Perception and Action: From Inner Zombies to the Predictive Brain
Course Handbook, 2017/18

Course Organiser: Dr. Keith Wilson (k.wilson@ed.ac.uk, @drkeithwilson)
Office Location: Room 4.04c, Dugald Stewart Building
Office Hour: TBA

Course Secretary: Ann-Marie Cowe (annmarie.cowe@ed.ac.uk, 0131 650 3961)
Office Location: Room G.06, Dugald Stewart Building

1. Overview
This course examines conceptual issues arising from recent philosophical and empirical work on the nature of perception and action. The topics include philosophical, psychological, neuroscientific, and computational perspectives on issues such as:

- What is perception, and how does perception relate to action?
- How many senses do we have, and is it possible to use one sense, e.g. touch, to replace another, e.g. vision?
- How should we explain the subjective character of hallucinations and illusions?
- What does change-blindness really suggest about our knowledge of the visual scene?
- Do sensorimotor or Bayesian theories offer an adequate account of perception and action?
- Do the philosophical distinctions between perception, cognition and action accurately reflect the underlying brain processes?

Note: lectures for the M.Sc. course (PHIL11126) are shared with the undergraduate course (PHIL10148).

2. Objectives and Outcomes
By the end of this course, students should gain:

- A sound understanding of some of the main conceptual issues arising from recent empirical work on the nature of perception and action
- An ability to think and write critically and knowledgeably about these themes
- An ability to present their ideas and arguments in informal discussion in the seminars

3. Assessment
This course will be examined on the basis of two pieces of assessed work:

- Mid-term essay: 1,500 words, consisting of 40% of the overall assessment mark, due midday, 1 March 2018.
- End-of-semester essay: 2,500 words, consisting of 60% of the overall assessment mark, due midday, 26 April 2018.
Essays should answer a question from an agreed list provided on Learn, and should be uploaded electronically to Learn. Please contact the Course Secretary in the Teaching Office if you are having problems uploading your essay. (Details of M.Sc. course assessment will be provided at the first tutorial.)

The word count of your essay, including footnotes but excluding bibliography, must not exceed the specified word limit. The precise word count must be written on the coversheet, and overlong essays will be penalised, as per departmental policy.

Please consult the PPLS Undergraduate Student Handbook for further information about general regulations and advice around coursework and assessments.

4. Lectures and Seminar Readings

You must read the essential reading, which is starred and highlighted in bold, in preparation for the seminars, and preferably one or more of the optional readings where possible. Additional further readings are provided for reference; e.g. if the topic interests you and/or you intend to write an essay on this topic. Useful sources and background reading may also be found in the Additional Reading section below. (Note that essential readings will be made available online via Learn.)

Week 1: The Problem of Perception

What problems do the phenomena of perceptual illusions and hallucinations present for common-sense accounts of experience and perceptual knowledge?


Further reading:


Week 2: ‘Direct’ versus ‘Indirect’ Perception

How should we respond to the traditional argument from illusion, and what does it mean to say that perception is ‘direct’ or ‘indirect’?


Further reading:


Week 3: Content and Phenomenal Character

Do perceptual experiences represent objects and properties in the world, and if so, what kind of content do they have?


Further reading:


Week 4: Hallucination and Illusion

Do we need representational content to explain the subjective character of hallucinations and illusions?


Further reading:


Week 5: Individuating the Senses

How many senses do we have, and is it possible to use one sensory modality, e.g. touch, to replace another, e.g. vision?

- Macpherson, Fiona (2011a). ‘Taxonomising the Senses’. Philosophical Studies 153 (1): 123–42. (See also the introduction to Macpherson 2011b below.)

Further reading:

Week 6: Multisensory Perception

Are there genuinely multimodal perceptual experiences, and if so, what does this tell us about how the brain processes sensory information?

* O’Callaghan, Casey (2015). ‘Not All Perceptual Experience is Modality Specific’. In Stokes, Matthen and Biggs (eds.), pp. 133–165.


Further reading:


Week 7: Change Blindness

What does change-blindness really suggest about our knowledge of the visual scene?


Further reading:


Week 8: Sensorimotor Contingency Theory

What is sensorimotor contingency theory, and does it offer an adequate account of perception and action?


Further reading:


Week 9: Bayesian Brains and Predictive Processing

Are our brains Bayesian prediction machines, and if so, what implications does this have for philosophical accounts of experience and action?


Further reading:


**Week 10: Perception, Cognition, Action**

Do traditional philosophical distinctions between perception, cognition and action accurately reflect the underlying brain processes?


Further reading:


**Week 11: Reflections – Rethinking Perception and Action**

Revision lecture: how should we characterise the relation between perception, action, and the world?


There are no additional readings this week. Instead, the class will be divided into groups and each group asked to take 15 minutes to agree upon 5 things we’ve learnt about perception and action, and 5 outstanding puzzles. Each group will then appoint a spokesperson to share their lists, and we will discuss each item in turn, noting where the two groups agree and differ in their estimation of the lessons and outstanding puzzles. Feel free to raise any other questions about the course contents that you’d like to discuss.
5. Additional Reading

Suggested sources for further and general background reading include:

(1) General Collections

- *Perception and Its Modalities*. Edited by Dustin Stokes, Mohan Matthen and Stephen Biggs (Oxford University Press, 2015)
- *Disjunctivism: Perception, Action, Knowledge*. Edited by Adrian Haddock and Fiona Macpherson (Oxford University Press, 2008)

(2) Introductory Texts (to be sampled rather than followed in sequence)


k.wilson@ed.ac.uk
@drkeithwilson