

Related readings

The readings are posted in Blackboard (Content > Unit 1: Rationalism and Empiricism):

- + G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*
- + Arthur Schopenhauer, *Essays on Pessimism*
- + Karl Marx, “On Alienation”

Guidelines

Be sure to read the **RWA Guidelines** document in the **Resources** folder in Blackboard; check the RWA rubric in the **Grading System and Rubrics** document so you understand how your paper will be graded. Check the **Semester Schedule** for due dates of the Prep Sheet, Rough Draft, and final RWA.

Context

Hume’s philosophical skepticism identified a huge gap between what philosophers and scientists claim to know about reality and what we can actually be certain of. Kant’s solution to this problem created another one: the identification of an unbridgeable gap between the world as humans experience and understand it and the world as it is in itself. The next major movements in modern philosophy were attempts to bridge these gaps.

Hegel develops a metaphysics and an epistemology that allows him to read the history of previous philosophy – with all its conflicts and counterarguments – optimistically: Just as the real things in the world are never static, but develop through a process of becoming, philosophical reasoning is itself part of the process by which ultimate reality (what he calls “Spirit”) becomes fully actual. On this view, the process of philosophical reasoning that is worked out through history—with its articulation of theses and their antitheses—is the way in which real truth (not just the superficial certainty of abstract ideas) needs to be worked out.

Arthur Schopenhauer, on the other hand, advances a starkly pessimistic view of existence. Like Hegel, he thinks there is fundamentally one kind of reality (what he calls “Will”) and that with philosophical insight we can grasp this reality. However, Schopenhauer sees no ultimate goal or design in the operations of this reality. Indeed, when we see things correctly, the best result we can get to is commiseration with one another because of the pointless suffering of our existence.

Finally, Karl Marx applies Hegel’s dialectical interpretation of history to political economy. On his view, it is not abstract “spirit” but *labor* that is the process by which humans strive to achieve fulfillment and synthesis with the objective world. Each era of human economic history can be interpreted as either supporting or alienating workers from this process.

Questions for each Group

Check the **Group Assignments** chart posted in Blackboard to see which group you are in.

+ **Group 1: Hegel**

Reading: The Phenomenology, , focusing on **pages 16.22 – 25.25**.

Summary: Citing specific points throughout the reading, discuss how Hegel distinguishes philosophical truth from the “familiarily known,” and from historical and mathematical knowledge.

Reflection: In this text, Hegel makes the interesting claim that “life of mind is not one that shuns death,” meaning that negation and contradiction are a necessary part of discovering the truth. Discuss whether you agree or disagree with this position. Specifically, do you agree with his characterization of mathematical knowledge—which focuses on what is positively true and certain—as something “defective” and “lifeless”? Defend your position with a clear argument supported by your own ideas.

+ **Group 2: Schopenhauer**

Reading: Studies in Pessimism, focusing on **pages 1.7 – 14.4**.

Summary: Citing specific points throughout the reading, explain why Schopenhauer describes human existence in thoroughly negative terms (a “mistake,” “misery,” a “disappointment,” etc.), Be sure to discuss how he compares human existence to that of other animals.

Reflection: In this text, Schopenhauer asks the provocative question: “If children were brought into the world by an act of pure reason alone, would the human race continue to exist? Would not a man rather have so much sympathy with the coming generation as to spare it the burden of existence?” Discuss how you would answer these questions. Given all we know about the suffering of human existence, is having children rational? Is it moral? Defend your position with a clear argument supported by your own ideas.

+ **Group 3: Marx**

Reading: “On Alienation,” focusing on **pages 10.7 – 21.32**.

Summary: Citing specific points throughout the reading, explain Marx’s analysis of how capitalism turns human labor into a “commodity,” and how in turn this leads to labor becoming a source of “alienation,” “estrangement,” and objectification,” rather than something fulfilling.

Reflection: In this text, Marx quotes (approvingly) the words of French economist Eugène Buret, who argues that industrial economies are analogous to perpetual “wars of conquest,” with laborers functioning as the soldiers in this war. Discuss whether you agree or disagree with that characterization. Do you think it is inevitable that in capitalist economies most workers will feel debased and objectified in this way? Defend your position with a clear argument supported by your own ideas.