

Phil 3200-01: Contemporary European Philosophy

Instructor: John Russon, Mackinnon 338

Office Hours: Thursday, 2:30-3:30 or by appointment

Course Meets: Tuesday and Thursday, 10:00-11:20 in MACK 225

European culture of the 19th and 20th Centuries witnessed an explosion of revolutionary intellectual and cultural movements, including Marxism, psychoanalysis, existentialism, the birth of sociology, impressionist, expressionist and cubist art, phenomenology, structuralism, surrealism and much more. By the mid-20th Century, European philosophers developed powerful ways of thinking about human experience that drew synthetically upon the insights of all these movements. We will study three of the most powerful philosophers from this time whose work simultaneously pulled together the results of the almost two centuries of European philosophical work since the time of Immanuel Kant's revolutionary writings in the 1780s and established the context within which European philosophy has continued to grow up to the present. In the first half of the course, we will study in detail Maurice Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception (1945). Through this book, we will study the forms of human experience, emphasizing especially the creative and the bodily character of meaning in our experience. With Merleau-Ponty we will study the nature of perception, embodiment, spatial experience, sexuality and language. Our careful study of this work will give us the resources necessary to work effectively with the works of other great French philosophers of the 20th Century, the writing duo of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, and Jacques Derrida. From Deleuze and Guattari, we will study Anti-Oedipus (1972), a book which brings together the deepest insights of psychoanalysis and Marxism in a compelling study of the basic structures of experience. Picking up where we left off with Merleau-Ponty, we will look more deeply into the primitive structures of psychological life ultimately drawing from this the resources for a rich understanding of politics. From Derrida, we will read Memoirs of the Blind (1990), which will take us through a study of the nature of expression into the deepest structures of meaning in our lives and to the very limits of meaning. These texts are all quite demanding, and so studying them is difficult, but it is also very rewarding, for they are also some of the very richest philosophical texts our contemporary culture has produced.

Course Objectives:

1. You are taking a high-level philosophy class, and doing well at that requires you to be significantly self-reflective about what you are doing in such a class. In other words, in addition to thinking about whatever content the course-texts have to communicate, you need also to be thinking about what is involved in study, what it takes to be a student, and what are the nature and the possibilities of a university course. The less effort you devote to reflecting independently on these themes, the less likely it is that anything very significant will be accomplished in your studies. Before reflecting on what I write here about course objectives, devote some effort to thinking on your own both about what your own personal objectives are in undertaking this study and about what the course demands of you.

2. This course will introduce you to some of the most powerful and the most precise thinking our human culture has ever produced. One of the main objectives of this course is to generate a substantial elevation in your ability to think rigorously and to think insightfully about the nature of our human reality. You should become more alert and more discriminating in your appreciation and understanding of perception, of sexuality, of language, of memory, of your body, of art, of self-reflection, of desire, of science, of mental health, of politics, of space, of time, and more. The extent to which this course produces this desired effect will vary pretty directly with how well-developed your academic skills are (i.e., your skills of reading, writing, time-management, critical thinking, and so on), and how much effort you put into the study.

3. The work will place significant demands on your ability to read and write accurately. Engaging with this work seriously should also significantly enhance your abilities in these areas. Typically, students engaging in this study find that, by being required to write precisely about works that are themselves very precise, the whole range of their communicative skills undergoes a significant development. Our course will also lead us into explicit study of communication, and ideally you will find that your practical efforts to improve your reading and writing and our theoretical studies of communication will be mutually enhancing. Through this process, you should develop a living appreciation of the way in which the ability to think and the ability to communicate well are not easily separated.

4. In reading these texts, you are encountering some of the most influential works our culture has produced in the last century. One goal of the course is to introduce you to these works in order to make you better aware of what is happening in our contemporary world: these works define where a great deal of contemporary intellectual culture is focused, and so reading these works gives you the opportunity to participate in the living pulse of contemporary thought.

5. As well as being texts representative of contemporary culture, these works are also great works of philosophy and therefore of timeless significance. One of the main objectives of this course is to introduce you to books that will, ideally, become your friends for life. This course will only be a small introduction to the world of insight that these books offer—insight that can reward and sustain your ongoing reflection for a lifetime. You should approach them as such.

Texts:

You must use the assigned translations, all available in the University Bookstore.

Required:

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, Phenomenology of Perception, Landes (trans.), (Routledge).

Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari, Anti-Oedipus, (Minnesota).

Derrida, Jacques, Memoirs of the Blind, (Chicago).

Recommended:

Crews, Frederick, The Random House Handbook, (Random House).

Schedule:

You are required to complete the scheduled readings in advance of the class meeting. You must come to class have read and digested the assigned texts, and you must be prepared to discuss them in class. Bring the assigned text with you to class.

Date: Reading:

I. Merleau-Ponty: Phenomenology.

Tues Jan 8, 10 Phenomenological Description

Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception,

Introduction: Chs 1-2, pp 3-27

15, 17 Perception

Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception,

Introduction: Chs 3-4, pp28-65

22, 24 Embodiment

Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception

Pt 1: Introduction, Chs 1-2, pp 69-99

--Thursday January 24: In-class test.

29, 31 Space

Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception,

Pt 1: Chs [3]-4 pp100-114, 139-148, 149-155

Feb 5, 7 Sexuality

Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception

Pt 1: Ch 5, pp 156-178

de Beauvoir, excerpt from The Second Sex, (on courselink)

12, 14 Language

Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception

Pt 1: Ch 6, pp 179-205

--Thursday February 14: In-class test.

19, 21 —Reading Week—no classes

II. Deleuze and Guattari: Schizoanalysis.

26, 28 Desire

Deleuze and Guattari, Anti-Oedipus, Ch 1 §§1-3, pp 1-22.

Mar 5, 7 Repression

Deleuze and Guattari, Anti-Oedipus, Ch 2 §§3-5, [6], pp 68-105, 109-11.

12, 13 Politics

Deleuze and Guattari, Anti-Oedipus, Ch 2 §7, pp 113-22; Ch 1 §[4], p. 33;
Ch 3 §§1, [5], 6, 9, pp 139-45, 190-2, 192-200, 222-40.

--Thursday March 13: In-class test.

III. Derrida: Deconstruction.

19, 21 Writing

Derrida, "Signature, Event, Context" [on courselink], esp. pp 315-6

Derrida, Memoirs of the Blind, pp 44-57

26, 28 Blindness, Self-Knowledge, Thanksgiving

Derrida, Memoirs of the Blind, pp 5-16, 60-68, 24-30

Apr 2, 4 Conversion

Derrida, Memoirs of the Blind, pp 92-129

--Thursday April 4: In-class test.

Assignments:

In order to succeed in this class, you will need to do all the readings on time, and you will need to attend all the classes. If you do not do this, it is unlikely that you will be able to handle the material we are studying.

There will be 4 in-class tests. Each test will have 2 essay questions, based on the readings. In each case, you will be given the questions in advance.

The tests will take place on January 24, February 14, March 13 and April 4. All questions will be weighted equally. Each test is worth 25% of your final grade.

College of Arts Policy Statements

E-mail communication

As per university regulations, all students are required to check their <uoguelph.ca> email account regularly: email is the official route of communication between the university and its students.

When you cannot meet a course requirement

When you find yourself unable to meet an in-course requirement because of illness or compassionate reasons, please advise the course instructor (or designated person, such as a teaching assistant) in writing, with your name, id#, and email contact. [See the Undergraduate Calendar](#) for information on regulations and procedures for [Academic Consideration](#).

Drop date

The last date to drop one-semester Winter 2013 [courses](#), without academic penalty, is *Friday, March 8, 2013*. For regulations and procedures for Dropping Courses, [see the Undergraduate Calendar](#).

Copies of out-of-class assignments

Keep paper and/or other reliable back-up copies of all out-of-class assignments: you may be asked to resubmit work at any time.

Student Rights and Responsibilities

Each student at the University of Guelph has rights which carry commensurate responsibilities which, broadly, being a civil and respectful member of the University community. The Rights and Responsibilities are [detailed in the Undergraduate Calendar](#).

Academic misconduct

The University of Guelph is committed to upholding the highest standards of academic integrity and enjoins all members of the University community—faculty, staff, and students—to be aware of what constitutes academic misconduct and to do as much as possible to prevent academic offences from occurring. The Academic Misconduct Policy is [detailed in the Undergraduate Calendar](#).

Recording of materials

Presentations which are made in relation to course work—including lectures—cannot be recorded in any electronic media without the permission of the presenter, whether the instructor, a classmate or guest lecturer.

Resources

The [Undergraduate Calendar](#) is the source of information about the University of Guelph's procedures, policies and regulations which apply to undergraduate programs. If you find yourself in difficulty, contact the undergraduate advisor in your [program](#), or [the BA Counseling Office](#).