Zones of Entanglement: Philosophy, the Life Sciences and Medicine 1785-2012

Tilottama Rajan

This course takes up the impact of the life sciences on philosophy and more broadly the organization of knowledge, with reference to the mutually unsettling transferences and interactions between philosophy and its others, specifically life sciences that shift the very nature of philosophy. The course deals mostly with late 18thc and early 19thc thinkers, but focalised through contemporary theorists, some to be studied and some just touched on. The course has five (entangled) sections:

1. An Introduction, which will look at Hegel’s, Schelling’s and Novalis’ theorization of an “encyclopedia of the philosophical sciences” that thinks even empirical fields of knowledge in terms of their philosophical potential, but also their contamination of philosophy and interimplication with each other within a (deconstructive) architecture of knowledge. Foucault’s work on a self-reflexive interdisciplinarity (in *The Order of Things*) and Derrida’s work on the university will provide a framework for looking at the above thinkers.

2. A section on Hegel’s philosophy of nature, the most ignored and troublesome part of his work. Here I will be concerned not only with the argument but also with layout and narrative structure, in other words, with the *Philosophy of Nature* as writing/écriture, as phantasmology, as a “pathography.” Hegel’s own *Aesthetics* is one tool for approaching the Philosophy of Nature in this way, and raises the larger issue of how we read philosophy in ways that exceed and trouble exegesis.

3. A section on Schelling, who more openly confronts the writing of philosophy and the very possibility philosophy as “science” (or systematic and certain knowledge). We will be particularly concerned with the interdisciplinary implications of the life sciences (physics, chemistry, physiology, medicine, geology) for other domains of thought, as shown by the consequences of Schelling’s early *Naturphilosophie* for later works such as the *Freedom* essay and *Ages of the World*.

4. A section on the uptake of the late 18thc. British medical theorist, John Hunter (1728-1893), whose collection of anatomical and fossil specimens was made a “national trust” in 1799. Hunter’s interdisciplinary corpus allows us to reflect on disciplines such as medicine, physiology, comparative anatomy, geology, paleontology and museology, as well as on the cultural management of knowledge. Unlike that of Hegel and Schelling, his work is thoroughly empirical. But in their most radical forms Idealism and empiricism meet at a vanishing point, where the latter is as speculative as the former. Malabou’s notion of “destructive plasticity” provides a framework for looking at what is most disturbing in Hunter’s pathology (whose impact can be seen in a writer like Blake). And German Idealism will provide a framework for looking at how British Idealism closes off this speculative threat, and thus for reflecting on differences between what Derrida calls “philosophical continents” that are still in play today.

5. A section on contemporary thinkers (Foucault, Malabou, Esposito) whose work also registers the interdisciplinary impact of the life sciences, as well as providing resources for approaching
the previous thinkers studied in a new key.

Readings include:


F.W.J. Schelling, *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature* (selections); *Introduction to the Outline* (selections); *Freedom essay* (selections); “On the Nature of Philosophy as Science” (selections)

John Hunter, selections

Michel Foucault: *The Birth of the Clinic* (selections); *The Order of Things* (selections)

Roberto Esposito: *Bios* (selections); *Immunitas*, “Introduction,” “The Implant”; *The Third Person*: Chapter 1.

Catherine Malabou: selections from *What Can We Do With Our Brains, Ontology of the Accident*, and *The New Wounded*; “The Wounds of Spirit.”