

## Phil.661: Seminar on Eighteenth-Century Philosophy

The topic of this seminar for Fall 2014 is Kant's *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785). We will try to figure out what is going on here. What does Kant mean by a 'metaphysics of morals'? What sort of 'groundwork' does it require? One of the obstacles to reading this work is that it is all too familiar to many of us. It has stimulated a lot of discussion in contemporary ethics. This is all to the good. But it can sometimes suggest that we understand and share Kant's assumptions, or that he would share and understand our assumptions (whatever they may be). This can throw up an obstacle to understanding what he was trying to do. But it is important to understand what he was trying to do, not just as a matter of historical interest, but precisely to the extent that we have any interest in engaging with his work philosophically. Otherwise, there is a risk that we and he will talk past one another. Now there is at least one concern in the *Groundwork* that matters a lot to Kant, that might or might not matter to us as contemporary moral philosophers and that has been badly under explored by his readers today: figuring out what is right and what is wrong in Stoic ethics and physics (broadly construed). That may well be, because, for better or for worse, contemporary moral philosophers do not seem to consider Stoicism a live option, as perhaps they should. Our program this term will be to figure out how Kant was engaging with the Stoics in the *Groundwork*. It will naturally be important to figure out who his sources were. But for one thing, that is not hard at all: the point of departure seems to be Cicero's *De Officiis*. For another thing, digging up sources all by itself isn't very interesting. The serious and -- I think -- stimulating work will be in figuring out precisely how Kant engaged with these sources: in short, what he thought was mistaken in them (and why) and what he thought could and should be salvaged from them (and why). This will require that we engage in a bit of 'scholarship', but it will also require that we learn to think like Stoic philosophers -- with the hope that we will also learn how Kant himself was thinking. Then, and (I think) only then, can we start to judge what the *Groundwork* has to offer us today.