Virtue, Reason and Duty: Episodes from the History of Ethics

Semester: Autumn
Category: Open Elective
Instructor: Bharani Kollipara

Course Objectives:
In this course, we will study two major moral traditions, one ancient and the other modern, whose paradigmatic representatives are Aristotle and Kant. We will also concentrate, in due course, on two intermediary sub-traditions—of the Stoics and David Hume—which have facilitated the transition of the ethical tradition from its ancient phase to the modern one.

Course Abstract
For Aristotle, a theory of ethics cannot be like any other theory, particularly of sciences. The subject matter of ethics is the nature of human well-being, and its objective is to specify what makes a life well-lived life. Aristotle, following Socrates and Plato, gives a virtue centred theory of ethics. In this account of ethics, such ethical virtues as justice, courage, moderation and so forth are viewed as complex rational, emotional and social skills which are necessary for any conception of good life. In order to live well, we need a proper appreciation of how the most important goods of our life, such as pleasure, happiness, friendship, virtue, honor and wealth fit together.

In contrast, for Immanuel Kant moral conduct is always premised on universalisable laws and impeccable rational cognition—reason. Such a theory implies that for every situation that generates moral problems, a solution that is universally applicable, in all similar sorts of occasions, is in principle possible. And one can formulate universally binding moral laws on the basis of such solutions. Therefore, obeying such laws, as commands of duty, is a central element of Kant’s conception of ethics.

Aristotle and Kant diverge from each other so much that they became representatives of two distinctly evolved traditions of ethical thinking. This is not to rule out that there are discernible affinities between them. Interestingly, both these philosophers have inspired a range of ethical philosophies: Epicureans, Stoics, and Christians drew inspiration from Aristotle, while major currents of modern moral philosophy owe their debt to Kant.

In this course, we will cover all central aspects of Aristotle’s and Kant’s ethical theories, and selected topics from the writings of the Stoics and David Hume, with the help of selected secondary sources. Our effort will be to understand how both Aristotle and Kant, as individual philosophers, gave birth to two prominent traditions of ethical thought.
Core Readings:


Secondary Readings:


**Course Requirements**

1. **Attendance and Participation**: Attending all classes is compulsory. Success of the course much depends upon your active engagement with the readings and with each other in the class.

2. **Mode of Teaching**: The course is organized around a close reading of five primary texts. They will be supplemented by several secondary texts. Lectures would introduce central problems and theories, and discussions would be aimed at targeting specific aspects of the assigned readings, such as ideas, difficult passages and arguments. Freewheeling discussions will not be encouraged at all. There will be periodic quizzes. Independent study and initiative will be highly encouraged and the required guidance would be provided.

3. **Writing and Evaluation**: You will be asked to write three short papers, varying between 1000 to 3000 words each, over the course of the semester. The word/page limit will be specified at the time of assigning the task. Late submissions are allowed only in case of documented cases of medical illness or emergency. Attendance, presentations and quizzes will constitute 20% of your grade. The first paper will count for 25%, second paper for 25% and the final paper for 30%.

**Plagiarism and Academic Integrity**

Submitting someone else’s work as your own, or using others’ words and phrases without proper citation, is a violation of norms of academic integrity, and may result in penalties up to and including a failing grade in the course. Genuine effort and commitment will have direct bearing on the evaluation.