

Phenomenology: Merleau-Ponty

PHIL 10158

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Course description: This course will introduce students to the 20th century philosophical movement of Phenomenology. Originating with the work of Edmund Husserl, Phenomenology attempts to ground substantive philosophical claims concerning metaphysics, epistemology, philosophy of mind, and beyond, in a careful articulation of the ways in which our experience of the world is structured. The course is structured around Merleau-Ponty's influential 1945 work, *Phenomenology of Perception*. There, Merleau-Ponty argues that proper attention to the structures that characterize thought and experience reveals that we are fundamentally *embodied* creatures, and that this has important consequences for our understanding of mind, language, metaphysics and epistemology. We'll start by considering the philosophical influences (Husserl, Sartre) that inform Merleau-Ponty's project, continue by exploring some of the most important parts of the *Phenomenology of Perception*, and finish by thinking about how Merleau-Ponty's work there informs his views on psychology, aesthetics and politics.

Required text: Merleau-Ponty, Maurice & Landes, Donald A. (2012). *Phenomenology of Perception*. Routledge. [Please make sure you have access to this translation rather than the earlier one by Colin Smith]

Course Structure:

Please see the course Learn page for full details of class schedule and format.

Each week there will be 40-60 minutes of pre-recorded material, which you should ideally work through in advance of doing that week's reading. I'll also often be uploading some reading notes and/or questions that you might like to use to help you make sense of the material we're reading each week.

When reading, make a note of anything you found particularly interesting, or confusing, or otherwise in need of discussion, and bring it along to the weekly tutorial. We'll use these tutorials to try to make sense of the reading together.

Seminar Topics and Readings

Below are the main topics and readings for each week of the course. Please do your very best to do the required reading each week, and come to the tutorials prepared to discuss it. The additional readings are suggestions for resources that will help you think further about any parts of the course you find particularly interesting. I'll post more suggestions for additional readings as the course progresses. If you find yourself wanting more stuff to read about a particular issue or aspect we've touched on during the course, just let me

know. And if you come across some reading that you find helpful for understanding something we've talked about on the course, please let everyone else know.

Unless otherwise stated, all required readings will be available via the course's Learn page – other than the (many) ones from the *Phenomenology of Perception*, which you should have access to yourself. All additional readings should be available via the library website, or easily googlable. If you have trouble accessing any of the readings for the course, please let me know.

Week 1: Introducing Phenomenology; Introducing *Phenomenology of Perception*

In the recordings I will talk a bit about the origins of Phenomenology as an approach to philosophy – but we are mostly going to start by diving straight in. We'll look at a couple of Sartre's early writings, and the first chapter of the *Phenomenology of Perception (PhP)* to get a sense of what Phenomenologists are actually trying to do.

Required reading:

- Sartre: Intentionality: A Fundamental Idea of Husserl's Phenomenology
- *PhP*, ch. 1: Sensation (pp. 3-12)
- Sartre: *The Imaginary, ch.1: Description* (pp.4-16 in Routledge edition)

Additional Reading:

Merleau-Ponty: The Contemporary Philosophical Movement [Short interview with M-P where he tries to summarise what *PhP* is all about, and talks about his relationship with Sartre]

Merleau-Ponty (1948/2008). *The World of Perception*, Routledge.

[The text of a series of radio lectures where M-P speaks about his work for a general audience. You can listen to them (and/or read the subtitles) here: <https://goo.gl/pFqWgS>]

Smith, David Woodruff, "Phenomenology", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Winter 2013 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), available at <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/phenomenology/>

[A very nice introduction and overview of Phenomenology as a movement and research programme in philosophy, from the trusty Stanford Encyclopaedia]

Romdenh-Romluc, K. (2011) *Merleau-Ponty and Phenomenology of Perception*, ch.1: Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology (pp. 4-35) [Available online via library website]

Week 2: How not to think about perception

This week we work through the rest of part 1 of *PhP*, where M-P is mostly trying to criticize existing ways of thinking about perception (though doing so in ways that point to the alternative he'll develop in the rest of the book). We'll consider what it means to identify and overcome 'classical prejudices' and 'return to the phenomena', and what the twin evils of 'empiricism' and 'intellectualism' that MP talks about here (and throughout *PhP*) might amount to.

Required Reading:

PhP: Introduction, chapters 2-4:

- "Association" and the "Projection of Memories" (Sections *a*, *b* [pp. 13-18] and *d* [pp.20-24]);
- "Attention" and "Judgment" (Sections *a-b* [pp.28-38])
- The Phenomenal Field (all of it – pp.52-65)

Additional Reading:

Romdenh-Romluc, Komarine. (2011) *Merleau-Ponty and Phenomenology of Perception*, ch.2 'Traditional Prejudices and the return to phenomena' (pp. 36-62) [*Available via Library Website*]

Carman, Taylor (2005). Sensation, judgment, and the phenomenal field. In Taylor Carman & Mark B. N. Hansen (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*. Cambridge University Press 50-73. [*Available via Library Website*]

Landes, Donald (2012). Translator's Introduction, in *Phenomenology of Perception*, Routledge 2012.

Week 3: Perception and the Body

The lesson of the chapters we looked at last week is that we need to rethink our experience, and that doing this will involve understanding how our status as embodied agents is inseparable from our experience of the world. This week we look at the chapters of *PoP* where M-P begins to introduce and explore these ideas.

Required Reading:

PhP: Part One:

- Introduction to Part One (pp.69-74),
- The Body as an Object and Mechanistic Psychology (pp.72-91)
- The Experience of the Body and Classical Psychology (pp.92-99)

Additional Reading:

Carman, Taylor (2008) *Merleau-Ponty*, chapter 3: 'Body and World', Routledge (scanned copy on Learn)
[Brief overview of Merleau-Ponty's bodily conception of experience. Takes us up to and beyond what we've covered so far – to the end of M-P's career, in fact]

Week 4: Bodily Perception and Cognitive Science

We get to the heart of part 1 of *PoP* this week, with the introduction of some influential notions (motor intentionality; the intentional arc) and an intriguing blend of phenomenological and cognitive scientific support (or illustration?) for the position we saw M-P begin to develop last week. This week's reading is one chunky, action-packed chapter:

Required Reading:

PhP: Part One:

- The Spatiality of One's Own Body and Motricity (pp.100-148)

Additional Reading:

Jensen, Rasmus Thybo (2009). Motor intentionality and the case of Schneider. *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 8 (3):371-388.

[An impressive forensic examination of Merleau-Ponty's account of motor intentionality and one of the case studies he uses to support it.]

Romdenh-Romluc (2007). Merleau-Ponty and the power to reckon with the possible

Dreyfus, Hubert (2007). Reply to Romdenh-Romluc; both in T. Baldwin (ed.) *Reading Merleau-Ponty*, Routledge.

Week 5: Phenomenology and Cognitive Science

We've now seen MP using discussion of the psychology of his time to support his phenomenological arguments. But how exactly are phenomenology and cognitive science related? This week we step back from *PhP* and consider this question by looking at the text of an interesting lecture that MP gave a few years after the publication of *PhP* that is explicitly devoted to this topic. It also contains some important ideas about what MP thinks is distinctive and important about *his* way of doing Phenomenology as compared to his predecessors and contemporaries.

Required Reading:

- MP: *Phenomenology and the Human Sciences* (copy on Learn)

Additional Reading:

The topic of the relationship between Phenomenology and cognitive science has seen quite a bit of recent interest, including plenty of discussion of what exactly MP's position was. Some different takes on this include:

Romdenh-Romluc, K. (2018). [Science in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology: from the early work to the later philosophy](#). In D. Zahavi (ed.) *Oxford Handbook of the History of Phenomenology*: Oxford: OUP, pp. 340-359.

Garner, S. (2015). Merleau-Ponty's Transcendental Theory of Perception. In Grist & Gardner (eds). *The Transcendental Turn*, OUP.

Reynolds, J. (2017). Merleau-Ponty's Gordian knot: Transcendental phenomenology, science, and naturalism. *Continental Philosophy Review*, 50(1), 81-104.

Week 6: Perceiving the World

We are going to start skipping around a bit now – we will come back to the influential treatment of speech and gesture at the end of pt.1 of *PhP* next week. Instead, we're now in a position to start see what MP's positive view of perception amounts to. We'll look at some key early parts of pt.2 of *PhP*, and a short essay that will start us thinking about the relationship between MP's phenomenology and art.

Required Reading:

PhP pt.2: The Perceived World

- Introduction to Part 2
- These sections of the 'Sensing' chapter: *a, c, d, e, j, m, n*
- These sections of the 'Space' chapter: *A(iii), A(iv); B(i)*
- Merleau-Ponty (1948/1991) Cezanne's Doubt, [on Learn]

Additional Reading:

Merleau-Ponty (1964/1991) *Metaphysics and the Novel; The Film and the New Psychology*, both in *Sense and Non-Sense*, Northwestern University Press, pp.26-40; pp.48-59. [More of MP's early writing on the relationship between art and his phenomenology]

Kelly, S. (2005). Seeing things in Merleau-ponty. In T. Carman (ed.), [The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty](#). 74-110. [Available via Library Website]

[Kelly gives an account of what he thinks M-P's fleshed out theory of perception amounts to]

Matherne, S. (2017). Merleau-Ponty on Style as the Key to Perceptual Presence and Constancy. *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 55(4), 693-727.

[Contrasting take on M-P's philosophy of perception to Kelly & other recent authors]

Allen, K. M. (2019). Merleau-Ponty and Naive Realism. *Philosophers' Imprint*, 1-25.

[Recent argument that MP's view of perception should be understood as a kind of naïve realism – the view that construes perception as essentially a relation to mind-independent qualities]

Week 7: Expression, Things, Others

This week we tie up some loose ends from Pt. 1 of *PhP*, and finish up with pt.2. We'll look at some of MP's arguments about expression, meaning and speech from the end of pt.1, and consider how these inform his understanding of the perceived world, and our relationship to others, in pt.2.

Required Reading:

PhP Part One:

- The Body as Expression, and Speech, sections *a* to *h* (inclusive)

PhP Part Two

- The thing and the natural world: A(i), B(i, ii, v), C(i, ii)
- Others and the human world: sections *a* to *g*; *k* to *o* (inclusive)

Additional Reading:

Baldwin, Thomas (2007). Speaking and spoken speech. In [Reading Merleau-Ponty: On Phenomenology of Perception](#). Routledge [Available via Library Website]

[A critical investigation of M-P's thoughts about language and gesture in this week's chapter, and in subsequent work.]

Kee, H. (2018). Phenomenology and ontology of language and expression: Merleau-Ponty on speaking and spoken speech. *Human Studies*, 41(3), 415-435.

[Great recent discussion of MP on language and expression in *PhP* – partly responding to Baldwin]

Romdenh-Romluc, Komarine. (2011) *Merleau-Ponty and Phenomenology of Perception*, ch.4 'The World and Its Relation to Consciousness' (pp. 103-129); ch.5 'Other Selves and the Human World' (pp.130-153) [Available via Library Website]

Week 8: (Almost) The end of *PhP*

We're almost ready to take stock of MP's project in *PhP*. First we need to consider the important chapter on thought and self-consciousness that begins pt.III. MP's goal in this part of the book is to show how the self-consciousness that philosophers like Descartes and Kant wanted to put at the heart of philosophy consists in the bodily, perceptual and agential relationship to the world we've been trying to uncover and understand. We'll also look at a helpful (?) section of the next chapter, where MP comes as close as he ever does to summarizing what's happened in the book.

Required Reading:

PhP: Part III:

- The *Cogito* (pp.387-431)
- Temporality: sections *l* & *m*

Additional Reading:

Romdenh-Romluc, Komarine. (2011) *Merleau-Ponty and Phenomenology of Perception*, ch.7: The Mind 2: Thought; ch.8: Temporality

Matherne, S. (2018). Merleau-Ponty on abstract thought in mathematics and natural science. *European Journal of Philosophy*, 26(2), 780-797.

[Argues that Merleau-Ponty endorses a conception of the role of thought in perception that brings together the roles of culture and expression we've considered in the previous weeks]

Week 9: Art, Being, Flesh

This week we look at two of the last things MP wrote before his untimely death – *Eye and Mind*, another essay on painting and phenomenology (and much else besides), and a key chapter from *The Visible and the Invisible*, the book on which he was working when he died. Some think that the vision of phenomenology outlined in late works like these represents a fundamental break from the project of *PhP*, while others think that they fit neatly together. Now that we've worked through most of *PhP* together, we can make up our own minds.

Required Reading:

- MP: Eye and Mind (on Learn)
- MP: The Intertwining – The Chiasm (on Learn)

Additional Reading:

Now would be a good time to go back and look at the Preface to *PhP*, which we skipped. There MP sets out his vision of Phenomenology (as he saw it at the time of *PhP*) – but it doesn't make much sense unless you've already read the book! In thinking about whether MP had fundamentally changed his mind about the nature or prospects of Phenomenology, it's useful to contrast the Preface of *PhP* with the later stuff we're looking at this week.

Muller, R. M. (2017). The Logic of the Chiasm in Merleau-Ponty's Early Philosophy. *Ergo, an Open Access Journal of Philosophy*, 4. [Argues that the ideas MP is developing in his latest works are already prefigured in his earliest works]

Week 10: History, Ethics and Politics

Merleau-Ponty was involved in politics throughout his career, as a writer, campaigner and public intellectual. The relationship between his Phenomenology and his politics is more complex than is the case with art, but is prefigured by some of the ideas we've already considered in the course. This week, we'll look at what MP has to say about freedom and history in the last chapter of *PhP*, and consider how this feeds in to his political writings – earlier and later.

Required Reading:

PhP: Part III, Freedom (pp.458-483)

M-P (1947/1964) The Yogi and the Proletarian (excerpt from *Humanism and Terror*, reprinted in *Primacy of Perception*)

M-P (1955/2007) Epilogue to *Adventures of the Dialectic* (reprinted in *The Merleau-Ponty Reader*)

Additional Reading:

Carman, Taylor (2008) *Merleau-Ponty*, chapter 5: History and Politics, Routledge [Scanned copy on Learn]

Goehr, Lydia (2004) Understanding the Engaged Philosopher: On Politics, Philosophy and Art, in T. Carman (ed.), [*The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*](#). Cambridge pp.318-351. [*Available via Library Website*]

Lefort, Claude (2004) Thinking Politics in T. Carman (ed.), [*The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*](#). Cambridge pp.352-380. [*Available via Library Website*]

Week 11: TBC!

There are several options for what we might do with this week of the course – go into more depth on an area that has been particularly interesting or puzzling; read more on MP’s engagement with art or politics; look more closely at some recent secondary literature dealing with the issues on the course; or think about how MP’s work was taken up or reacted to by his contemporaries, like de Beauvoir and Fanon. We’ll discuss this as the course progresses – but we need to decide by week 9 so I can record the lectures!

Assessment Information

One 1500 word essay explaining a key quote from one of the required readings. A list of quotes to choose from will be available on Learn by week 3. (40% of final grade)

One 2500 word essay exploring a question or theme from the course. A list of questions to choose from will be available on Learn by week 6 (55% of final grade)

A participation grade based on your contributions to class discussions, message boards, and level of engagement with the material on the course. (5% of final grade)

Full details of assessment deadlines and submission procedures are available on the course Learn page.