

What is Philosophy? Philosophy and Theory from the Late Eighteenth- to Twentieth Century

Tilottama Rajan (winter 2025)

This course takes up the role of philosophy in Theory, the invention of Theory in the cross-fertilization of Idealist and Romantic philosophy, and at times the resistances of “philosophy” and “Theory” to each other. We will begin with Kant’s modest proposal for protecting a place for philosophy in the university and with the way he saw the place of philosophy in relation to other disciplines. We will then move on to Hegel’s attempt to make philosophy a meta-discipline, through his attempt to construct an encyclopedia of all the “*philosophical sciences*,” and will read Hegel together with Schelling’s experimentation with the form and potential diversity of philosophy, and the complex relations between the empirical and transcendental that this geo- and biodiversity of philosophy create.

The radical opening up of thought that thus occurs sees the emergence of something like “Theory” within philosophy, but also results in several attempts, from the mid-century to the modern period, to close off this opening. These include a shift away from philosophy as the umbrella discipline for knowledge, for instance in the positivism of Comte. In philosophy itself these foreclosures include neo-Kantianism, British Hegelianism, Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology, and logical positivism: in other words, they occur in “continental” as well as analytic philosophy. The course cannot cover all of these developments, but will push towards the question of whether philosophy, as a result, migrates out of philosophy strictly speaking. As Žižek says, “often other disciplines,” such as aesthetics or sciences, “take over (at least part of) the ‘normal’ role of philosophy,” which results in the “‘proper’ space” for “authentic philosophical thought” being “these very gaps and interstices in the social edifice,” where philosophy is led outside itself. It is in this displacement and the aftermath of German Idealist and Romantic philosophy that we can situate “Theory,” as a mode of thinking that develops, initially at least, through the migration of philosophy into aesthetics/literature. The course will return to the issue with which it began, namely the role of philosophy in relation to other domains, but now at a point when philosophy is no longer a rising force, as in Idealism, but is increasingly marginalized within current neo-liberal organizations of knowledge. Here, we will explore both the need for philosophy in Theory now, and the possible differends between Theory and philosophy.

Readings (most of these will be made available as selections of pdfs; an asterisk * indicates a text ordered at the bookstore; I may retain or change these slightly depending on interests of class members).

Immanuel Kant: *The Contest of Faculties* (selections); *Critique of Pure Reason* (brief selections); *Critique of Judgment* (selections); “To Perpetual Peace,”

G.W.F.Hegel: *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Outline* (“Preface”); selections from *The Philosophy of Nature* (“Organics”) “Introduction” to *Aesthetics* (section 5), other selections on Symbolic and Romantic art; possibly the *History of Philosophy* (selections).

Friedrich Schelling: **First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature*; “On the Nature of Philosophy as Science”.

Auguste Comte: brief selections from *Course of Positive Philosophy*

Friedrich Nietzsche: *The Birth of Tragedy* (sections 1-17)

Walter Benjamin: *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (selections)

Georg Lukacs: *Theory of the Novel* (selections)

Edmund Husserl: *Encyclopedia* article; brief selections from *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*

Maurice Blanchot, “Literature and the Right to Death,” “The Essential Solitude.”

Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic* (selections), *Raymond Roussel* (selections), **The Order of Things* (selections)

Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition; The Differend* (selections: Preface and Kant section);

maybe an essay from *The Inhuman*, something on the sublime, maybe part of *Heidegger and the 'jews'*.

This list is subject to change.