Philosophy 780:
After Empiricism: Experience and Reality in Kant, Hegel, and Sellars
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Immanuel Kant’s Critical Philosophy responded to 19th century British empiricism (and the empiricism of the German Johannes Tetens) by arguing that human knowledge and experience cannot be passively impressed upon us via the senses, but must be actively constructed in accordance with logical (and therefore normative) concepts and principles. Kant thought this entailed that we could not know things as they are in themselves; he called his position ‘transcendental idealism.’ Post-Kantian thinkers argued that the fact that mind contributes to knowledge does not mean reality itself is inaccessible, though it did perhaps entail that empirical science was limited in scope. This movement culminated in the absolute idealism of G.W.F. Hegel.

Two centuries later, Wilfrid Sellars responded to 20th century logical empiricism with “variations on Kantian themes,” emphasizing again the active, norm-governed side of knowledge and experience. But Sellars thought he could reject Kant’s idealism and defend a strong scientific realism: science tells us what there really is. Sellars’ work has inspired many leading philosophers in epistemology and philosophy of mind. Some of them have moved to positions closer to Hegel’s (e.g., Robert Brandom, John McDowell), while others have resisted the idealist impulse strongly, staying with Sellars’ scientific realism (e.g., Ruth Millikan, Paul and Patricia Churchland).

After a brief introduction to Empiricism, we will dive into the responses from Kant and Hegel, juxtaposing readings from their works with readings from Sellars and his followers, comparing and contrasting their positions and arguments. Specific topics will be the nature of intuition and perception (e.g., are there both conceptual and non-conceptual elements in perceptual experience?), concepts and understanding (e.g., how deep does the analogy between language and thought go?), knowledge and conceptual change (e.g., how radical a change can there be in our most basic concepts or categories; could most everything we now believe prove false?), and, finally, the relation between reason and freedom (what are the sources of normativity in a physical world?).

This is a writing intensive course; students will also be responsible for several in-class presentations as well as leading discussions in the course.