

Research
Based
Curricula

Does consciousness have
a body?

Key Stage 5 Philosophy
Resource 2

2019



Resource Two

Overview



Topic	The Phenomenology of Perception
A-Level Modules	Perception as a source of knowledge
Objectives	<p>After completing this resource you should be able:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ To develop an understanding of Merleau-Ponty's idea of perception✓ To explore the Gestalt principles of perception and evaluate how they condition the way we experience the world✓ To compare this view with Descartes's and draw conclusions on the nature of the relationship between mind and body
Instructions	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Read the data source2. Complete the activities3. Explore the further reading
Context	<p>Phenomenology of Perception (Phénoménologie de la Perception) is a 1945 book by the French philosopher Maurice –Merleau Ponty, in which the author expounds his thesis of the “primacy of perception”. This work establishes Merleau-Ponty as the pre-eminent philosopher of the body, and is considered a major statement of French existentialism.</p> <p>Merleau-Ponty's account of the body helps him undermine what had been a long-standing conception of consciousness, which hinges on the distinction between the for-itself (subject) and in-itself (object) which plays a central role in the philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre. The body stands between this fundamental distinction between subject and object, ambiguously existing as both.</p>

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Section A

Maurice Merleau-Ponty



Toadvine, Ted, "Maurice Merleau-Ponty", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2018 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2018/entries/merleau-ponty/>

Completed in 1944 and published the following year, *Phenomenology of Perception* (PhP) is the work for which Merleau-Ponty was best known during his lifetime and that established him as the leading French phenomenologist of his generation. Here Merleau-Ponty develops his own distinctive interpretation of phenomenology's method, informed by his new familiarity with Husserl's unpublished manuscripts and his deepened engagement with other thinkers in this tradition, such as Eugen Fink and Martin Heidegger. *Phenomenology of Perception* again draws extensively on Gestalt theory and contemporary research in psychology and neurology; the case of Schneider, a brain-damaged patient studied by Adhémar Gelb and Kurt Goldstein, serves as an extended case-study. Psychological research complements and, at times, serves as a counterpoint to phenomenological descriptions of perceptual experience across a wide range of existential dimensions, including sexuality, language, space, nature, intersubjectivity, time, and freedom. In *Phenomenology*, Merleau-Ponty develops a characteristic rhythm of presenting, first, the realist or empiricist approach to a particular dimension of experience, followed then by its idealist or intellectualist alternative, before developing a third way that avoids the problematic assumption common to both, namely, their "unquestioned belief in the world": the prejudice that the objective world exists as a ready-made and fully present reality.

Phenomenology of Perception introduces its inquiry with a critique of the "classical prejudices" of empiricism and intellectualism. Merleau-Ponty rejects the empiricist understanding of sensation, treating the basic units of

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Section A

Maurice Merleau-Ponty

sensation as determinate atoms rather than as meaningful wholes. These wholes include ambiguities, indeterminacies, and contextual relations that defy explanation in terms of the causal action of determinate things. Intellectualism aims to provide an alternative to empiricism by introducing judgment or attention as mental activities that synthesize experience from the sensory givens, yet it adopts empiricism's starting point in dispersed, atomic sensations. Both approaches are guilty of reading the results of perception (the objective world) back into perceptual experience, thereby falsifying perception's characteristic structure: the spontaneous organization or configuration of perceived phenomena themselves, with their indeterminacies and ambiguities, and the dynamic character of perception as an historical process involving development and transformation. By treating perception as a causal process of transmission or a cognitive judgment, empiricism and intellectualism deny any meaningful configuration to the perceived as such and treat all values and meanings as projections, leaving no basis in perception itself for distinguishing the true from the illusory.



In contrast, Merleau-Ponty argues that the basic level of perceptual experience is the gestalt, the meaningful whole of figure against ground, and that the indeterminate and contextual aspects of the perceived world are positive phenomenon that cannot be eliminated from a complete account. In this context, perception is seen as a situated activity that takes place in the context of a real-world environment, and inherently involves a bodily engagement. It is not as Descartes, would have thought, a mental activity (reality as a projection of the intellect).

Sensing is thus a "living communication with the world that makes it present to us as the familiar place of our life" (PhP:

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Section A

Maurice Merleau-Ponty

79/53), investing the perceived world with meanings and values that refer essentially to our bodies and lives.

We forget this “phenomenal field”, the world as it appears directly to perception, as a consequence of perception’s own tendency to forget itself in favor of the perceived that it discloses. Perception orients itself toward the truth, placing its faith in the eventual convergence of perspectives and progressive determination of what was previously indeterminate. But it thereby naturally projects a completed and invariant “truth in itself” as its goal. Science extends and amplified this natural tendency through increasingly precise measurements of the invariants in perception, leading eventually to the theoretical construction of an objective world of determinate things.

Once this determinism of the “in itself” is extended universally and applied even to the body and the perceptual relation itself, then its on-going dependence on perception as an embodied phenomenon is obscured. For this reason, the “fundamental philosophical act” would be to “return to the lived world beneath the objective world” (PhP: 83/57) and to understand perceptual awareness in terms of its corporeal ties.

Section B

Gestalt: A theory of perception

According to the Gestalt psychologists – notably Max Wertheimer (1880–1943), Wolfgang Khlér (1887–1967) and Kurt Koffka (1886– 1941) – certain features in visual perception are universal. Gestalt theory proposes that we see by forming light and dark objects, edges and contours into a whole image without thinking about it. Gestalt (the German word means “organized whole”) is a theory that the brain operates holistically, with self-organizing tendencies. Gestalt states that we perceive the whole without being aware of the

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connection of the parts, and that the essence of the whole does not change when we transpose it. In the more direct sense of the word “transpose,” a musical tune remains in essence the same even if played in a different key. We recognize a square as a square even if we transpose it by changing its size and color (Figure C). But if we rotate a square 45 degrees (Figure D), we see a diamond. Gestalt psychologists have outlined fundamental and universal principles, sometimes called “laws,” of perceptual organization. The terms vary from theorist to theorist, but these eight are generally accepted:

1. proximity
2. similarity
3. good continuity
4. common fate
5. closure
6. figure and ground
7. symmetry, surroundness
8. prägnanz

Figure One

This panda is really just a collection of shapes.

How do we make sense of it?

Explore the Gestalt principles to find out.



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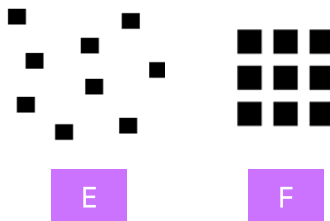


connection of the parts, and that the essence of the whole does not change when we transpose it. In the more direct sense of the word “transpose,” a musical tune remains in essence the same even if played in a different key. We recognize a square as a square even if we transpose it by changing its size and color (Figure C). But if we rotate a square 45 degrees (Figure D), we see a diamond. Gestalt psychologists have outlined fundamental and universal principles, sometimes called “laws,” of perceptual organization. The terms vary from theorist to theorist, but these eight are generally accepted:

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1. Proximity

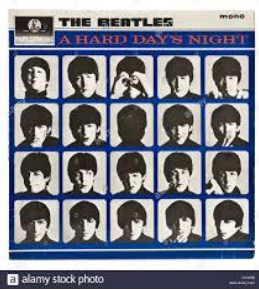


The principle of proximity is apparent in Figures E and F. We perceive Figure E as a random pattern of dots because they are unevenly spaced. In Figure F the close proximity of some dots leads us to see them as a unified composition.

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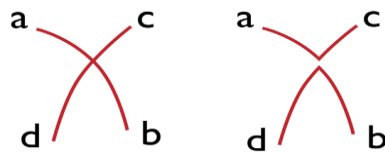


2. Similarity



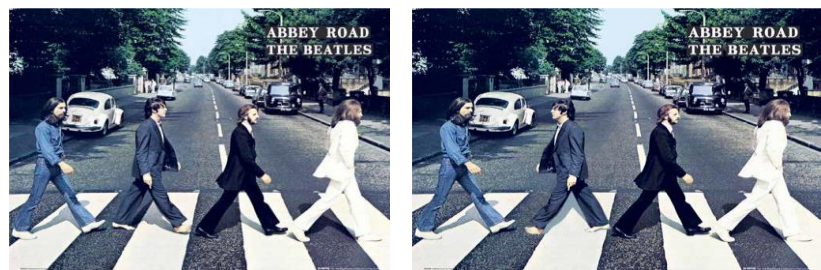
The principle of similarity states that things which share visual characteristics such as shape, size, color, texture, value or orientation will be seen as belonging together. The Beatles album cover (above) uses images of the same shape and size, but as we study them, we find subtle, interesting differences, such as the blacked out image of George Harrison at center.

3. Good continuity



We prefer to see contours based on smooth continuity instead of abrupt changes of direction. We are more likely to identify lines a-b and c-d crossing than to identify a-d and c-b or a-c and d-b as lines.

4. Common fate



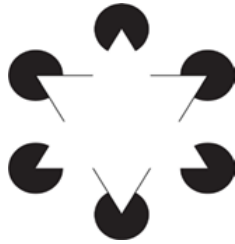
According to the principle of common fate, we see groups of objects as lines moving along the smoothest path. The Beatles provide another famous example with the cover of their album Abbey Road. Consider the debate that would have ensued had one of the Beatles walked in the opposite direction.

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5. Closure



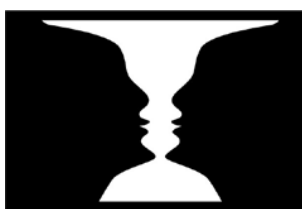
Closure states that we tend to perceive figures as “closed” rather than “open.”

Closure and comics



- ✓ First, we could not read comics if we didn't do our part in filling in the gaps between frames; We connect the two frames into action-reaction.
- ✓ Second, we fill in the details of simple drawings, such as Charlie Brown. This gives comics a universal quality because we can complete the picture in a way that suits us.

6. Figure and Ground



This principle of Gestalt is really several principles that fall under the heading figure and ground. It attempts to explain how the brain separates figures from the background, a critical skill for prehistoric man, who had to decide quickly if something far off was a threat. Theorists believe several factors figure into how we perceive figure and ground:

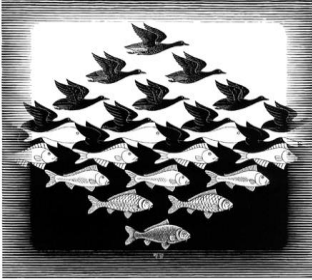
- Smallness: Smaller areas tend to be seen as figures against a larger background.
- Light/dark: Dark objects on light backgrounds are more common, so when we have a light figure/dark background, we are more likely to interpret the drawing as two faces.

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7. Symmetry, surroundness



Symmetrical areas tend to be seen as figures against asymmetrical backgrounds.

Which shapes do you see as figures and which as ground? Because some shapes are dark and some light, some symmetrical and some asymmetrical, we might be confused about figure-ground relationships.

The principle of surroundedness states that areas surrounded by other areas tend to be seen as figures.

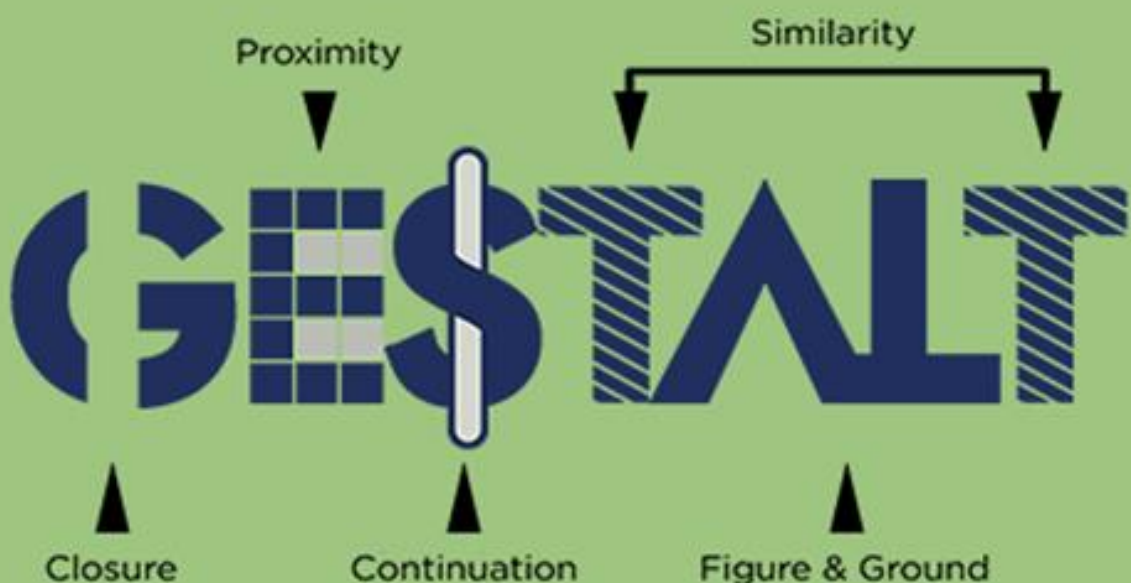
Resource Two Activities



Activities



1. Read the "Gestalt: a theory of perception". Create a poster with pictures, photos and drawings to illustrate the key ideas of the Gestalt principles.
2. Read extracts from "Gestalt : a theory of perception" and the "Phenomenology of Perception". Prepare a Power Point Presentation to explain the Gestalt principles to a group of fellow students. In simple words, explain how the study of these principles has helped Merleau-Ponty to review the traditional philosophical view on perception.
3. Watch the [Gestalt Principles at Work in Logo Design](#)
4. Listen to Hubert Dreyfus' podcast on Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception
<https://syntheticzero.net/2017/03/15/hubert-dreyfus-on-merleau-pontys-phenomenology-of-perception/>



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Further Reading



Explore



Maurice Merleau-Ponty (14 March 1908 – 3 May 1961) was a French phenomenological philosopher, strongly influenced by Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger. The constitution of meaning in human experience was his main interest and he wrote on perception, art and politics. He was on the editorial board of *Les Temps Modernes*, the leftist magazine created by Jean-Paul Sartre in 1945. At the core of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy is a sustained argument for the foundational role perception plays in understanding the world as well as engaging with the world. Like the other major phenomenologists, Merleau-Ponty expressed his philosophical insights in writings on art, literature, linguistics, and politics. He was the only major phenomenologist of the first half of the twentieth century to engage extensively with the sciences and especially with descriptive psychology. Because of this engagement, his writings have become influential in recent project of naturalizing phenomenology, in which phenomenologists use the results of psychology and cognitive science. Merleau-Ponty emphasized the body as the primary site of knowing the world, a corrective to the long philosophical tradition of placing consciousness as the source of knowledge, and his insight that the body and that which it perceived could not be disentangled from each other. The articulation of the primacy of embodiment led him away from phenomenology towards what he was to call "indirect ontology" or the ontology of "the flesh of the world" (*la chair du monde*), seen in his last incomplete work, *The Visible and Invisible*, and his last published essay, "Eye and Mind".

Merleau-Ponty was born in 1908 in Rochefort-sur-Mer, Charente-Maritime, France. His father died in 1913 when Merleau-Ponty was five years old. Thomas Baldwin in *Introduction to Merleau-Ponty's The World of Perception*

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Further Reading



Explore



(New York: Routledge, 2008): 2. After secondary schooling at the lycée Louis-le-Grand in Paris, Maurice Merleau-Ponty became a student at the École Normale Supérieure, where he studied alongside Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Simone Weil. He passed the agrégation in philosophy in 1930. Merleau-Ponty first taught at Chartres, then became a tutor at the École Normale Supérieure, where he was awarded his doctorate on the basis of two important books: *La structure du comportement* (1942) and *Phénoménologie de la Perception* (1945). After teaching at the University of Lyon from 1945 to 1948, Merleau-Ponty lectured on child psychology and education at the Sorbonne from 1949 to 1952. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Child Psychology and Pedagogy: The Sorbonne Lectures 1949-1952*. Translated by Talia Welsh. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2010. He was awarded the Chair of Philosophy at the Collège de France from 1952 until his death in 1961, making him the youngest person to have been elected to a Chair. Besides his teaching, Merleau-Ponty was also political editor for *Les Temps modernes* from the founding of the journal in October 1945 until December 1952. In his youth he had read Karl Marx' writings. Jean-Paul Sartre even claimed that Merleau-Ponty converted him to Marxism. Merleau-Ponty died suddenly of a stroke in 1961 at age 53, apparently while preparing for a class on Descartes. He is buried in Père Lachaise Cemetery in Paris.

Selected Works

Phenomenology of Perception—trans. by Colin Smith (New York: Humanities Press, and London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962); trans. revised by Forrest Williams (1981; reprinted, 2002); new trans. by Donald A. Landes (New York: Routledge, 2012).

The Visible and the Invisible, Followed by Working Notes trans. By Alphonso Lingis, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968).

The Prose of the World trans. by John O'Neill, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973; London: Heinemann, 1974



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