

THOUGHT AND REALITY PHI 3030/PSY 3030

Baruch College, Fall 2014

Tuesday and Thursdays, 9.30 - 10.45

"How it is that anything so remarkable as a state of consciousness comes about as a result of irritating nervous tissue, is just as unaccountable as the appearance of the Djinn, when Aladdin rubbed his lamp." – Thomas Huxley

INSTRUCTOR

Henry Shevlin (hfshevlin@gmail.com, @dioscuri)

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Congratulations! If you're reading this sentence, you have a mind. With a mind, you can do awesome stuff like have thoughts, beliefs, and emotions. You can also have conscious experiences. You're probably having conscious experiences right now. You're seeing colour and shape. On top of that, you're processing a ton of information. You're translating marks on a screen into representations of English words, and you're using these representations to form thoughts.

Stop and think about that. It's pretty remarkable, and the world's top scientists, philosophers, and psychologists still only have a very limited understanding of how the hell any of this works.

Sadly, there is no simple instruction manual for the mind. This course is about the closest thing you'll get. Over the next four months, we'll try to figure out the basics of how the mind works. We'll also talk about consciousness (whatever THAT is). We'll ask a lot of questions. For example, how do the firings of little nerve fibers in the squidgy grey mass we call the brain generate perceptions, beliefs, desires, dreams, and emotions? Do we have free will? Who am I? If I lost my memory, would I be the same person? Could a computer ever be conscious? Do animals and babies have experiences like us? Could I survive the death of my body? Do we really know what we're thinking and feeling from one moment to the next? If we're very lucky, we might even answer some of them.

A word of warning: expect to be challenged. Expect to work hard. You're going to read a lot of interesting stuff. Most of it will be philosophy, but there will be some psychology and neuroscience in there too. I'm going to call on you in class. You're going to have discussions with your fellow students. You're going to take a bunch of quizzes. You're

going to write a badass essay. And, by December, you'll be a better-informed, more interesting, more thoughtful human being.

REQUIRED TEXTS

There are no required texts. All readings will be emailed to you. However, there are a few books we'll be using heavily which might be useful for you to have, especially when it comes to writing papers. These are 'A Dialogue On Consciousness' (<http://goo.gl/9SXw3F>), 'The Mind's I' (<http://amzn.to/12B5Vhe>) and 'Philosophy of Mind: Classical and Contemporary Readings' (<http://amzn.to/17VxnWE>).

GRADE

Your grade will be a function of three things: quizzes, a paper, and participation. There will be NO midterm or final exam and NO extra credits will be awarded.

40% quizzes (5% per quiz) – there will be ten short quizzes over the course of the semester covering the reading announced in advance from the previous class. Each quiz will have eight questions. These won't be particularly hard, but if you haven't done the reading, you'll suck at the quiz. At the end of the semester, you'll get a grade based on your top eight quizzes. Note that there will be ten quizzes total, so it's not the end of the world if you miss one due to absence or illness, or completely screw up one quiz. But you want to take as many of them as possible, and do well at them. Also note that the three students who get the highest final scores in the quizzes are guaranteed an A (provided that they complete all other requirements).

40% final paper – at the end of the semester I will expect each student to submit a longer piece of philosophical writing (approximately 2000-3000 words). This should address philosophical themes covered in the class. We'll discuss topics for your final papers over the course of the semester, and also have a workshop focusing on how I expect you to write and format the paper (also see attached rubric for what I expect from your paper).

20% participation, punctuality, and attendance – I expect all students to attend every class, arrive on time, and participate in class discussions. I appreciate that not everyone loves debating things in public, so there are some other ways to boost your score. First, I'll sometimes ask for volunteers to lead discussion on an article for the next class.

Second,

you can email me interesting and relevant links, articles, or questions relating to the material. Third, you can boost your participation simply by being engaged. That means looking at me during the class. But here's a warning: if you say nothing all semester,

you'll struggle to do well on the course (also see attached rubric for my expectations regarding participation).

POLICIES

- Show up on time. I notice people who are late, and it will hurt your participation grade. Plus if you come late on a pop quiz day, you'll miss the quiz.
- At the end of the class, please don't begin packing up until I explicitly signal that the class session has ended; this too is both distracting and disrespectful.
- Cell phones on silent, please. If your phone rings—especially if your ringtone is some cheesy R&B club hit—you'll look silly in front of everyone.
- In discussion, be respectful to me and to your fellow students. But especially to me.
- I'll tolerate students using laptops or tablets for taking notes, but please use them exclusively for this purpose, and honestly, I'd prefer it if you didn't bring them at all. They're a temptation ("I wonder if I got any new emails?") and it's easy to tell whether someone is when someone is watching cat gifs during class or scrabbling to take down notes, and it will affect your ability to understand ideas. Also, if you're using a computer and you look tuned out, I'm pretty much guaranteed to call on you for questions.
- Please treat your email correspondences with me as professionally as possible. You should include your full name and your course section in the body of the email, and should avoid using cheesy slang or netspeak. If you're asking me to do you a favour – like give you information because you missed class – then ask me nicely. Also, if you email me a question that's answered in this syllabus, then expect a snarky reply from me saying "RTFS" ("Read The Syllabus").
- Academic honesty: Plagiarism, cheating, copying from others, handing in work that isn't one's own or isn't in one's own words, and all other types of academic dishonesty will result in the offender's immediate failure of the course. If you are unsure about what counts as academic dishonesty, please consult either me or the following website at your very earliest convenience:
http://www.baruch.cuny.edu/academic/academic_honesty.html.

TIPS

- Attend every class and make careful notes.
- Do all of the required reading, ideally 1-2 days before class (so your brain has time to digest it). Make notes to help you remember.
- Participate in discussion, and think of something smart to say when I call on you.
- Start thinking about your paper early in the semester so that you can write a good draft.

- Work like a beast on your final paper, incorporating my suggestions, and hand in something you're justifiably proud of.

Reading and writing philosophy papers is unlike reading and writing papers in any other subject, so if you're relatively new to philosophy, you'll be required to develop new skills. As a guideline, you should expect to spend at least five minutes reading each page. You should not expect to understand every idea or grasp every reference, but you should try to get an overall understanding of the piece.

Three quick tips: (i) skim read the whole article once, ignoring things you don't understand; (ii) re-read it again a second time much more slowly, taking at least five minutes per page; (iii) write a brief summary of the article as you read it, and make annotations as you go. In general, expect a ten page philosophy article to take between an hour and an hour and a half to read.

Writing philosophy papers is also quite tricky, but we will discuss this in some detail together in class. Jim Pryor has some excellent guidelines on how to read and write philosophy papers. See <http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/index.html>. We will also discuss these issues in class.

Additionally, for assistance with citation formats, see the Newman Library's online guide: http://newman.baruch.cuny.edu/help/tutorial/Specific_Topics/cit_guides.htm.

SCHEDULE

"No battle plan survives contact with the enemy." - Helmuth von Moltke the Elder

I like to be extremely flexible with scheduling. Topics take as long as they take. I also enjoy pursuing relevant tangents. However, here's a rough idea of some of the topics we might be covering. We won't have time for all of them, but we're definitely going to do the first three. After that, we can be flexible, and I might put it to a vote.

Topic 1: the mystery of consciousness

What on earth is conscious experience? Do we have souls? What makes experiences feel the way they do? Could things that look red to me look blue to you?

Topic 2: the mind-body problem

Is the mind just the brain? How do they relate? Could you have experiences even if you didn't have a brain? What are different mental states like beliefs and desires?

Topic 3: consciousness and attention

Are there some mental states that aren't conscious? What makes them different from unconscious mental states? What is attention, and what role does it play in the mind?

Topic 4: personal identity and other minds

Could I survive the death of my body? Could my mind be backed up on a computer? If I lost my memory, would I be the same person? Do other people have minds? Could I be the only real person in the world?

Topic 5: Perception

How rich is perception? Do we really see the world directly? How do illusions work? Does what we see influence what we hear?

Topic 6: Free will and mental causation

Do we have free will? Do mental states cause things independently of brain states? Libet, Penfield, and the end of the world.

Topic 7: Introspection

How well do we know our own minds? If you think of a zebra, how many stripes does it have?

Topic 8: Delusions and deficits

What can damage to the brain tell us about the mind? Why do some stroke patients believe that they're dead? Why might someone mistake their wife for a hat?

Topic 9: Animal minds and infant minds

Do animals have mental states? If so, how are their minds different from human minds? How do babies experience the world? How are children's minds different from adult minds?

Topic 10: Unity of consciousness and The Self

Who is this 'I' that people keep talking about? What's the self? Does it even exist? Is there one place in the brain where all my experiences come together?

IMPORTANT DATES

Tuesday September 23rd: No class (Friday Schedule)

Thursday September 25th: No class (College closed)

Thursday November 27th: No class (College closed)

Thursday December 11th: Our last class

Monday December 15th: Final papers due for submission (email only). Midnight deadline.

FINAL WORDS

Philosophy of mind is easily the most controversial, exciting, and swiftly changing field of philosophy in the 21st century. Philosophers, neuroscientists, and psychologists are working together and breaking new ground every day. Bit by bit, we're getting closer to answering the big questions, and in particular, the biggest question of all: what is the self?

And who (or what) we are is something matters to everyone. Whether we'll survive the death of our bodies is something that matters to everyone. Whether we're truly free or just robots is something matters to everyone. Congratulations on choosing a course that covers the most fascinating and fundamental problems facing humanity today. Get ready to work hard and have your mind blown.