

Kant and German Idealism

Instructor: Dr. Joseph Carew

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.

Detailed 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 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.

Student Evaluation

- 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

Introduction: The Importance of German Idealism

Week 1: The Basic Insight of German Idealism and Its Role in Continental and Analytic Philosophy

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* (1781/1787), 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).

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*, 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.