

## Epistemology in German Idealism

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### **Description:**

In this course we will be discussing the epistemology in German Idealism. German idealism has been one of the most important and influential philosophical schools in the entire history of philosophy. However, it is not that easy to understand. Starting with Descartes, we will try to unfold this complex philosophy step by step.

Epistemology is a unique branch of philosophy that deals with knowledges. In German, epistemology is called *Erkenntnistheorie*, which literally means the theory of identifying things. Epistemology is especially concerned with the property and boundary of knowledge, as well as the structure of it. For instance, what can we know for sure? or even: what is knowing something for sure?

German Idealism, or, *Deutscher Idealismus*, is a brief yet prosperous school of philosophy that emerged in eighteen century Germany. Though debatable which exact philosophers should belong in this school, Kant, Fichte, Schelling and Hegel have been considered the most important figures without controversy. German Idealism starts with human ideas: The formation, existence, structure and properties of it. Thus, all philosophers in this school started their philosophy from an epistemological base. Yet all of them have also developed their philosophy further into the fields of ethics, aesthetics and so on.

**Objectives:** By the end of the course, students should at least have a clear impression of what German Idealism looks like. They should also be able to talk about epistemology: What objects does it deal with? What methods are introduced in the process of studying it?, etc. If students complete all assignments and readings as required, they should also be able to get a sense of what academic reading and writing is like in the field of philosophy.

**Language of Instruction:** *Symposium expects all seminars to be conducted in English, but discussion leaders can use Chinese to make clarifications when necessary.*

**Assignments:** All participants will finish **TWO** short papers and **ONE** brief post.

1. Submit them in our WeChat group before day one so everybody (including me) gets to know you better!

2. One short paper: I will be providing you with a list of questions each day before class. You can also find all of them on the syllabus. You will need to pick ONLY ONE question and answer it. I'm not expecting a thorough and complicated philosophical essay from you, so the length should be around one page (Serif Font, Size 12, double spaced). This being said, your paper should still be well organized. Make sure you proofread them before you submit them to me. You should be submitting the papers each day before class. Printed out versions are preferred, but electronic versions are also acceptable.

**Required Texts:** All participants are expected to read through the following material **before** each seminar pertaining to it. 1. Descartes, René. *Meditations*. Penguins, 2010. Book I, Book II and Book VI 2. Kant, Immanuel. *Critiques of Pure Reason*, Cambridge University Press. Preface & Second Chapter  
Second Division 3. Fichte, Johann. *Foundations of the Entire Science of Knowledge*. Cambridge University Press.  
Preface and Chapter I

**Day One: Skepticism** 1. Prior to day one, please submit a brief post to our WeChat group. In this post, please briefly introduce one text that influenced you the most. This post should be no longer than 125 words and in English. 2. Before we go in to the discussion, we will have some time to briefly discuss the syllabus, writing assignments, readings and any problem that concerns the class. 3. After that, we will have a brief discussion on this question: **What is epistemology?** 4. On day one, we will be discussing **Book I and II** of Descartes' *Meditations*. So make sure you read it **before** you come to class.

Following is a list of questions I would like you to consider carefully in the course of reading. If you wish, you may also write a brief paper on this (no more than a page) and submit it to me before class.

1. What is Descartes' dream doubt and his evil demon thought? How did this contribute to his skepticism? 2. Critically analyze Descartes' skepticism. Do you think it is valid? If you think it's valid, provide reasons for why do you think so; If you don't, come up with a possible objection. 3. Would Descartes' skepticism lead to the proof of God's existence? Why and how? 4. Critically analyze Descartes' claim on "*I think therefore I am*". Would he consider our human body as a part of "I?"

**Day Two: The Subject-Object Dichotic and Dualism** 1. We will be discussing the subject-object dichotic that stems from Descartes' epistemology. So make sure you read **Book VI** of the *Meditations* **before** you come to class. 2. After a thorough discussion of the subject-object dichotic, I will briefly introduce a little bit of Spinoza and David Hume's reaction to it. You are **NOT** expected or required to read their work; however, you are welcomed to do so. Their work can be found in the "Further Readings" section of the syllabus.

Following is a list of questions I would like you to consider carefully in the course of reading. If you wish, you may also write a brief paper on this (no more than a page) and submit it to me before class. 1. What is an object? What is a subject? Please provide an example for each. 2.

Does the subject-object dichotomy follow directly from Descartes' skepticism? Why? 3. Is the subject-object dichotomy a big problem for Descartes' philosophy? Why? 4. Do you think that subject and object are necessarily dualistic? Why? (Don't refer to Descartes when answering this question)

**Day Three: Perceptions, Understanding, and Rationality** 1. We will be discussing the **preface** of the Critique on Pure Reason (CPR). So make sure you read the preface of it **before** you come to class. 2. In this class, we will be touching on the very essence of Kantian epistemology. Critically think about this: How do we come to know this world? Is the way we know the world today necessary or random?

Following is a list of questions I would like you to consider carefully in the course of reading. If you wish, you may also write a brief paper on this (no more than a page) and submit it to me before class. 1. In an expository fashion, analyze the difference, under Kantian philosophy, between understanding and rationality 2. In an expository fashion, analyze the order that perceptions, understanding, and rationality each serves in the process of human beings coming to know the world. 3. In an analytical fashion, discuss the possible limits of human knowledge under Kantian philosophy. If you think it is infinite, please explain why. 4. Analytically discuss the boundaries of human perceptions. What do you think would be existing out of such boundaries?

**Day Four: Noumenon World, Phenomenon World and the Antinomy** 1. In this class, we will be discussing the validity, possibility, and necessity of the noumenon world Kant proposed. Remember to refer back to Descartes and think about this: Is Kant's noumenon world dualistic? What is the problem that may stem out of this?

Following is a list of questions I would like you to consider carefully in the course of reading. If you wish, you may also write a brief paper on this (no more than a page) and submit it to me before class. 1. Propose an example of a noumenon object and explain why it should be considered noumenal 2. Would a noumenon object confront itself to causal law? 3. Is the

noumenon-phenomenon world dualistic? Why? (How would they interact if you think they are not?) 4. In an expository fashion, assess the validity of one set of the antinomies. 5. Is the antinomy a necessary result of Kantian philosophy? If you think it is, which part exactly in Kantian philosophy would necessarily lead to antinomy?

**Day Five: Self and Non-self: The Basis of Self Negation** 1. We will be discussing the first part of Fichte's *Foundations on the Entire Science of Knowledge*. So make sure you read the preface of it **before** you come to class. 2. We will go through Fichte's dialectic and see how he addressed the antinomies properly.

Following is a list of questions I would like you to consider carefully in the course of reading. If you wish, you may also write a brief paper on this (No more than a page) and submit it to me before class.

1. In an expository fashion, discuss the nature of self and why it is the basis of human knowledge. 2. In an expository fashion, discuss the nature of Non-Self and the process of Non-self regulating self. 3. Critically analyze this statement: The nature of abstraction is negation. 4. Could self and non-self be eventually unified? How?

**Day Six: The French Revolution and German Idealism.** 1. We will be connecting the historical background of German Idealism with its philosophical nature.

Descartes, Kant and Fichte each lived through and represented three stages of the French Revolution: Before, Revolution and the Terror. 2. There will be no new reading in this seminar from this day on. This being said, you are encouraged to

(1) Do research on the internet on your own on the French revolution, and (2) Read Voltaire's *Letters on England*; Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès: *What is the Third Estate?* and; Alexis de Tocqueville's *The Old Regime and the Revolution*. These readings will provide you with thorough knowledge on the revolution, however, they are not required.

Following is a list of questions I would like you to consider carefully in the course of reading. If you wish, you may also write a brief paper on this (No more than a page) and submit it to me before class. 1. The French Revolution is a revolution for the bourgeois to overthrow the feudal regime in France.

Pick a philosopher from Descartes, Kant and Fichte and analyze their philosophy: Do you think their philosophy is in accordance with the spirit of the revolution? 2. How do you think Kant and Fichte's philosophy could support the legitimacy of private properties? <sup>1</sup> 3. Do you think that like politics, philosophy is also made of revolutions against the traditions? Please

provide examples to support your view (For this question, you don't necessarily have to limit yourself to the three philosopher we discussed)

**Day Seven: What is Epistemology?** 1. This is the last day of class, so we will not study anything new. Again, you don't have required readings for this session. 2. After seven days of discussion and reading, you should be having some sort of impression for epistemology in your mind. Hence, during the first half of the session, we will be discussing this: What is, in your mind, epistemology? What are its objects and what are its methods? Don't worry, you don't have to establish a complex system and write a book in seven days. We are simply trying to tie everything together before you leave the classroom.

3. In the last half (60 minutes) of day seven, we will be having a mini-debate. Chips and sodas will be provided, cookies on request. The debate will be focused on this topic: Is the way that human beings identify this world certain? or, Could human knowledge be formed in a different way? You can freely choose your side on the end of day six, but if one side drastically outnumbers the other, I reserve the right to rearrange some of the players. The nature of debating is to try to force your opponent into a contradiction, which is very similar to what philosophers have been doing. For this debate, you do not have to prepare a stack of written materials like you do in American style debating. However, you should be able to come up with a brief thesis for your team.

4. There will be no writing assignments for today.

**Further Readings** 1. First of all, you are always welcome to finish the whole book of Meditations, CPR and the Foundations on the Entire Science of Knowledge. These are great books and I can't recommend them more. But you are also encouraged to read:

1. Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Practical Reason*. Cambridge University Press, 2009.
2. Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Judgement*. Cambridge University Press, 2009.
3. Schelling, Frederich. *System of Transcendental Idealism*. Cambridge University Press, 2009.
4. Tocqueville, Alexis de, et al. *The Old Regime and the Revolution*. University of Chicago Press, 1998.
5. Sieyès Emmanuel Joseph. *What Is the Third Estate?* Frederick A. Praeger, 1964. 6. Voltaire. *Letters on England*. Penguins Books. 1960

#### **Notes on the Syllabus:**

1. Needless to say, complete everything on time!
2. Plagiarism: Just don't
3. The version of the text: Symposium requests every one of you to read exactly the version of the text I provide. That's fine. I will upload PDFs of the book for you guys to read. Note however, that none of the texts we will be reading were originally written in English. So if you have problems reading Kant in English (which is perfectly natural), you are always welcomed to refer to Chinese versions of the texts since they were all translated from the German text. I will provide PDF of the Chinese version on request.
4. Electronics: Please don't use them. Taking notes on your laptop during a seminar is just being disrespectful to me and to your fellow students. However, if you have an emergency feel free to give me phone call.