


Kant and German Idealism

Short Course Description

German Idealism is one of the most influential movements in the history of Western philosophy. It left its impact on virtually every philosophical discipline and played a pivotal role in most major intellectual developments of the 19th and 20th centuries, including Marxism, existentialism, phenomenology, and the philosophy of mind. In this course, we will give an overview of three key representatives of the tradition—Kant, Fichte, and Hegel—and how their respective idealist systems evolved in dialogue with one another. The foci of the class will be how each provides original theories of freedom, reason, knowledge, the source of moral obligations, and social life in their respective philosophies of transcendental idealism, ethical idealism, and historical dialectics. Beyond historically reconstructing these developments, we will also explore the legacy of German Idealism in contemporary analytic and continental philosophy. The goal of this class is to train students in the historical-critical methodology of reading texts while also demonstrating that insights can still be drawn from these texts through a plurality of philosophical approaches.

Thematic Course Description

German Idealism begins with Kant’s “transcendental idealism,” first articulated in the *Critique of Pure Reason* and further elaborated in the *Critique of Practical Reason*. This enacted the so-called “Copernican revolution” in philosophy, which radically challenged traditional models of knowledge and the source of moral obligations. Its central themes are *human freedom* and its relationship to *human reason*. In a first moment, we will examine Kant’s arguments that space, time, and general laws such as cause and effect are not *objective* features of the world, but instead *subjective* forms and categories that *we* impose on experience to bestow upon it a universal and necessary order. For Kant, the world is not something “out there” to which our representations must correspond—it is a spontaneously-generated, rational construction of our mind trying to make intelligible sensory data passively given to us. In a second moment, we will investigate his thesis that human reason gives itself the moral law in the form of a “categorical imperative” that we must unconditionally follow, despite what our natural desires or cultural traditions may tell us we should do. Kant’s innovative claim is that ethical principles (e.g., “Do not kill”) are not divine commands, mind-independent moral facts inscribed in the universe or in our nature, or social conventions, but rational constructions that spontaneously arise from our need to find universally and necessarily binding explanations of how we should act and which we hold each other to. As he puts it, they are laws legislated *by us* as absolutely true.

Next, we will look at how Fichte’s *Science of Knowledge* systematizes Kant’s theoretical and practical philosophy by developing a new kind of “ethical idealism,” itself a unique brand of pragmatism. Making human freedom into the first principle of philosophy, Fichte famously deduces the structure of human experience from it. For Fichte, because our original freedom finds itself “checked” or “limited” by the contingent constraints of the natural and social world, the rational agent is always confronted with its radical finitude vis-à-vis its infinite freedom of self-actualization. This sets up our need to cognize the world in order to, in an endless process of striving, transform what the world *is* into what it *ought to be* if we are to realize our freedom in

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it. For freedom to be realized, however, we must not only act according to self-legislated rational or moral laws, i.e., Kant's categorical imperative, but also recognize the rights of other rational agents, who "summon" us to restrict our own freedom out of respect of theirs. In short, we will see how Fichte not only deduces human cognition, morality, and political rights as the conditions of possibility of freedom, but also shows how he believes that Kant overlooks the dimensions of finitude, embodiment, recognition, and intersubjectivity crucial to human experience.

Finally, we will turn to Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. The central idea motivating Hegel's *magnum opus* is that previous idealist systems have not taken seriously the intrinsically social and historical nature of knowledge and moral obligations. As we shall see, this is because, for Hegel, rationality is essentially *normative*. As rational creatures, we instinctively make claims about what the world is and how we should act. But the claims we make demand recognition of their truth from others. As such, Hegel maintains that our theoretical and practical claims can only be adjudicated in a practice of giving and asking for reasons: we seek consensus on our fundamental beliefs and moral values, compelling us to establish, through politics, art, religion, and philosophy, *communal worldviews and ways of life that evolve over time* as these worldviews face internal problems. As Hegel makes the point, spirit is an "'I' that is 'We' and 'We' that is 'I.'" Hegel's innovative argument is that Kant and Fichte's idealist systems can only be understood as arising from within the social context of the late Enlightenment and the trials and tribulations of human history. In short, historical dialectics is the most consistent account of the "Copernican" nature of knowledge and morality.

This course will conclude with an interlude on the legacy of German Idealism in contemporary analytic and continental philosophy. We will look at how McDowell endorses a Kantian position in the philosophy of mind, Darwall uses Fichte to articulate a second-person standpoint in ethics, and Comay's use of Hegel as a way to understand historical trauma.

Course Schedule

Week 1: Introduction: Why German Idealism?

Part I: Transcendental Idealism: Kant's Epistemological and Moral Constructivism

Week 2: Space and Time as *A Priori* Forms of Sensible Intuition

- Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781; 2nd ed., 1787), Second Preface, Transcendental Aesthetic

Week 3: Nature as a Construction of the *A Priori* Categories of the Understanding

- Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Transcendental Deduction B

Week 4: The Rational Source of Human Freedom and Moral Laws

- Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), excerpts

Part II: Ethical Idealism: Fichte's Pragmatism

Week 5: The Divided Self: The Self-Positing of Freedom and the Surd of Human Finitude

- Fichte, *The Science of Knowledge* (1794/95)

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Week 6: The Summons of the Other and the Rational Source of Political Rights

- Fichte, *Foundations of Natural Right* (1796/97), excerpts

Week 7: Embodiment and the Rational Source of Moral Laws

- Fichte, *The System of Ethics* (1798), excerpts

Part III: Hegel's Historical Dialectics

Week 8: From Consciousness to Self-Consciousness: The Rational Source of Theoretical Beliefs

- Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), chapters 1-3

Week 9: Self-Consciousness: The Rational Source of Practical Values

- Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, chapter 4

Week 10: Spirit: The Rational Source of Beliefs and Values in Communities and Their History

- Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, chapter 6, excerpts

Part IV: The Contemporary Legacy of German Idealism

Week 11: Kant and the Contemporary Debate about the Nature of Perceptual Content

- McDowell, *Mind and World* (1994), excerpts
- Bird, 'McDowell's Kant: *Mind and World*'

Week 12: Fichte and the Second-Person Standpoint in Ethics

- Darwall, *The Second-Person Standpoint* (2006), excerpts
- Darwall, 'Why Fichte's Second-Personal Foundations Can Provide a More Adequate Account of the Relation of Right than Kant's'

Week 13: Hegel and Current Theories of Historical Trauma

- Comay, *Mourning Sickness: Hegel and the French Revolution*

Assessment

The final grade will consist of four components:

- Participation (10%)
- In-Class Midterm Exam (20%)
- Term Paper of 2500-3000 words (40%)
- Take-Home Final Exam (30%)

Learning Outcomes

At the end of the course, students will be familiar with one of the most major movements in the history of Western philosophy. Since German Idealism has provoked complex reactions by Kierkegaard, Feuerbach, Marx, Heidegger, Russell, and many others, understanding what is at stake in the tradition is crucial for having a better understanding of late 19th-century philosophy and contemporary continental and analytic philosophy. In addition, students will learn about multiple historical methods (e.g., transcendental philosophy and dialectics) and concepts (e.g., the categorical imperative, embodiment, recognition, intersubjectivity, and normativity) whose influence can still be felt today in phenomenology, the realism/anti-realism debate, analytic metaethics, pragmatism, and critical theory. The two writing assignments, in which students are

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asked to summarize key concepts from different texts, are meant to assure that students have sufficiently internalized the central tenets of German Idealism for their future studies. 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 thinking best learned in practicing it.