

Philosophy 491

Philosophy of mind and cognitive science

Professor: Bryce Huebner
Office: 234 New North
Office hours: M 12:00-13:30, and by appointment

Course meets:
Monday & Wednesday 17:00-18:15
Maguire 102

One of the reasons cognitive science is such a land of plenty for philosophers is that so many of its questions—not just the grand bird’s-eye view questions but quite proximal, in-the-lab-now questions—are still ill thought out, prematurely precipitated into forms that deserve critical reevaluation. If philosophy is, as my bumper sticker slogan has it, what you’re doing until you figure out just what questions to ask, then there is a lot of philosophy to be done by cognitive scientists these days. (Dennett 2009)

Course Overview: In this course, we will examine some of the key issues that trouble people in the philosophy of mind, and we’ll try to figure out when and how research in cognitive sciences can help to address such issues. We will be addressing the following sorts of questions:

- What is folk psychology, and how can we study it?
- What is the relationship between our folk-taxonomies and a scientific understanding of cognitive mechanisms?
- Can thinking about the nature of 'faith' shed light on the nature of mind?
- How much do we really know about our own mental states?
- Can we really trust the things that seem obvious to us?
- Are we really responsible agents?
- How worried should we be about our lack of self-knowledge as regards our own agency?
- Is situationism a challenge to our concept of agency? Or does it open up new ways of conceptualizing agency?
- What kind of control do we have over our own actions?
- When and where is it important for us to take first-person perspectives seriously?
- What does it take to be a conscious thing, with a first person-perspective?
- Can we answer that from a third person perspective, or do we need a first person perspective?
- What is the relationship between phenomenology and the third-person perspective of the cognitive sciences?
- What does it mean to be or to have a self?

In doing so, I hope to make it clear why philosophy must play a central role in the study of the mind.

Requirements: This is a small, discussion-oriented class, and you will be expected to make consistent contributions to the class discussion (**10% of your grade**). To enhance the quality of these discussions, you must submit a brief response for each of the assigned readings sometime before midnight, on the night prior to the class where we will be discussing that paper (**15% of your grade**). These responses should consist of 3 sentences, responding to the following three questions:

1. Which of the author’s philosophically interesting claims do you agree with?
2. Which of the author’s philosophically interesting claims do you disagree with?
3. If you could ask the author one question to improve your understanding of their position, what would it be?

One of our goals in each class will be to *work through* responses to these questions together, with the aim of collectively trying to get a better handle on the issues that have been raised (or have been ignored) in each of the readings.

You will be required to submit two short papers over the course of the semester (max: 3000 words; abstract max: 150 words) each paper will be worth **30% of your grade**. You may choose to write on any two sections of the course: Beliefs, Desires, and Other Attitudes (due on **15 February**); Agency, Action and Accountability (due on **30 March**); Consciousness and Experience (due on **25 April**); Graduate students can petition to write a single longer paper (max: 8000 words; abstract max: 300 words), and all students can petition to revise and expand upon their first paper, submitting a longer paper (max: 6000 words; abstract max: 300 words) on **25 April**.

Finally, at the end of the semester, you will be required to re-submit all of your submitted sentences, along with a brief narrative assessment of what you have learned in the class, and what questions you feel have been left unresolved (and why). Details will be provided in due course (due on **8 May; 15% of your grade**)

Grading Criteria: *In general*, a 'B+' paper will 1) clearly articulate the claims being defended, 2) be well organized, 3) will rely on strong evidence and arguments, and 4) will be stylistically clear—thereby presenting a competent argument. A 'B' paper will be weaker in one of these areas—but still satisfactory—and an 'A-' paper will excel in one of these areas. A 'C' grade will be awarded to a paper that is weak in one or two of these categories; a 'D' grade will be awarded to a paper that is weak in 3 or 4 categories or omits one altogether (e.g., by lacking a thesis or lacking arguments for a thesis). An 'A' grade will only be awarded to a paper that *excels* in each category, thereby exhibiting a clear capacity for *doing philosophy*.

Paper deadlines: The deadlines for assignments are firm. Extensions will only be given where evidence of illness or a family emergency is submitted prior to the due date. Unless an extension is granted, assignments will automatically be penalized 1/3 of a grade (A- to a B+, B+ to a B, etc.) for each day they are late.

Appealing a grade: You can appeal any grade that you feel does not accurately represent the work you have done. All appeals for re-evaluation must be made in writing, no more than two weeks after your paper is returned, and must provide a compelling argument for raising the grade. A re-evaluation is no guarantee of a better grade, and it can even result in a lower grade if you do not offer a compelling case for raising your grade.

Accommodations and diversity: One finds a great deal of diversity in teaching and learning styles in a modern university. These styles may not always mesh in ways that are conducive to the success and wellbeing of everyone in a course. But there are often ways of improving things. I am happy to discuss the structure of this course, and to accommodate the learning styles people have to the best of my abilities. So please feel free to talk to me in office hours. I sincerely think that every student is entitled to a meaningful and stimulating classroom experience! Disabled students and students on record with the university as requiring particular accommodations, please let me know that this is the case, in confidence, during the first few weeks of the semester—and please take advantage of the services provided by the university. Finally, if you find over the course of the semester that additional accommodations are necessary, please let me know.

The honor code: The Georgetown University Honor pledge requires you to be honest in your academic endeavors and to hold yourself to the high ideals and rigorous standards of academic life. I expect you to be familiar with the letter and the spirit of this pledge; and, I will enforce the Honor Code by reporting any and all suspected cases of academic dishonesty.

Mind your manners: Philosophy is best done collectively and collaboratively; however, some of the questions we will be discussing may generate contentious claims, spirited discussions, vehement disagreements, and trenchant criticisms. This is at least part of what doing philosophy is all about. In discussing, disagreeing, criticizing, and arguing with one another, we must make an effort to remain courteous and respectful. I promise to do my best to raise philosophical issues and to start philosophical discussions in ways that are as sensitive as possible to the variety of viewpoints and opinions that we are sure to find among the members of this class. But I will only be able to do this if each of you helps to create an atmosphere where we can develop ideas in a friendly and welcoming environment where we all learn from one another. Perhaps more importantly, if you want to disagree with someone, or if you want to offer a criticism of their viewpoint, be sure to offer reasons for the approach that you are suggesting. If we reason through things together, we are sure to have a great semester!

Tentative Course Schedule:

1/7	Introduction: No reading
Beliefs, Desires, and other attitudes	
1/12 1/14	Stephen Stich & Shaun Nichols , " Folk psychology " Ruth Millikan " Thoughts without laws " (Optional) Daniel Dennett , " Three kinds of intentional psychology "
1/21	Kathleen Akins , " Of sensory systems and the aboutness of mental states "
1/26 1/28	Ryan Preston-Roedder , " Faith in humanity " Kranti Saran , " Faith and the structure of mind " (optional) Will Gervais & Joseph Heinrich , " The Zeus problem "
2/2 2/4	Dorit Bar-on & Doug Long , " Knowing Selves: Expression, Truth, and Knowing Selves " Lauren Ashwell , " Deep, dark...or transparent? "
2/9 2/11	David Miguel Gray , " Cognitive Phenomenology and the Ascription of Thought " Lisa Bortolotti , " The epistemic innocence of motivated delusions "
Agency, Action, and Accountability	
2/18	Susan Hurley , " Is Responsibility Essentially Impossible? "
2/23 2/25	Dan Wegner & Thalia Wheatley , " Apparent mental causation " Holly Andersen , " Causation and the awareness of agency " (optional) Tim Bayne , " Phenomenology and the Feeling of Doing "
3/2 3/4	Elisabeth Pacherie , " Can conscious agency be saved? " Manuel Vargas , " Situationism and moral responsibility: Free will in fragments "
3/16 3/18	Hagop Sarkissian , " Minor tweaks, Major Payoffs " Tamar Gendler , " Alief in Action (and Reaction) " (optional) Meena Krishnamurthy , " Nudging Global Poverty Alleviation? "
3/23 3/25	Andy Clark , " Soft selves & ecological control " Natalia Washington & Dan Kelly , " Who's Responsible for This? " (optional) Jules Holroyd & Dan Kelly , " Implicit Bias, Character, & Control "
Consciousness and Experience	
3/30 4/1	Iris Marion Young , " Throwing like a girl " Melanie Yergeau , " Clinically significant disturbance " (optional) Laurie Paul , " What you can't expect when you're expecting "
4/8	Eric Schwitzgebel , " If Materialism Is True, the United States Is Probably Conscious "
4/13 4/15	Christian Coseru , " Buddhist Foundationalism and the Phenomenology of Perception " Jake Davis & Evan Thompson " From the 5 Aggregates to Phenomenal Consciousness "
4/20 4/22	Nina Strohminger , " The self is moral " and Daniel Dennett , " Where am I? " Jonardon Ganeri , " An irrealist theory of self "