

PY Core Course Objectivity – second semester

On many accounts, the modern period is opened by Descartes' dualistic division between subjectivity and objectivity as two ultimate domains. However, more recent developments within the Cartesian tradition have attempted to rethink this division. In this second semester PY core we will take a look at 19th and 20th century movements in philosophy and art which have attempted to articulate a more dynamic and relational understanding of the meanings of subjectivity and objectivity. While the very term objectivity itself seems to describe the goal and end point upon which thinking and philosophy would come to a rest, this sense of neutrality and apparent ultimacy can be seen as something which is perhaps more fitting to a science than to the proper dynamic character of philosophy. Indeed, in such a way that any construal of the task of philosophy as merely analyzing a pre-thematized domain of objectivity would amount to a betrayal of the scope of questioning which defines philosophy as such.

The restriction of philosophy to the realm of objectivity would offer a crystal-clear analytical vision but also would amount to a totalizing form of vision which would be simultaneously blind with respect to the more primordial vocation of philosophy. From this perspective we ask the more informed question as to the possible role of objectivity within philosophy. Can we borrow from past philosophies and aesthetics which have been couched upon uncritical conceptions of objectivity? Are there perhaps more philosophical conceptions of objectivity which are able to shed light on and be employed within our own current situation? In light of these questions we trace through a history of the meaning of objectivity which can be seen to run from Hegel's understanding of phenomenology up to the very different phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty.

Week One: Introduction: Definitions

In this introductory session the history of the concept of objectivity will be set out and the structure of the course will be presented.

Week Two: Hegel

In this opening week the discussion will be led by Julia and the focus of the seminar will be the way in which Hegel understood objectivity. While Hegel stands firmly within the Cartesian tradition, his philosophy can be seen to open many differences with earlier forms of that tradition. Above all, the concept of subjectivity and its relation to its field of objectivity can be seen to become more dynamic and the dimension of history is seen as essentially determining the nature of this relation.

Week Three: Schopenhauer

This week the discussion will be led by Sophia. Schopenhauer's philosophy represents in many ways the antithesis of Hegel's. And yet, Schopenhauer's system is yet another form of German Idealism in which the subject-object relation is seen to the ultimate structure of phenomenal reality. In the session we will ask whether Schopenhauer's conception of objectivity is a compelling one.

Week Four: Nietzsche

This week the discussion will be led by Barry. In the early Nietzsche we find a critique of German Idealism which looks forward to many later philosophies. This critique is contained in Nietzsche's early text "On Truth and Lies in the Extra-Moral Sense". Is objectivity simply a mechanical correlate of transcendental subjective structures as it still was in Schopenhauer? Maybe not. In Nietzsche these terms are displaced as moments which are no longer original but rather structures which are moments of repose within the deeper latent capacity of life for metamorphosis.

Week Five: Emerson

In this week we will read the short essay by Emerson entitled "Experience" initially it would seem that this essay would describe the nature of experience in much the same way as the tradition of German Idealism to which Emerson was a direct heir. However, Emerson was also an heir and inspired reader of Plato and the structure of experience on his account is not seen in terms of transcendental forms but rather structures which are open to

transformation. Going perhaps even further than the early Nietzsche, Emerson can be seen to have developed an image of living experience as a pattern or rhythm in which objectivity and subjectivity are not the ultimate terms but moments of a more original ontological sense of life as vitality and transcendence.

Week Six: Stevens

In this week we will read some selected poems by Wallace Stevens. In the medium of poetry Stevens can be seen to bring into question the normal understanding of things as inert objects. His view will be contrasted to the philosophical expressions of this theme which we will have read up to this point.

Week Seven: Velázquez

This week the discussion will be lead by Jeff and will focus not on a text but on a picture: the painting *Las Meninas* by Diego Velázquez. We will consider the problem of objectivity in representation through a close reading of *Las Meninas*, in light of issues such as perspective and perception, naturalism, the subjects and objects of vision and/or visual attention, and the concept of representation as a system of knowledge. There will also be short reading assignments, but the focus will be more on looking than on reading.

Week Eight: Sartre

In many ways the philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre represents the most extreme terminus of the Cartesian tradition. While Sartre can be seen as still working in the tradition of phenomenology his accounts of subjectivity and objectivity have been seen as very unclarified and extreme. Above all, Sartre's treatment of inter-subjectivity has been seen by many as unsatisfactory. Reading selections from his "Being and Nothingness" and "No Exit" we ask the question – is human life dividable into correlate poles of subjectivity and objectivity?

Week Nine: Levinas

Responding to Sartre and all previous phenomenology Levinas offers an account of subjectivity and objectivity which is unprecedented in the tradition. Rather than seeing the other as simply a field of objectivity Levinas describes the phenomenology of the other as irreducible to the frame of subjective structures and describes this irreducibility in terms of an ethical relation. (Guest Lecturer Invited)

Week Ten: Merleau-Ponty

In this last week we read the short work "Eye and Mind" by the French phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty which deals directly with the contrast between the objectivity of theoretical vision and the artist's pre-theoretical incursion into the world's more primordial textures and dimensionalities.