of will that is practical, whereas *Wille* is not practical" (MoP, 27:140). There is not much literature on Powalski's notes. There is no English translation.

Mrongovius (29:597-642)

Krzysztof Celestyn Mrongowiusz (Latinised: Mrongovius) was a student at Königsberg from 1782 to 1790. The notes were taken by him in class in the Winter Semester of 1784/85 (though the extant notebook appears to be an attempt to prepare a clean copy of rougher notes now lost). What makes the notebook so special is that they show us an author who is eager to present and defend his new ethical theory in class. Mrongovius' manuscript often reads like a commentary on central themes of the *Groundwork*: the good will, hypothetical and categorical imperatives and the brand new notion of autonomy within a kingdom of ends. But this notebook also touches on many topics that reappear, if at all, only much later in Kant's published works, e.g. reflections on ancient philosophy, on religion and on the highest good, as well as his legal philosophy and his theory of punishment.

On the note of goodness, Mrongovius tells us that the first sentence of the *Groundwork* – which stresses the singular status of good willing – is intended as the response of common human reason to the ancient ethical question of what is the highest good, construed as the problem of the *supreme* good (MoM2, 29:599/CELE:227). The principle of such singularly good actions is the categorical imperative (MoM2, 29:607/CELE:231). Also, what makes them special is that in them goodness is self-contained and independent of any external ends or purposes (MoM2, 29:610/CELE:233). (This latter point is much clearer in Mrongovius' notes than in the published *Groundwork*.) At the same time, the notes emphasise that the supreme good (morality) is not the *whole* good, because something genuinely good can be added to it to constitute the highest good in another sense: the happiness of the agent, in so far as he is worthy of it (MoM2, 29:599/CELE:227, cf. CPrR, 5:110/CEPP:228).

Mrongovius explains the workings of the categorical imperative as a formal principle. The manuscript contains a full account of the two ways an immoral will can be at odds with itself, commonly called ‘contradiction in conception’ and ‘contradiction in the will’, as well as instructive discussion of examples of immoral maxims that fail the test: one of theft and one of loveless selfishness (MoM2, 29:608–609/CELE:231–233). The authority of moral imperatives is traced back to the autonomy of the human will. Human beings are not “guided by nature”; they do not “receive” the laws they act on because they are not determined by their inclinations (MoM2, 29:630, not in CELE). The principle of morality is, rather, the “autonomy of the will in that the will can view itself as self-legislating in all actions”. As in the *Groundwork*, this leads to the idea of a “kingdom of rational beings whose purpose is a universal system of ends” (MoM2, 29:629/CELE:246). The laws of morality are grounded in pure reason, but they need to be legislated because to be obligated the will needs to be subject to “the will of another”, a legislator, who is no longer God: this is “not the will of another being; but rather our own will, in so far we make it universal and consider it as a universal rule” (MoM2, 29:627/CELE:244). It is therefore curious that, if Mrongovius’ notes are to be believed, Kant was prepared to acknowledge a second layer of duties that in content concern human beings, oneself as well as others, but are still formally due to additional divine legislation and owed to a God who ensures that all is well (MoM2, 29:633/not in CELE). The prospect of divine rewards does not motivate; but it is still needed as confirmation of the “correctness and truth” of very demanding moral laws (MoM2, 29:637/not in CELE). The Academy text of Mrongovius’ notes is riddled with problems, and the Cambridge translation is incomplete. (For a detailed discussion of these notes see Timmermann 2015.)

Vigilantius (27:479-732)

Johann Friedrich Vigilantius, a lawyer and a friend of Kant’s, audited his lectures in his mid-thirties. His notes – taken in the Winter Semester of 1793/94 – are unusual in that they records lectures that explicitly concern Kant’s long-standing project of a metaphysics of morals. References to Baumgarten’s textbooks are much less prominent than in the lectures represented in, e.g., the Kaehler/Collins tradition. In particular, Vigilantius discusses the principle of both the doctrine of right and the doctrine of virtue, much like the book that appeared a few years later under the title of *The Metaphysics of Morals*. Indeed, Vigilantius’ manuscript often sheds light on questions left open by the published work.

The lecture notes introduce the subject by distinguishing, in the customary manner, the laws of nature from the laws of freedom. They associate the subject of a metaphysics of morals with the study of the latter (MoV 27:479–481/CELE:251–253), before turning to the theory of the highest good as Kant found it in the Ancients and his general theory of imperatives and duty, the necessitation of the will, means and ends, and virtue. The categorical imperative is stated as follows: “You ought to act according to that maxim which qualifies for universal legislation, i.e. you ought to act in such a way as to make the maxim of your action *a universal law*.” (MoV 27:495–496/CELE:263–264) It is illustrated in the usual way by examples of honesty and beneficence; and morality is sharply distinguished from the doctrine of happiness. Morality is grounded in Autonomy (MoV 27:499/CELE:266). Transcendental idealism is adduced to explain, up to a point, how a categorical imperative is possible, and how free human actions are different in kind from mere physical events (being murdered from being killed by a falling roof-tile, MoV 27:502/CELE:268). We have – indirect, inferential – access to the realm of freedom through cognition of moral laws (MoV 27:506–507/CELE:271–272).

Vigilantius then turns to discussing various types of obligations as well as the – potential – danger of a conflict or collision of obligations. The latter topic is discussed in much more detail than in the published *Metaphysics of Morals* (MoV 27:508–509/CELE:273–274 and, in particular, 27:537–538/CELE:296–297, also 27:493/CELE:261 and 27:558/CELE:313; cf. MM 6:224/CEPP:378–379). There can be no conflict of duties or obligations. Perfect duties curtail imperfect duties. And we learn about several examples in which insufficient ‘grounds’ of obligation – which exist only in the sphere of imperfect or ethical duty – are vanquished by more stringent grounds or matters of strict obligation (e.g. charitable obligation generally loses out against the filial duty to help one’s parents in need). What is striking about the realm of perfect duties, to oneself and others, is that they are by and large equated with duties of right. There are therefore – non-enforceable – duties of right to humanity in one’s own person, duties that are not duties of virtue and that do not admit of exceptions or latitude (cf. MoV 27:580/CELE:331 and 27:586–587/CELE:335–336). Kant apparently even went so far as to say that “duties of right to oneself are the highest duties of all” (MoV 27:604/CELE:350).

This cannot be the place to discuss the substance of the Vigilantius lectures in detail, but the following passages are particularly noteworthy: Kant’s repeated engagement with Schiller’s criticisms, much along the lines of the well-known footnote in *Religion* (Rel 6:23 fn./CERRT:72–73, cf. MoV 27:488–491/CELE:258–260, 27:624–625/CELE:366–367 and 27:707–708/CELE:432–

433); his theory of conscience (MoV 27:572–576/CELE:251–253/CELE:324–326 and 27:613–620/CELE:357–363); extended discussions of money and avarice (MoV 27:658–662/CELE:394–397) as well as honour and ambition, which still places the Ulpian formula of *honeste vive* in the ethical sphere (MoV 27:664–668/CELE:398–402, cf. 27:527/CELE:288–289); several attacks on what Kant takes to be Aristotle’s doctrine of the mean (MoV 27:611–613/CELE:356–357, 27:648/CELE:386, 27:654/CELE:390 and 27:660–662/CELE:395–397); his views on sex and marriage (MoV 27:637–642/CELE:377–381); an examination – often classical in spirit – of the notions of contentment and happiness, which includes the recommendation not to indulge desires that are not strictly necessary (MoV 27:643–651/CELE:382–388); an extensive exploration of the topic of friendship (MoV 27:675–686/CELE:497–415); an analysis of lying, fraud and insincerity (MoV 27:700–703/CELE:426–429); and, at last, a fresh Kantian account of religion and our moral relation to God (MoV 27:712–732/CELE:436–452). (For further discussion of the Vigilantius notes see Louden 2015.)

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