Philosophy Department

Kalamazoo College
1200 Academy St. Kalamazoo, MI 49006

PHI 540

CONTEMPORARY CONTINENTAL PHILOSOPHY (PHI 555):

French Post-Structuralism

Spring 1998

11:50 - 1:05 MWF

Professor Ted Toadvine
203 Humphrey House

Course Description

With the decline of existentialism in the Fifties and the death of Merleau-Ponty in 1961, the French philosophical scene was ripe for the rise of a new philosophical movement. The resulting explosion of activity, given such monikers as "postmodernism," "poststructuralism," and "neostructuralism," will be the topic of this course. Our overview will explore the last forty years of French thought as an explicit reaction against existentialism and phenomenology, taking Vincent Descombes' Modern French Philosophy as our guide. After briefly surveying the preceding influence of Kojève, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty, we will examine, in sequence, classical structuralism as found in Lévi-Strauss and Lacan; the critique of history developed by Foucault and Althusser; the post-modernism of Lyotard; and Derrida and Deleuze as representatives of the "philosophy of difference." Throughout, we will be seeking to understand the commonality of these disparate thinkers in the enterprise of overcoming metaphysics, in reaction against or simply apart from existentialism and phenomenology, by a radicalized appropriation of Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Freud. What, we will ask, are the implications of this "overcoming" for an understanding of history, subjectivity, meaning, and truth? In closing, we will look at two French thinkers whose work is currently making a great impact on Continental thought in the United States but who stand apart from the poststructuralist tendency: Emmanuel Levinas, who has argued that ethics should replace metaphysics as first philosophy, and Luce Irigaray, for whom sexual difference is the most primordial philosophical category.

Requirements

50% five 500-word response papers (10% each)
40% two 1500-word papers, midterm and final (20% each)
10% participation

Five typewritten response papers of at least 500 words will be based on the readings and class discussions, and will be in response to questions distributed in class. The midterm will be a 1500-word typewritten response to questions distributed in advance and will draw on material covered through that point in the course. The final term paper will be a 1500-word typewritten essay examining one of the figures or themes from the course in greater detail. Topics for the final paper must be approved in advance by the instructor. Final papers will be due on the date set for the final exam. Attendance and participation in class discussions is expected. Missing three or more classes will result in a full grade reduction.

Required Texts


Tentative Reading Schedule

WEEK 1: Course Mechanics

Sartre, "The Origin of Negation," Being and Nothingness (packet).
Sartre, "The Look," Being and Nothingness (packet).

Merleau-Ponty, "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence," Signs (packet).


Foucault, "Truth and Power," 51-76.

WEEK 6: Descombes, "Difference," 136-167
Derrida, "Implications," 1-14.

WEEK 7: Boundas, Editor's Introduction to The Deleuze Reader, 1-23

Lyotard, "On a Figure of Discourse," Toward the Post-Modern (packet).


WEEK 10: Whitford, Editor's Introduction to The Irigaray Reader, 1-15.
Irigaray, "Equal or Different," 30-33.
Irigaray, "Questions," 133-139.