

JOSEPH CAREW
CONTINENTAL CRITIQUES OF MODERNITY

Course Description

In modernity, the thinking subject was celebrated for its incomparable powers. Philosophers were convinced that anyone, by relying on their own rational capacities, could determine what to believe and how they should act. As such, the thinking subject was seen as the vehicle of truth and the source of humankind's radical freedom of self-determination, enabling us to liberate ourselves from superstition, tradition, and systems of oppression. But what if the thinking subject is not as powerful as it appears? What if, say, forces beyond the control of our rationality influence our consciousness, or there are other dimensions to human experience that are more primordial than our rationality, or rationality itself unwittingly perpetuates its own systems of oppression, systems that it was set up to fight against?

In this course, we will investigate these questions through a close reading of texts in 19th- and 20th-century continental philosophy. We will see that a decentering of the thinking subject and by implication the critique of modernity are two of its major themes, bringing together thinkers as diverse as Hegel, Nietzsche, Freud, Heidegger, Levinas, and Bordo. In particular, we will examine and evaluate the groundbreaking theories that they propose concerning, but not limited to:

- how history shapes the fundamental beliefs and values that we adhere to in our lives;
- how unconscious drives structure our individual and social behaviour;
- how our experience is determined by social roles and norms over which we have no control (are “thrown into”), casting doubt on our pretensions to radical freedom;
- how the face-to-face encounter with others continually disrupts any claim that rationality is the be-all and end-all of human life;
- how notions of a “detached” rationality have not only wrongly devalued other forms of rationality traditionally associated with the feminine (e.g., of the body or affects), but also led to the wrongful exclusion of women from political life.

Class Schedule

Week 1: Introduction: The Rise and Fall of the Thinking Subject

- Kant, “What is Enlightenment?”

Week 2-3: The Historical Backdrop of Human Life

- Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, VI. Spirit

Week 4-5: The Historical Contingency of Moral Values

- Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, “First Treatise: ‘Good and Evil,’ ‘Good and Bad’”

Week 6-7: The Discovery of the Unconscious: “The Ego is Not Master of its own House”

- Freud, *An Outline of Psychoanalysis*

Week 8-9: Dasein and the They

- Heidegger, *Being and Time*, §§1-4, 9-10, 25-7, 35-8

Week 10-11: The Call of the Other

- Levinas, “Is Ontology Fundamental?”
- Levinas, “Ethics as First Philosophy”
- Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* (excerpts)

JOSEPH CAREW
CONTINENTAL CRITIQUES OF MODERNITY

Week 12-13: The Gendered History of Reason

- Bordo, *The Flight to Objectivity: Essays on Cartesianism and Culture* (excerpts)

Assessment

The final grade will consist of four components:

1. Participation (10%)
2. Presentation (30%)
3. Commentary (10%)
4. Term Paper of 5000 words (50%)

Learning Outcomes

At the end of the course, students will be familiar with several major historical developments in continental philosophy—Hegelian dialectics, the Nietzschean genealogical method, psychoanalysis, phenomenology, and feminist epistemology—and key texts associated with them. This will ensure that they have a solid knowledge base to orient themselves in this tradition. The presentation and commentary, in which students are asked to summarize key concepts from different texts and respond to one another's readings, give students the opportunity to be "experts of the day." As such, these are meant to assure that students have sufficiently internalized the central issues of various continental approaches and thinkers for their future studies and give them training in oral presentation and leading discussions. Students will also improve their critical reading and writing skills by analyzing texts and creatively putting them to use in order to explore their own philosophical interests and existential concerns through course material. The term paper, the topic of which can be freely decided by each student in consultation with the instructor, is to promote the development of such skills. Philosophy is not just a body of knowledge, but also a distinctive methodology of critical methodology best learned in practicing it.