



PHI 320:
Philosophy of Mind
with Dr. Sarah Vincent



Course Description

The advertised course description is as follows: “How should we understand minds? Are minds and mental states physical or non-physical? Is the mind identical to the brain, or is it somehow more than that? Our consideration of questions like these will be facilitated by discussions of basic problems in the philosophy of mind, such as ‘the mind-body problem’ and ‘the problem of other minds,’ as well as several theories like dualism, behaviorism, materialism, functionalism, connectionism, and embodied cognition. With this foundation in place, we will transition into talking about more specialized areas of philosophy of mind, including the philosophy of psychiatry and the philosophy of animal cognition.”

To elaborate on the general description above, this course is divided into three sections. First, we will engage in an overview of some major theories regarding how we should conceptualize the ‘mind.’ These theories include (Cartesian) dualism, (logical) behaviorism, (type) materialism, functionalism, connectionism, and (biological and enactive approaches to) embodied cognition. But adopting a sort of ‘one-size-fits-all’ goal when it comes to understanding minds means that the philosophy of mind, as a discipline, has been neglective of or – worse – profoundly inaccurate about what I’ll call ‘othered’ minds until very recently. This brings us to the second section of the course, in which we will discuss the othered minds of women, persons of color, and children (most especially infants). Our third and final section of the course will explore the complementarity of philosophy of mind with ethics through the lenses of philosophy of psychiatry and animal cognition.

Structure-wise, the first section on major theories of mind differs from the other two; this is because those latter two sections will involve reading assigned articles written by contemporary philosophers who are arguing for specific positions. For each of those readings, there will be a class session dedicated to exposition and evaluation; you will need to complete the readings before the relevant classes, but I will help guide you through understanding those arguments before we discuss the strengths and weaknesses of each position defended in those arguments. Then, a second class session for each reading will be dedicated to in-class question/response activities. On exposition/evaluation days, classes will be a mix of lecture and discussion – a blend of ‘I (the professor) do’ and ‘we (all of us) do.’ Activity days that follow that preparation gives students the responsibility for completing tasks and sharing their answers – ‘you (groups of students) do.’ I find that most students truly benefit from this scaffolded ‘I do, we do, you do’ approach to our time together; I hope you too will find the structure helpful.