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. After introducing Phenomenology via some key ideas from Husserl’s work, the course will focus on 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. Most of the course will be devoted to exploring ideas and arguments of key sections of *Phenomenology of Perception* in detail. We will also consider how Merleau-Ponty applied his views to aesthetics and politics, and how other thinkers such as Heidegger and Sartre pursued Husserl’s research programme in different ways.

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]

Seminar Topics and Readings

Week 1: Introducing Phenomenology
Our job for this week is to understand enough about what Phenomenology is to allow us to understand what Merleau-Ponty is up to in his *Phenomenology of Perception*. We’ll do this by introducing some key ideas from Edmund Husserl, a formative influence on Merleau-Ponty, and thinking through some classic and contemporary examples of ‘Phenomenological’ arguments.

Required Reading: For all other weeks of the course there will be one or more reading that you must read, since we’ll use our tutorial sessions for close discussion of it. Since this is the first week of the course, we don’t have one. But a quick and useful thing to read for this week’s class is:

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

Additional Reading: I’ll put a few suggestions here for each week. Don’t try to read them all! For most of them, I’ll include a few words about what the reading consists in, so you can decide which readings you might find most interesting or helpful. Note that there are loads of additional readings for the first couple of weeks, intended as useful background to Phenomenology and Merleau-Ponty, then fewer as we get into the specifics of *Phenomenology of Perception*. Lots of the readings from the first weeks will be helpful at other points of the course too.

On Husserl

In a course on Phenomenology, you should really read some Husserl. The problem is that Husserl is no fun to read! This series of lectures is one of the more accessible introductions to his conception of Phenomenology in the middle part of his career. ([on Learn])


Similar to the above reading, an introduction to Husserl’s conception of philosophical methodology in the middle of his career. There’s a copy of this in the philosophy and psychology library (.51 Hus)


A longer work that does the same thing as the previous two readings, and is written stylistically parallel to Descartes’ Meditations on First Philosophy. The introduction and first two meditations are the most important for the purposes of this course. Copies in the library (including the PhilSoc library)


[A late essay by Merleau-Ponty on Husserl and what M-P thinks was most important about his philosophy (scanned copy on Learn)]


[A relatively short and lucid overview of the main themes of Husserl’s Phenomenology (Library Website)]


A longer and more in depth overview of the themes of Husserl's work (Library Website)


On Phenomenology


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


[One contemporary view of the relationship between Phenomenology and cognitive science – a theme we’ll be thinking about at several points on the course]

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice (1945/2012) Preface to Phenomenology of Perception (pp. lxx – lxxxv)

[Reflections from Merleau-Ponty on what Phenomenology is, written after he’d completed the rest of the Phenomenology of Perception. Tricky, but rewarding.]

Week 2: Introducing Merleau-Ponty

This week we dive in to the Phenomenology of Perception, where we'll spend most of the rest of the course. After a quick sketch of what M-P is up to, we'll start working our way through the initial
chapters of the introductory part of the book, where M-P tries to get us to identify and overcome ‘classical prejudices’ and ‘return to the phenomena’.

**Required Reading:**

*Phenomenology of Perception*: Introduction, chapters 1-3: “Sensation” (pp.3-12); “Association” and the “Projection of Memories” (pp. 13-30); “Attention” and “Judgment” (pp.29-52)

**Additional Reading:**

*Phenomenology of Perception*: Introduction, chapter 4: The Phenomenal Field (pp.52-65)

*On this week's chapters*

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]


*Background to Merleau-Ponty*

[A short overview of what M-P saw as the results of his work, and some hints about what he planned to get up to next. Scanned copy on Learn.]

[Text of a lecture M-P gave summarizing what he saw as the main lessons of *Phenomenology of Perception* to the French Philosophy Society. Scanned copy on Learn.]

[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](https://goo.gl/pFqWgS)]


**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:**

*Phenomenology of Perception*: Part One: Introduction to Part One (pp.69-74), and The Body as an Object and Mechanistic Psychology (pp.72-91)

**Additional Reading:**

[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]

A bit of a lull in terms of additional reading this week! Many of the readings from the previous week and from next week are also relevant for understanding this week’s material. If you find yourself at a loose end, re-read or read ahead in *PoP*!

**Week 4: Bodily Perception and Cognitive Science**

We get to the heart of part 1 of *PoP* this week, with the introduction of some key 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. We’ll think some more about the relationship between phenomenology and cognitive science, and consider how this week’s material stacks up against cognitive science since M-P was writing.

**Required Reading:**

*Phenomenology of Perception*: Part One: The Spatiality of One’s Own Body and Motricity (pp.100-148);

**Additional Reading:**

*Phenomenology of Perception*: Part One: The Experience of the Body and Classical Psychology (pp.92-99) [We’ve skipped this chapter as a required reading in the interests of time, but it’s still a good one – drawing out why the ‘classical’ psychology M-P was criticizing in the Introduction can’t provide an adequate conception of the way our bodies figure in experience.]

*Phenomenology of Perception*: Part One: The Synthesis of One’s Own Body (pp.149-155)


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

[A classic paper applying Merleau-Pontian ideas to issues of gendered experience of body and space. Read it!]

[An exploration of the cognitive science of motor intentionality at the turn of the century]

[Some overlap with the previous reading, but more emphasis on linking M-P’s arguments and related empirical work to issues about the structure and content of perception]

**Week 5: Speech and Gesture**

We finish off part 1 of PoP by looking at M-P’s influential treatment of speech and gesture, building on the previous chapters. We’ll also consider the significance of the previous chapter, ‘The Body as a Sexed Being’ for M-P’s thought.

**Required Reading:**

*Phenomenology of Perception: Part One: The Body as Expression, and Speech* (pp.179-205)

**Additional Reading:**

*Phenomenology of Perception: Part One: The Body as a Sexed Being* (pp.156-178)

[M-P uses the simultaneously bodily and perceptual character of sexual experiences as a case study for the way the body figures in all perception, and should inform our understanding of the qualities we perceive.]


[An exploration of the historical antecedents of the ‘expressive’ conception of language M-P argues for in this week’s reading, and its relevance for our self-understanding. Charles Taylor is the best.]

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**Flexible Learning Week**

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**Week 6: Sensing**

We’re now into part two of PoP, ‘The Perceived World’, where the arguments of the previous parts of the book inform M-P’s treatments of various topics: what is perception? What is space? What are things? This week we’ll focus on the ‘Sensing’ chapter, a key source for M-P’s views on perception.

**Required Reading:**

*Phenomenology of Perception: Part 2: Introduction* (pp.209-213); Sensing (pp.214-252)

**Additional Reading:**

*Phenomenology of Perception: Part 2: Space* (pp.253-311); The Thing and the Natural World (pp.311-360)
[Both great and important chapters – but I couldn’t quite squeeze them in as required readings. Next week's required reading is shorter, so you might use the extra time to have a look at one or both of these.]


[A great paper arguing against (what probably counts as) the orthodox interpretation of M-P as engaged in empirically-motivated philosophy of perception. Relevant to issues about the relationship between Phenomenology and cognitive science]

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

[Some overlap with the previous reading – but (again) the focus here is more on debates in the philosophy of perception, this time about the objects of perceptual experience, than on M-P exegesis.]

**Week 7: Art**

This week we take a break from working through *PoP* to look at the way MP thought his views applied to various aesthetic domains – and in which those domains informed his views. We've already seen numerous literary and artistic examples in *PoP*, but this week we'll look at a couple of M-P’s most celebrated essays on art.

**Required Reading:**


**Additional Reading:**


Week 8: Other Minds
Though most of PoP so far has been concerned with us and our bodies, M-P has a lot of original and important things to say about other minds and our access to them. Our focus this week will be on this aspect of his thought, and on the way in which these ideas have filtered through to contemporary debates about interpersonal perception.

Required Reading:
*Phenomenology of Perception: Part 2: Others and the Human World* (pp.361-383)

Additional Reading:
It would be good to go back and have a look at the previous chapters of Part 2 if you haven't done so already.

Romdenh-Romluc, Komarine. (2011) *Merleau-Ponty and Phenomenology of Perception*, ch.5 ‘Other Selves and the Human World’ (pp.130-153) [Available via Library Website]


[Transcript of a late lecture where M-P argues (with a characteristic mix of phenomenology and psychology) that the ability to distinguish between one’s own experiences and another’s is something a child acquires only through development.]

[A critical examination of M-P’s thought on self and other in PoP and the above reading]

[Uses findings from cognitive and developmental psychology since M-P's time to support some of his claims and question others]

[Argues that Phenomenological insights and observations have no evidential or explanatory value in debates about social cognition.]

[A recent, Phenomenologically-inspired, argument for the direct perception of other people’s mental states. Mainly cites Husserl, but could just as well be talking about M-P!]

Week 9: Thinking
In our final week on the PoP we’ll dip a toe into part III, which deals with weighty themes like freedom, temporality, and – our focus for this week – the *Cogito*. We’ll be in a better position to understand the subject matter of this chapter by the time we reach this part of the course (hopefully), but M-P’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.
Required Reading:
*Phenomenology of Perception: Part III, The Cogito* (pp.387-431)

Additional Reading:
*Phenomenology of Perception: Part III, Temporality* (pp.432-457); *Freedom* (pp.459-483)
[Again, important chapters that can't be squeezed on as required readings. But do give them a look if you have time!]

[Not specifically focused on this week’s reading, but a great big-picture account of how Taylor sees M-P’s thought fitting in with the currents that have come together to form contemporary philosophy]


**Week 10: 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 much more complex than is the case with art – nonetheless, this week we’ll consider the evolution of M-P’s political views, and draw some connections with the different aspects of his work we’ve considered on this course.

Required Reading:
Merleau-Ponty (1946/1991) Marxism and Philosophy, in *Sense and Non-Sense* [Scanned copy on Learn]

*Phenomenology of Perception: Part III, Freedom* (pp.458-483)

Additional Reading:

Merleau-Ponty has many hundreds of pages of political writings. The most famous collection is his *Humanism and Terror* (1947), currently available online. A later collection, more critical of Marxism, is his *Adventures of the Dialectic* (1955). A key essay from each of these is reprinted in the Northwestern University Press edition of *Primacy of Perception*.


**Week 11: Revision**

We’ll use this week of the course to go over themes from the past weeks that we think need more discussion, and to talk about plans for the final essays.