Course Handout

HM 484: Modern European Philosophy: From Descartes to Nietzsche

Course Structure: 3-0-0-3

Prerequisites: None

Course Abstract:

While this course follows the format of a survey and introduction to modern European philosophy from Rene Descartes to Friedrich Nietzsche, it generally is organized around a theme.

For this semester the theme is “Phenomenology and Modern Philosophy”. Edmund Husserl (1858-1938) is the father of the great philosophical movement of the 20th century called phenomenology. Phenomenology began as an alternative to the official and mainstream tradition of doing philosophy. While the traditional philosophy asked questions and proposed answers about the nature of existence, God, the soul, free will, knowledge etc from the standpoint of either an inductive or a deductive inquiry, phenomenology altogether dispenses with such standpoints. A phenomenological way of doing philosophy makes a radical beginning; the inquiry starts from the first person vantage point, without any presuppositions, and begins to analyse the contents of consciousness in the manner of their occurrence. The idea is that by analysing what occurs, and the manner in which they occur, in the conscious spectrum of a person’s life—as thoughts, images, ideas, emotions, one can get to penetrate to the essences of things and objects in the real world. Husserl had devised a way of arriving at the essences of objects, namely the method of reduction—epoche. Husserl advocated that we should stop proposing explanatory theories, and start describing things as they occur in our conscious lives.

Even as Husserl tried to re-envision new goals for philosophy, he sought precedents and inspiration for his project from the great modern philosophers like Descartes and Kant. In a way, phenomenology attempts to address the core problems of philosophy, in its own way, that were inaugurated by Descartes and subsequently addressed by all the modern philosophers until Kant and Hegel. He also had a tremendous influence on the generation of philosophers that followed him, namely Martin Heidegger, Emmanuel Levinas, Jean Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Each one of these philosophers has reworked the core issues of modern philosophy to align with their respective radical phenomenological projects.

In this course, we will study phenomenology in the context of modern philosophy and its legacies. We will particularly concentrate on four philosophers: Descartes, Kant, Husserl and Heidegger.
Primary Readings:

Glendinning, Simon. *In the Name of Phenomenology*
Moran, Dermot. Ed. *The Phenomenology Reader*

Secondary Readings:

Descartes, Rene. *Meditations on First Philosophy*
Williams, Bernard. *Descartes: The Project of Pure Inquiry*
Marion, Jean-Luc. *Descartes’ Metaphysical Prism*
Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Pure Reason* (Selections)
Gardener, Sebastian. *Routledge Guide Book to Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason*
Mulhall, Stephen. *Heidegger and Being and Time*
Scruton, Roger. *A Short History of Modern Philosophy: From Descartes to Wittgenstein*

LEARNING OUTCOMES

The course aims to make students proficient in some well-known debates in modern philosophy, and laterally aims to hone their argumentative and critical skills.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

1. *Attendance and Participation*: Success of the course much depends upon your active engagement with the readings and with each other in the class.

2. *Mode of Teaching*: The course will be organized around the ideas of the philosophers chosen for study. The lectures will help you in critically approaching the assigned readings. Discussions would be aimed at targeting the specific aspects of the readings, such as ideas, difficult passages and arguments. There may be periodic quizzes. Independent study and initiative will be highly encouraged and the required guidance would be provided.

3. *Writing*: You will be asked to write three short papers, varying between 1000 to 3000 words each, over the course of the semester. The word/page limit will be specified at the time of assigning the task. Alternatively, on popular demand the term papers can be substituted with scheduled exams.

EVALUATION

The first paper/exam will count for 30%, second paper/exam for 40% and the final paper/exam for 30%.

PLAGIARISM AND ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

Submitting someone else’s work as your own, or using others’ words and phrases without proper citation, is a violation of norms of academic integrity, and may result in penalties up to and including a failing grade in the course. Genuine effort and commitment will have direct bearing on the evaluation.