

History of Philosophy

72 Other Phenomenologists

By Dr. Arthur Holmes of Wheaton College

Abstract:

This lecture by Dr. Arthur Holmes provides an overview of **post-Sartrean phenomenology** and the evolution of **hermeneutical theory**. Holmes contrasts Sartre's focus on alienation with **Gabriel Marcel's** emphasis on hope and **Merleau-Ponty's** insistence on the "lived body" as a source of personal identity. The text then shifts toward **Paul Ricoeur** and **Hans-Georg Gadamer**, exploring how interpretation involves a "dialogue" between the subjective horizons of the author and the reader. This progression leads into the **deconstructionism** of Jacques Derrida, where the stability of meaning is challenged by linguistic skepticism. Finally, Holmes addresses **Richard Rorty's** modern skepticism, suggesting it arises from an exaggerated demand for absolute certainty rather than a middle ground of **critical realism**.

Briefing Document:

Contemporary Phenomenology and Hermeneutics: Themes, Critiques, and Evolutions

Executive Summary

This briefing document analyzes the development of phenomenological thought following Jean-Paul Sartre, tracing its evolution into modern hermeneutics and deconstruction. Key developments include a shift from Sartrean alienation toward more optimistic interpersonal descriptions (Marcel), the grounding of identity in "lived bodily experience" (Merleau-Ponty), and the application of phenomenology to religious and moral structures (Tillich, Ricoeur).

The document further outlines the progression of hermeneutical theory from Enlightenment objectivity to the subjective "authorial intention" of Schleiermacher,

culminating in Gadamer's "merging of horizons" through dialogue. Finally, it examines the emergence of deconstruction and anti-realism (Derrida, Rorty), which challenge the possibility of fixed meaning and certain knowledge, leading to a tension between critical realism and linguistic skepticism.

I. Critiques and Refinements of Sartrean Existentialism

Several mid-20th-century philosophers sought to correct what they viewed as distortions in Sartre's phenomenology, specifically regarding the nature of the self and interpersonal relationships.

Gabriel Marcel: Negation vs. Disengagement

Gabriel Marcel, a French Catholic "philosopher of existence," critiqued Sartre's dialectic between the "for-itself" and the "in-itself" as overdrawn and exaggerated.

- **Alienation vs. Love:** Marcel argued that human relationships are not defined solely by negation or alienation. Instead, they move between the poles of alienation and love.
- **Disengagement:** He introduced "disengagement"—a simple drifting apart—as a middle ground that lacks the vehement antithesis and constant negation found in Sartre's work.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty: The Lived Body

Merleau-Ponty rejected the reduction of the self to a mere act of intentionality created "over and over again."

- **Restoring the Subject:** He maintained that for a subject-object relationship to exist, there must be a subject pole with a continuing personal identity.
 - **Lived Bodily Experience:** Merleau-Ponty shifted focus to the "phenomenology of perception" and the "lived body" (*er-lib-ness*). He argued that concrete experience is fundamentally bodily, providing a basis for enduring identity that transcends simple intentional acts.
-

II. Applied Phenomenology: Religion, Guilt, and Freedom

Post-Sartrean thinkers applied phenomenological methods to interpret specific aspects of the human condition, moving beyond strictly existential concerns.

Paul Ricoeur: Phenomenological Hermeneutic

Ricoeur focused on the essential structures of human existence through interpretation.

- **Core Areas of Study:** He explored the voluntary and involuntary, the experience of freedom, the phenomenology of guilt, and the structures of language.
- **Theoretical Critiques:** Ricoeur used these phenomenological structures to critique Freud's views on guilt and the "artificial structures" of structuralists like de Saussure.

Paul Tillich: Faith as Ultimate Concern

Tillich utilized a Heideggerian phenomenological method to pose existential questions that Christian theology could then address.

- **Dynamics of Faith:** He defined faith phenomenologically as an "ultimate concern"—a centered act where the whole being is unified in its intentionality toward an object.
- **The Courage to Be:** This work examines existential courage in contrast to lesser forms of courage.
- **Argument from Experience:** Tillich argued that the human condition points toward "God" as the object of our ultimate intentionality.

III. The Evolution of Hermeneutical Theory

The document traces the shift in how texts and actions are interpreted, moving from objective logic to subjective interaction.

	Central Hermeneutical Concept	Role of the Interpreter
Period/Thinker		

Enlightenment	Objectivity of knowledge	Objective activity; drawing logical conclusions from data.
Schleiermacher	Authorial Intention	Seeking the "subjective grid" or divine spirit manifest in the author's intention.
Husserl	Meaning-constituting act	The reader brings meaning to the text; subjectivity of the reader strengthens.
Heidegger	Mode of Dasein	Understanding is a way of "being in the world"; hermeneutic of the reader, not the text.
Gadamer	Fusing of Horizons	Dialogue between two subjectivities (reader and author) through a "pre-understanding."

IV. Gadamer's Phenomenological Hermeneutic

Hans-Georg Gadamer provides the mainstream for contemporary hermeneutical thought, viewing interpretation as an interpersonal dynamic.

- **Pre-understanding (Prejudice):** Every reader approaches a text with a "subjective grid" or "pre-judgment." Gadamer argues this is necessary for the interpretive process.
- **The Dialogue:** Interpretation is a "two-way street" where the reader poses questions to the text, and the text reshapes the reader's questions.
- **Merging Horizons:** Through ongoing interaction, the "historical gap" between the author's perspective and the reader's perspective is narrowed until their "horizons" begin to merge.
- **The Language Bridge:** This dialogue is made possible by a shared cultural tradition and "effective history" carried by a common language.
- **Application:** Gadamer rejects the distinction between interpretation and application; to interpret a text "for me" is to apply it in the very act of understanding.

V. Deconstruction and Linguistic Skepticism

Late 20th-century thought, particularly that of Jacques Derrida, introduced a radical challenge to the possibility of understanding.

Jacques Derrida: Anti-Realism

Derrida, a deconstructionist, maintains that texts are "inscrutable" and lack fixed meaning.

- **Structural Failures:** He views language as an artificial structure imposed by the author (often unconsciously) that "doesn't work" or refer consistently.
- **Plurality and Relativism:** Because any interpretation is an artificial superimposition, no single interpretation can be validated as rational or certain. This leads to a relativism where a plurality of interpretations is considered legitimate.

Richard Rorty: Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature

Rorty bridges European phenomenology with American pragmatism to argue against "representational" theories of knowledge.

- **The Mirror Metaphor:** He rejects the idea that the mind contains "mirror images" or true copies of nature.
- **Skepticism vs. Certainty:** Rorty suggests that if we cannot have absolute certainty, we must accept skepticism. He advocates for "interesting dialogue" over the attempt to settle philosophical questions.

VI. Epistemological Conclusions: Realism vs. Skepticism

The synthesis of these traditions presents a fundamental tension in contemporary epistemology regarding the limits of human knowledge.

1. **Critical Realism:** This tradition (rooted in Scottish Realism and thinkers like Thomas Reid) argues for a direct awareness of an object's existence, even if our understanding of the object's *nature* is subject to correction. It occupies a "third alternative" between naive realism and anti-realism.

2. **Linguistic Skepticism:** Emerging from deconstruction, this view argues that the "structure of language" makes unequivocal meaning impossible. As Gorgias suggested anciently, if we cannot know something with certainty, we cannot communicate it reliably.
3. **The "Illicit Disjunction":** The document suggests that the move toward radical skepticism (as seen in Rorty) often results from "exaggerated epistemological expectations." By demanding "knock-down, drag-out proofs" for certainty, thinkers ignore probabilistic middle grounds that have historically existed between absolute certainty and total skepticism.

Study Guide:

A Study Guide to 20th-Century Phenomenology and Hermeneutics

This document provides a comprehensive review of the philosophical developments in the European tradition following Jean-Paul Sartre, focusing on the works of Gabriel Marcel, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Paul Ricoeur, Paul Tillich, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Jacques Derrida, as well as the American pragmatist-phenomenological synthesis of Richard Rorty.

Part I: Short-Answer Quiz

Directions: Answer the following questions based on the provided lecture notes. Each response should be approximately 2–3 sentences.

1. How does Gabriel Marcel's view of interpersonal relationships differ from that of Jean-Paul Sartre?
2. What was Maurice Merleau-Ponty's primary objection to Sartre's "Transcendence of the Ego"?
3. Define Merleau-Ponty's concept of the "lived body."
4. What is the core focus of Paul Ricoeur's "phenomenological hermeneutic"?

5. In Paul Tillich's theology, how are "God" and "faith" defined phenomenologically?
 6. How did the Enlightenment's view of text interpretation differ from the post-Kantian "Copernican Revolution" approach?
 7. Describe Friedrich Schleiermacher's specific understanding of "authorial intention."
 8. What does Hans-Georg Gadamer mean by the "merging of horizons"?
 9. Why does Jacques Derrida characterize language as an "artificial structure"?
 10. What is Richard Rorty's "illicit disjunction" regarding knowledge and skepticism?
-

Part II: Answer Key

1. **Marcel's Critique of Sartre:** Marcel argued that Sartre's dialectic between the "for-itself" and "in-itself" was overdrawn, failing to distinguish between active negation and simple disengagement. While Sartre focused on constant alienation, Marcel presented a more optimistic spectrum of relationships ranging from alienation to love.
2. **Merleau-Ponty on the Subject:** Merleau-Ponty rejected Sartre's denial of the transcendental ego because it eliminated the "subject" pole of the subject-object relationship. He maintained that there must be a continuing personal identity to ground the relationship, rather than a self that is merely created repeatedly through acts of intentionality.
3. **The Lived Body:** The "lived body" refers to concrete, lived bodily experience as the foundation of self-identity. Merleau-Ponty argued that this bodily presence is given in experience and possesses an enduring identity that cannot be reduced to a simple act of consciousness.
4. **Ricoeur's Hermeneutic:** Ricoeur moved beyond existential concerns to seek the "essential structures" of human being-in-the-world, such as language, freedom, and guilt. His work involved interpreting these aspects of life

through a phenomenological lens, often engaging in critiques of Freud and structuralism.

5. **Tillich on Faith and God:** Tillich defined faith as an "ultimate concern," a centered act where the whole being is unified in its intentionality toward an object. Phenomenologically, "God" is understood as the object of this ultimate concern toward which the human consciousness leans.
 6. **Enlightenment vs. Post-Kantian Interpretation:** The Enlightenment emphasized the "objectivity of understanding," treating interpretation as an inductive process of drawing logical conclusions from objective data. Following Kant's Copernican Revolution, it was recognized that readers bring their own "subjective grids" or frameworks to the interpretation of any text.
 7. **Schleiermacher's Authorial Intention:** For Schleiermacher, intentionality is a pervasive, often unconscious direction or creative divine spirit immanent within the author. Interpreting a text means getting "behind" it to discover this subjective grid of the author, which reflects the broader movement of a divine spirit in history.
 8. **Merging of Horizons:** Gadamer posited that interpretation is a dialogue between the "horizon" of the reader (their pre-understanding) and the "horizon" of the text (the author's perspective). Through a two-way street of questioning and answering, these two perspectives eventually narrow the historical gap and merge into a shared understanding.
 9. **Derrida on Language Structure:** As a deconstructionist, Derrida viewed language as a structure unconsciously imposed by the author that fails to refer consistently to a fixed reality. He argued that because any interpretation is as artificial as the language used, it is impossible to reach an unequivocal, rational meaning.
 10. **Rorty's Illicit Disjunction:** Rorty argued that if we cannot have exact, certain knowledge (a "mirror" of nature), we must accept a total skepticism. Critics argue this is a false dilemma that ignores "third alternatives," such as the probabilistic tradition or the various methods of justifying belief found in contemporary epistemology.
-

Part III: Essay Questions

Directions: Use the themes discussed in the source text to develop comprehensive responses to the following prompts.

1. **The Evolution of the Self:** Compare and contrast the "self" as presented by Sartre (the self as a constant creation of intentionality) with the "self" defended by Merleau-Ponty (the lived body and enduring subject identity).
2. **The Dialogue of Interpretation:** Analyze Hans-Georg Gadamer's model of the "hermeneutical circle." How do "pre-understanding" and the "historical bridge" of language facilitate the process of understanding across time?
3. **Theology through Phenomenology:** Discuss how Paul Tillich and Paul Ricoeur utilized phenomenological methods to address religious themes. How does their approach differ from traditional, text-based biblical theology?
4. **From Structuralism to Deconstruction:** Explain the transition from structural linguistics (de Saussure) to deconstructionism (Derrida). Why does Derrida believe that a "plurality of interpretations" is the only legitimate outcome of reading a text?
5. **Realism vs. Anti-Realism:** Evaluate the debate between "Critical Realism" and the "Anti-Realism" of Rorty and Derrida. How does the concept of "intentionality" serve as a pivot point for these two conflicting views of truth and existence?

Part IV: Glossary of Key Terms

Term	Definition
Anti-Realism	The philosophical position, held by thinkers like Derrida and Rorty, that we cannot access a fixed, objective truth or referent through language or interpretation.
Authorial Intention	In Schleiermacher's sense, the subjective, creative direction of the author, influenced by an immanent divine spirit, which the interpreter seeks to uncover.

Critical Realism	A tradition (linked to Scottish Realism) asserting that while we can know an object exists directly, our understanding of its nature is subject to correction and reflection.
Deconstructionism	A movement, associated with Jacques Derrida, that seeks to take apart the artificial structures of language to show that they fail to convey unequivocal meanings.
Effective History	Gadamer's concept that the dialogue between reader and text is made possible by a shared cultural and linguistic tradition that connects the past to the present.
Intentionality	The directedness of consciousness toward an object; in phenomenology, it is seen as a meaning-constituting act.
Lived Body	Merleau-Ponty's term for the concrete bodily experience that provides a sense of enduring personal identity and serves as the subject of the subject-object relationship.
Pre-understanding	Also referred to as "prejudice" or a "subjective grid," this is the set of perspectives and questions a reader brings to a text before the process of interpretation begins.
Structuralism	The view that language is an artificial, formal structure imposed on the world, often focusing on the rules and subject-predicate forms that carry meaning.
Ultimate Concern	Paul Tillich's phenomenological definition of faith; a centered act of the whole being directed toward "God" as the object of that concern.