



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 ‘the mind’ means that philosophy of mind, as a discipline, has at times been neglectful of or – worse – profoundly inaccurate about both neurodivergent and non-human animal minds. So, we will dedicate the second half of the course to more specialized areas of philosophy of mind. In the second section of the course, we will engage philosophy of psychiatry, while our third and final section of the course will explore the philosophy of animal cognition. In both the second and third sections, we’ll also do a bit of work around how these developments in philosophy of mind are impacting ethics.

Structure-wise, the first section on major theories of mind differs from the other two, in that it will involve more basic, expository reading and will move at a faster pace of two readings/topics per week. However, the latter two sections will involve reading assigned articles written by contemporary thinkers 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 relevant reading before this session, 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 (teams 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.