PHIL-490

SENIOR SEMINAR 2015/2016

“Gnothi Seauton” – “Know Thyself”:
Conceptions of Self-Consciousness
in German Idealism, Semantic Theory, and Psychoanalysis

KALAMAZOO COLLEGE

PROFESSOR: Chris Latiolais
Philosophy Department
Kalamazoo College
Humphrey House #202
Telephone # 337-7076

Offices Hours:
• Monday: 10:30 – 11:30
• Tuesday: 11:30 – 12:30
• Wednesday: 1:15 – 2:15
• By Appointment.

COURSE DESCRIPTION:
The imperative to “know thyself,” which addresses basic questions about human being in the world, lies at the foundation of western mythology, religion, and philosophy. In the Greek enlightenment, self-understanding – knowing what or who I am – and world-understanding – knowing one’s placement in the world – are intimately interconnected. It’s hard to overestimate the extent to which all questions in philosophy return, in some fashion or another, to this very question. Famously, the imperative or, better, caution, “Gnothi Seauton” written above the entrance to the Oracle to Zeus at Delphi forewarns those who seek answers from the Sybil to know how to interpret what is prophesied about one, making self-knowledge largely a matter of rightly reading what is said, written, or otherwise configured in one’s life – as if ignorance functions predominately in one’s inability to understand or “read” one’s own situation in the world. Of course, the ancient Greeks understood the forces at work in human life as multiple, different, competing, and yet taken together determinative of one’s life course: namely, as impersonal fate, personal agency, and the intervention of individual gods whose purposes were quite often at odds. Modern philosophy was formed by a broad and sweeping rejection of impersonal fate, on the one hand, and personal divine intervention, on the other, as actual forces at work in human life, retaining only personal agency as the locus of responsibility – an agency, however, subject to indifferent anonymous forces of the natural and social dimensions of modern life. The central theme of this course is self-consciousness, the way in which knowledge of self and world are inextricably interconnected.

In this course, we will limit ourselves to three specific areas of contemporary scholarship: German idealist accounts of intentionality or “mindedness,” contemporary semantic theorizing about linguistic self-reference, and, finally, 20th-century Neo-structuralist psychoanalytic theory. There is a fascinating convergence among these three disparate areas of contemporary scholarship in accounts of self-consciousness: namely, that consciousness and self-consciousness are two inseparable sides of the same unitary phenomenon: namely, human intentionality. This is decidedly not to say, however, that our consciousness, our outlook upon and involvement with the world, is transparent to itself. On the contrary, the way in which consciousness-of-self is conceptually articulated in these three areas of scholarship condemns human agents to the essential opacity, density, thickness, or depth of our world involvement, an involvement that is, taken as a whole, constitutively removed from conscious availability. Quite
surprisingly, self-consciousness becomes the imperative of executive self-configuration or self-determination within the world, where our world involvement simply precludes the possibility of ever consciously grasping our entire openness to, or involvement with, the world as such. Dramatically stated, in the traditions we will study in this course, self-consciousness introduces a constitutive ignorance, unknowability, or cognitive displacement at the very heart of subjectivity itself – a blind spot to the eye or “non-sense” to the ear, if you will. Moreover and most importantly, rather than diminishing our responsibility in conducting our own lives, this epistemic unavailability of the totality of our situatedness in the world dramatically sharpens and intensifies our “taking responsibility” for our beliefs, desires, and actions. Ancient Greek tragedy is dedicated to aesthetically addressing this ambiguous, paradoxical, and poignant nature of the human condition, a condition that demands action amidst forces that are simply not under our conscious control, though eerily interconnected with our agency. Perhaps psychoanalysis represents our most vibrant modern successor to Greek tragedy, it being no accident that Freud develops psychoanalysis in close proximity to the wisdom of the ancients so evident in their tragic rituals and performances. Freud’s “discovery” of the unconscious and its radical linguistic reformulation at the hands of Jacques Lacan re-assert, in altered modern form, Greek sensitivity to the peculiar intertwining of contingency and necessity, chance and fate, accident and inevitability.

The Cartesian understanding of consciousness as consciousness-of-an-object forces a peculiarly misleading conception of self-consciousness as the self’s taking itself as an object, a sort of mental gymnastics or contortionism that generates an infinite regress, since any object about which the subject is aware leaves out the very subject of such awareness, generating the endless – and fruitless – regress. The three areas of contemporary scholarship we examine in this course construe self-consciousness, not as the passive awareness of a given “self” object, but instead as the activity of holding oneself open to the world. This shift from noun to verb, from a given thing to a generative and executive activity, from “having” an object to “taking oneself” as confronting something, is initiated by Kant’s famous “Copernican Turn” in philosophy, a radical reconceptualization of the possibility of knowledge based upon the fact of human freedom or spontaneity. Famously, Kant asserted that the objectivity of our mindedness is grounded in conditions of its subjectivity. The experiencing “I” stands under the imperative to comprise “all of its representations.” The “transcendental unity of apperception” is the principle of the necessary possibility of the “I’s attaching itself (sich haften) to each of its representations” (A105-108). This founding imperative of the mind’s directedness to the world, Kant argues, is based upon the constitutive unavailability of mind’s presence to itself as a phenomenal object in the world. As the synthetic activity of self-configuration, the “I” “knows itself,” not as an object, but instead as carry out, conducting, or executing such cognitive operations. The implications of Kant’s argument against a transcendental psychology, given in his famous “Transcendental Dialectic,” are far-reaching. We will track this far-reaching reconceptualization of the human understanding of self and world in the 19th-Century critical reception of Kant’s transcendental idealism through contemporary semantic theory, on the one hand, and psychoanalytic practice, on the other.

In “Kant and the Semantic Problem” from *Kant and the Analytic Tradition*, Robert Hanna presents the working parts of Kant’s idealist account of the human cognition of objects (*Erkenntnis*) in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, framing Kant’s theory of knowledge in contemporary semantic terms. Hanna staunchly defends the basic framework of Kant’s account of “objective” representations or experience (*Erfahrung*), connecting it to the tradition of 20th-century Anglo-American “analytic” philosophy. In this important work, Hanna demonstrates that Kant conceives of consciousness of objects as essentially self-consciousness, as a form of active, synthesizing, rule-governed – “executive” – cognitive processing. Simply put, the self is not a thing but, instead, an activity or, better, the execution of “designated functions” of unifying representations into full fledged judgment (*Urteil*) – in modern parlance, a truth-evaluable proposition. By familiarizing ourselves with this basic model of the executive cognitive processing required to generate propositional content, we become familiar with the *locus classicus* of our contemporary cognitive sciences, with all of their attendant difficulties and problems.

We then turn to Sebastian Roedel’s far-reaching explication of self-consciousness in Kant’s theoretical and practical philosophy, Kant’s accounts of belief and action, and finally to his provocative account of our access to the second-person perspective of those with whom we interact in an “I-thou” manner. Roedel’s central claim is that human consciousness just is self-consciousness, full stop! Unique to human life is our rational capacity to raise questions about what we ought to believe or do, where our answer to such theoretical and practical questions causes, respectively, beliefs and actions. It’s customary in contemporary philosophy to distinguish between two types of explanations, two ways of asking the question of why someone believes or does something: namely, causal explanation, on the one hand, and
normatively justification, on the other – the real and the ideal, as Kant and Hegel would say. The core of Roedel’s account is that the explanation of human belief and action requires the identification of rational capacities (Vermögen or powers (Kraefte) that allow us to confront the normative question of what we ought to believe or do, where our answers to such theoretical and practical questions causes belief and action. Explaining the human capacities to either form beliefs about the world or competently intervene in it unifies these two dimensions, the normative and the causal – indeed, in such a way that the subject of belief and action is essentially conscious of itself as this very executive activity. The capacity to engage in theoretical and practical reason is structured as a form of self-reference, where the referential relation is not sustained by sensibility (alone) but, in contrast, the intellect. As Roedel puts it, the self refers to itself, not via sensibility but spontaneously, via the executive and generative capacity of the human mind.

It’s important to appreciate that such theoretical and practical human capacities are “dedicated” to forming true beliefs about the world, on the one hand, and, on the other, acting with either instrumental efficiency or moral rightness. Nevertheless, a capacity, precisely as a competency, can misfire. Having the capacity to raise questions about truth and rightness by no means guarantees that humans will form true beliefs or act rightly; instead, the capacity demands that we take stock of such congruity or incongruity. In short, such capacities cannot be explained without presupposing that they are dedicated to the unity of causal and normative dimensions of such human abilities. The Neo-empiricist tenor of so much Anglo-American analytic philosophy misconstrues such capacities, largely on the basis of continuing influence of Cartesian-style arguments from illusion, which drive a wedge between causal explanation and normative justification. Roedel’s key point in this regard is that such capacities are dedicated to the unity of the causal and justificatory and that this unity of the order of reason is severely misunderstood by Neo-empiricist models of mind.

Roedel’s painstaking clarification of this essentially idealist model of mind as self-consciousness has, or so he argues, far-reaching and surprising consequences for our conceptualization of second-person relations. If human agents refer to themselves, not via sensory receptivity, but instead via intellectual spontaneity, then reference to a second person is likewise via spontaneity. Simply put, the way in which I am present to myself and the way in which a second person is present to me are the same insofar as each demands the exercise of spontaneity. The famous “problem of other minds” generated by broadly empiricist models of perception – i.e. only the body of another is present to me, not the mind, which must be inferred on the basis of the latter – is, Roedel demonstrates, a pseudo problem. What’s so remarkable about this closing chapter of the book is its unflinching emphasis upon the essentially social nature of human mindedness, not because two formerly integrated minds interact, but instead because what it is to be minded is to participate in a shared order of reason. Simply put, the demand for social cooperation does not generate rational structures; instead, rationality as such is mutual recognition among humans. From this perspective, much of the “intersubjectivist turn” in European-Continental philosophy – most famously called for and carried out by Jurgen Habermas’s theory of communicative action – misconstrues the relationship between subjectivity and intersubjectivity, self-consciousness and consciousness of others.

In the next portion of the course, we examine Francois Recanati’s fascinating work on subjectivity and experience in contemporary semantic and pragmatic theorizing. Recanati’s staunchly defends an approach in the philosophy of language, “truth-conditional pragmatics,” that moves beyond the traditional formal semantic approach characteristic of the first half of the 20th Century. The key to understanding Recanati’s philosophy of language is his emphatic and uncompromising demand to distribute the semantic content of utterances across the standard, dual components of the speech act: namely, across illocutionary force, on the one hand, and propositional content, on the other. The Duality Thesis claims that both force and content are potential carriers of meaning, and the Distribution Thesis is the claim that both illocutionary force and propositional content do indeed contribute distinctive elements to the encompassing content of the whole utterance. Traditional truth-conditional formal semantics is committed to minimizing the contribution of force – the so-called “pragmatic” dimension of the utterance – to utterance content, focusing almost exclusively upon propositional content. Decrying the “fallacy of misplaced information,” Recanati points out that formal semantic misplaces important dimensions of overall utterance content into the propositional content. The Duality and Distribution theses ensure that utterance content distributes across the dual components of speech acts. So too in the Recanati’s philosophy of mind – his account of intentionality – the content of the experience or aim of the action distribute across the dual components of both act and content, highlighting the active nature of the experiencer or agent whose psychological attitude contributes elements of meaning not contained in the explicit content of the act. For instance, the causal self-referentiality built into both perception and action does not, Recanati insists, belong to the explicit
content of the perception or action but, instead, to the psychological force of the act. In this fashion, the entire intentional content of perception of action distributes across the dual components of perception and action, highlighting the active, executive nature of the subject who assumes such different psychological attitudes to the world.

Recanati’s model of perception and action – which insists upon the two dimensional, force-content determination of intentional content – provides a precise way of locating the essentially self-conscious nature of human mindedness. I want to suggest that consciousness of explicit content is always connected with self-consciousness of the subject’s active attitude toward such content. In short, the force/content distinction captures important dimensions of the consciousness/self-consciousness distinction. Roedel demonstrates that the formation of belief and the conduct of action consists of an active, executive, generative accomplishment that combines both normative and causal dimensions. In both perception and action, what one explicitly perceives or does is accompanied by how the subject relates herself to such conceptual content, producing a double conscious/self-conscious structure that is, I am suggesting, similar to Recanati’s analysis of content and force. The unfolding of perception and the conduct of actions consist of two interactive layers of meaning – force and content – the former implicit and the latter explicit, with the proviso that implicit meaning can be made explicit and therein domiciled in expanding propositional content. Our excursion into the semantic and pragmatic theorizing provides us with precise terms for analyzing the complex, multilayered, tandem nature of the determination of intentional content of perception, action, and speech.

In the final section of the course we follow our theme of self-consciousness in the domain of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, as interpreted by the Slovenian philosopher, Slavoj Zizek. Unlike Kantian idealism, which is broadly focused on epistemological and moral viewpoints, Lacanian analysis is exclusively focused on desire, erotic happiness (widely understood), and the unconscious, which manifests itself in symptomtic behaviors. Zizek has devoted his career to reading German idealism through the conceptual lens of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, and this orientation greatly facilitates our reflective comparison of different areas of scholarship. This exegetical approach allows us to simply contextualize Roedel’s idealist account of self-consciousness and Recanati’s truth-conditional pragmatic account of intentionality into the domain of psychoanalysis. In short, Zizek offers a psychoanalytic reading of the idealist account of self-consciousness and pragmatic account of intentionality. According to Zizek, the “fundamental operation of German idealism” is the formation of a “split subject” divided between self-images and self-symbols, on the one hand, and, on the other, that dimension of human life that escapes such imaginary and symbolic representations, which Lacan calls “the real.” As Henry Allison famously puts it, human beings “incorporate” what they perceive, believe, or do within conceptual content that articulates what it is that we confront, assume, or do, installing us within the articulated “space of reasons.” Zizek equates Allison’s “Incorporation Thesis” with the psychoanalytic concept of castration: Human beings are in this sense “subject to,” or “inscribed within” language or conceptual self-articulation – that is, self-images and self-symbols constitute our primary access to ourselves – and its precisely this “cut” or “excision” into any presumably immediate relation to our being that counts as the formation of the unconscious. It’s fascinating that this dialogue between idealist and psychoanalytic models of mind appear to install the unconscious at the very heart of self-consciousness. Self-consciousness is structured by a constitutive blindspot located at its center.

Another important feature of Lacan’s account of the subject is his distinction between the “subject of the enunciation” and the “subject of the enunciated,” which is entirely isomorphic with our familiar pragmatic distinction between the force and the content of the utterance or state of mind. In the same way that pragmatics distinguishes between the one who speaks (force) and the one who is spoken about (propositional content), so too psychoanalysis demands that we distinguish, in the clinical setting of someone talking about herself, the locus of the speaker, on the one hand, and the content of what is said about the speaker, on the other – with the overall concern being whether the analysand can stand independently “in the first-person” position of responsibility vis-à-vis another. During his middle period, Lacan famously claims that “the subject begins analysis by speaking about himself without speaking to you, or by speaking to you but not about himself. When he can speak to you about himself, the analysis will be over” (E, 373). The distinctive type of normative ideal of health or well being that defines psychoanalytic practice is precisely this coincidence of the first-person force provisionally coinciding with the propositional content of what one says about oneself to another. Here we see an important psychoanalytic appropriation of Recanati’s account of the duality and distribution of meaning determination across force and content: only a full-fledged pragmatic analysis of utterance meaning allows
us to capture the complexity of speech and human desire, which is characteristically a symptomatic, “transference laden” exchange between a desiring speaker and a more or less fantasized interlocutor.

Zizek draws upon these fascinating parallels between German idealism and Lacanian analysis to work out a complex account of human subjectivity. Zizek develops his conception of desiring – indeed driven – human subjectivity to underscore the fraught nature of political agency within modern social and systemic complexity. Like critical theorists, Zizek is concerned with agency amidst global capitalism, the worldwide web, pleasure-driven consumer society, religious extremism, and political disempowerment. His overall goal is to identify various forms of contemporary agonistic politics that are alike compromised, unresponsive the crisis of 21st-century capitalism, and ultimately coopted. A good deal of what he says about such political factions hinges upon a lucid understanding of how desire and politics often produce imaginary foes and friends, political allergies and allegiances, then, that are more symptomatic of the crisis of modernity than responsive to it. More specifically still, Zizek draws attention to various basic options or approaches to the crisis of modernity created by the ontological options of materialism and idealism, along the vertical axis, and methodological options of historical and ahistorical, along the horizontal axis: namely and respectively, postmodern discursive historicism, reductive scientific naturalism, New Age Buddhism, and the philosophy of finitude. We will examine how the idealist model of self-consciousness and pragmatic model of intentionality, which we developed in the first part of the course, have important repercussions for critical social theory.

REQUIRED TEXTS:

  - Introduction
  - “Moderate Relativism: The Framework”
  - “Relativism and Indexicality”
  - “Content and Mode”
  - “Immunity to Error through Misidentification,”
  - “Fichte’s Choice”
  - “Not Only as Substance, but also as Subject”
  - “Suture and Pure Difference”
  - “Objects, Object Everywhere”
  - “The Foursome of Struggle, Historicity, Will . . . and Gelassenheit”

BACKGROUND TEXTS:

READING SCHEDULE FALL TERM

INTRODUCTION TO SENIOR SEMINAR:

- Week One:
  - Introduction to Senior Seminar.
  - Preliminary Discussion of Course Themes

KANT’S FUNDAMENTAL QUESTION IN THE CRITIQUE OF PURE REASON:

- Week Two:
  - Hanna: “Kant and the Semantic Problem”

SEBASTIAN ROEDEL’S ACCOUNT OF SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS:

- Week Three:
  - Roedel: Preface
  - “First-Person Thought”
- Week Four:
  - Roedel: “Action and the First Person”
- Week Five:
  - Roedel: “Belief and the First Person”
- Week Six:
  - Roedel: “Reason, Freedom, and True Materialism”
- Week Seven:
  - Roedel: “Receptive Knowledge”
- Week Eight:
  - Roedel: “The Second Person”

CONTEMPORARY SEMANTIC AND PRAGMATIC THEORY: FRANCOIS RECANATI’S MODERATE RELATIVISM & THE SOLIDIFICATION OF KANTIAN THEMES IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE:

- Week Nine:
  - Recanati:
    - Introduction
- Week Ten:
  - Recanati:
    - “Moderate Relativism: The Framework”
READING SCHEDULE WINTER TERM

CONTEMPORARY SEMANTIC AND PRAGMATIC THEORY: FRANCOIS RECANATI'S MODERATE RELATIVISM & THE SOLIDIFICATION OF KANTIAN THEMES IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE:

- Week One:
  - Recanati:
    - “Relativism and Indexicality”
    - “Content and Mode”

- Week Two:
  - Recanati:
    - “Immunity to Error through Misidentification,”

CONTEMPORARY PSYCHOANALYTIC CONCEPTIONS OF SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS: SLAVOJ ZIZEK'S LACANIAN READING OF HEGEL'S CONCEPTION OF SUBJECTIVITY AND ABSOLUTE KNOWING: SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS AND DESIRE:

- Week Three: Fichte on Self-consciousness:
  - Zizek:
    - “Fichte’s Choice”

- Week Four: Hegel on Self-Consciousness:
  - Zizek:
    - “Not Only as Substance, but also as Subject”

- Week Five: Lacan on Self-consciousness, the unconscious, and Subjectivity:
  - Zizek:
    - “Suture and Pure Difference”

- Week Six:
  - Zizek: Lacan on Object Relations:
    - “Objects, Object Everywhere”

- Week Seven: Heidegger’s on Dasein, Sein, and the Ontological Difference:
  - Zizek: “The Foursome of Struggle, Historicity, Will . . . and Gelassenheit”

- Week Eight: Open
- Week Nine: Open
- Week Ten: Open
- Finals Week: Open