MSc in Philosophy, Science, and Religion

Mind, Matter, and Spirit

THET11055
Welcome and Introduction
Welcome to ‘Mind, Matter, and Spirit’! This course is highly interdisciplinary, exploring some of the most significant questions in the field of science & religion: What is mind, and how does it relate to physical matter? How does mind relate to religious conceptions of God, who is often considered to be relational, conscious, and spiritual? Are there limits to what science can tell us about consciousness (both human and divine)? Addressing such questions is an inherently interdisciplinary task, and requires engagement with such fields as philosophy of mind, metaphysics, neurobiology, psychology, and theology. This course introduces students to the complex questions involved, emphasizing theological and philosophical challenges to scientific approaches to mentality, but also scientific challenges to religious claims about the mind.

People

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Office hours

I am happy to meet virtually with students upon request. Please do not hesitate to request an appointment.

Course aims and objectives

The relationship between mind and matter is one of the key questions in the science-and-religion discussion. This course explores the various dynamics of this relationship by engaging with the relevant scientific, philosophical, and religious concepts involved. Students will gain an understanding of what is at stake for theology and religious traditions, philosophy, and the scientific disciplines when addressing the relationship between mind, matter, and possible spiritual realities. Attention is paid to particular concepts and approaches relevant to the mind/matter question, such as: naturalism, physicalism, the question of the soul, panpsychism, and evolutionary pneumatology. The goal is to provide a clear understanding of the conceptual challenges and possibilities for both science and religion when considering the relationship between mentality and the material world. The course will enable students to engage and critically evaluate perspectives from a variety of disciplines on the relationship between mind and matter, and to do so in a manner that prioritizes interdisciplinary dialogue.

Intended learning objectives

On completion of this course, the student will be able to:

- Demonstrate an understanding of key scientific, philosophical, and religious approaches to the relationship between mind and matter.
- Demonstrate the ability to engage in interdisciplinary analysis of given aspects of the mind/matter relationship, bringing science and religion into constructive conversation with each other.
- Develop an ability to critically engage key texts within an interdisciplinary context.
- Engage in constructive and critical debate with peers.
- Demonstrate an ability to identify what is at stake (scientifically and theologically) in various approaches to the course themes.
Learning, teaching and assessment

Syllabus
Schedule of lectures, seminars, tutorials and assessments

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Topics and Required Reading

(Additional recommended readings, as well as required readings, can be found on the Resource List within the course’s Learn Page.)

Week 1 – Mind and Matter
What is reality? Do religious conceptions of reality require a strict distinction between the ‘natural’ and ‘supernatural’? What is the role of mind in the relationship between nature and the supernatural? This week explores the metaphysical and philosophical topics of naturalism, materialism, and physicalism.

Essential Reading:


Week 2 – God and World
What is the relationship between God and the physical universe? Is the mind natural or uniquely spiritual? Subjects include theistic naturalism, panentheism, and the “causal joint.”

Essential Reading:

Week 3 – What is a Person?: Soul

This week examines theological anthropology, and the relationship between mind, body, and soul.

Essential Reading:


Week 4 – What is a Person?: The Imago dei

What does it mean to be made in the “image of God”?

Essential Reading:


Week 5 – What is a Person?: Mind and Body

What does it mean to be conscious, and what role should intuition play in our approach to the mind-body problem? This week examines the so-called “Hard Problem of Consciousness,” and interdisciplinary perspectives on the relationship between mind and body.

Essential Reading:

Recommended Video: David Chalmers, “The Hard Problem of Consciousness.” Serious Science. URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C5DfnlZPGw


Philip Clayton, ‘Neuroscience, the Person, and God: An Emergentist Approach,’ Zygon 35:3 (613-652.


Week 6 – AI and Mind

What does the continuing development of AI say about the relationship between mind and matter?

Essential Reading:


Alan Turing, ‘Computing Machinery and Intelligence’. In Epstein, Roberts, and Beber, eds., Parsing the Turing Test (Springer, 2009), pp 23-65.

Week 7 – ‘God Spots’, Near-death Experiences, and Neurotheology: How might spiritual experiences relate to the brain?

It would appear uncontroversial to assume that experiences we classify as ‘religious’ – such as experiences of God – might have corresponding brain activity associated with them. What might a theologically sensitive approach to such experiences look like?
Essential Reading:


Week 8 – Transcendence: Mysticism, Religious Experience, and Religious Naturalism

How should the human experience of transcendence be understood? This week examines both religious and non-religious approaches to exceptional, transformative spiritual experiences.

Essential Reading:


Week 9 – Panpsychism

Do all physical realities have experience or experience mentality? This week examines the theological, scientific, and philosophical aspects of panpsychism.
Essential Reading:


Week 10 – Spirit (Part 1): Wolfhart Pannenberg

German theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg is one of the most fascinating thinkers in the science-religious dialogue. Among many other things, he developed an intriguing theory integrating physics (field theory) and pneumatology (the study of the Holy Spirit).

Essential Reading:


Week 11 – Spirit (Part 2): Evolutionary Pneumatology

This week explores various ways of understanding the role of ‘Spirit’ in the natural world, exploring both Christian pneumatology and inter-religious approaches.

Essential Reading:

James K.A. Smith, ‘Is the Universe Open for Surprise? Pentecostal Ontology and the spirit of Naturalism,’ Zygon 43:4


Resources
Reading list materials are available via the course LEARN site.

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Reading list materials are available via the course LEARN site. Please ensure you have completed the library induction tutorial. Should you have any problems accessing any of the materials for the course please contact the course librarian, Mrs Anne Donnelly: anne.donnelly@ed.ac.uk

Assessment

Coursework (85%)
This course will primarily be assessed through the submission of an essay of no more than 3000 words on a topic selected from a list of prompts (prompts to be made available on Learn). This will account for 85% of the student’s course mark. The deadline for the summative essay is Tuesday 20th April 2021 at 12 noon.

There is also the option to submit an optional, non-graded formative essay for additional feedback. This essay cannot be a draft of your final essay, but can be on the same topic. The deadline for the optional essay is Thursday 4th March 2021 at 12 noon.

Participation (15%)
The remaining 15% of the final course mark will be determined by the student’s video post on a specific assigned reading (10%) and successful participation in the online course discussion board (5%).

The video post will be on a single selected reading from the assigned week. It should introduce the text, highlights its major themes, and solicit class engagement. The marking rubric and ‘how to post’ info for the video can be found on Learn. We will discuss these video posts in detail during the first live seminar.

The requirements and guidance for the video post and discussion board engagement are as follows:
Video Post

What to post?
Each student will submit one video post to the course Video Blog section (found under Course Activities). Each video post should discuss one of the further readings provided in this course guide. The post should be approximately 10-12 minutes in length.

When to post?
When you post is determined by the reading/topic you choose to post on. Video posts should be made on the Monday on which the selected topic is due to begin. For example, if you choose to create a video post on the reading Lea F. Schweitz (2020). A Case Study for Lived Religion-and-Science: Theology of Urban Ecology in Week 12, then your video blog post should be posted at the start of Week 12, on or before Monday 29 March, 2021.

When can I choose my topic?
During the first week of the course, students will be able to sign up for a week in which to submit their video posts. Please note that only two students will be able to submit each week, so spaces will be allocated on a first-come, first-served basis once the sign-up sheet is made available in the first week of class.

Summary:
1. Choose a reading from the further readings (not the required readings) provided in this course guide.
2. Identify the topic/week to which the reading belongs.
3. When the online scheduler is opened, sign up to post on the appropriate Monday corresponding to the selected reading.
4. The Course Organiser will confirm the dates for which each student should prepare their video posts.

Discussion Board

Discussing weekly topics with one another is an essential component of this course. Weekly posts are expected, and successful engagement is required on at least five weeks (of the student’s choice) throughout the course. ‘Successful engagement’ for a single week is defined as follows: Students are required to contribute at least two posts (maximum 300 words each) on the discussion board in a single week. Posts should engage weekly readings and/or student video blogs. The first post must be posted by midnight (UK time) on Wednesday of the relevant week, and the second post must be posted by midnight (UK time) on Sunday of the same week. These posts are not marked. Each week of successful engagement is worth 1% of the overall course grade, for a maximum of 5%.
How to submit assessments

Submission guidelines and links can be found on the course Learn page.

Marking and feedback

For details of grading criteria, details on word count and referencing, penalties for exceeding the word count or for late submissions, and many other issues please consult the Programme Handbook, available on the Philosophy Hub Page. It is recommended that all students read the Programme Handbook carefully. Feedback for submitted work will be provided within 15 working days.