

INSTRUCTOR: Colin McLear  
COURSE: PHIL 971  
TIME: T 1:30-3:35 p.m.  
LOCATION: 312 Louise Pound Hall  
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OFFICE HOURS: R 1-3:00 p.m.

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# KANTIAN CONCEPTIONS OF RATIONAL AGENCY

if [a human being] were led merely by natural laws, it would be impossible to impute to him any action, since the ground of action then would never lie in his control, but rather would be determined in the previous time.

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*Metaphysik Vigilantius* (K<sub>3</sub>), 29:1020 (1794/95)  
IMMANUEL KANT

## Course Overview

Kant famously considers moral agency to consist in acting from a grasp of rational principles as such. But what is a rational principle and what is it to act from such a principle? In this seminar we'll look at how Kant answers these questions, and evaluate the theory of rational agency that results. We'll also look at the reception of Kant's position in contemporary Anglophone philosophy, particularly in the work of Frankfurt, Korsgaard, Velleman, Reath, and Herman. Some related questions we'll be trying to find answers to include:

- How does Kant conceive of the connection between rational action and free action?
- What kind of metaphysical commitments does Kant build into his conception of rational action? Do any of these commitments seem plausible today?
- What is the importance of the capacity for self-consciousness with respect to being rational?

## Course Objectives

Upon completion of this course students should have a good grasp of central philosophical arguments in the early modern period concerning the nature and importance of rationality as well as the historical context in which these doctrines were articulated. This includes being able to (i) articulate some of the central metaphysical, epistemological, and scientific disputes in Europe from the late eighteenth to the early nineteenth centuries; (ii) clearly explain the different positions of the figures discussed in the course, as well as their dialectical context; (iii) articulate ways in which these issues continue to have importance in contemporary philosophy.

## Course Materials

The following book is required for this course:

- Kant, Immanuel. *Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge UP 1999) ISBN: 978-0521654081

The following book is recommended for this course:

- Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (Cambridge UP 1998) ISBN: 978-0521354028

Other readings will be posted on the [course website](#) under “Assignments.”

## Course Requirements

- **Preparation:** You are expected to attend every class meeting fully prepared to discuss each assigned reading, to submit written work punctually, and to offer thoughtful and constructive responses to the remarks of your instructor and your classmates. Make sure that you bring the relevant readings with you to every lecture class. I further expect you to treat both the texts at hand and your classmates’ ideas with openness and respect.
- **Attendance:** Attendance is required. 1/2 a letter grade may be deducted from your final course grade for every unexcused absence.
- **Website:** We will use a course website for all materials. The site address is: [phil971.colinmclear.net](http://phil971.colinmclear.net). Upcoming assignments and readings will be posted there. Please let me know if you have any problems. Technical glitches, computer malfunctions and crashing hard drives are not excuses for failing to complete work in this class.
- **Format for Papers:** Please submit work as a .pdf, .docx, or .rtf file. All work must be typed. I will not accept any handwritten work aside from that we do in class. Your papers should be in 12-point Times New Roman font, double-spaced with margins set to one inch on all sides. Your name, my name, the date and assignment should appear in the top left hand corner of the first page. Your last name and page number must appear in the top right hand corner on each subsequent page. Please staple or paperclip hard copies of papers and drafts. You are responsible for the presentation of your papers.
- **Late Work:** Late papers and assignments will standardly be marked down by 1/3 of a letter grade for each day the work is late (for example, from A- to B+, from B+ to B, and so on).

## Evaluation

### Paper: 60%

- Explain and critically assess a philosophical argument. Topics will be suggested. Papers (6-8000 words) will be written in two drafts, with a first draft due by mid-semester.

### Weekly reading responses: 10%

- Submit a weekly reading response of roughly 100-150 words (500 max) to me via email on Mondays by 8pm. Your reading responses should detail your observations about a primary text (though one can also relate this to secondary readings). They are not summaries. Move to delimit 1-2 major points or ideas from the reading and discuss them. What do you find interesting or compelling? What do you find logically problematic?

### Weekly reading précis: 5%

- Write a précis addressing a particular secondary text assigned for the week (this does not include my notes). Due by class time on Tuesdays. A précis is a rhetorical exercise that asks you to summarize a text, including the claim/argument, supporting evidence, purpose, and audience in 4 sentences. For a helpful example of the form, see: [http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/ph1201/modules/rhetorical-precis/sample/peirce\\_sample\\_precis\\_click.html](http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/ph1201/modules/rhetorical-precis/sample/peirce_sample_precis_click.html)

**Participation: 25%**

- The participation grade takes into account your attendance as well as the quantity and quality of your participation.

## Policies

- **Academic Integrity:** All the work you turn in (including papers, drafts, and discussion board posts) must be written by you specifically for this course. It must originate with you in form and content with all contributory sources fully and specifically acknowledged. Make yourself familiar with UNL's Student Code of Conduct and Academic Integrity Code, available online. **In this course, the normal penalty for any violation of the code is an "F" for the semester.** Violations may have additional consequences including expulsion from the university. Don't plagiarize – It just isn't worth it.
- **University Policies:** This instructor respects and upholds University policies and regulations pertaining to the observation of religious holidays; assistance available to physically handicapped, visually and/or hearing impaired students; plagiarism; sexual harassment; and racial or ethnic discrimination. All students are advised to become familiar with the respective University regulations and are encouraged to bring any questions or concerns to the attention of the instructor.
- **ADA:** In compliance with University policy and equal access laws, I am available to discuss appropriate academic accommodations that may be required for students with disabilities. Students are encouraged to register with Student Disability Services to verify their eligibility for appropriate accommodations.
- **Miscellaneous:** Please turn off cell phones, beeping watches, and other gadgets that make noise before entering our classroom. Absolutely no texting is permitted during class. I will subtract up to five points from your participation grade each and every time your phone rings or I see you texting during class.

## Further Resources

- **Jargon:** It's important to be on top of the technical terms used by philosophers. Please ask for clarification of terms in class. You can also consult Jim Pryor's online "Philosophical Terms and Methods."
- **Help with writing:** Papers should adhere to some consistent practice of footnoting and citation (Chicago, MLA, etc.). I don't really mind which one you use as long as you are consistent. On writing a philosophy paper, there is no better on-line guide than Jim Pryor's. Please consult it. Hacker's A Writer's Reference is also extremely helpful. Useful online writing help may be found at the Purdue Online Writing Lab at <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/>.

The University of Nebraska-Lincoln Writing Center can provide you with meaningful support as you write for this class as well as for every course in which you enroll. Trained peer consultants are available to talk with you as you plan, draft, and revise your writing. Please check the Writing Center website for locations, hours, and information about scheduling appointments.

- **Reference:** The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy at <http://plato.stanford.edu> is an excellent online resource.