

**PHILOSOPHY 451/651 MORAL OBLIGATION**  
**STEPHEN DARWALL**

What is it for an act to be morally obligatory or, by contrast, to be morally wrong? Philosophers since Kant have tended to focus on the idea that moral duties are “categorical imperatives,” that they necessarily provide (or otherwise guarantee the existence of) reasons for acting that are inescapable and overriding. But what can ground this distinctive “normativity”? We will consider, first, Kant’s, and then, Christine Korsgaard’s attempts to ground it in unavoidable presuppositions of the “first person” practical standpoint, the perspective one takes up when deliberating about what to do. Next we will consider the idea that moral obligation is an irreducibly second-personal phenomenon. The key notion will be a putative conceptual connection between the ideas of moral obligation and moral wrong, on the one hand, and what P. F. Strawson called “reactive attitudes,” on the other: more specifically, that for an action to be morally wrong (contrary to moral obligation) is for it to be of a kind that would render the agent blameworthy were she to perform it without excuse. We will consider a systematic development of this idea in *The Second-Person Standpoint*, alongside some writings of Strawson, Gary Watson, and T. M. Scanlon about the nature of blame. Finally, we will consider *The Second-Person Standpoint*’s attempt to locate moral obligation within a theory of practical reason, together with more recent critical responses to the book.

**READINGS\***

Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (G)  
Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity* (SN)  
Stephen Darwall, *The Second-Person Standpoint: Morality, Respect, and Accountability* (SPS)  
T. M. Scanlon, *Moral Dimensions: Permissibility, Meaning, Blame* (MD)

**REQUIREMENTS**

Those taking the course for credit will write 3 or 4 short discussions (due the Monday preceding the seminar on Tuesday evening) and a longer (3,000 to 5,000 words) essay (due by 11:59 pm on Monday, May 4. The paper can be on a topic of the student’s choosing, but topics should be cleared with me by April 14.)

**TENTATIVE SCHEDULE**

January 13	Kant, G, Section I
January 20	Kant, G, Section II-III
January 27	Korsgaard, SN, 1-89
February 3	Korsgaard, SN, 90-166

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\* Available through Labyrinth Books.

February 10**	Darwall, SPS, 3-61
February 17	Darwall, SPS, 65-118 Strawson, "Freedom and Resentment"
February 24	Scanlon, MD 1-7, 122-216
March 3	Darwall, SPS, 119-180
March 24	Darwall, SPS, 181-209 Darwall, "Demystifying Promises"
March 31	Darwall, SPS, 213-242, Rödel, "Darwall Contra Kant: Kant Defended" Korsgaard redux
April 7	Darwall, SPS, 243-299
April 14	Darwall, SPS, 300-320 <i>Ethics</i> symposium on SPS
April 21	loose threads Darwall, "But It Would Be Wrong"

My normal office hours will be Wednesday from 1 to 3 pm and by appointment. My office is 306 Connecticut Hall. My email address is: [stephen.darwall@yale.edu](mailto:stephen.darwall@yale.edu)

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\*\* This class will have to be scheduled at a different time.