

Lecture 6

German Classical Philosophy

Structure: context → Kant → Fichte & Schelling → Hegel → Feuerbach

Lecture Roadmap

The presentation follows the logic of the uploaded lecture and preserves its central claims.

- General characteristics and historical prerequisites of German Classical Philosophy.
- Immanuel Kant and the “Copernican Revolution” in epistemology and ethics.
- Fichte and Schelling as post-Kantian attempts to overcome dualism.
- Hegel’s dialectics, philosophy of history, and doctrine of World Spirit.
- Feuerbach’s anthropological materialism and the transition beyond classical idealism.

Why German Classical Philosophy Emerged

Late eighteenth-century philosophy inherited both powerful achievements and deep crises.

- The end of the Enlightenment produced a theoretical deadlock: skepticism on one side and dogmatism on the other.
- German thinkers wanted to preserve both scientific knowledge and human dignity.
- Their answer was not to reject reason, but to rethink reason as an active principle.
- Philosophy became a search for a unified system explaining knowledge, nature, freedom, and history.

The Enlightenment Deadlock

Empiricism at its limit

- If all knowledge comes only from experience, we never directly perceive necessity itself.
- Hume's skepticism undermined secure knowledge of causality, substance, and God.
- Science seemed threatened by the reduction of reality to disconnected impressions.

Rationalism at its limit

- Rationalism defended universal reason, but often drifted into abstract dogmatism.
- Detached from lived reality, it risked building systems without experiential grounding.
- German philosophy sought a synthesis rather than a victory of one camp over the other.

The “German Revolution in Thought”

Political fragmentation and intellectual intensity shaped a specifically philosophical response to modernity.

- While France experienced revolution in public life, Germany experienced a revolution in theory.
- Ideas of freedom were internalized: the center shifted from state institutions to the inner life of spirit.
- Marx later summarized this by calling German classics the theory of the French Revolution.
- The decisive move was from asking how humans obey laws to asking how reason gives laws.

From “Cognizing Reason” to “Creative Reason”

The decisive paradigm shift concerns the activity of the subject.

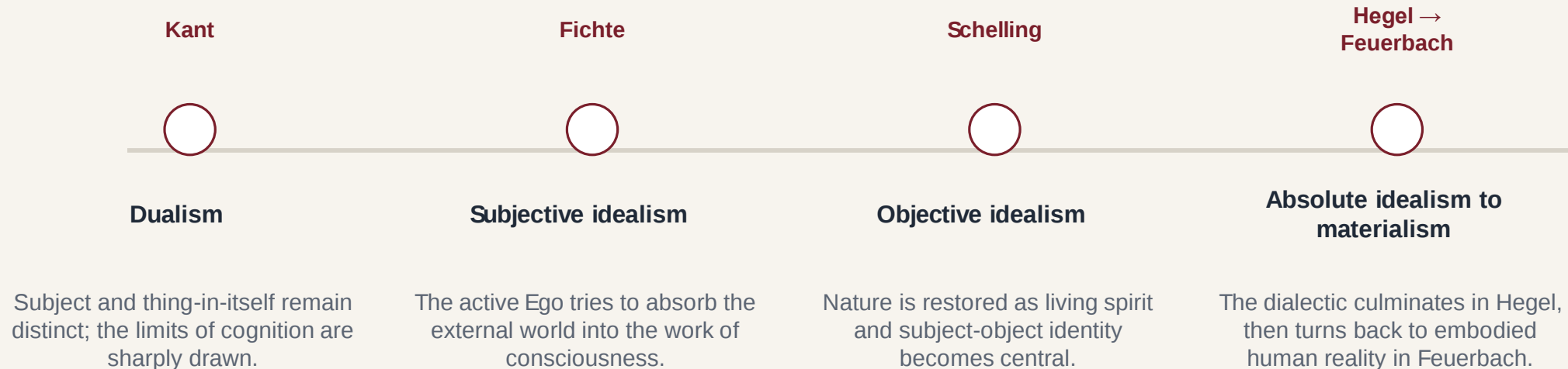
- Early Modern thought often treated the mind as a mirror or passive observer of reality.
- German classical philosophy argues that the world is not simply given in a ready-made form.
- Human cognition actively structures, organizes, and in a philosophical sense “constructs” the world-for-us.
- Reason therefore becomes productive: it does not merely receive order, but imposes form.

Defining Features of the Era

- Systematicity: philosophy should become a rigorous “science of sciences.”
- Dialectical thinking: reality is dynamic, contradictory, and developmental rather than mechanically static.
- Humanism and ethics: the free person has absolute moral significance and cannot be reduced to a mere mechanism.
- Historicism: truth, reason, and freedom unfold through time in the self-development of spirit.

The Developmental Arc of the Tradition

A single line of thought runs from epistemic critique to anthropological materialism.



PART I

Immanuel Kant

The “Copernican Revolution” and the critical limits of reason

Kant's Central Question

- Kant changes the philosophical agenda from “What do we know?” to “How is knowledge possible?”
- He investigates the conditions that make mathematics, natural science, and experience coherent.
- The result is a critical philosophy that examines the powers and limits of human reason itself.
- Knowledge becomes possible only because the mind contributes structure to experience.

The “Copernican Revolution” in Philosophy

- Before Kant, consciousness was usually treated as adapting itself to independently given objects.
- Kant reverses this model: objects of experience must conform to the forms of our cognition.
- Just as Copernicus displaced the Earth from the center, Kant displaces naive object-centered epistemology.
- Science is possible because nature, as experienced, already bears the imprint of our cognitive faculties.

Phenomenon and Noumenon

Phenomenon: the world for us

- Phenomena are objects as they appear within human experience.
- They are shaped by sensibility and understanding, and therefore can become objects of science.
- All empirical knowledge remains within this domain of appearances.

Noumenon: the thing in itself

- The noumenon is reality as it exists independently of our mode of cognition.
- Kant insists that this “thing in itself” cannot be known theoretically.
- The distinction protects both scientific certainty and the humility of reason.

A Priori Forms of Sensibility

Space

- Space is not a property discovered in things themselves.
- It is the a priori form in which outer objects are intuited by us.
- Without it, sensations could not appear as ordered external objects.

Time

- Time is the a priori form of inner sense and of all appearances generally.
- Every event is received within temporal succession because our mind necessarily orders experience this way.
- Space and time are therefore “human glasses,” not features of noumenal reality.

Categories of Understanding

- Sensory intuitions alone are blind; they become knowledge only when brought under concepts.
- The understanding supplies a priori categories such as causality, unity, plurality, and substance.
- We do not literally see causality; the mind necessarily connects appearances as cause and effect.
- Thus understanding “legislates” nature by giving stable laws to the field of phenomena.

Kant's Synthesis of Empiricism and Rationalism

Against one-sided empiricism

- Kant agrees that cognition begins with experience.
- Yet experience alone cannot generate necessity, universality, or lawful order.
- Without concepts, sensory data remain fragmented and blind.

Against one-sided rationalism

- Kant also agrees that the mind contains a priori forms.
- But thought without experiential content is empty and yields no real knowledge.
- His synthesis binds receptivity and spontaneity into one account of cognition.

Kant's Hierarchy of Cognition

Sensibility

- Receives the impact of objects as sensations.
- Orders the manifold through space and time.
- Produces intuition: the image of an object here and now.

Understanding

- Applies categories to intuitions.
- Unifies data into judgments and laws.
- Makes experience and science possible.

Reason

- Seeks absolute unity and the unconditioned.
- Generates ideas such as soul, world, and God.
- Tends to exceed the limits of possible experience.

Stage One: Sensibility

- Cognition begins when external objects affect the senses, producing a manifold of impressions.
- This manifold is never encountered in pure chaos, because sensibility already frames it spatially and temporally.
- The result is intuition: a concrete presentation of something appearing at a given place and time.
- Sensibility supplies the material of knowledge, but not yet its conceptual form.

Stage Two: Understanding

- Understanding transforms mere intuitions into experience by subsuming them under categories.
- It produces judgments and connects appearances into objective relations, especially causal laws.
- Because of this, scientific knowledge is not copied from nature but actively constituted in experience.
- Nature as an ordered system exists for us only through the work of understanding.

Stage Three: Reason

- Reason does not stop at particular laws; it seeks the unconditioned ground of all conditioned knowledge.
- It forms three guiding ideas: the soul, the world as a totality, and God as first cause.
- These ideas express the drive toward systematic unity rather than direct empirical knowledge.
- Reason therefore expands the horizon of thought but also tempts the mind to overreach.

The Problem of Transcendental Illusion

- Reason naturally mistakes its own ideas for objects that can be known in the same way as phenomena.
- It illegitimately applies categories beyond experience to the soul, God, and the world as a whole.
- This produces impressive but empty metaphysical constructions.
- The illusion is transcendental because it arises from reason's own unavoidable tendency toward totality.

Antinomies and the Limits of Theoretical Reason

Why antinomies arise

- When reason treats the world as a complete object, it leaves the field of possible experience.
- It can then justify opposite claims with equal logical force.
- The result is paralysis: reason proves both thesis and antithesis.

Examples and consequence

- The world has a beginning in time / the world is infinite in time.
- Everything is composed of simples / no simple substances exist.
- Kant concludes that theoretical reason must recognize its competence and its boundary.

From Pure Reason to Practical Reason

- Kant's critical restriction of knowledge does not destroy metaphysical ideas; it relocates them.
- In morality, the human being experiences an inner command that cannot be reduced to natural causality.
- The question shifts from "What can I know?" to "What should I do?"
- Practical reason reopens the domain that pure reason could not prove scientifically.

Freedom, Duty, and Autonomy

Moral consciousness

- We experience ourselves as bound by duty, even against inclination or advantage.
- The word “ought” implies that genuine choice is possible.
- Therefore moral life presupposes freedom.

Autonomy

- Freedom is not arbitrary desire, but self-legislation by reason.
- A free will is one that gives itself the moral law rather than obeying impulse alone.
- Thus submission to moral law is the highest form of human freedom.

Postulates of Practical Reason

- Freedom of the will is required if responsibility and duty are to be meaningful.
- Immortality of the soul is postulated so that moral perfection remains an open task.
- God is postulated as the guarantor that virtue and happiness can ultimately coincide.
- These are not scientific proofs, but necessary assumptions for the moral standpoint.

The Categorical Imperative

Principle of universality

- Act only according to that maxim which you can at the same time will as a universal law.
- Every action must be tested by asking whether its rule could hold for all rational beings.
- Morality therefore depends on universalizability, not on consequences or private motives.

Principle of humanity

- Treat humanity, in yourself and in every other person, always as an end and never merely as a means.
- Each person possesses absolute worth because rational agency cannot be instrumentalized.
- This formula grounds the dignity of the human being at the center of ethics.

Kant's Historical Significance

- Kant secures scientific knowledge by showing that reason legislates the phenomenal world.
- He defends morality by grounding freedom in practical reason rather than empirical psychology.
- At the same time, his system leaves a split between consciousness and the unknowable thing in itself.
- This unresolved dualism becomes the starting problem for the next generation of German idealists.

PART II

Fichte and Schelling

The post-Kantian path toward absolute idealism

Fichte: The World as Product of the Ego

- Fichte radicalizes Kant by discarding the thing in itself as an unnecessary residue.
- The first principle is the active Ego: a self-positing, creative source of consciousness.
- This Ego is not merely an individual person, but a universal spiritual activity.
- Reality becomes intelligible as the work of subjectivity rather than as an external given.

Fichte's Dialectic of Self-Consciousness

Thesis

- The Ego posits itself.
- Self-consciousness affirms its own activity.
- Freedom begins as self-assertion.

Antithesis

- The Ego posits the Non-Ego.
- The world appears as limit, obstacle, and task.
- Opposition is needed for action.

Synthesis

- The Ego recognizes the Non-Ego as its own product.
- Conflict becomes the means of self-development.
- Consciousness discovers itself through activity.

Action, Will, and Freedom in Fichte

- Fichte turns idealism into a philosophy of action rather than contemplation.
- The world matters because it provides resistance through which freedom becomes concrete.
- Human life is understood as an endless moral striving to overcome limitation.
- The weakness of the system is that nature risks becoming only a projection or obstacle for the will.

Schelling's Correction of Fichte

- Schelling objects that Fichte reduces nature to a dead barrier set before the Ego.
- He seeks an objective idealism in which nature has its own inner life and dignity.
- The task is no longer only to derive the world from subjectivity, but to show the unity of spirit and nature.
- This move broadens idealism from moral activism to cosmological vision.

Nature as “Visible Spirit”

Nature in Schelling

- Nature is not inert matter; it is dynamic, productive, and inwardly spiritual.
- Inorganic existence, life, animality, and human consciousness form stages of one process.
- Spirit sleeps in stone, dreams in the plant, awakens in the animal, and becomes self-aware in humanity.

Philosophical consequence

- Spirit is invisible nature, and nature is visible spirit.
- The opposition between subject and object becomes a relative differentiation within one reality.
- Nature now participates in the same creative development previously reserved for consciousness.

Absolute Identity

- At the deepest level, Schelling argues, subjective and objective are identical in the Absolute.
- Matter and thought are not ultimate opposites, but differentiated expressions of one ground.
- This identity cannot be grasped fully by discursive reasoning alone.
- The system therefore aims to think unity before the split into consciousness and world.

Art and Intellectual Intuition

Intellectual intuition

- Schelling believes that philosophy must somehow grasp the unity behind all oppositions.
- Ordinary analytic reason divides and fixes distinctions.
- Intellectual intuition names a higher insight into the living identity of subject and object.

Why art matters

- Art becomes the highest manifestation of this unity because it joins freedom and necessity.
- In a work of art, the finite image bears an infinite meaning.
- The artist reveals the Absolute more adequately than abstract logic alone can do.

The Path from Kant to Schelling

Thinker	Type of idealism	First principle	How the world/nature is understood
Kant	Transcendental	Subject plus thing in itself	The world of experience is structured by a priori forms; the noumenal remains unknowable.
Fichte	Subjective	Active Ego	The Non-Ego is posited as the field in which freedom acts and overcomes limits.
Schelling	Objective	Absolute identity	Nature is living spirit; subject and object are two expressions of one Absolute.

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel

Universal dialectics and the self-development of the World Spirit

World Spirit and Absolute Idea

- Hegel seeks a single principle capable of explaining logic, nature, history, society, and culture.
- That principle is the Absolute Idea or World Spirit: impersonal reason that develops itself.
- Spirit does not remain hidden beyond the world; it externalizes itself and returns to itself through history.
- The goal of reality is therefore self-knowledge.

Universal Dialectics

Contradiction as the motor of development

- For Hegel, development occurs because every finite determination contains its own negation.
- A concept becomes dynamic when it confronts what it excludes and passes into its opposite.
- Truth is therefore not static identity but mediated self-development.

Triad and sublation

- The familiar scheme is thesis, antithesis, and synthesis.
- Sublation (Aufheben) means to negate, preserve, and raise to a higher level at once.
- Each new stage overcomes conflict while retaining the essential content of the earlier moments.

The Stages of the Spirit's Self-Development

Logic

- The Idea exists within pure thought.
- Categories unfold in their necessary relations.
- This is the pre-natural self-development of the concept.

Nature

- The Idea alienates itself into externality and matter.
- Nature is Spirit in the form of otherness.
- It is necessary, yet incomplete and still unconscious.

Spirit

- The Idea returns from nature into human consciousness and institutions.
- History is Spirit coming to know itself as free.
- Freedom becomes explicit in culture, law, state, religion, and philosophy.

Philosophy of History

History as progress in freedom

- History is not a random succession of events, but a rational process.
- The Oriental world knows that one is free; the Greco-Roman world knows that some are free.
- The Germanic-Christian world reaches the principle that all are free as spiritual beings.

Meaning of historicism

- Reason does not stand outside time; it unfolds through historical forms.
- Institutions, states, and cultures are moments in Spirit's education.
- Humanity becomes the medium through which universal freedom is gradually disclosed.

The “Cunning of Reason” and Panlogism

- Hegel argues that the World Spirit uses private passions and ambitions to realize universal ends.
- Great historical figures such as Caesar or Napoleon do not see the whole rational plan they serve.
- This is the “cunning of reason”: subjective motives become instruments of objective development.
- The broader conclusion is panlogism: everything real is intelligible as a moment of logical reason.

PART IV

Ludwig Feuerbach

Anthropological materialism and the decline of the classical era

Feuerbach's Critique of Hegel

- Feuerbach rejects the primacy of the Absolute Idea and returns philosophy to embodied human reality.
- Thought, he argues, cannot exist on its own; it depends on the sensuous, bodily human being.
- Nature is primary, while spirit is nature's highest product rather than its creator.
- In this sense Feuerbach "turns Hegel right-side up," replacing idealism with a materialist orientation.

Religion as Projection and Alienation

Projection

- Human beings attribute their own best qualities—wisdom, goodness, power—to an imagined divine being.
- God is therefore not an independent metaphysical subject, but a projection of human essence.
- Religion objectifies what is originally human.

Alienation

- Once projected outward, these qualities return as an alien power standing over the believer.
- Human beings then feel weak, sinful, and dependent before their own displaced essence.
- Liberation requires reclaiming those qualities from heaven back into humanity.

Anthropological Materialism and the Ethics of Love

Anthropological turn

- Philosophy must begin with the real person as a bodily, sensuous, natural being.
- Truth is rooted not in abstract conceptual systems alone, but in living intuition, feeling, and need.
- Human beings eat, love, suffer, and communicate; these facts belong to philosophy itself.

“I and Thou”

- An isolated self is incomplete; personhood is realized in relation to another human being.
- Feuerbach replaces love of God with love of humanity.
- His “religion of humanity” makes interpersonal recognition the basis of morality.

The End of the Classical Era

- Feuerbach dismantles the edifice of German idealism and opens the road toward Marxism and later human-centered philosophies.
- At the same time, his materialism remains contemplative: it treats the human primarily as a natural species-being.
- Later thinkers, especially Marx, will criticize him for not making social practice central enough.
- The overall arc of German classical philosophy thus runs from the limits of reason, through its self-deification, back to man.