Immaterialism

Rationale for Theory and Criticism

This course treats one of the fundamental and most contested ideas in philosophy and theory: immaterialism. The readings, some of which are taken from the Theory qualifying exam list, will deepen students’ understanding of the history of metaphysics and the role of the immaterial, while also familiarizing them with the history of materialism’s emergence in seventeenth-century scientific thinking. The course will reflect on this history in its own terms and by way of current theorists’ recent turn to the incorporeal as a critique of materialism.

Course Description

This course investigates the immaterialism in Western thought from its beginnings in Plato’s forms and Aristotelian hylomorphism. Part of a totalizing view of the nature of things, the immaterial is a cause and telos for the ancients; it is that on which everything depends and thus allied with the divine and with substantial form or essences. We will then trace the fortunes of the immaterial in the seventeenth century when its relation to materiality becomes, perhaps, the single animating philosophical inquiry. Rather than plot the rise of materialism and its challenge to incorporeality, we will study how the incorporeal is preserved, not by orthodox theology, but in the revival monism. Accounts of material transformation, picking up pagan philosophies, redefine the immaterial with and within matter.

Among our interests here will be not only to grasp the shifting notion of the immaterial, but its reputation as occultish neo-platonism against the virtuous skepticism of mechanistic materialism, and thus to gauge the poetic and eclectic styles of philosophical writing that the immaterial elicits. Finally, the course will inquire about the stakes of immaterialism in modern writer Simone Weil, and by studying its current recuperation in theorists such as Elisabeth Grosz and Graham Harman.

Syllabus
Plato, *Phaedrus*
Aristotle, from *De Anima*
Anne Conway, *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*
Henry More, selection from *Immortality* and from *Psychozooia*
W. G. Leibniz, “The Principles of Philosophy, or, the Monadology,” “On Nature Itself,” selected correspondence
John Locke, from *Essay concerning Human Understanding*
Simon Weil, “The Needs of the Soul”
Elizabeth Grosz, from *The Incorporeal: Ontology, Ethics and the Limits of Materialism* (2017)