

PH 8122: Topics in Philosophy: Phenomenology and the Problem of Passivity

Fall 2013

Thursdays, 6-9 p.m., 440 JORG

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Course Description:

Phenomenology aims to go “back to the things themselves” and in this way to distinguish itself from modern thought in its rationalist and empiricist alternatives. Empiricism and rationalism, according to phenomenologists, have lost touch with the things themselves and our living experience of them. Carried away by certain prejudices or presuppositions, these traditions of thought, each in their own way, have interposed a way that things are *for us* (i.e. their appearance to consciousness) *between* us and the things themselves. Phenomenology, in contrast, seeks to acknowledge the ways in which realities—that is, beings that transcend us, beings that are other to us—are given *within* conscious experience. By doing so, phenomenology also opens itself up to *learning from* such otherness, to having its own prejudices or presuppositions called into question by this otherness as it reveals itself within our lived, unreflective experience. The phenomenological attitude is thus characterized by openness and wonder, by the pursuit of learning and self-overcoming through answering to what is other. The phenomenologist is, in this sense, a “perpetual beginner.”

Answering to otherness is not, however, quite as simple as it sounds. Rationalism has argued that how an object appears for consciousness is a function of the nature of consciousness, which is to say that consciousness *constitutes* its object. And phenomenologists recognize that there is significant truth to this. Things can appear to us as what they are only by virtue of consciousness or subjectivity being what it is. Thus, things will always be in some way a reflection of our capacities for taking them up and making sense of them. The trick, for phenomenology, is to understand in what sense these things can be BOTH constituted by subjectivity AND given to us as the things that they are in themselves. Or, in other words, the trick is to understand what subjectivity or consciousness must be such that it is not simply what gives meaning to realities, but can also be what *learns* new meaning from these realities, what can be transformed by otherness. Indeed, once we start thinking about this *passivity* of subjectivity, we are drawn to rethink the subject, ego, or self itself. The self, we are led to see, is not a pre-existing transcendental activity, an autonomous source of meaning; it is rather an activity that is *realized* only through its passive implication in otherness, in meaning or sense that exceeds it. Thinking this passivity is the guiding problem that will take us through a reading of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty.

Sartre and Merleau-Ponty are arguably engaged in very similar projects. Whether and how they differ is not at all easy to say, once one gets past stylistic differences and differences in focus. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty himself both drew heavily on Sartre’s ideas, and seemed at pains to distinguish his own thought from Sartre’s. One of the foremost ways in which Merleau-Ponty sought to differentiate his own thought from Sartre’s was, however, in terms of passivity. At work in his focus on embodiment, habit, intersubjectivity, freedom, expression and child development (or the genesis of a self) we find a great emphasis on such passivity. We will therefore read each author with a keen eye to the insights that each lends us into consciousness, being, and the problem of passivity; and we will seek to articulate any relevant differences that exist between the two, and to assess for ourselves how consciousness, being, and their relation must be thought.

Texts:

The following texts are available at the Ryerson University Bookstore (105 Bond St.). Please be certain to purchase the translations that I have listed here.

REQUIRED

- Sartre. *Being and Nothingness*. Translated by Hazel Barnes. New York: Washington Square Press, 1953.
- Merleau-Ponty. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Translated by Donald Landes. New York: Routledge, 2012.

RECOMMENDED:

- For those new to phenomenology:
 - Sokolowski. *Introduction to Phenomenology*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

- For those wanting to improve their writing:
 - Strunk and White, *Elements of Style*, Allyn & Bacon
 - Baker, Sheridan, *The Practical Stylist*, Longman
- For those who find writing difficult:
 - Elbow, Peter, *Writing without Teachers*, Oxford University Press

Assignments and Grade Breakdown:

Details about the assignments and grading criteria will be posted on the course site on Blackboard and/or discussed in class.

- 15% **Participation**
This participation grade will be divided up into two parts.
 - 8% For constructive contributions to class discussions—contributions, that is, that help to further learning.
 - 7% For posting seven “Provocations to Thought,” each worth 1%, each posted on days you are NOT handing in a reflection paper. See below for details.
- 48% **Four Short Explicative Papers**
4 short papers, approximately one page single-spaced. Worth 12% each. See below for details. Sign up in advance for the weeks in which you will submit these papers.
- 37% **One Conference Length Paper with Abstract**
A 12-page paper, double-spaced, accompanied by an abstract (250-500 words). Due December 22. See below for details (including the option to present the paper at a workshop).

Phenomenology Workshop, December 14

You will have the option of presenting your conference length paper at a workshop, with your colleagues and a panel of scholars in attendance. If you take this option, you will be assigned one of the scholars as a mentor. Your mentor will talk with you about how you might improve your paper, about presenting at conferences, and about phenomenology in general. The panel of scholars may also be available for consultation about publishing, applying to PhD programs, other possible career paths, and the relevance of philosophy to life, more generally.

Tentative Reading Schedule:

| Date | Assigned Readings | Focus |
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| SARTRE | | |
| Sept. 5 | <i>Being and Nothingness:</i> • “Introduction: The Pursuit of Being,” pp.3-30 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Section III, “The Pre-Reflective Cogito and the Being of the Percipere” • Section V “The Ontological Proof” |
| Sept. 12 | <i>Being and Nothingness:</i> • “The Origin of Negation,” pp.33-44, 56-85 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the examples of négatités: destruction, fragility and Pierre’s absence. In “Negations,” pp.39-44 • the being of humans is freedom, pp.59-73 |
| Sept. 19 | <i>Being and Nothingness:</i> • “Bad Faith,” pp.86-116 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • example of the woman on a date, pp.96-98 • example of homosexual and sincerity, pp.107-112 • the faith of bad faith, pp.112-116 |
| Sept. 26 | <i>Being and Nothingness:</i> • “The Look,” pp.340-354, 358-382, 393-394 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the other as object, pp.340-345 • example of shame, and the other as subject, pp.347-354 |
| Merleau-Ponty | | |
| Oct. 3 | <i>Phenomenology of Perception.</i> • Introduction, Ch.1: “Sensation” | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Sensation as quality,” pp.4-7 • all discussion of the Müller-Lyer illusion |

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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction, Ch. 2: "Association' and the 'Projection of Memories'" | |
| Oct. 10 | <p><i>Phenomenology of Perception.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction, Ch.3: "Attention' and 'Judgment'" <p>For experienced students of phenomenology, read also:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction, Ch.4: "The Phenomenal Field" | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How should we understand attention? Judgment? • Merleau-Ponty's key concept of motivation |
| Oct. 17 | Reading Week | |
| Oct. 24 | <p><i>Phenomenology of Perception.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction to Part One • Part One, Ch. I: "The Body as an Object and Mechanistic Physiology" • From Part One, Ch.V: "In what sense does sexuality <i>express</i> existence? By accomplishing it" pp.163-169. • Part One, Ch.II: "The Experience of the Body and Classical Psychology" | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological explanation of the phantom limb • The discussions of repression in Ch.I and Ch.V |
| Oct. 31 | <p><i>Phenomenology of Perception.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Part One, Ch.III: "The Spatiality of One's Own Body and Motricity" • From Part One, Ch.IV: "Perceptual habit as the acquisition of a world," pp.153-155. <p>* NOTE: much reading for this week</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "The existential ground of the 'symbolic function' and the structure of illness," pp.126-132 • "The intentional arc"; "The intentionality of the body" and "Habit as the motor acquisition of a new signification," pp. 137-148. • "Perceptual habit as the acquisition of a world," pp.153-155. |
| Nov. 7 | <p><i>Phenomenology of Perception.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Part One, Ch.VI: "The Body as Expression, and Speech" • Part Two, Ch.IV: "Others and the Human World" <p>* NOTE: much reading for this week, in preparation for our guest speaker, and two very important chapters.</p> | |
| Nov. | Philosophy Colloquium Special Guest: Lisa Guenther, Vanderbilt University | |

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| 12 | Tuesday, 3-5 p.m. | |
| Nov. 14 | <i>Phenomenology of Perception.</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Part Two, Ch.IV: "Others and the Human World" (continued) Part Two, Ch.I: "Sensing" | |
| Nov. 21 | <i>Phenomenology of Perception.</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Part Three, Ch.I: "The Cogito" | |
| Nov. 28 | <i>Phenomenology of Perception.</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Part Three, Ch. III: "Freedom" | |
| Dec. 1 | Conference Length Paper Due, if you are presenting at the Workshop | |
| Dec. 14 | Phenomenology Workshop Presentation of your Papers; Work with Mentor | |
| Dec. 22 | Final Version of Conference Length Paper Due | |

Written Assignments:

• **Provocations to Thought**

Whenever you are NOT handing in a short paper, you are required to submit a "Provocation to Thought" to a shared document that I will set up, likely through Blackboard. You must submit it before noon on Thursdays. Each submission is worth 1%. You will need to submit these on 7 different weeks (the other 4 weeks will be for your short papers). Each submission should be 250 words or less.

A "Provocation to Thought" is a sentence or two that will help deepen our understanding of the reading for the day. It can take many forms, including:

- Pursuing a clarification of key concepts at work in the text
- Proposing possible implications of a key idea in the text
- Highlighting possible assumptions of the text
- Querying tensions between claims made in the text or between the text's ideas and data of experience.
- Suggesting interesting connections between an idea in this reading and ideas in previous readings for the course
- Articulating something that is generally interesting, and outlining why.

The "Provocation" that you post should be written in full sentences, and aim at clarity and responsible communication.

• **Four Short Explicative Papers**

4 short papers, approximately one page single-spaced. Worth 12% each. These papers are due at noon on the Thursday of the reading that you are explicating. Email your papers to me.

In each paper, you should choose a key idea or claim made in the day's reading, and explicate it. That is to say, you should teach your reader (and probably, through teaching your reader, teach yourself) what the key point is, and the line of reasoning that the text gives to make that point. Include page references, but keep quotations to

an absolute minimum (none at all is often good). This is your opportunity to give your reader insight into the author's ideas, but using your own voice.

If you are having difficulty settling on a key idea or claim to write about, consult with me.

- **One Conference Length Paper with Abstract**

A 12-page paper, double-spaced, accompanied by an abstract (250-500 words). Due December 22.

Though this paper is finally due on December 22, I invite you to do the following, in order to develop an excellent piece of writing that can be submitted to conferences or, if you are pursuing doctoral studies, as part of your PhD application:

- Submit a complete version of your paper to me by Dec. 1. I will return your paper to you by Dec.7. You may not present a paper at the Phenomenology Workshop, or receive mentoring from a scholar of phenomenology unless you have submitted your paper to me by Dec. 1.
- Revise your paper in light of my feedback.
- Present your paper at the Phenomenology Workshop, Dec.14-15 (tentative dates).
- Work with a scholar of phenomenology to improve your paper. This scholar will also be able to mentor you with respect to conference presentations, the philosophical profession, and questions concerning the significance of philosophy.

You are expected to develop your own topic for this paper. You are encouraged, however, to consult with me about it. I have also included supplementary readings that illustrate, in different ways, how one might write an excellent paper in phenomenology.

I will give you more details about how to write an abstract for a paper.

Policies:

Assignment Deadline Extensions:

Extensions for deadlines can usually be granted if you are facing difficult circumstances of some sort. It is crucial, however, that you contact me (by phone, on email or in person) and ask for such an extension *before the due-date arrives*. In cases where it is impossible to contact me before the deadline, you should have documentation to support your request for an extension.

Extensions will not be given, except under the gravest of circumstances, for the Short Explication Papers, since these are designed to set up class discussions.

Late Policy:

Assignments handed in late will be docked 3% for each day late.

Changes to the Syllabus:

I reserve the right to make changes to the syllabus—both to the time schedule and to the content—in case these are required. All changes made will be for the good of the class, and will be noted in writing (on paper or on the web site for the course).