

Continental Philosophy

Instructor: Dr. Joseph Carew

Short Course Description

This course treats some of the most creative and influential thinkers in 19th- and 20th-century continental philosophy. Continental philosophy can be understood as a critical response to modernity and the latter's emphasis on the rational subject, offering rich analyses of human experience that cast doubt on traditional views on reason, freedom, and the nature of action and responsibility. To this end, we will explore philosophical insights offered by dialectics, existentialism, psychoanalysis, phenomenology, and feminism.

Detailed Course Description

In modernity, the rational 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 one should act. As such, the rational 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 rational subject is not as "all-powerful" as it appears? What if, say, we can never fully overcome the impact of history on how we think, or unconscious forces beyond the control of our rationality influence what we believe and do, 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 rational 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 ground-breaking 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.

Student Evaluation

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| • Participation | 10% |
| • Essay 1 | 20% |
| • Take-Home Midterm | 20% |
| • Essay 2 | 30% |
| • Take-Home Final | 20% |

Essay 1:

The first essay will be of a historical and exegetical nature. You will contextualize and summarize key concepts of an important and influential textual passage and reconstruct its formal argument. The essay will be 1500 words.

Midterm:

Short-answer questions on course readings and class discussions up to the midterm.

Essay 2:

The second essay will be a reflective essay that deals with a topic of your choice and argues for your own position on this topic. I will circulate a list of topics, although you are encouraged to choose a topic of your own in consultation with me if there is a specific theme you would like to explore further. This essay can be a place for you to investigate your philosophical interests and existential concerns through the course material. The essay will be 2000 words.

Final:

Short-answer questions on course readings and class discussions after the midterm.

Class Schedule

Week 1: Introduction: The Rise and Fall of the Rational 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.

Week 12-13: The Gendered History of Reason

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

Course Procedures and Policies

- 1 *Email:* I will respond within 2 business days. If something is urgent, please indicate so in the subject line so that I can prioritize getting back to you.
- 2 *Missed Exams:* Please contact me within 24 hours, if possible. If you are excused (for medical reasons, bereavement, etc., as determined on a case-by-case basis), you must reschedule.

- 3 *Late Essays:* Any essay handed in late will be penalized by 5% per day for a maximum of 7 days. Late essays after this point will not be accepted, except under extenuating circumstances.