Advanced Philosophy of Mind and Cognitive Science (PHIL11135)

Spring 2019 Course Guide

People
Course instructor: Dr Sophie Keeling (sophie.keeling@ed.ac.uk)
Course secretary: Ms Becky Verdon (Rebecca.Verdon@ed.ac.uk)
Learning Technologist: Dr Simon Fokt (sfokt@ed.ac.uk)
Academic Support Librarian: Mrs. Anne Donnelly (anne.donnelly@ed.ac.uk)

Course aims and objectives
Having acquired a broad understanding of the philosophy of mind and cognitive science in PHIL11130, this course will focus on one topic in particular: social cognition. That is, the course examines the question of how we understand other people's behaviour. It considers different philosophical theories concerning how we attribute mental states to others, and discusses related questions such as whether this ability is unique to the human species, and whether it is innate. It will also examine the relation between social cognition and further issues such as our knowledge of our own minds. The course is strongly interdisciplinary, and will draw on sources from developmental psychology, neuroscience and anthropology, to support philosophical arguments.

Students should have taken ‘Philosophy of Mind and Cognitive Science’ before taking this course.

Intended learning outcomes
On completion of this course, students will be able to demonstrate:

- Knowledge about the current philosophical debates concerning our ability to attribute mental states to others

- Understanding of some of the primary methodologies used in current cognitive science

- Knowledge of key empirical findings in the field of social cognition, and an understanding of how they can be used to critique philosophical arguments in this area

- The ability to bring analytic and critical skills to bear on texts in both philosophy and psychology

Students will also develop the following transferable skills:

- The ability to present complex ideas in a concise and clear manner in both oral and written work.

- Analytic and critical skills

- The development of research skills, such as using library and online resources
**Teaching and learning**
This course will comprise of pre-recorded lectures and a mix of online seminars and assessed forums. Further, students will take turns to introduce one of the seminars/forums – either in the form of a short verbal presentation or an opening post. This will consist of a summary of the paper in question and several suggestions for discussion.

**Syllabus**
Week 1: Introduction and Folk psychology (synchronous seminar)
Week 2: Theory-theory (synchronous seminar)
Week 3: Simulation theory
Week 4: Mirror neurons (synchronous seminar)
Week 5: Can infants mindread?
Week 6: Flexible learning week
Week 7: Cross-cultural variations in theories of mind (synchronous seminar)
Week 8: Altruism in non-human animals
Week 9: Confabulation (synchronous seminar)
Week 10: Social cognition and knowledge of our own minds: asymmetric accounts
Week 11: Social cognition and knowledge of our own minds: symmetric accounts (synchronous seminar)
Week 12: Review

**General recommended reading**


- Lavelle, J.S. (2019). *The Social Mind: A Philosophical Introduction*. Taylor and Francis. [This is the core textbook for the class].


**Week 1: Introduction and Folk Psychology**
Welcome to Advanced Philosophy of Mind and Cognition! The course will focus on how we think about other minds (and how this relates to the way in which we think about our own mind). This session will introduce the topic of social cognition and examine a foundational idea that sets the scene for further debates in the field: folk psychology.

**Class reading:**

Secondary Reading:

**Week 2: Theory-theory**

Weeks 2-5 will introduce the main theories concerning how we understand other people’s behaviour. This seminar looks at how *Theory-theorists* answer this question. Theory-theorists maintain that we need a *theory of mind* in order to grasp mental state terms. We therefore need to have sufficient grasp of this theory in order to attribute mental states to others. In this class we examine the view that this theory is pre-dominantly learned, later in the course we will consider more nativist accounts.

Class Readings:

Secondary Readings (many of these are useful for further weeks as well):
**Week 3: Simulation theory**

In this week we look at the earliest challenger to the *Theory-theory* in the form of *Simulation theory*. Simulation theorists think that we attribute mental states to others by ‘putting ourselves in their shoes’, using the mechanisms which generate our own emotional responses and mental states to ‘simulate’ the situation of the other person.

**Class readings:**

**Secondary readings:**

**Week 4: The direct perception of mental states and mirror neurons**

As saw in the previous week’s seminar, Simulation theorists have appealed to neuroscience in support of their claims. Mirror neurons are a group of neurons which are active both when we engage in actions and when we perceive those actions in others. But how should we interpret these data? In this seminar we will examine the role of mirror neurons in different theories of social cognition, focussing on Vittorio Gallese and Shaun Gallagher’s claim that the discharge of mirror neurons somehow enables us to ‘directly perceive’ mental states. We will also look at theories which give mirror neurons a less explanatory and more predictive role.

**Class reading:**

Secondary reading:


**Week 5: Can infants mindread?**

There is a lively debate in cognitive science about how best to explain the ‘gap’ between young infants (6 – 15 months) ability to pass non-verbal false belief tasks and older children’s (3-4 years) failure in verbal versions of the task. This leads Apperly and Butterfill to endorse the ‘two systems’ account of mindreading.

Class reading:


Secondary reading:

Week 7: Cross-cultural variations in theories of mind

In the late 90’s and early 2000’s, researchers in developmental psychology began to question the premise that we understand other people’s behaviour (primarily) by attributing mental states to them. Perhaps this is simply an artefact of a Western culture, where most of these experiments are carried out, with its focus on the individual. Cross-cultural studies started to take place contrasting the behaviour of participants from East Asian societies (traditionally believed to have a strong ‘collectivisit’ ethic) and Western societies. Anthropologists also studied belief attribution in traditional societies. The results, as we will see, are a mixed bag. But they promise to shed light on which parts of our social cognition are innate, and which may be affected by the culture in which we grow up.

Class reading:

Secondary reading:


**Week 8: Altruism in non-human animals**

Helping others requires being able to know what they need. But how close is the relation between social cognition and altruistic behaviour? What does altruistic behaviour even consist in? In this seminar we will look at how philosophers have conceived of the altruism/egoism debate, including the important distinctions between *ethical egoism, psychological egoism, and evolutionary egoism*. We then turn to the question of whether the ability to attribute goals to others, and whether altruistic behaviour exists in species other than our own. We will look at the recent work of the psychologist Frans de Waal, as well as more traditional philosophical accounts of altruistic behaviour.

**Class Reading**


**Secondary Reading**


- Butler, J. (1726). *Sermon XI. Upon the love of our neighbour*. Available through Project Guttenberg.

- Sterelney, K. & Griffiths, P. *Sex and Death*. University of Chicago Press. *Ch.8*


**Week 9: Confabulation**
The course so far has mostly examined how subjects learn of other’s mental states (although simulation theory made important reference to our capacity to learn of our own). Over the next three weeks we will consider the relations between social cognition and self-knowledge.

Week 8 focuses on confabulation. Roughly, ‘confabulation’ is the phenomenon whereby subjects form false post-hoc beliefs explaining their attitudes and actions. We will examine how best to categorise confabulation, before considering how to explain it. Specifically, we will consider whether the failures in self-knowledge in such cases are profoundly social: do subjects make mistakes because they are motivated to please their interlocutors?

Class readings:

Secondary readings:

**Week 10: Social cognition and knowledge of our own minds: asymmetric accounts**

Social cognition is often held to importantly differ from subjects’ knowledge of their own minds, both in terms of the mechanism by which such ascriptions are formed and how they
are justified. We might think that subjects have a special mode of access to their own minds which others lack. Indeed, this may also form the basis of our account of social cognition.

Class readings:

Secondary readings:

**Week 11: Social cognition and knowledge of our own minds: symmetric accounts**

This week considers objections to the view discussed in week 9. Here we will examine the contention that self-knowledge importantly resembles our knowledge of other people’s minds – both are acquired and justified in the same way.

Class readings:

Secondary readings:


**Week 12: Revision**

A chance to look back over the course and its themes.

**Office Hours**

My office hours are 2-3pm on Wednesdays. Alternatively, please email me to arrange an appointment.

**Assessment**

This course has two components of assessment:

- 2,500 word essay due at the end of term. This is **85%** of your mark for this course. **Due Tuesday 23rd April 2019 by 12 pm GMT.**
- 5 x discussion posts (see below). This is **15%** of your mark for this course.

You will also have the opportunity to submit a midterm formative essay. The deadline for this is **Thursday 7th of March 2019 by 12 pm GMT.** For more details regarding the formative essay and general advice for writing please see the Programme Handbook.

For both essays, I will discuss/comment on one page plans. I will try to provide written feedback within a week.

Students will be required to set their own questions for both essays. Please send me your questions for approval at least a week in advance.

**Assessed discussion posts**

Your participation grade for this course will be based on your interactions on the course forum. On weeks where there is no synchronous seminar you will be asked to contribute to the online discussion board. *Each post should not exceed 300 words.* Your collective posts for each week will receive a mark out of ten. This is divided into two parts: a mark out of five for the depth of your contribution; and a mark out of five for the quality of your response to the other posts. Note that if you’re the first to post for a given week you will need to add a further response post in order to get the second of these marks. I will use the following rubric below to assess your posts.
All posts must be online by midnight on Sunday GMT. Late posts will be counted as a failure to participate.

Penalties for failure to participate:

Students will be deducted 5% of their grade for this component of the course for each post missed. For example, if a student submits just three posts over the semester, s/he will have 15% deducted from their final grade for this component. If a student submits no posts then they will receive a mark of 0. If a student has a good reason why they have been unable to post to the forum (e.g. serious illness), they can contact their Personal Tutor to apply for Special Circumstances.

Where to post:

### Depth of post

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<td>No post, or irrelevant content.</td>
<td>A poor contribution, may contain factual errors.</td>
<td>An adequate contribution but does not go beyond the material covered in the lecture.</td>
<td>A good contribution highlighting an important challenge to, or development of the topic.</td>
<td>A very good contribution containing an original challenge to, or elaboration on, the topic.</td>
<td>A creative and insightful comment demonstrating outstanding comprehensio of the debate.</td>
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### Quality of response to other posts

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<td>No post, or post which does not refer to any aspect of the discussion.</td>
<td>Contains only a short, non-descriptive, response to the other posts.</td>
<td>Mentions some other contribution but without providing a detailed response.</td>
<td>Offers a response to another’s post by suggesting a challenge, or developing an idea further.</td>
<td>Develops a careful and detailed response or challenge to another’s post.</td>
<td>An excellent response which develops the idea much further, and/or suggests possible response to challenges.</td>
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You should post the contribution you wish to be assessed in the weekly discussion forum marked ‘Debate’. If you want to post something which you don’t want to be assessed, e.g. a straightforward clarification request, then you should start a new forum outside of the ‘Debate’ forum.

Facilitating the discussion:

- Be respectful towards the other members of the group. We all know that things we say in emails can sometimes come across as more critical than we intend them to be. You’re all nice people, so just double check your posts before you make them public to make sure nothing can be misinterpreted.

- Start a new discussion thread for each week to keep your discussions organised.

- Don’t be afraid of saying that you don’t understand an aspect of the paper. The marking scheme is designed to reward thoughtful contributions, and not to punish misunderstandings! As you can see in the examples below, there are ways of expressing your confusion which demonstrate that you have thought about the paper and have tried to understand it.

- Read the previous posts carefully! It doesn’t take long, and it will improve the discussion significantly.