

Phil 469/ 569: Recent French Phenomenology

This course aims to provide advanced philosophy students with a grounding in the recent history of a major movement in contemporary philosophy. Phenomenology has, since its inception in the work of Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), attempted to do justice to the first-person experience. Experience was to be described by the phenomenologist exactly as “intended” in the act of consciousness, “bracketing” the question of the metaphysical existence of the phenomenal object. This meticulous attention to first-person experience was designed to foreground, not the subject as it perceives itself in reflection (as in the constructivism and idealism of the Neo-Kantians), but rather the “thing itself,” as it originally “gives” itself in immediate consciousness. While Husserl hoped to use phenomenology as a rigorous method to set philosophy at last upon the sure path of a science, the most influential of his successors saw in phenomenology a means of acknowledging and recovering aspects of the plenitude of being that are overlooked, ignored, or systematically denied in the abstractive and reductionist methods of the modern sciences. In particular, inspired by Husserl’s great student Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), the first generation of French phenomenologists, including such luminaries as Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980), Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995), and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961), sought to recover through phenomenology the concrete, embodied, existential, and historical situation of the human being. In its “first wave,” French phenomenology was characterized by an intense ethical and political concern, but one with a strongly atheistic tenor. That all began to change with the succeeding second and third generations of French phenomenologists. The leading figures in the later French phenomenological tradition – Jean-Luc Marion (b. 1946), Michel Henry (1922-2002), Jean-Louis Chrétien (1952-2019), and Jean-Yves Lacoste (b. 1953) – have pursued phenomenology in a manner that unabashedly shows an interest in issues, concepts, and questions from the Western theological (especially Christian) tradition. As with their predecessors, these philosophers start from the concrete, lived experience of the existing human being. However, unlike them, the younger phenomenologists in France are prepared to acknowledge and recover the religious dimension of this experience, as it gives itself “originally” in consciousness. Religion thus reemerges within a properly phenomenological practice, one that sets aside questions of personal faith or metaphysical speculation in favor of the meticulous description of concrete, lived religious experience. Specific phenomena with a religious coloring or flavor, such as revelation, the gift, charity, embodied truth, being-as-life, redemptive suffering, radical rebirth, the call of being and its response, transcendent hope, liturgy and the parousia (or “coming”) come to the fore in their work. The result is arguably the richest and most productive strain of phenomenological research in the last several decades, which has come to be known as the “theological turn” in phenomenology. In this course, we will examine representative writings from these recent French phenomenologists within a seminar setting. While there are no specific prerequisites, students are encouraged to have a basic familiarity with twentieth-century continental philosophy before starting the class. Grades will be based upon attendance and participation, preparatory questions on the reading, a short analytical-critical essay, a proposal and brief presentation of planned research, and a longer independent research project.