

Practical Session Plan No. 6

German Classical Philosophy

Core figures

- Immanuel Kant
- J.G. Fichte
- F.W.J. Schelling
- G.W.F. Hegel
- Ludwig Feuerbach

Session Goals

What students should understand and be able to discuss by the end of the class

- Explain Kant's Copernican Revolution and the new role of consciousness in cognition.
- Differentiate phenomenon from noumenon and relate this distinction to the limits of reason.
- Interpret how Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel developed German idealism beyond Kant.
- Discuss Feuerbach's anthropological critique of religion and its philosophical consequences.
- Establish logical links among key concepts and use them in short oral argumentation.

Road Map of the Practical Session

The seminar moves from Kant to the transformation and critique of idealism

Part I: Foundations

- Kant: subject–object relations
- Phenomenon and noumenon
- Antinomies and the limits of reason
- Categorical imperative and practical reason

Part II: Development and critique

- Fichte: E go, Non-E go, activity
- Schelling: nature, spirit, identity
- Hegel: dialectics, spirit, history
- Feuerbach: projection, love, materialism

Why German Classical Philosophy Matters

A brief frame for practical discussion

- It asks how knowledge is possible, where freedom comes from, and how history acquires meaning.
- It shifts philosophy from static metaphysics to active reason, self-consciousness, and development.
- It provides key categories still used today: autonomy, contradiction, alienation, projection, synthesis.
- It also shows an internal movement: from criticism of knowledge to idealism, then toward materialist critique.

Section 1. Immanuel Kant

Cognition, moral law, and the limits of reason

Kant and the “Copernican Revolution”

The subject is no longer passive in cognition

Before Kant

- Earlier modern philosophy often treated the mind as a receiver of an already formed reality.
- The main problem was how the subject correctly mirrors the object.
- Truth was sought mainly as correspondence between thought and an external world.

Kant's turn

- The subject actively structures experience through a priori forms and categories.
- Objects as known must conform to the conditions of possible experience.
- Cognition becomes a relation shaped by human consciousness itself.

What Exactly Changed?

Kant redefined the balance between object and subject

- Space and time are not properties of things as they are in themselves; they are forms of sensibility.
- Causality, unity, plurality, and other categories belong to the understanding as conditions of experience.
- Therefore, experience is possible only because the mind synthesizes sensory data according to universal rules.
- Kant does not deny reality; he limits what can be known about it through theoretical reason.

Phenomenon and Noumenon

Two levels in Kant's theory of cognition

Phenomenon

- The world as it appears to us within experience.
- Structured by sensibility and understanding.
- Legitimate object of science and knowledge.

Noumenon / thing-in-itself

- Reality considered independently of our way of knowing.
- Thinkable as a limiting concept but not knowable through experience.
- Marks the boundary of theoretical cognition.

Why the Distinction Matters

Kant protects both science and philosophical modesty

- Science remains valid because it studies phenomena governed by universal conditions of experience.
- Metaphysical dogmatism is restrained because reason cannot legitimately claim knowledge of things-in-themselves.
- Human cognition is powerful within its field, but it is not absolute.

Antinomies of Pure Reason

Why reason collides with itself when it seeks the totality of the world

- Reason naturally seeks the unconditioned: the complete world, the first cause, the ultimate whole.
- When it moves beyond possible experience, it can prove opposite claims with equal logical force.
- This produces antinomies: for example, whether the world has a beginning or is eternal.
- The contradiction shows not that logic fails, but that reason has crossed its own proper limits.

Discussion Prompt: Limits of Cognition

Questions for oral participation

- Prompt 1
 - Why is the noumenon necessary if it cannot be known?
- Prompt 2
 - Does Kant weaken knowledge, or does he make knowledge more secure?
- Prompt 3
 - Can science answer metaphysical questions about freedom, God, or immortality?

Kant's Ethics: The Categorical Imperative

Morality must be universal and autonomous

- Act only according to that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law.
- Moral worth depends not on consequences or inclinations, but on acting from duty.
- A rational being must never be treated merely as a means, but always also as an end in itself.

Duty and Autonomy of the Will

Why obedience to moral law is also freedom

Duty

- The subject submits to a universal moral law.
- The law is valid regardless of personal desire.
- Duty expresses respect for rational lawfulness.

Autonomy

- The moral subject gives the law to himself as a rational being.
- Freedom means self-legislation, not arbitrary choice.
- Thus the highest obedience is self-determined obedience to reason.

Postulates of Practical Reason

Why Kant reintroduces freedom, immortality, and God

- These ideas cannot be scientifically proved by theoretical reason.
- Yet morality presupposes freedom: without it, responsibility would be impossible.
- Immortality and God function as practical assumptions that support the highest good and the moral order.
- Kant does not transform them into knowledge; he treats them as necessities of moral reason.

Mini-Summary on Kant

A classroom-ready synthesis

- The mind is an active condition of experience.
- Knowledge concerns phenomena, not things-in-themselves.
- Reason reaches antinomies when it seeks totality beyond experience.
- Morality is grounded in autonomy, duty, and the categorical imperative.
- Practical reason justifies postulates that science cannot prove.

Section 2. Fichte and Schelling

The development of idealism after Kant

Fichte's Philosophy of Action

The Ego becomes radically active

- Fichte radicalizes Kant by refusing to leave the thing-in-itself as an unknowable remainder.
- For him, the Ego is not simply a static subject; it is a self-positing activity.
- Consciousness is produced through action, opposition, and self-limitation.

Ego – Non-Ego – Synthesis

A dynamic process of self-consciousness

Concept pair	Main relation	How to explain it in class
Ego	The self posits itself as activity.	Consciousness begins not with passivity, but with self-assertion.
Non-Ego	The self encounters a limit or opposition.	The world appears as resistance necessary for action and awareness.
Synthesis	The Ego relates itself to the Non-Ego through practical activity.	Self-consciousness emerges through the regulated relation between self and its limit.

How Fichte Transforms Kant

From unknowable reality to a product of consciousness

- Kant's thing-in-itself remains outside cognition as a limit-concept.
- Fichte interprets the obstacle to the self as generated within the activity of the self itself.
- Thus the Non-Ego is no longer an inaccessible external remainder, but a necessary moment in self-constitution.
- The stress moves from contemplation to moral-practical striving.

Schelling's Philosophy of Nature

Nature is not dead matter but living productivity

Earlier approaches

- Nature was often treated as a mechanistic object outside consciousness.
- Spirit and nature appeared sharply divided.
- The subject dominated philosophy.

Schelling's position

- Nature is dynamic, self-organizing, and internally productive.
- Nature and spirit belong to one deeper reality.
- Nature is visible spirit, and spirit is invisible nature.

“Nature is visible Spirit, and Spirit is invisible Nature.”

F.W.J. Schelling

Absolute Identity in Schelling

The unity behind subject and object

- Absolute Identity means that the subjective and the objective are ultimately one in the Absolute.
- Differences between nature and spirit are real at lower levels, yet grounded in a prior unity.
- Philosophy therefore seeks the point where oppositions are understood as moments of one system.

Why Art Becomes So Important

For Schelling, art reveals unity directly

- In art, conscious production and unconscious creativity coincide.
- The artwork manifests the reconciliation of freedom and necessity.
- Therefore art becomes the highest intellectual intuition of the Absolute Identity.
- What philosophy explains conceptually, art presents in living form.

Mini-Summary on Fichte and Schelling

Key takeaways for the seminar

- Fichte turns the subject into active self-positing Ego.
- The Non-Ego functions as a necessary limit within self-conscious activity.
- Schelling restores the dignity of nature as productive and spiritualized.
- Absolute Identity overcomes the split between subject and object.
- Art becomes the privileged expression of unity.

Section 3. Hegel

Dialectics, World Spirit, and the philosophy of history

Hegel and Panlogism

Reality is intelligible because reason is immanent within it

"Everything rational is real, and everything real is rational."

G.W.F. Hegel

How to Read Hegel's Aphorism

The statement is not a defense of every fact as justified

- “Real” for Hegel means more than merely existing; it means having rational necessity in a historical whole.
- The rational is not external to the world: the world itself is the process in which reason unfolds.
- Therefore institutions, history, and culture must be interpreted as moments in the self-development of Spirit.

World Spirit and Historical Development

Hegel's system is dynamic, not static

- The World Spirit is the universal process through which freedom becomes conscious of itself.
- History is not random succession but the progressive manifestation of this freedom.
- Individuals, peoples, and states are moments in a larger rational movement.

The Dialectical Method

Development through contradiction

Concept pair	Main relation	How to explain it in class
Thesis	An initial position or determination.	It affirms a specific form of truth, but only partially.
Antithesis	The internal opposite or negation.	Contradiction appears because the first position is limited.
Synthesis	A higher unity that preserves and overcomes both sides.	Truth advances by integrating conflict into a richer form.

What Is Sublation (Aufheben)?

Negation, preservation, and elevation at once

- Sublation does not simply destroy a previous stage.
- It cancels one-sidedness, preserves what is essential, and raises it to a higher form.
- Because of this, dialectical development is cumulative rather than merely destructive.

Why Contradiction Is Necessary

Conflict is the motor of development for Hegel

- A concept becomes fully intelligible only when its limits generate its opposite.
- Contradiction is not a defect to be eliminated immediately; it is a productive force.
- Without contradiction there would be no movement, no self-correction, and no higher truth.

The Cunning of Reason

Private passions serve universal history

- Historical actors pursue personal aims: power, glory, security, ambition.
- Yet through their actions, reason realizes ends they themselves do not fully understand.
- This is the “cunning of reason”: the universal uses the particular to advance freedom in history.

Discussion Prompt: Hegel's History

Questions for interpretation and debate

- Prompt 1
 - Does Hegel overestimate the rationality of history?
- Prompt 2
 - Can destructive events still be part of historical progress?
- Prompt 3
 - Is contradiction always productive in politics and social life?

Mini-Summary on Hegel

Seminar conclusion for absolute idealism

- Reality is intelligible as the unfolding of reason.
- Spirit realizes itself historically as freedom becomes conscious of itself.
- Dialectics explains development through contradiction and sublation.
- The cunning of reason links individual motives with universal historical outcomes.

Section 4. Ludwig Feuerbach

The anthropological turn and critique of religion

Feuerbach's Critique of Religion

From theology back to anthropology

- Feuerbach argues that religion is not revelation from above, but a human product.
- The divine image is formed by projecting ideal human qualities outward and upward.
- What theology describes as God's essence is, in fact, alienated human essence.

Projection and Alienation

Why religion “drains” the human being

Projection

- Humans transfer their own powers—love, reason, will, goodness—onto God.
- What is highest in man appears as belonging to an external being.

Alienation

- Once these powers are placed outside the human subject, the person becomes impoverished.
- Religion elevates God by diminishing humanity and separating humans from their own essence.

Anthropological Materialism

The sensuous, corporeal human being comes first

- Feuerbach rejects abstract speculation that neglects living, embodied human beings.
- Thinking is rooted in the sensuous and bodily existence of man as part of nature.
- Philosophy must therefore begin with concrete humanity rather than self-moving concepts.

The ‘Religion of Love’ and the I–Thou Principle

Human relation replaces theological abstraction

- For Feuerbach, authentic fulfillment is found in human-to-human relation, not in worship of a transcendent being.
- The I–Thou relation affirms the other person as concrete, sensuous, and meaningful.
- Love becomes a humanistic principle that reunites people with their own essence.

Why Feuerbach Marks a “Decline” of the Classical Era

A turning point rather than a simple failure

- He breaks with speculative idealism and redirects philosophy toward concrete humanity.
- This closes the grand classical systems of Absolute Spirit and restores the primacy of man and nature.
- At the same time, later thinkers argue that his materialism remains contemplative and insufficiently historical or practical.

Later Criticism: Why Marx Moves Beyond Feuerbach

Main limitation identified by later thinkers

- Feuerbach explains religion as alienation, but does not fully explain the social and material conditions that produce it.
- He centers the human being, yet often treats humanity in abstract, universal terms.
- Marx will insist that real transformation requires practice, labor, and social change, not only reinterpretation.

Exercise: Connection of Concepts (1–3)

How one concept develops from or opposes another

Concept pair	Main relation	How to explain it in class
Thing-in-itself → Non-Ego	Fichte internalizes Kant's external limit.	The obstacle becomes a moment generated within consciousness.
Contradiction → Synthesis	For Hegel, opposition is necessary for higher truth.	Conflict pushes thought beyond one-sided positions.
Alienation ↔ Projection	Hegel sees objectification in Spirit's development; Feuerbach sees transfer of human essence onto God.	Both concern externalization, but in very different frameworks.

Exercise: Connection of Concepts (4–5)

Short answer patterns for seminar response

Concept pair	Main relation	How to explain it in class
Duty ↔ Autonomy of will	Moral law is obeyed freely because reason gives it to itself.	Freedom is self-legislation, not lack of law.
Nature ↔ Matter	Schelling: nature as “sleeping spirit”; Feuerbach: nature as the sole objective reality.	One view spiritualizes nature; the other naturalizes humanity.
Classical idealism → anthropological turn	The center shifts from Absolute Spirit to real man.	This prepares later materialist and social critique.

Vocabulary for Philosophical Discourse I

Core terms for speaking precisely in class

Phenomenon

The world as it appears to us through sensibility and understanding.

Noumenon

Reality considered independently of our perception; not knowable by experience.

A priori

Forms or knowledge that precede experience and make experience possible.

Antinomies

Contradictory conclusions reason reaches when it goes beyond possible experience.

Categorical imperative

Kant's universal moral law that tests whether a maxim can become law for all.

Autonomy

Self-legislation of the will according to reason.

Vocabulary for Philosophical Discourse II

Additional terms for idealism and critique

Identity

Schelling's principle of unity of subject and object in the Absolute.

Dialectics

Development through contradiction, negation, and higher reconciliation.

Sublation

Simultaneous negation, preservation, and elevation in Hegelian development.

Cunning of reason

Reason uses private aims of individuals to realize universal ends in history.

Projection

Transfer of human qualities onto God in Feuerbach's critique of religion.

Alienation

Human powers appear as something external and independent from the human subject.

Final Comparative Map

One historical movement across the whole practical session

Concept pair	Main relation	How to explain it in class
Kant	Critique and limits	The subject structures experience, but knowledge remains finite.
Fichte	Activity and self-positing	The self produces opposition as a condition of self-consciousness.
Schelling	Unity of nature and spirit	Opposites arise from an underlying identity.
Hegel	Dialectical totality	Contradiction drives reason toward self-knowledge in history.
Feuerbach	Anthropological return	Philosophy returns from absolute spirit to the real human being.

Conclusion and Seminar Tasks

A concise ending for the practical class

- Use the conceptual pairs to produce short, logically connected oral answers.
- When answering, always show movement: from problem to concept, from concept to implication.
- The overall trajectory of the session is clear: criticism of knowledge → development of idealism → dialectics of history → anthropological critique.
- This makes German Classical Philosophy not a set of isolated doctrines, but a living philosophical sequence.