Philosophy of Psychology
2016–17

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Office Location: 5.12, Dugald Stewart Building

Office House: Monday mornings, book a slot using this link to arrange a meeting: https://calendly.com/sprevak/office-hours-meeting

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Course Aims and Objectives

This course will survey philosophical issues particular to the scientific study of the mind, with a special focus on the methodology and explanatory practices of psychology. We will cover questions such as:

- Can subjective reports count as evidence?
- Is ‘unconscious inference’ a coherent concept?
- What can evolution tell us about our minds?
- Do mental representations considered as computational states "mean" anything?
- Does the mind extend outside the head?

By the end of the course, the student should be able to:

- Examine the basic literature on psychological explanation
- Make use of the empirical literature in a philosophical context
- Critically discuss the evidential support for and theoretical significance of unconscious mental processes

Readings

For each week, readings are listed below. Readings include core and secondary readings. The core readings for each week are starred (*).

Core readings are the material that it is your responsibility to read before each class.

Core readings are also the material on which your weekly online discussions will be based (see below). Please do delve into the further reading too; these should be your first port of call when writing your essay.

Some hints: Read the core readings carefully. You may find an article challenging or difficult—persist! If you do not understand something, read it again, think about it, try to make sense of it in your own words. If after multiple attempts to make sense of a
passage, you still cannot, then there is a good chance that you have identified a real problem in the article—a perfect point to raise in your discussion forum, in the class, or to form the basis of an excellent essay! Jim Pryor has some wonderful tips for reading philosophy (as he says, 'you should expect to read a philosophy article more than once')

Seminar Content and Schedule

In trying to understand the nature of psychology as a discipline and analyze it philosophically, we will be interested in questions such as:

- What are the primitive objects?
- What counts as evidence?
- What counts as an explanation?

The history of psychology is a history of different answers to these questions, and with each shift, the philosophical understanding of psychology has become richer and more subtle. Consequently, we’ll be looking at how these questions have been debated at key moments in the development of the study of mind.

Week 1: What is (philosophy of) psychology?

Psychology as a science dates back at least to Aristotle’s *De Anima* (4th century BCE). During the 17th century scientific revolution, just as physics and astronomy had been reformed by changing concepts of explanation, attempts were made to reform psychology by following new explanatory practices. However, it was only in the 19th century that psychology emerged as a full-fledged quantitative science, and only in the 20th that philosophy of psychology emerged as a field distinct from psychology itself. In this introductory week, we survey the changing explanatory practices which define the early history of psychology, from Aristotle’s teleological account, through Descartes’ mechanisms, and Hume’s associationism. We also discuss the difference between philosophy of psychology and philosophy of mind.

Class Readings

- (* ) Aristotle (4th cent BC) *De Anima*, Book 2, Ch. 1.

Secondary Readings

- Herrnstein and Boring (eds.) *Sourcebook in the History of Psychology*, Harvard UP (1965), Sec. XV.
- James, W. (1890) *The Principles of Psychology*, vol. 1, Ch. 1.
Week 2: Explanation: 1st and 3rd Person

Psychology as a science is distinct in its use of first personal evidence, i.e. evidence directly reported by subjects about their experiences. What methodological pitfalls are presented by this unique subject matter? How does it affect the nature of psychological explanations? How does the psychologist’s own first person perspective affect his or her attempts to develop a third person theory of the mind? This week we examine James’ methodological analysis of these questions, and in particular his warning against “the psychologist’s fallacy”, and Dennett’s explanation-oriented analysis of the distinction between the personal and the sub-personal.

Class Readings

- (*) James, W. (1890) *The Principles of Psychology*, vol. 1, Ch. 7.

Secondary Readings


Week 3: Behaviorism

The behaviorist movement dominated psychology in the first half of the 20th century. It arose as an attempt to remove the dangers of the subjective perspective, and turn psychology into a quantified mathematical science. In addition to the basic motivations and methods of behaviorism, we’ll examine the shift in attitudes from the first generation of behaviorists (represented by Watson) to the neo-behaviorism of Skinner and his peers. This shift is characterized in terms of (i) the move from molecular (physiologically defined) to molar (more broadly defined) notions of behavior; (ii) the shift from classical conditioning to operant conditioning (conditioning of voluntary behaviors); and (iii) a shift toward positing variables (standing for internal states) which are not directly observable.

Class Readings

- Koffka, K. (1938) *The Principles of Gestalt Psychology*, Ch. 1+2
Week 4: Critiques of Behaviorism

After dominating psychology for the first half of the 20th century, behaviorism was sharply criticized, famously in an article by Noam Chomsky arguing it could not account for language. He criticizes the types of theories allowed by behaviorists and advocates the need in linguistics for the positing of rich internal and innate structures. During the dominance of behaviorism, however, a contemporary voice of dissent had come from the gestalt psychologists, who criticized the supposed scientific rigor of behaviorist methodology. Köhler, for example, argues that appeals to subjective experience necessarily play a role in sciences such as physics, so cannot be ruled out as a source of evidence. This week we compare these two critiques.

Class Readings

- (*) Köhler, Gestalt Psychology, Ch. 1 & 2.

Week 5: Unconscious Inferences

An issue that plagued debates about behaviorism was the question of how much internal structure to posit in a psychological theory. A related question is the distinction between conscious and unconscious structure—this week we look at the specific example of unconscious sensations and inferences. The view that there are unconscious sensations and inferences played a critical role in the development of Helmholtz’s classic theory of perception. Despite repeated “refutations” (we look at one from Köhler although others are listed under secondary readings) the positing of unconscious inferential processes has risen to prominence again (see, for instance the article by Clark). Were the arguments against the positing of unconscious processes in error? Or is the new notion of unconscious inference immune to the classic critiques?

Class Readings

section of volume 3 of 1910 translation).
○ (*) Köhler, *Gestalt Psychology*, Ch. 3.

Secondary Readings


Week 6: Gestalt and the New Mechanism

The success of Newton’s theory of gravity seemed to defeat Descartes’ project to give all scientific explanations in the form of mechanisms. Yet the idea of mechanisms as explanations has recently returned to philosophy of science with a vengeance. Driven by the idea that physics, where explanations take the form of laws, is not paradigmatic of all science, the new mechanism movement is motivated by the idea that explanations in biology, chemistry, and cognitive science come in the form of mechanisms. While Köhler in 1947 argued the mechanisms were inadequate, and dynamical structures needed to be posited to explain psychological phenomena, this view looks very much like the new mechanism proposed by Bechtel, which emphasizes the importance of simulations for understanding the dynamical properties of the brain and mind. To what extent can the new mechanism subsume the distinctive features of gestalt psychology?

Class Readings

○ (*) Köhler, *Gestalt Psychology*, Ch. 4 & 5.

Secondary Readings

New Mechanism:


Many relevant papers by Bechtel are available on his website. Here are some of particular interest:


**Gestalt Psychology:**


**Week 7: Essay writing workshop**

This week is different from the others. Rather than read a book chapter or journal article, you will read some essays from past students on this course. Your job is to mark the essays and give feedback on them based on the Philosophy-specific marking scheme:

- Your reading for the class are essays of past students from this course (in Dropbox folder).
- Your task for your discussion post is be to mark 2 those essays (assign them a numerical mark) and to provide constructive feedback on each essay (what they did well, what they could do better, how they could improve their grade).
- State clearly in your discussion post which essay you are marking
- Look in the handouts folder for week 7 for (a) my guidelines for writing a good essay and (b) the Philosophy-specific marking scheme used for marking essays.
- Use the marking scheme to justify your marks and as a basis for providing feedback.
- MSc students – please pick the MSc essay in Dropbox plus any 1 of the UG essays to mark.
- A discussion post should be no longer than ~400 words.
- If you have any questions, please let me know!

**Week 8: The Role of Meaning?**

The gestalt psychologists foreshadowed computationalism and modern modeling-based approaches to psychology, but their approach turned on taking *meaning* as a basic component of psychological explanation. Jerry Fodor has argued that the
computational theory of mind cannot motivate attributions of meaning at all, i.e. there is no place for meaning in psychological explanations.

Class Readings


Secondary Readings


Week 9: Inference and Belief in Simpler Minds

What are the minds of children like, of animals? Do they have beliefs and concepts? Can they perform inferences? We’ve seen abstract theoretical arguments for and against “meaning” as an appropriate part of psychological science. What about our attempts to analyze the behavior of animals and children, however? Can these be explained more easily in scientific terms if we appeal to meanings? We survey the answers to some of these questions by looking at the relationship of anthropological and developmental psychology to these more abstract questions.

Class Readings


Secondary Readings

Week 10: Evolutionary Psychology

One strategy for naturalizing meaning and for introducing a new source of evidence into cognitive psychology is to consider evolutionary constraints on the development of the mind. Cosmides and Tooby have suggested one influential approach to this task, positing “massive modularity,” i.e. the view that evolution instilled the mind with a large number of specialized sub-processes, or modules. But their so-called “evolutionary psychology” is only one strategy for taking evolutionary evidence into account. More generally, the question for an evolutionary psychology, just as for any evolutionary theory, is to analyze processes in terms of the problematic notion of “optimality.” Sterelny surveys and contrasts the explanatory role of optimality models with their heuristic role.

Class Readings

- (*) Cosmides, L. and J. Tooby (1997) "Evolutionary Psychology: A Primer"
  http://psychology.psy.sunysb.edu/ewaters/552/PDF_Files/EvolPsych.PDF

Secondary Readings

Week 11: The extended mind

We finish the course by looking at ‘externalism’ about the mind: the idea that the mind is not contained wholly inside the head. Various forms of externalism have been proposed in recent years. One of the most exciting, radical versions of externalism, and one that appears to have the greatest implications for psychology, is the extended mind hypothesis. In this class, we examine the extended mind hypothesis and we assess the best argument for it.

Class Reading


Secondary Readings