

Philosophy of Mind

PHIL 3820 · Upper-Division Seminar · 3 Credits

Instructor	Dr. Elena Vasquez, <i>Associate Professor of Philosophy</i>
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Office	Humanities Building, Room 214 · Office hours: Tue & Thu 2:00–3:30 pm
Term	Spring 2025 · January 13 – May 2, 2025
Meetings	Monday / Wednesday / Friday, 10:00–10:50 am, Whitmore Hall 107
Prerequisites	PHIL 1100 (Introduction to Philosophy) or instructor consent

Course Description

What is the mind, and how does it relate to the physical brain? This seminar offers a rigorous, historically grounded, and scientifically informed inquiry into the central problems of the philosophy of mind: the mind–body problem, the nature of consciousness, mental representation, intentionality, and the prospects of artificial minds. Students will engage primary texts ranging from Descartes and Hume to contemporary work by Chalmers, Dennett, and Nagel, supplemented by readings from cognitive science and neuroscience. Weekly discussions, short response papers, and a research paper culminate in a final seminar presentation. By the end of the course, students will be equipped to participate meaningfully in ongoing debates at the intersection of philosophy, cognitive science, and AI.

Learning Objectives

Upon successful completion of this course, students will be able to:

1. Articulate the major positions in the philosophy of mind (dualism, physicalism, functionalism, eliminativism) and their principal objections.
2. Critically analyse primary philosophical texts, identifying arguments, assumptions, and logical structure.
3. Apply philosophical frameworks to contemporary empirical research in neuroscience and artificial intelligence.
4. Construct well-structured, evidence-based philosophical arguments in written and oral form.
5. Evaluate the ethical implications of theories of mind for issues such as personal identity, moral status, and the design of intelligent systems.

Weekly Schedule

Week	Topic	Readings	Assignment Due
1	Introduction & the mind-body problem	Descartes, <i>Meditations</i> II, VI (excerpts)	—
2	Substance dualism & its critics	Ryle, <i>The Concept of Mind</i> , Ch. 1; Princess Elisabeth correspondence	Response 1
3	Behaviourism	Skinner (sel.); Chisholm, "Sentences about Believing"	—
4	Identity theory & eliminativism	Smart, "Sensations and Brain Processes"; Churchland, <i>Scientific Realism</i> , Ch. 2	Response 2
5	Functionalism	Putnam, "The Nature of Mental States"; Block, "Troubles with Functionalism"	—
6	The knowledge argument	Jackson, "Epiphenomenal Qualia"; Nemirow; Churchland reply	Response 3
7	Consciousness & the hard problem	Chalmers, <i>The Conscious Mind</i> , Ch. 1–3; Levine, "Materialism & Qualia"	Paper outline
8	<i>Spring recess — no class</i>	—	—
9	What is it like to be something?	Nagel, "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?"; Lycan reply	Response 4
10	Intentionality & mental content	Brentano (sel.); Fodor, <i>Psychosemantics</i> , Ch. 1; Dretske (sel.)	—
11	Perception & representationalism	Tye, <i>Ten Problems of Consciousness</i> , Ch. 4; Siegel, "The Contents of Perception"	Response 5
12	Personal identity	Locke, <i>Essay</i> , Bk. II Ch. 27; Parfit, <i>Reasons and Persons</i> , Pt. III (sel.)	—
13	Minds, machines, and AI	Turing, "Computing Machinery and Intelligence"; Searle, "Minds, Brains, and Programs"; Dennett reply	Draft paper
14	Embodied & enactive cognition	Clark & Chalmers, "The Extended Mind"; Varela et al. (sel.)	Response 6
15	Student presentations I	—	Presentation
16	Student presentations II	—	Final paper

Grading

Component	Weight	Notes
Weekly response papers (6 ×)	24 %	400–500 words each; due Fridays 11:59 pm
Class participation	16 %	Seminar discussion; attendance is mandatory
Research paper outline	5 %	≈400 words + provisional bibliography
Research paper draft	10 %	2,500–3,000 words; peer review in class
Seminar presentation	15 %	15 min talk + 5 min Q&A, Weeks 15–16
Final research paper	30 %	4,000–5,000 words; due May 5, midnight
Total	100 %	

Grade scale: A = 93–100; A– = 90–92; B+ = 87–89; B = 83–86; B– = 80–82; C+ = 77–79; C = 73–76; D = 60–69; F < 60.

Course Policies

Attendance & participation. Seminar discussion is the heart of this course. More than two unexcused absences will lower your participation grade; four or more will result in a failing grade for that component. Please arrive having completed all readings.

Late work. Response papers may be submitted up to 48 hours late with a 10 % penalty. The research paper draft and final paper are subject to a 5 % per-day deduction. Extensions for documented emergencies must be requested *before* the deadline.

Academic integrity. All written work must be your own, submitted in accordance with the Whitmore College Academic Integrity Policy. Use of generative AI tools to produce submitted text is not permitted. Citation style: Chicago author-date.

Accessibility. Students requiring academic accommodations should contact the Office of Disability Services (ods@whitmore.edu) and provide documentation within the first two weeks of term.

Discussion norms. Philosophical inquiry requires respectful, charitable engagement with ideas you may strongly disagree with. All participants are expected to engage constructively and listen actively.

Reading List

Required Texts

- **David Chalmers** — *The Conscious Mind: In Search of a Fundamental Theory*. Oxford University Press, 1996. ISBN 978-0195117899.
- **Andy Clark** — *Supersizing the Mind: Embodiment, Action, and Cognitive Extension*. Oxford University Press, 2008. ISBN 978-0195333213.
- **Daniel C. Dennett** — *Brainstorms: Philosophical Essays on Mind and Psychology*. MIT Press, 1978 [repr. 1981]. ISBN 978-0262540441.
- **Derek Parfit** — *Reasons and Persons, Part III: Personal Identity*. Oxford University Press, 1984. Selections distributed via course portal.
- **Course Reader** — Compiled Selections. Available for purchase at the campus copy centre or as PDF on the course portal. Includes all journal articles and book chapters listed in the weekly schedule.

Recommended / Further Reading

- **Ned Block, Owen Flanagan, and Güven Güzeldere (eds.)** — *The Nature of Consciousness: Philosophical Debates*. MIT Press, 1997. An indispensable anthology.
- **Patricia Smith Churchland** — *Neurophilosophy: Toward a Unified Science of the Mind/Brain*. MIT Press, 1986. Essential background for the eliminativist tradition.
- **Jerry A. Fodor** — *The Language of Thought*. Harvard University Press, 1975. Foundational for computational theories of mind.
- **Thomas Nagel** — *Mortal Questions*. Cambridge University Press, 1979. Contains “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?”
- **John R. Searle** — *The Rediscovery of the Mind*. MIT Press, 1992. Develops biological naturalism beyond the Chinese Room.
- **Francisco J. Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch** — *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience*. MIT Press, 1991. Foundational text for enactivism.

- **Gilbert Ryle** — *The Concept of Mind*. Hutchinson, 1949 [Routledge, 2009]. The locus classicus of philosophical behaviourism.

This syllabus is subject to minor revision. Any changes will be announced in class and posted to the course portal at least one week in advance.

Whitmore College · Department of Philosophy · Spring 2025