

Philosophy of Psychology Syllabus

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1 Course Summary: What this course is about

We are feeling, perceiving, thinking creatures. To summarize: we have minds. How do feeling, perceiving, and thinking work? (How do minds work?) Psychology is the scientific pursuit of these questions. It aims to give mathematically rigorous, experimentally testable theories of feeling, perceiving, and thinking. But how can it? How is a science of mental life possible? And what can such a science tell us about what it is to have a mind?

At a broad level, this course will explore two questions:

- How can we study minds scientifically?
- What can the scientific study of mind teach us about what it is to have a mind?

One might expect that in order to study how minds work, we need to know what minds are. Otherwise, how would we know what to study? But we can fruitfully study the *clear-cut*, obvious cases of mental phenomena without ever articulating a full theory of what it is to be a mental phenomenon. This is largely how psychology has proceeded: we look at clear cases of feeling, perceiving and thinking, and we examine how those cases work. As philosophers looking at the science, we hope that knowledge of how the clear cases of mental phenomena work might inform our attempts to say, more generally, what it is to have a mental life.

In order to explore these questions in a more focused way, we will look primarily at *perceptual psychology*. There are two reasons for this. First, perceptual psychology is arguably one of the most well-developed disciplines in psychology. Second, perception seems to be central to mind. What we perceive is the basis for many of our thoughts, feelings, and plans. And, arguably, if one can perceive then one has a mind.

The course will center around three issues:

- (1) What is perception?
- (2) How do we figure out what we can perceive?
- (3) How do we perceive what we do?

2 Course Goals: What I hope you will get from the course

This course is geared toward building *reading skills*; namely, the skill to read philosophy off of science. This skill is not just relevant to academic philosophers. *Everywhere*—in news, TV, the Internet, books and day-to-day conversations—you can see philosophical claims being made about the mind on the basis of interpretations of psychological research. These claims have implications for how we understand ourselves as part of

the universe and as members of a moral community. So it is a good idea to be able to critically evaluate those claims and the interpretations of psychological research on which they rest.

At the end of this course, you should be able to:

- See, at a broad level, how psychological investigations are conducted. How do psychologists formulate the topic of investigation? How do psychologists collect data, build theories, and gather experimental evidence for or against these theories?
- Use psychological research in order critically engage in philosophical discussions about the nature of mind.
- Adjudicate between conflicting philosophical claims, where each of the claims is presented as based in the science.

The goal is not to learn the latest in psychological findings or the ins and outs of contemporary debates in philosophy of psychology. Instead, I hope that you will come out of the course with an ability to independently learn about and understand psychological findings, and with an ability to engage critically and fruitfully with debates in philosophy of psychology.

3 Course Work: How you will develop your reading skills

3.1 Reading

There will be approximately 50 pages of reading per week, all available on the course CCLE website. The readings are pulled from both psychology and philosophy. The psychology is not necessarily up-to-date or correct. The point of the psychology readings is, first and foremost, to see and understand the *method*. The point of the philosophy readings is to look at and evaluate attempts to draw philosophical conclusions from the methods and results of psychology.

It is important that you do all of the readings—both philosophy and psychology. In order to be able to draw philosophical conclusions from psychology, you have to have some acquaintance with psychology itself and you have to have some familiarity with how philosophers have interacted with psychology. Additionally, it is important to read the psychology so that you have some independent check on what philosophers are claiming about the science. Do not assume that philosophers are characterizing the science correctly.

Several days before each class, I will post a reading quiz on the CCLE website (in the section for that week). I will ask you to take this quiz before the beginning of class. The quiz will have one question for each reading. Answers will be short-answer and only need to be one or two sentences long.

3.2 Writing

You will have three opportunities to practice, in writing, drawing philosophical conclusions from psychology. (The details of the assignments will be given outside of this syllabus.)

- **Critical evaluation (2-3 pages):** I will ask you to read a chapter from a pop science book, which argues that plants are capable of visual perception. You will (i) describe how the author uses the term “seeing”; (ii) try to clearly formulate his argument for the claim that plants can see, and (iii) critically assess whether his argument establishes that plants have capacities of the sort that perceptual psychologists study.
 - This should challenge you to clarify the nature of *perceptual* (as opposed to non-perceptual) capacities by reference to how psychologists study those capacities.
- **Build-A-Perceiver (1-2 pages):** I will ask you to make up a step-by-step story about how a particular property (e.g., size, distance, motion) could come to be perceived on the basis of the information available to the eyes.
 - This should put you into the mindset of a psychologist trying to figure out how the visual system might solve a computational problem.
- **Long-form writing (5-7 pages):** You will write on a topic of your choosing, subject to approval by your TA.
 - This should allow you to pursue a topic in philosophy of psychology that interests you, and give you an opportunity to develop your skills in exploring that topic. Start looking for topics *right away*.

3.3 Participation

In addition to reading and writing, participation in lecture and sections is deeply important. One of the best ways to get to understand a claim or argument is to try to formulate lots of questions about it and explore how they might be answered; and one of the best ways to understand a question is to conjecture lots of answers to it and explore how those answers do or don't work out. Doing this along with your peers and your mentors is one of the best ways to learn. Just the activity of trying to communicate with others about an idea can immediately help you to get clearer about the idea. Just as important, trying to communicate ideas also helps you to see for yourself how well you understand those ideas. (One of the secrets of the University is that often it is the teachers who are learning the most from their lectures.)

4 Grading: How we will assess progress

- **Reading questions = 10%**

Your answers are not graded, but if you do not hand one in (or if it is too off the mark) then you do not get a point for that day.

- **Critical evaluation = 30%**

Letter grade. We want to see how you extract and describe an argument from a piece of writing and how you evaluate it on the basis of how well it fits with psychological research.

- **Build-A-Perceiver = 10%**

This will be scored “✓+” (10 pts), “✓” (6.6̄ pts), or “✓−” (3.3̄ pts). We want to see you clearly define the problem and think creatively and rigorously about how to solve that problem.

- **Long-form writing = 50%**

Letter grade. We want to see you explore, in a clear and systematic way and with appeal to the experimental methods, theories, or results of psychology, a philosophical topic in which you are interested.

5 Academic Honesty: How to be a person

- Be respectful to yourself, your peers and your instructors. Don't make it difficult for yourself or others to learn, and try not to do anything that would dampen yours or others' motivation to learn.

So, among other things, **do not**: tell insensitive jokes or give insensitive examples; play games or online videos (or anything that involves flashy, distracting movements on your screen); sleep in lecture or section; wear headphones/earbuds during class; etc.

If you are having any questions or concerns about the classroom environment, don't hesitate to raise them with your instructor or your TA or both.

- **Don't be dishonest.** Including (but not limited to):
 - Plagiarism: Representing the words or ideas of another as one's own in any academic exercise. This includes: reproducing passages verbatim without quotation marks and citations to the original source; paraphrasing the source without citation; presenting an idea that you got from someone else without citing them as the source.

Plagiarism is a serious offense. It is the presentation of another author's words or ideas as if they were your own. University regulations require that any case of plagiarism be sent to the Dean of Students for review. If you have any questions about documentation, quotations, and related matters, please do not hesitate to ask me or your TA before submitting your work.

- Fabrication: Intentional or unauthorized falsification or invention of any information or citation in an academic exercise.
- Multiple submission: Submitting the same piece of work for multiple assignments (from the same or different quarters).
- Unauthorized collaboration: Getting and/or giving substantial help from/to others without the instructor’s permission.
- Facilitating dishonesty: Intentionally or knowingly helping or attempting to help another to commit an act of academic dishonesty.

6 Tentative Schedule

All readings will be accessible from the course website.

- **Week 1 - What is this course about?**

- *T (6/23): What is philosophy of psychology?*
 - * Jerry Fodor: “Preface,” *The Language of Thought* (1975).
- *R (6/25): What is perceptual psychology?*
 - * Davida Teller: “The Domain of Visual Science” (2014)

- **Week 2 - What is perception?**

- *T (6/30): When should we call something a perceptual capacity?*
 - * Tyler Burge: “Perception: Where the Mind Begins” (2014)
 - * José Luis Bermúdez: “Morgan’s Canon and Psychological Explanations of Behavior” (2003)
 - * Edwin Land and John McCann: “Lightness and Retinex Theory” (1971) [Read pp. 1–4]
- *R (7/2): Perception vs. mere sensation*
 - * Kathleen Akins: “Of Sensory Systems and the ‘Aboutness’ of Mental States” (1996) [Skip §III]
 - * (Suggested; not required) Davida Teller: “Introducing perception” (2014) [§18.1–5]

BEGIN SPEAKING WITH YOUR TA OR INSTRUCTOR ABOUT TOPICS FOR YOUR LONG-FORM WRITING PROJECT

- **Week 3 - How do we figure out what we can perceive?**

- *T (7/7): Psychophysics and the semantics of perception*

- * David Foster: “Does Colour Constancy Exist?” (2003)
- * Susan Carey: “The Initial Representational Repertoire” (2009)
- * Barbara Von Eckardt: “The Representational Theory of Mind” (2012)
[Read §2.1–§2.5]

– *R (7/9): Is the semantics of perception scientific?*

- * Lawrence Shapiro: “The Nature of Nature” (1997)

CRITICAL EVALUATION DUE ON SUNDAY (7/12) @ 5PM

• **Week 4 - How do we perceive what we do?**

– *T (7/14): Explanation by functional decomposition*

- * Robert Cummins: “‘How does it work’ vs. ‘What are the laws?’” (2010)
- * Edwin Land and John McCann: “Lightness and Retinex Theory” (1971)
[Read pp. 4–11]

– *R (7/16): Computational psychology*

- * Patricia Kitcher: “Marr’s Computational Theory of Vision” (1988)

BUILD-A-PERCEIVER DUE ON SUNDAY (7/19) @ 5PM

• **Week 5 - Where does the brain enter into psychology?**

– *T (7/21): Does neuroscience constrain psychology, or is it the other way around?*

- * Gary Hatfield: “The Brain’s ‘New’ Science” (2000)

– *R (7/23): Linking psychology and neuroscience*

- * Davida Teller: “Linking Propositions” (1984)
- * Davida Teller: “Motion Physiology” (2014) [Read §21.3–6 and §21.8]

• **Week 6 - Beyond perception**

– *T (7/28): What distinguishes thought from perception?*

- * Daniel Weiskopf: “The Architecture of Higher Cognition” (2014)
- * Susan Gelman: “Psychological Essentialism in Children” (2004)

– *R (7/30): Does what we think influence what we see?*

- * Jerry Fodor: “Observation Reconsidered” (1984)

LONG-FORM WRITING DUE ON FRIDAY (7/31) @ 5PM

References

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