

Philosophy, Life, Science in German Idealism and Beyond

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(fall term, as I'm retiring at the end of 2026)

This course builds itself around the troubling role of the life sciences in the organization of knowledge with reference to German Idealist and Romantic philosophy, as sciences such as biology, physiology, and psychology shift the very nature of philosophy as “Science” in its older sense of systematic, apodictically self-certain knowledge. “Organised life” was a major concern of science even before the word “biology” was introduced in 1810, and this “life” began to exceed normative concepts of “nature” that had kept nature firmly subordinate to spirit so that the transcendental could govern the empirical. German Idealism (especially in Hegel) claimed for philosophy an “encyclopedic” purview that gave it the right to think all other domains, but the result was that it was reciprocally impacted by its “others.” We will therefore approach philosophy as a general economy in which disciplines, instead of being self-sufficient and self-limited, reciprocally affect, compromise, but also forward, even as they destabilize, each other. This interdisciplinarity makes Idealism a first instance of “theory” as well as a corpus that can be read theoretically. In focusing on how Idealism exposes itself to a “life” that it both takes on and struggles to contain, even to the point that the “writing” and epistemic personality of philosophy are affected, the course will also refract Idealism through the work of a number of contemporary thinkers (Canguilhem, the early Foucault, Esposito and Malabou). Recurring concerns in the course will include the question of interdisciplinarity, the subjective or existential turn in philosophy, institutional Philosophy’s investment in preserving philosophy as a “Science,” and conversation/divergences between Theory and Philosophy.

The course will proceed as follows:

1. A methodological introduction that takes up Hegel’s concept of an “encyclopedia of the philosophical sciences” which 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 that is anticipated by Novalis’ rhizomatic *Romantic Encyclopedia*. The question of interdisciplinarity
2. Kant: Kant’s understanding of the relation of philosophy to other areas, his critical apparatus, and his influential conception of organisms will provide a context for, an opening into, and a foil for subsequent German Idealism. Kant’s notion of organisms was influential in biology as a discipline, but is also the scene of Philosophy’s curtailment of the more risky consequences of a focus on the organic.
3. Hegel: Hegel’s *Philosophy of Nature* is the most ignored and troublesome part of his work, and continues to bleed into the next stage of his ascent of disciplines, the *Philosophy of Mind*. One reason for its neglect is that its intensive, ruinous, yet fertile exposure to the sciences challenges the self-identification of Philosophy as “Science” that his Logic seeks to preserve. Here I will be concerned not only with the argument but also with layout and narrative structure of PN, in other words, with the *Philosophy of Nature* as writing/écriture in Derrida’s sense. In some of his work Hegel is a profoundly affective writer, and PN is something of a “pathography”

as well as a “phenomenology” of the transition from nature to “spirit” that Hegel desperately wants to see. Hegel’s own *Aesthetics* is useful for approaching the text as writing, which also raises the larger issue of how we read philosophy in ways that do more than provide an exegesis.

4. Schelling: Schelling more openly confronts the writing of philosophy and the nature of 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 his middle work, the work that has most interested theorists.

5. Schopenhauer: This will necessarily have to be a briefer segment, dealing with Schopenhauer’s relationship to other Idealists, to the struggle for system, to the psychological sciences, and his agon with a “life” that unlike Schelling he sees as blind will.

Primary texts will include:

Kant, “Critique of Teleological Judgment” (in *Critique of the Power of Judgment*); other extracts from the first and third *Critiques*.

GWF Hegel, “Introduction” to the *Encyclopedia* (1817); *Philosophy of Nature* (Introduction and *Organics*; other extracts); *Philosophy of Mind* (extracts from Psychology and Anthropology sections)

FWJ Schelling, *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature* (selections); *Introduction to the Outline* (brief selection); *Freedom essay*; *Ages of the World* [1815] (selections); “On the Nature of Philosophy as Science.”

Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation* (selections)

Ancillary texts will include

Michel Foucault, selections from *The Order of Things*

Georges Canguilhem, extracts from *The Normal and the Pathological, Knowledge of Life*.

Roberto Esposito, extracts from *Immanence, Third Person*.

Catherine Malabou, “The Wounds of Spirit”; her notion of plasticity.