

McGill University
Department of Philosophy
Topics in Contemporary European Philosophy:
Phenomenology of Presence: Husserl, Heidegger, Derrida
PHIL 475 (Fall 2011)

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Course description

Jacques Derrida's corpus can arguably be considered as the most important philosophical contribution coming from Europe (at least from France) of the last fifty years. His work – best known under the heading 'deconstruction' – has had an extraordinary wide-ranging influence not only in philosophy, but also in literary criticism and theory, gender studies and queer theory, and in arts (architecture in particular), to name just a few.

In this course – which is basically designed as an introduction to Derrida's thinking – we will restrict ourselves to the specifically philosophical dimension of his work and read *Voice and Phenomenon*, which is certainly one of his greatest essays. Published in 1967, *Voice and Phenomenon* exhibits remarkably Derrida's philosophical strategy as it interprets some crucial segments of Husserl's phenomenology. In order to appreciate not only the merits but also the limits of Derrida's interpretation, it will be necessary to read Husserl, and some Heidegger as well, since 'deconstruction' is essentially a creative appropriation of Heidegger's *Destruktion*.

Of the many themes that are central to Derrida's work, the notion of 'presence' occupies a particular place. From the 1960's, where he devoted the bulk of his writings (including *Voice of Phenomenon*) to a deconstruction of the 'metaphysics of presence', to the texts of the late 1990's and early 2000's, in which he attempted to elaborate a notion of the event that resists absolutely to what has traditionally been called the 'present', the value of 'presence' has been a constant concern for Derrida.

The course is divided into 3 modules. In module 1, we'll familiarize ourselves with 'deconstruction' by reading a selection of short texts (or text excerpts) of Heidegger and Derrida. Module 2 will be the longest (and hardest): it is dedicated to a close reading of Derrida's *Voice and Phenomenon* against the background of Husserl's 1st *Logical Investigation*. In the last weeks of the term, in Module 3, we'll provide a rapid overview of Derrida's later writings centered on his novel 'concept' of the event.

Required Readings

- Jacques Derrida, *Voice and Phenomenon*, trans. by Len Lawlor. Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press 2011.
 - * The book is (or will soon be) available at the bookstore *The Word* (on Milton). I put two copies on reserve at the library as well.
 - * If, for whatever reason, you want to buy the book elsewhere, make sure not to confuse Len Lawlor's (excellent) new translation with the old one (oddly titled *Speech and Phenomena*).
 - * Of course, all are encouraged to read the text in French: *La voix et le phénomène*. Paris: PUF 1967.
- There is a course pack for this course that is available at the McGill University Bookstore.
- Supplementary readings will be added regularly during the term; photocopies of these texts (mostly *very short* text excerpts) are going to be provided by the instructor in class at the relevant time.

Recommended Readings

I put a book on reserve at the library that some of you might find useful:

- Len Lawlor, *Derrida and Husserl. The Basic Problem of Phenomenology*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2002. (Ch.7 consists of a close study of Derrida's *Voice and Phenomenon*).

Depending on your research interests, I'll recommend other books / essays on an individual basis. Ask a question in class or come during my office hours.

Method of Evaluation

20% One take-home midterm exam. There will be two essay questions on the midterm based on the material seen in class so far, and you will be asked to answer to one question in a 500-word essay. The take-home will be distributed in class after the midterm period (probably at the end of October or at the beginning of November, depending on how fast we progress). The exact date is TBA.

30% One take-home final exam. There will be three essay questions on the final exam covering all the material discussed in class since September and you will be asked to answer to two of them in two 500-word essays (one essay for each question). Exams are going to be distributed on the last day of class (Dec. 1st) and must be handed-in at the department exactly a week later, on Dec. 8th (before noon).

50% Final essay on any topic discussed in class (around 10 pages). Topics *must* be discussed in advance with the instructor during his office hours on an individual basis. Papers are due a week after the final take-home are due (so on Dec. 15th at noon).

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All essays and exams are graded on your understanding of the material you have been assigned to read, your understanding of the lectures, on your ability to draw on further material where relevant. Your ability to write in a clear and thoughtful manner is also an important aspect of the grading. *In accord with McGill University's Charter of Students' Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded.*

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In the event of extraordinary circumstances beyond the University's control, the content and/or evaluation scheme in this course is subject to change.

Academic Honesty

McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures (see <http://www.mcgill.ca/integrity> for more information).

Remember, *any* instance of presenting the work of someone else as your own counts as plagiarism, whether that someone else is your favourite philosopher, an anonymous website author, or your mother. If you use an idea, an argument, or a phrase that is not your own, be sure to cite it – even if it is from a website.

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Instructors who may adopt the use of text-matching software to verify the originality of students' written course work must register for use of the software with Educational Technologies (*Email*) and must inform their students before the drop/add deadline, in writing, of the use of text-matching software in a course.