It is often thought that phenomenology offers an explanation of the conditions for the possibility of conscious experience. While some commentators have stressed Merleau-Ponty’s transcendental commitments, a closer look at his view of phenomenology’s explanatory work shows that he rejects two key transcendental claims: that explanations should aim for completeness; and that they have a regressive structure. His hesitations about explanatory completeness are motivated by his sensitivity to the idealizing and transformative effects of phenomenological description. This bears directly on the philosophical adequacy of regressive models. If phenomenology is to make good on its philosophical goals, models that move from phenomena to their conditions of possibility are insufficient: explanation is better understood as a continuing critical reevaluation of the meaning of experience, and a willingness to reinvent the categories used to explain it. These commitments suggest that instead of Kant or Husserl, Merleau-Ponty is more proximate to Hegel’s view of philosophical methodology. This offers us an opportunity to rethink phenomenology’s conceptual lineage to German Idealism, and suggests the possibility of developing Merleau-Ponty’s incipient account into a systematic phenomenological alternative to existing models of explanation.

Thursday, Feb. 15, 2018, 5:00 p.m.
Tribble Hall B316

Supported by the Thomas Jack Lynch Fund