

## Seminar on Hegel's *Phenomenology*

Instructor: Dr. Joseph Carew

### Short Course Description

There is no better way to understand Hegel than to look at his most influential work: *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807). This book, which deals with the “idealistic” structure of our consciousness of objects, our self-consciousness of action, our social consciousness of communal beliefs and values (the “spirit” of a community, as he puts it) and their “dialectical” history, was designed to be an introduction to his system and hence sketches the major ideas governing his mature thought. While this course will primarily be a close reading of the foundational text of the Hegelian project, we will also look at how the text has been appropriated by contemporary analytic and continental philosophy in order to show its complex and longstanding historical impact as well as to show how unique insights can still be gathered from the text through a plurality of philosophical approaches.

### Detailed Course Description

According to a widespread belief, Hegel is one of the last great rationalist metaphysicians. It is said that he not only tried to deduce, by logic alone, the necessary structure of what exists, but that also he tried to use logic to demonstrate the dialectical progression of human history as culminating in the coming to self-consciousness of a “cosmic spirit” in and through us. This led him to be considered the enemy of most of 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>-century analytic and continental philosophy. On the analytic side, Hegel was seen as misunderstanding and abusing logic. On the continental side, he was seen as creating a grandiose system that left no room for the contingency and finitude of the human condition. As Kierkegaard humorously remarks, Hegel is like someone who created a castle in the sky and then was forced to live next to it in a shack.

In this course, we will examine Hegel's *Phenomenology* in order to offer a non-metaphysical reading of Hegel's philosophy as one that offers a captivating answer to what it means for us to be an embodied rational subject enmeshed in a history that precedes us and informs every step of our lives, but which we can never master. Since Hegel's *Phenomenology* is an introduction to his *Science of Logic*, which is the first part of his philosophical system (the second being the *Philosophy of Nature* and the third the *Philosophy of Mind*), to grasp that system we must first come to terms with it.

We will investigate three ground-breaking moves Hegel makes. (1) The world around us is neither given immediately through the senses or perception, nor is it a pre-existing order that the understanding must capture. Instead, it arises through our theoretical attempts to give meaning to our conscious experience of things. (2) Theory itself has to be understood in terms of the role it plays in our practical life, namely how it makes our self-conscious awareness of who we are and the goals that guide our actions more important to us than the imperatives of our biological nature. (3) Our theoretical relationship to the world and our practical relationship to ourselves are ultimately sociohistorical products—a result of our attempt, as a community, to comprehend the world around us, who we are, and how we should live with one another, leading to shared beliefs and values that evolve over time. As such, we will see how Hegel's account of the “dialectical progression” of history is an account of the evolution of our worldviews as that which makes possible distinctively human experience. We shall see that this account neither “deduces” history from logic and is open to the contingency of the human condition (our worldviews could have been otherwise) and its finitude (we are “thrown into,” as Heidegger would say, the sociohistorical life-worlds that make us who we are and only have some control over them).

We will, in conclusion, look at two contemporary appropriations of Hegel's *Phenomenology*: Brandom's return to Hegel as a precursor of his own pragmatist understanding of truth as arising from the social practice of giving and asking for reasons and how Butler's interpretation of the master-slave dialectic plays a role in her own feminist theory of desire and political recognition.

### **Student Evaluation**

- Participation 10%
- Expository Essay 20%
- Presentation 25%
- Research Proposal 10%
- Research Essay 35%

#### *Participation:*

Participation includes both attendance and active contribution to class discussions. You are expected to pose questions, provide commentary, and/or identify textual passages of particular importance for us to analyze and evaluate together.

#### *Expository Essay:*

The expository essay will be of a historical and exegetical nature. You will contextualize and summarize the key concepts from a text by Freud. The essay will be 1500 words.

#### *Presentation:*

Each student will be responsible for leading one seminar session. You will summarize the seminar reading of the meeting in a presentation of approximately 20 minutes. You will be required to produce a handout or PowerPoint.

#### *Research Proposal:*

At the end of this course, you will submit a research essay on a topic of your own choosing. You may write on Hegel or you may relate Hegel to other philosophers you have studied or to contemporary issues. To this end, you will hand in a prospective abstract of 500 words that describes your topic, the thesis you will defend, and the main steps of your argument. Additionally, you will include a bibliography that identifies the relevant primary texts from Hegel as well as secondary texts from your own independent research. The research proposal is not a contract; your essay is likely to change as you start writing, but the proposal will allow you to get feedback on your ideas before you jump in.

#### *Research Essay:*

You will submit a thesis-driven research essay that reflects your engagement with the course material, class discussions, and independent research. The essay will be 3000 words.

## **Class Schedule**

### **Week 1: What Does it Mean to be "Modern"?**

- Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Second Preface.
- Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, excerpts.

### **Week 2: The "Dialectical History" of Modernity: The Project and Methodology of Hegel's *Phenomenology***

- Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, §§73-89.

**Week 3: Consciousness: Sense-Certainty and Perception**

- Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, §§90-131.

**Week 4: Consciousness: The Understanding**

- Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, §§132-165.

**Week 5: Self-Consciousness: The Master-and-Slave Dialectic**

- Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, §§166-196.

**Week 6: Self-Consciousness: Stoicism, Skepticism, and the Unhappy Consciousness**

- Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, §§197-230.

**Week 7: Reason: The Actualization of Rational Self-Consciousness Through its Own Activity**

- Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, §§231-239, §§347-393.

**Week 8: Reason: Individuality Which Takes Itself to Be Real In and For Itself**

- Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, §§394-437.

**Week 8: Spirit: The Ethical Order of Ancient Greece**

- Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, §§438-487.

**Week 9: Spirit: Medieval Culture**

- Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, §§488-537.

**Week 10: Spirit: The Enlightenment and the Reign of Terror during the French Revolution**

- Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, §§538-595.

**Week 11: Spirit: Kantian Morality and the Beautiful Soul**

- Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, §§596-671.

**Week 12: What is “Absolute Knowing?”**

- Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, §§788-808.

**Week 13: Contemporary Appropriations of Hegel’s *Phenomenology***

- Brandom, “Untimely Review of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*.”
- Brandom, “Some Pragmatism themes in Hegel’s Idealism: Negotiation and Administration in Hegel’s Account of the Structure and Content of Conceptual Norms.”
- Butler, *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France*, 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.

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