

Department of Philosophy
Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century German Idealism/107-366B 2021
Professor Alison Laywine (514-398-1671)
a.laywine@mcgill.ca

§1. Purpose and Modalities of the Course:

The purpose of this course is to introduce students to German idealism of the eighteenth and nineteenth century. To that end, we will carefully read and discuss selections from works of different philosophers who might be characterized as German idealists. (This will include works by philosophers writing in languages other than German.) We will try to learn from our readings and discussions what the philosophical goals of German idealism might or might not have been and what strategies were available to achieve these goals. We would normally do this together in person: in a physical class room assigned to us by the university for certain times during the week. Because of the ongoing pandemic, that is still impossible. We will thus take our course online. Our platform will be the page set aside for us on Mycourses. About half of the content of the course will be made available on this platform synchronously, while the other half will be made available asynchronously.

The asynchronous content will be uploaded weekly to our Mycourses page – by Thursday evening. It will largely consist in recorded presentations by me, but it will occasionally consist in (or include) written documents (by me). The synchronous part of the course will take place on Tuesdays by zoom conferencing in the 16:00 to 17:30 slot (Eastern Standard Time) the university has reserved for us. Please note: I will upload my first presentation on Thursday, January 7th, which is our official first day of class. Our first zoom discussion section will take place on Tuesday, January 12th (from 16:00 to 17:30, EST). You will find the link to that zoom meeting on our Mycourses page (under ‘Zoom’).

The plan is this. I will notify students every week, usually by email, by Friday at the latest, which readings I will present the **following** Thursday in my recorded lecture. My presentation that Thursday will be about those readings, **and it will presuppose that students have carefully done them**. Our zoom session the Tuesday thereafter will be the occasion on which we discuss your questions about the material I presented the Thursday **before**. By implication, we can think of our discussion and engagement with each week’s reading as running from Thursday of any given week to the Tuesday of the next week. This is due to the fact that our first class was scheduled, before the Christmas break, for Thursday, January 7th.

§2. Rationale for Conducting the Course as Described Above:

My decision to conduct our class in this way is motivated by the following considerations.

On the one hand, students cannot expect to get much out of a course on German idealism (or anything else) – even when we are not trying to cope with a serious public health crisis – **if they do not get into a regular routine of reading carefully the passages assigned for the class in a given week**. But, on the other hand, these readings are very difficult, which means that students will need guidance. The rationale behind the uploaded presentations and written documents is to provide such guidance. But it is important to understand what guidance is and what it is not. Guidance does not consist in telling students how to make up their own minds about what the German idealists were trying to do and whether they succeed on their own terms (or anybody else’s) in doing it. It consists in what I would like to call ‘brush-clearing’.

Brush-clearing a difficult text consists in figuring out (among other things) what its goals **might** be, what strategies it **might** be using to achieve these goals, whether it makes use of a technical vocabulary, and if so, what it **might** be – in general what questions the text **seems** to raise and what sorts of answers **might or might not** be plausible. It can also involve figuring out the historical and philosophical context in which the text was written: to which philosophers and philosophical debates **might** the German idealists be responding, and how. The weight of the ‘**might**’ in bold, in the previous sentences, will depend on what evidence we can find – in the works by German idealists and related texts: collecting the evidence and weighing it will be one of the recurring subjects I discuss in my presentations and written documents.

Brush-clearing by me is designed to **get you started** and help you deal with the natural puzzlement you will likely feel when you sit down with these texts (especially if you are sitting down with these texts for the first time). But you will also need an opportunity to raise questions about the material with other students. The weekly discussion sections by zoom will give you a (virtual) place to do that. Our exchange of ideas on zoom must be focussed. That means two things. The first is that it will be a moderated discussion (I’ll do the moderating) and not simply a free for all. Second,

it means that you need to come to these meetings **prepared**: be sure you have done the assigned readings ahead of time as carefully as you can; formulate your questions and observations ahead of the meeting. Don't forget: sometimes the most useful questions are clarificatory and take the form, 'What does Plato mean here?' If you find yourself puzzled about what he is up to, please share that with the rest of us. **It is part of doing good philosophy.**

Please note: I will **not** be recording our discussion sections. That is because the prospect of being recorded trying to formulate one's questions and ideas may inhibit some students from participating. (It would inhibit me.) I realize that some of you may be living far outside our time zone in Montreal (Eastern Standard Time). But I do not believe that trying to record our zoom discussions will help.

§3. Office Hours

Note too that I will be holding regular weekly office hours. They will be Tuesdays from 17:35 to 18:35 (Eastern Standard Time) on zoom. That means you will have to get in touch with me by email so that I can send you a zoom invite.

§4. Reading Materials:

We will be mostly be reading works by Kant, Schelling and Hegel. The main work of Kant's we will be reading is the *Critique of Pure Reason*. The translation of this work we will be using is that of Paul Guyer and Allen Wood, published by Cambridge University Press in 1998. The main work of Hegel's we will be reading is his *Phenomenology of Spirit*. The translation of this work we will be using is that of Terry Pinkard and Michael Baur, published by Cambridge University Press in 2018. The main work of Schelling's we will be reading is the *First Outline of a Philosophy of Nature*. The translation is that of Keith Peterson, published by the press of the State University of New York. Please note: **I have not ordered physical books for the course.** But you all have access to these books through our library.

§5. Program for the Course:

German idealism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was not one thing: it came in lots of flavours. But the philosophers we will be reading this term had something in common, namely a commitment to the claim that knowledge requires the identity of the knowing subject and the object of knowledge. That claim would be a non-starter if it meant that nothing is real outside of my thinking. But it seems more plausible if it means that the object of knowledge is itself a product of the effort of enquiry. Suppose you are curious about something. That something is the object of your curiosity. But as an object of curiosity, it cannot yet count as an object of knowledge for you. What will you do to satisfy your curiosity? You will have to figure out how to state your questions about the object, and you will have to work out strategies for answering these questions. It would be astonishing if these strategies did not involve drawing on items of knowledge that you judge to be relevant and secure: if these items of knowledge suggest provisional answers to your questions, they will also likely suggest ways to test these provisional answers. If your provisional answers survive your tests, they will give you a theory that has converted your object of curiosity into an object of knowledge. But your object of knowledge, *as such*, has emerged as the fruit of your enquiry. To that extent, we might plausibly say that subject and object are, if not precisely the same, then certainly united as the essential ingredients in this process of enquiry.

All I did, in the previous paragraph, was to make plausible the claim that knowledge requires the identity of the subject and the object of knowledge. But it leaves open all sorts of questions. For one thing, it is unclear what sorts of objects are at issue. Curiosity can take us to lots of different places. Does that mean that anything can count as an object here? But it is at least as important to figure out who or what is the subject here. Is it you, the individual reader of this syllabus, and other individual persons like you and me? Is it science as such, i.e., an intellectual activity that individual persons might engage in, without itself being an individual person? Is it something else? And what about the 'process of enquiry' as I was calling it earlier? Is it something like the 'scientific method' (whatever that may be)? Is it the culture of science as such? Is it history? Is it life? Part of what makes German idealism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries so interesting is the array of different answers that different philosophers tried out. Our program for the term will be to explore some of them.

I will not give a week-by-week break down of the course. But here is a break down of the course into units of roughly three to four weeks each.

Unit One: this will unit will last exactly a week. It will serve as an introduction to the course. I will elaborate on the reflections I just laid out in my first recorded lecture on January 7th (which you will find uploaded to our Mycourses

page). And this presentation will give us something to talk about on January 12th. The reading for this lecture will be from the introduction to T. H. Green's *Prolegomena to Ethics* (1883). As you will surmise from his name, Green was not German; he was an English philosopher. But he was immersed in the ideas of Kant. His presentation of these ideas is helpful. The readings from Green will be available as a pdf scan and uploaded to the content section of our Mycourses page.

Unit Two: in this unit we will read excerpts from Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. Our focus will be on the so-called 'Transcendental Deduction of the Pure Concepts of the Understanding'. This is the part of the Critique in which Kant can be understood to lay out the idealistic claim I stated and briefly elaborated in the first two paragraphs of §5 of this syllabus. The German idealists coming after Kant seem to have taken the 'Transcendental Deduction' as offering a strategy for elaborating the idealistic claim, though they will urge lots of tweaks.

Unit Three: in this unit we will read a mix of different things to set up our engagement with Hegel in the final unit. There are two topics we will cover. First, we will need to understand the significance of Spinoza (and Leibniz) for the German idealists. Second, we will need to understand the significance, for these people, of the emergence of the life sciences at this time. Our main readings will be from Schelling and Herder.

Unit Four: in this unit we will read selections from Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

§6.Method of Evaluation:

There will be two short written assignments due during the term. Each will be worth 25%. These assignments will be on questions I set. A final paper will be due at the end of the term. It will be worth 50%. It will be on a topic that you set for yourself – in consultation with me.

§7.A Very Important Tip for the Term:

Keep up with the readings! Establish a consistent routine of reading during the course of the week. Do not assume that a single pass-through of the readings is enough. These texts must be studied. Underlining key passages is not, in general, a useful study strategy. Learn to take notes that record your understanding of what you read. These notes should include a road map of the text: a document that lays out in a cogent way the structure of the text and its most important high lights. Strive to assimilate the text. A test of whether you really have the readings under your belt is whether, with the help of your road map, you can explain to a friend how it unfolds, how it progresses, what its main arguments are.

§8.Academic Integrity:

"McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures." - Senate resolution, January 29, 2003

Plagiarism is not compatible with academic integrity. It is your responsibility to inform yourself about what counts as plagiarism and what the consequences of it are. To this end, read up on the McGill policy on this important topic. Follow this link: <https://www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/students>

§9.Language Policy at McGill:

Les étudiantes/étudiants à McGill ont le droit de soumettre leurs travaux en français s'ils le veulent; s'ils le veulent, je les invite chaleureusement à le faire. A noter:

Charter of Students' Rights, Article 15:

15. Every student has the right to submit in English or in French written work that is to be graded. This does not apply to courses in which acquiring proficiency in a language is one of the objectives.

15. Chaque étudiante/étudiant a le droit de soumettre en français ou en anglais tout travail écrit (sauf dans le cas des cours dont l'un des objectifs est la maîtrise d'une langue).