

Graduate Seminar: Topics in Early Modern Philosophy: Moral Change and Social Critique
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The force of morality is often thought to lie in its being necessary, unchanging, and consisting in universal principles that apply to all. Yet, throughout the history of philosophy as well as in contemporary debates, critiques have been leveled against moral universalism: for instance, that what we take to be morally necessary leaves out crucial social inequities that are denied normative relevance. Recent proponents of moral universalism have therefore grappled with how to integrate the prospect of social critique and how to account for moral change and progress. In this course, we will examine this nest of issues. Questions we will address include: Is there a way to make sense of the possibility of moral and social change without giving up the prospect of universal moral foundations? Is social change itself to be grounded in unchanging moral principles, or is morality responsive to social change? Is there a way to make sense of a kind of moral universalism that can integrate acknowledgment of the particular features that make up the texture of our lives?

In tackling these issues, we will start with Kant's ethics as the most prominent theory of moral universalism, before delving into critiques of Kant's ethics from his successors in the 19th century, and then examine contemporary attempts to reconcile moral universalism with the prospect of moral change and social critique. Readings will be drawn from Kant, Hegel, Marx, Beauvoir, Bernard Williams, Barbara Herman, Christine Korsgaard, Jonathan Dancy, Michele Moody-Adams, Matthew Congdon, Axel Honneth, Charles Mills, and Amy Allen, among others.