PHILOSOPHY 340
CONTEMPORARY CONTINENTAL PHILOSOPHY
Hermeneutics and Deconstruction:
The Problem of Transcendence in Heidegger and Derrida
Fall 2011
MWF 12:30-1:20 pm, HH339

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I. Required Materials
Heidegger, *Towards the Definition of Philosophy*
Heidegger, *Ontology: The Hermeneutics of Facticity*
Heidegger, *Being and Time*
Heidegger, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*
Derrida, *Writing and Difference*
Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*
Various handouts (indicated by “H”)

II. Course Description
Our aim in this course is to achieve an understanding of some of the most important methodological and conceptual trends in contemporary European philosophy by charting the representative philosophical journeys of two of the most influential “continental” thinkers of the twentieth century: Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida. The need to specify our explicitly philosophical intentions arises in response to the widespread predisposition of the broader academy to view these thinkers as principally hostile to the Western philosophical tradition. However ascendant this “postmodern” reading of Heidegger and Derrida may be, there are good reasons to dispute it. In fact, both thinkers began their careers as scholars of ancient and medieval philosophy, and it is precisely their formation within (and their ongoing commitment to) this tradition that motivates their respective “destructions” and “deconstructions” of “Western metaphysics”. In short, Heidegger and Derrida criticize the philosophical tradition not in order to declare it bankrupt, but rather to excavate from it the positive possibilities for thinking that have been covered up by centuries of overemphasis (especially since the onset of modernity) on the “theoretical” or “epistemological” tasks of philosophy—tasks that, while important, have too often overshadowed the more fundamental question of what motivates the search for foundational principles (and unshakable knowledge of said principles) in the first place: the desire to ground and sustain human flourishing in a world of fallenness, flux, uncertainty, and violence.

Our task, thus, is to understand these thinkers in view of the explicitly philosophical concerns that motivate their work. In preparation for this task, we will begin with a brief *apologia* for the relevance of the “continental” tradition to the concerns of Christian philosophers. We will go on, then, to consult several stage-setting readings designed to draw out the central themes of contemporary continental philosophy, especially its intimate relation to the project of phenomenology as articulated by its
founder Edmund Husserl. With this general introduction behind us, we will spend the majority of the course tracing the development of the hermeneutic and deconstructive critiques of the philosophical tradition through careful readings of primary sources by Heidegger and Derrida. In so doing, we will place a special emphasis on clarifying these thinkers’ deep and sustained concern over the “problem of transcendence”—the perplexing question of how the essentially finite, historical, and thus revisable character of human understanding affects our relation to what, if anything, lies beyond us (our future? Being? God?). In conclusion, we will argue that the resolute attempts of Heidegger and Derrida to keep this question open (in a time when many philosophers would prefer to see it closed) can lend substantial inspiration and support to Christian philosophers seeking to break new ground on the most ancient philosophical problem of our tradition: that of how to believe in what cannot be seen that we may better understand our responsibility as stewards of the visible.

III. Course Objectives
This course is designed to help you meet the following four objectives.

**Objective One:** To achieve a charitable understanding of course material through disciplined reading, and clear and concise expository writing (no jargon!).

While it is important for experienced scholars working in this tradition to read and write about these thinkers in the critical mode, it is appropriate for the beginner to set the decidedly less ambitious goal of simply understanding what is going on in these notoriously difficult texts. One of the best ways to cultivate a clear understanding of difficult texts is to engage in good old fashioned expository writing: no ambitious argumentative aims, no grandiose critical agenda, just following the text and rehearsing the key moments of its development clearly and concisely in your own words. The fact that we will focus primarily on understanding the texts we read rather than on criticizing them, however, doesn’t mean that you should abstain from raising critical concerns if you have them. It simply means that you shouldn’t feel badly if it takes everything you’ve got just to figure out what’s going on.

**Objective Two:** To cultivate the virtues of patience and perseverance through reading, re-reading, and re-re-reading the assigned texts.

The guiding insight of hermeneutics is that human understanding is always to a certain degree “circular”: our present understanding of the world is based in large part on what we’ve previously understood about it. This presents a problem when we experience something new that is radically different from our past experiences. How are we to reconcile ourselves to the new experience without having some previous experience of the phenomenon in question with which to compare it? We feel lost! We know we’re not getting it, but there doesn’t seem to be any clear cut way to get it if we don’t already have it! Many of the readings you’ll encounter this semester are likely to frustrate you in precisely this way. Take courage! Persevere! Read for what you can understand, and then read again, using what you’ve gained the first time around as leverage on what remains obscure. This movement of reading and re-reading, moving from part to whole and then back to part, is what is known as the “hermeneutical circle”, and you should expect to make several circuits on it before you achieve even the vaguest inkling of what’s going on in the text. (I cribbed these last several sentences from one of Lee Hardy’s syllabi. It’s good advice, and well expressed! Thanks, Professor Hardy!)

**Objective Three:** To engage (and enjoy!) your community of colleagues in discussion, both inside and outside the classroom.
In a course of this kind, vigorous discussion is indispensable to the process of understanding, appreciating, and applying course material. In my experience, people tend to come to class better prepared and contribute more vigorously when they have a sense of affinity for and responsibility toward their instructor and fellow students. With regard to fostering participation and interaction, my goals as an instructor are ambitious. I hope to convey a contagious excitement (and a good sense of humor) about what I take to be fascinating and highly relevant material, to model respect for and interest in the contributions of all participants, and to facilitate discussion that is well-directed enough to illuminate the issues at stake, but open-ended enough to inspire a sense of wonder and enjoyment in as many of you as possible.

**PLEASE NOTE:** Since creating this kind of classroom community has proven difficult in the face of distractions such as laptops, cell phones, and iPods, electronics are NOT ALLOWED except with written permission from Student Academic Services.

**Objective Four:** To discern the possibilities and the challenges that hermeneutics and deconstruction present for thinking and living in Christian community.

As you’ve surely gathered by now, Calvin is a place where we take our identity as a community of Christian scholars and servants very seriously. Naturally, the question of how our course material can aid us in the pursuit of faithful Christian thinking and living will be a central theme of our inquiries.

**IV. Requirements and Grade Assessment**

**A. Attendance and Class Participation—10%**

Since some of us are naturally inclined to verbal participation and others of us are not, frequency of verbal input isn’t always the most reliable indicator of who is involved; it is possible, in other words, to participate vigorously without speaking up a whole lot in class. My aim is to foster a classroom environment in which different people with different learning styles may flourish equally, and that means I never put people on the spot and I strive to include as many people in the discussion as can be persuaded to get involved. The more tightly-knit our classroom community, the more progress we are likely to make together (both academically and personally), so please be attentive to your colleagues’ different learning styles and comfort levels.

**NOTE:** Your daily attendance is absolutely critical. This material is extremely difficult and to make any sense of it, you will need regular input from me and from your colleagues. To provide you with incentive, I will take attendance every day. If there is some pressing reason or extenuating circumstance that requires you to miss class, communicate this to me in advance. Students with more than 3 unexcused absences may incur a 5% penalty off their final grades. Students with excessive absences may become ineligible to pass the course.

**B. Expository Writing Assignments—60%**

I will routinely assign discussion questions and brief expository papers that you will type, print out, and keep in a journal. I’ll collect your journals twice over the course of the semester (on Friday, October 14 and Wednesday, November 23), and each of the two collections will count for 30% of your final
grade. In order to provide strong incentive to manage your time wisely, I will not accept late journal collections except in cases of documented medical or family emergency.

Over the course of each collection period, there will be four journal assignments circulated of which you must complete three. The first assignment in the first collection period is required, but you may choose to omit one of the remaining three assignments from the first collection, as well as one of the four assignments in the second collection. In short, each collection that you turn in will be composed of three assignments, for a total of six expository writing assignments over the course of the semester. Since I will allow you to revise selections from your journal for inclusion in your final paper, those of you who work hard on the journal stand to reap significant rewards.

C. Final Paper (10-15 pages)—30%

The culminating assignment of the course is a 10-15 page final paper on a topic of your choosing (due in class on Friday, December 9). Late papers will incur a penalty of 4% off the final paper grade per day for up to five days. No late papers will be accepted after noon on Wednesday, December 14. To provide motivation for you to begin thinking about the paper well in advance of the deadline, I am requiring each of you to submit a 1-page email on the topic or topics you are considering by noon on Monday, November 28.

You may write on any figure or issue pertinent to contemporary continental philosophy (it need not have been covered in class). If you choose to draw your inspiration from somewhere other than the syllabus, however, I strongly advise you to consult me well in advance of the deadline. In keeping with my decision to stress the virtue of understanding over the virtue of criticism, you should feel free to write a paper that is largely expository. It will be sufficient, in other words, to write a paper the principal aim of which is merely to clarify the meaning of a difficult text or problem (without going on to give a critical evaluation of it). Please note, however, that you are more than welcome to engage these texts critically in your paper if you so desire; my intent here is simply to acknowledge that the material is difficult enough that careful, clear expository work is a rigorous enough enterprise on its own to qualify as a final project.

V. Course Calendar

The following schedule is merely a regulative ideal, and the topics scheduled for a certain day will often carry over into the next meeting. As the semester progresses, we will nip and tuck the schedule as necessary. The abbreviation “H” indicates that the assigned text is a handout.

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<th>Week 1</th>
<th>Preliminaries and Course Overview</th>
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<td>Sep. 7, 9</td>
<td>Topics:</td>
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<td>Course Introduction</td>
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<td>Saving Philosophy From Itself: Discourse vs. Love of Wisdom</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Preparing for Our Task: Christian Philosophers as “Continental” Philosophers?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reading:</td>
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<td>Merold Westphal, “Christian Philosophers and the Copernican Revolution” (H)</td>
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<th>Week 2*</th>
<th>Introducing the “Continental” Tradition</th>
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<td>Sep. 12, 14, 16</td>
<td>*Draft of Journal Assignment #1 due in class on Friday, Sep. 16</td>
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Topics:
Understanding our Task: Guiding Themes/Tensions in “Continental” Philosophy
Guiding Themes in Summary: Language, History, Freedom, Otherness

Readings:
1. Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, selected letters (H)
2. Hans-Georg Gadamer, selections from Truth and Method (H)
3. Gadamer, “Man and Language” (H)
4. Heidegger, “Preface to the German Edition of Pathmarks” (H)

Journal Assignment:
#1—On the Path to “Continental” Philosophy

Week 3
Husserl and the Foundations of Phenomenology
Sep. 19, 21, 23
Topics:
Problems with the “External World” and the “Subject/Object” Schema
Dismantling and Redefining “Transcendence” and “Correspondence”
From Husserl to Heidegger: A Shift in Phenomenological Emphasis

Readings:
1. Lee Hardy, “Translator’s Introduction” to Husserl’s “Idea” (H)
2. Husserl, from “The Idea of Phenomenology” (H)
3. Heidegger, from The Basic Problems of Phenomenology (H) (pp. 19-23, especially pp. 21-23)

Journal Assignment:
#2—From Husserl to Heidegger: A Shift in Phenomenological Emphasis

Week 4
Heidegger: On the Way to Being and Time
Sep. 26, 28, 30
Topics:
Introduction to Heidegger
From the “Theoretical Attitude” to “Environmental Experience”
The “external world” vs. the “environing world”
Hermeneutical Intuition and “Devivification”

Readings:

Journal Assignment:
#3—Does Environmental Experience Presuppose the External World?

Week 5
On The Way to Being and Time, continued
Oct. 3, 5, 7
Topics:
Phenomenology as Ontology: “The Hermeneutics of Facticity”
The ontological difference in Dasein: “being” vs. “a being”
“Formal Indication”: Interpreting Dasein’s “Facticity” as “Being-in-a-World”
Analyzing “Being-in-a-World”: Everydayness, Curiosity, Care, Temporality

Readings:

Journal Assignment:
#4—“Being-in-a-world” and “Everyday experience”

Week 6*
Oct. 10, 12, 14

Heidegger: In The Wake of Being and Time

*First Journal Collection (#1-4) due in class on Friday, Oct. 14

Topics:
Between Two “Worlds”: On Why We’re Skipping Over Being and Time
Deconstructing “epistemological” and “theological” transcendence
Reappropriating Transcendence as “Being-in-the-world”
“Openness to World As Such”: Freedom and Temporality

Readings:
Heidegger, The Metaphysical Foundations of Logic (1928)
  pp. 123-154—Background: propositional truth, its history, the central
  problem of Being and Time
  pp. 154-170—Fundamental Ontology and the Problem of Transcendence
  pp. 170-196—Transcendence as World, Freedom
  pp. 196-219—World and Freedom Understood as Temporality

Journal Assignment:
#5—The Problem of Transcendence in The Metaphysical Foundations of Logic

Week 7
Oct. 17, 19, 21

In the Wake of Being and Time, continued

Topics:
Metaphysical Foundations of Logic, continued
Transcendence and Truth: “On the Essence of Ground”
From Freedom to “Abyss”: Inklings of the “Turn” from Fundamental Ontology

Readings:

Journal Assignment:
#6—Freedom as World-Projection in The Metaphysical Foundations of Logic

Week 8*
Oct. 24, 28

Being and Time: Past and Future

*No class meeting on Wednesday, Oct. 26—Reading Recess

Topics:
“On the Essence of Ground”, continued
After Fundamental Ontology: Themes in “The Later Heidegger”
A New Perspective on the Two Divisions of Being and Time
Readings:

Journal Assignment:
#7—Truth and Temporality in “On the Essence of Ground”

Week 9
Retrieving Being and Time, Division I
Oct. 31, Nov. 2, 4
Topics:
Division I: A Mature Expression of Dasein’s “Environing World”
“Falling” and the “Dimming Down” of Dasein’s Possibilities

Readings:
1. Division I, Sections 15 and 16, pp. 95-107
2. Division I, Sections 22-24, pp. 134-148 (start at “C” just before section 22)
3. Division I, Sections 26 and 27, pp. 153-168
4. Division I, Sections 34B-38, pp. 210-224
5. Division II, Sections 40 and 41, pp. 228-241

Journal Assignment:
#8—Being and Time, Division I

Week 10
Retrieving Being and Time, Division II
Nov. 7, 9, 11
Topics:
Division II: A Fledgling Expression of the Transcendence of World
Strange Phenomena: Being-unto-death, Anxiety, Conscience, Resoluteness

Readings:
1. Division II, Section 45, pp. 274-278—An overview of the trajectory of Div. II
2. Division II, Section 69, pp. 401-418—A reappropriation of the overall project
   of Being and Time in view of the importance of transcendence
3. Division II, Section 53, pp. 304-311—Being-unto-death
4. Division II, Sections 54-60, pp. 312-348—Anxiety, Conscience, Resoluteness

Week 11
Deconstructing Heidegger: On the Way to Derrida
Nov. 14, 16, 18
Topics:
Derrida in the Trace of Heidegger: Debts and Departures
On Difference, Deconstruction, “Authenticity” and the “End” of Metaphysics
Transcendence as “Infinite Play”: “Differance”

Readings:
2. Derrida, “Differance” in Margins of Philosophy, pp. 1-27

Assignment:
Paper Prospectus Email—1-page statement of your paper topic and strategy
*Due by email ASAP, but no later than noon on Monday, Nov 28.

**Week 12***
Nov. 21, 23
*Catch-up Week—No class meeting on Friday, Nov 25 (Thanksgiving)*
*Second Journal Collection (#5-8) due in class on Wednesday, Nov 23*

**Week 13**
Nov. 28, 30, Dec. 2
*Derrida: “Infinite Play” and the Possibility of Ethical Violence*

**Topics:**
Derrida from Early to Late: Nietzsche or Levinas?
Is Ontology a Philosophy of Violence? (continued on next page)
Heidegger vs. Levinas: The Priority of Ontological Transcendence

**Readings:**
*Paper prospectus email due by noon on Monday, Nov 28.*

**Week 14***
Dec. 5, 7, 9
*The “Ethics” of Deconstruction: An Inkling of “Infinite Justice”*
*Final paper due in class on Friday, Dec. 9*

**Topics:**
“Deconstruction is Justice” (continued on next page)
The Demands of “Infinite Justice”

**Readings:**
1. Derrida, selections from “Violence and Metaphysics” in *Writing and Difference*, pp. 79-153 (Please Review)
2. Derrida, “Force of Law” (H)

**EXAM WEEK**
Th. Dec 15, 1:30p
*Course Retrospective*

**Topics:**
Catch-up
From Ethics to Religion
Looking Back That We May Look Forward