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 use this translation rather than the earlier one by Colin Smith – pdfs available via the library website, paper copies available from (e.g.) Blackwell’s South Bridge]

Course Structure

Weekly Preparation:
Before coming to the seminar each week, please make sure you’ve done these three things:
- Read the ‘required reading’ for that week.
- Watched/listened to the lectures for that week
- Thought about what you’d like to discuss in the seminar

Reading: Each week I’ve set around 30 pages of reading. Please allow yourself more time than you’d usually require to read 30 pages of philosophy! Merleau-Ponty, like many other 20th Century continental European philosophers, doesn’t always tell you how he wants you to understand the unfamiliar terms he’s using, or spell out the argument he’s making in nice clear stages – he mostly leaves you to figure that stuff out for yourself. Please budget your time accordingly!

As optional assistance, I’ll provide some notes and questions alongside each week’s readings. These will give quick summaries of how I think M-P’s arguments are unfolding, how we might understand some of his terminology, and some questions that I think are helpful to ponder for the purposes of working out what’s going on. You don’t have to look at these – only if you find them useful.

Lecture recordings: Each week there will be 40-60 minutes of pre-recorded material. This will try to summarise some of the important ideas from that week’s readings, and some of the philosophical issues they raise. It’s up to you whether to watch/listen to the recordings before or after doing the reading.
**Seminar preparation:** When reading, make a note of anything you found particularly interesting, confusing, or otherwise in need of discussion, and bring it along to the weekly seminar.

**Seminars:** The majority of the time you spend on this course should be taken up by working through the readings, watching/listening to the recordings, and thinking for yourself about the topics that interest you most. We’ll use the time we have together each week (a 2-hour-ish seminar, with a break in the middle) to try to make sense of the reading together, and think through the philosophical issues it raises. Please make sure you have access to a copy of the reading for the seminar each week (and any notes you’ve made), as we will often be discussing specific passages together.

In some weeks I might give a very short presentation at some point in the seminar – but for the most part, how we use these meetings is up to you. So please come along with an idea of what you’d like to discuss that week.

**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 seminars prepared to discuss it. I’ll post suggestions for additional readings on Learn 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 otherwise easily findable online. 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)

**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 (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:**

- [Readings and topics for Week 1 and Week 2](#)
**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)

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

We get to the heart of part 1 of *PhP* 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)

**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)

**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]

**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 MPs 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)

**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

**Week 9: Art, Being, Flesh**
This week we look at two of the last things MP wrote – *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)

**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*)


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 – decision by week 9!

Assessment Information

One 1500 word essay **due 3rd March by 12 noon** 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 **due Thursday 21st April by 12 noon** 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.