

PHILOSOPHY OF PSYCHOLOGY

Tuesday/Thursday, 2.30 – 3.45, Room 9-120

“Man is the only animal for whom his own existence is a problem which he has to solve”

– Erich Fromm

INSTRUCTOR

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

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Psychology is the study of the human mind: our beliefs, our desires, perceptions, emotions, and dreams. In the broad sense, we're all psychologists: we're all constantly trying to make people like and respect us, figure out when they're lying, and work out the motives for their behavior, for example. In this broad sense, psychology is as old as humans themselves, and most great writers, poets, and rhetoricians are skilled psychologists. This is what's called *folk* psychology.

There's a more narrow sense of 'psychology', namely *scientific* psychology. Amazingly, scientific psychology is only a hundred or so years old, and begins with the work of people like William James, Sigmund Freud, and William Wundt. Contrary to what most Americans think, scientific psychology isn't just about sitting on a couch discussing your mother, or even primarily helping people with mental illness: it's a huge field with one foot in research and the other foot in medicine. A massive number of professionals can properly be described as psychologists, ranging from people trying to understand group behavior, scientists trying to figure out how we process incoming auditory information, and clinicians working to help children with behavioral problems.

What unifies all of scientific psychology *and* folk psychology is their subject matter: the mind, and mental states. But mental states are a messy business, which raise all sorts of deep questions. For example, what is a belief? What is intelligence? Is there a difference between empathy and understanding? How do people learn new things? How did the mind evolve? This is where philosophy enters the picture.

This semester, we'll be trying to answer questions like this. A word of warning: this is a reading intensive class, and your grade will depend on taking in a ton of information and performing well on quizzes. It's also a participation intensive class, so be ready to contribute to discussion in class and on the class website. You'll also have to produce one extended piece of thoughtful, well researched writing by the end of the semester. But there's a payoff from this: work hard, and by the end of the semester, you won't just have a good grade – you'll have a better grasp on what it is to be human.

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) – most Thursdays, we'll have a short quiz. We'll have 10-12 quizzes over the course of the semester covering the reading announced in advance from the previous class. Each quiz will have eight or so 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 at least 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). Additionally, any student who completes at least 10 quizzes is guaranteed a minimum of a C+ (again, 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 I also count submissions or discussions on the class website as counting for your participation grade. Talking in class and contributing to the website are the main ways to get a high participation score, but you can also boost your score simply by being engaged and on time. That means looking at me during the class and getting here for 2.30. 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).

REQUIRED TEXTS

I'm going to recommend two books for the course. The primary book we'll be using is *The Philosophy of Psychology* by Peter Carruthers and George Botterill. It's quite a high level introduction, and unless you're already experienced in philosophy of mind and psychology, you'll probably find it quite a challenging read. We'll be using it for at least 3-4 quizzes, and it'll be very useful when writing your final paper. You can find it here: <http://goo.gl/kR2K98>

A second text I recommend is *Thought: A Very Short Introduction* by Tim Bayne. We'll be using this for at least two quizzes, and it contains gentler and more accessible introductions to many of the topics we'll be covering. You can find it here: <http://goo.gl/FCH311>

CLASS ID NUMBERS

I'll post everyone's scores for the quizzes over the course of the semester. This will allow you to gauge how well you're doing relative to the rest of the class, and help you avoid falling behind. However, to protect anonymity, I'll also assign you an ID number. Please use this ID number rather than your name when completing quizzes, and also use it for comments on the website (see below).

CLASS WEBSITE

I'm going to be using reddit.com as a homepage for the class, specifically the subreddit www.reddit.com/r/phi3035spring2015. All important course documents will be available there. I'll also occasionally post interesting material, but it's primarily intended to give you all a place to have discussions. There are also a bunch of links to useful philosophical resources there!

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 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: What are mental states?

Psychology studies mental states, but what exactly *are* mental states? What is emotion? What is belief? How do they fit into a scientific picture of the world? How we answer these questions will affect how we approach psychology, not to mention how we think about human beings' place in nature. We'll examine five main approaches to this question: dualism, behaviorism, identity theory, functionalism, and eliminativism.

Topic 2: Are mental states real?

No-one would deny that there are molecules, animals, or planets. Most people would also accept that there are things like interest rates, music genres, and football teams. Are mental states more like the first set of thing, or more like the second set of things? Would it even be true to say that, in some sense, mental states don't even exist?

Topic 3: Consciousness and attention

Can all mental states occur both consciously and unconsciously? What is attention, and what role does it play in the mind? What are the different types of attention?

Topic 4: 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? How do children learn about the world

Topic 5: Learning, Rationality, and Intelligence

Do humans come preprogrammed with knowledge about the world or are we born as blank slates. What is rationality, and how rational are we? Is there one such thing as 'intelligence', and if so, how is it important?

Topic 6: Evolutionary psychology

Can evolution help us understand the mind? What are some pitfalls of evolutionary approaches?

Topic 7: 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?

IMPORTANT DATES

February 12 (Thursday): Lincoln's Birthday - College is closed; no classes are scheduled

April 3-11 (Friday-Saturday): Spring Recess - no classes are scheduled

April 12 (Sunday): Beginning of *Game of Thrones* Season 5.

May 16 (Saturday): Last day of classes

May 23 (Sunday): Final papers due