

Phil 98: Debates in Philosophy of Perception Syllabus

Fall 2018
Meeting time: Wednesday 6-8
Meeting location: Emerson 310

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Office Hours: By appointment

Course Description

When we see the world, what exactly do we see? And how do we come to see it?

We use the word ‘see’ in ordinary conversation in a variety of ways, ranging from “I see the cutest dog across the street” to “I see your point”. The vision scientist may think of seeing as what your visual system does in response to sensory stimuli, while philosophers may think of seeing as a type of experience. What does it mean to see something?

To take an ordinary example, looking out at Harvard Yard you might see rows of locked bicycles, a dog barking at a squirrel, and a student anxiously checking her watch. You experience quite a complex scene, yet all that hits your retina is a particular pattern of light. How does your visual system construct such a rich experience of the world from something so minimal? And what are these experiences typically like, for perceivers like you?

In this course, we will consider how we perceive the world, from both philosophical and scientific perspectives. Are we born with the ability to see the world, or do we learn how to see it? Do our beliefs, desires, fears, and emotions influence our perceptions? Do we merely see shapes and colors, or can we also see emotions, relationships, and moral right and wrong?

This course is structured around three major debates in the philosophy of perception, each centered on one of the above questions. These debates are: 1) empiricism vs. nativism, 2) modularity vs. cognitive penetrability, and 3) rich vs. thin contents (for details, see the descriptions below). These controversies are at the heart of our understanding of the human mind. Each unit will examine arguments for both sides of the debate in detail. Students will have the opportunity to form and defend their own positions on these issues, both in writing and in discussion.

This course is interdisciplinary, drawing heavily on material from psychology and neuroscience to shed light on classic philosophical questions. Both science and philosophy are needed to give us a full understanding of the human mind. Not only can experimental results bear on philosophical hypotheses about the way the mind works, but cognitive science can also point us toward important areas of philosophical inquiry. Readings for the course will include classic historical philosophy texts, contemporary philosophy articles, experimental results, and first-personal narratives. We will also visit a psychology lab. We will work as a group to synthesize these diverse sources, and figure out how they bear on the course’s central questions.

Further details on the three debates follow.

1) Empiricism vs. Nativism

Is the way we see the world shaped by experience? Empiricists hold that we come into the world with minds only equipped with the most minimal general learning mechanisms, and build up all of our knowledge from experience. In contrast, nativists hold that our minds come pre-equipped with certain pieces of crucial information. We'll focus on two test cases of aspects of perception that may be innate or learned. First, we'll examine the historical debate between Descartes and Berkeley over how we come to perceive three-dimensional distance, given that the image on the retina is only two-dimensional. We'll then move on to the debate over whether the capacity for object perception is innate or learned, engaging with recent psychological research from the Carey and Spelke psychology labs.

2) Modularity vs. Cognitive Penetrability

If you have a fear of snakes, you're more likely to misperceive a rope as a snake than someone without such a fear. But does this fear only influence what you pay attention to, by calling your eyes toward coils of ropes, garden hoses, and shoelaces, or does it actually transform your very experience when looking at an innocent rope? Modularists hold that the only way that perceptual systems can be influenced by cognitive states like preconceived beliefs, desires, fears, and emotions is through the direction of attention. Once attention is fixed, they hold that perceptual systems operate only according to their own isolated, internal store of information. In contrast, proponents of cognitive penetration hold that cognitive states can truly influence perception, changing how the visual system works. Your snake-fear really can transform the sensory input given by a rope into an experience of a snake. We'll read some classic psychological arguments for and against modularity, as well as some more recent cognitive penetration challenges. We'll also consider the epistemic and moral implications of cognitive penetration, if it does turn out to occur.

3) Rich vs. Thin Contents

What sorts of things do we see exactly? Proponents of thin contents of perceptions hold that we perceive only a very minimal set of properties, such as shape, color, and motion. When looking at a hopping rabbit, you see a light brown oval blob connected to a set of smaller ovals (feet and ears), moving in a repeating arc-like pattern. According to the thin-content view, all other properties (such as being a rabbit, being a herbivore, and being your favorite animal) are not directly seen, but merely judged in response to our more basic visual experiences of shapes, color, and motion. Proponents of rich contents of perception, on the other hand, hold that we can perceptually experience a much wider array of "rich" properties, such as species membership, identity, and one thing causing another. We'll focus on two test cases of rich properties that may or may not be perceived: causation and facial expressions of emotions. We'll consider both introspective and scientific methodologies for determining the contents of perception.

Course Goals

This course will help you develop key skills for doing interdisciplinary work in philosophy and psychology.

- You'll develop a working knowledge of some of the central issues in philosophy of perception.
- You'll learn how to use empirical results to critically assess philosophical theories.
- You'll become familiar with some key test cases for these issues, and the experimental methodologies used in them.
- You'll learn how to design experiments that bear on philosophical views.
- You'll hone your ability to explain theories, arguments, and empirical results clearly and concisely to your peers.
- You'll learn to construct arguments that incorporate both theoretical and empirical considerations.
- You'll learn to both give and receive constructive philosophical feedback, and to develop creative responses to objections.

Assignments

- 1) **Readings:** There will be 1-3 required readings for each meeting. Readings will include both philosophy and psychology articles. Philosophy readings will be both historical and contemporary. Psychology readings will include both overview articles and experimental journal articles. This requires a diverse set of reading skills, which we will work on together.
- 2) **Papers:**
 - You'll write three short papers (~1000 words), one for each unit.
 - You'll rewrite the first paper in response to peer feedback and my comments (~1300 words).
 - You'll rewrite and expand one of the second two short papers into a longer final paper, also in response to peer feedback and my comments (~2000 words).
 - You're required to meet with me at least once while working on the final paper.
 - In the final paper, you'll be encouraged to propose a design for a new experiment that would help assess your thesis.
 - All papers should clearly and concisely argue for a position, either defending one of the sides in the debates we've covered or offering an alternative view.
 - You'll submit a cover letter for each paper, including an abstract, your take on the strengths and weaknesses of the paper, and the improvements you've made from previous work.
- 3) **Presentations:** You'll each give two 10-minute presentations during the semester.
 - **Reading Presentation:** The first presentation will be on a reading from the syllabus. These reading presentations will begin most class meetings. You'll present the main thesis of the article, the author's main argument/evidence for that claim, and some questions for the group to discuss.

- **Final Paper Presentation:** During one of the last few class meetings, you'll each present on your final paper topic. You'll tell the group about your main ideas, and receive feedback that will aid in the writing process.
- Presentations can be done using PowerPoint, a handout, or an alternative medium. Please run your ideas by me if you are interested in doing something outside the box, so I can help strategize.

Expectations

- Read each article twice. A thorough understanding of the assigned reading will be expected at each meeting, in order to participate in discussion.
- Read each article with the goal of being able to summarize its main point and argument. Note any confusions you have, so we can discuss them in class.
- Complete readings and assignments on time.
- Bring printed copies of the readings to class.
- Interpret both authors and your peers charitably.
- Respect your peers in discussion, even when your views differ.
- Come talk to me if any issues come up, so we can work together to resolve them.

Policies and Logistics

Attendance: Attendance is mandatory, and unexcused absences will detract from your grade (see below for details). Please email me at least 24 hours in advance if you need to miss class. If illness comes on with less notice, just notify me when you can.

No Electronics: Please put away all electronics during class. This means you should print the readings and bring them to with you to class. If you have a documented medical reason to use a laptop or other electronic device, please let me know. I may also allow laptops in select circumstances (e.g. presentations), but please check with me first.

Office Hours: Office hours will be by appointment. Just send me an email and we'll find a time.

Papers: I'm happy to talk with you about your papers, either before you turn them in or to explain my feedback after they are returned. I'll read and discuss drafts during office hours or meetings, but I won't send written feedback on drafts (aside from the formally assigned drafts). If you'd like to discuss a paper before you turn it in, please try to set up a meeting with me as far in advance of the deadline as possible. You can also make an appointment with the philosophy department writing fellow to look over your paper (see below for more info).

Collaboration: Feel free to bounce paper ideas off your classmates and other peers, and to read each others' drafts and give feedback. Some of the best philosophy happens this way. If you have a really crucial conversation with someone that helps you make a particular point in your paper, you can cite them to give them credit.

Late Papers: For each day your paper is late, you will lose 1/3 of a grade (e.g. from A- to B+). After 10 days, I will not accept late papers.

Extensions: Extensions will be granted if you have a good reason. Good reasons include illness, family issues, multiple simultaneous deadlines for other courses, and job interviews. If you ask for an extension well in advance (i.e. 2-3 days before the deadline), I will be more willing to grant it. In any event, please email or talk to me rather than just turning in the paper late.

Emails: I'll offer help with questions that only require a short response over email, but anything that requires a long reply will be better dealt with in person at my office hours.

Grading

Attendance and Participation	15%
Presentations	10%
Paper 1	10%
Paper 1 Rewrite	20%
Paper 2	10%
Paper 3	10%
Final Paper	25%

Accessibility

If you need accommodations due to a documented disability, please speak with me and present me with your letter from the AEO (Accessible Education Office) as soon as possible (by the end of the second week of class at the latest), so we can figure out how to make the course work best for you.

Department Writing Fellow

The philosophy department writing fellow is Noel Dominguez. He is available to answer questions about philosophical writing and give feedback on papers. You can schedule a meeting with him at his website:

<https://projects.iq.harvard.edu/phil-dwf>

You can also email him at ndominguez@g.harvard.edu.

Schedule of Readings

Unit 1: Empiricism vs. Nativism

Week 1 (9/5): Distance

Berkeley, G. (1732). *An Essay Towards a New Theory of Vision*. Sections I-XXVIII and XLI-LI.

Week 2 (9/12): Distance cont., **Paper 1 Assignment Distributed**

Copenhaver, R. (2014). "Berkeley on the language of nature and the objects of vision". *Res Philosophica*, Vol. 91, No. 1, 29-46.

Hatfield, G. (2015). "On natural geometry and seeing distance directly in Descartes". In *Mathematizing Space: The Objects of Geometry from Antiquity to the Early Modern Age*, V. De Risi (ed.). Berlin: Birkhäuser.

Week 3 (9/19): Objects

Spelke, E. (1998). "Nativism, empiricism, and the origins of knowledge", *Infant Behavior and Development*, 21 (2) 181-198.

Haith, M. (1998). "Who put the cog in infant cognition?", *Infant Behavior and Development*, 21 (2), 167-179.

Week 4 (9/26): Objects cont., Lab Visit, **Paper 1 Due**

Excerpts from Carey, S. (2009). *The Origin of Concepts*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Unit 2: Modularity vs. Cognitive Penetrability

Week 5 (10/3): Do Beliefs Influence Perception? **Paper 1 Rewrite Assignment Distributed**

Excerpts from Hanson, N. (1958). *Patterns of Discovery*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Excerpts from Fodor, J. (1983). *Modularity of Mind*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Week 6 (10/10): The El Greco Fallacy, **Paper 1 Rewrite Due**

Stefanucci, J. and Geuss, M. (2009). "Big people, little world: The body influences size perception", *Perception*, 38, 1782–1795.

Banerjee, P., Chatterjee, P., and Sinha, J. (2012). "Is it light or dark? Recalling moral behavior changes perception of brightness", *Psychological Science*, 23, 407–409.

Firestone, C. and Scholl, B. (2014). "Top-down effects on perception where none should be found: The El Greco fallacy in perception research", *Psychological Science*, 25 (1), 38-46.

Week 7 (10/17): Bias, **Paper 2 Assignment Distributed**

Levin, D. and Banaji, M. (2006). "Distortions in the perceived lightness of faces: The role of race categories", *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 501-512.

Eberhardt, J., Goff, P., Purdie, V., & Davies, P. (2004). "Seeing black: Race, Crime, and Visual Processing". *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 87 (6), 876-893.

Week 8 (10/24): Epistemology

Silins, N. (2016). "Cognitive penetration and the epistemology of perception" *Blackwell Compass*.

Siegel, S. (2012). "Cognitive penetrability and perceptual justification" *Nous* 46 (2): 201-222.

Unit 3: Rich vs. Thin Contents

Week 9 (10/31): What do we see? **Paper 2 Due, Paper 3 Assignment Distributed**

Excerpts from Siegel, S. (2010). *The Contents of Visual Experience*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Siegel, S. and Byrne, A. (2017). "Rich or Thin?" In *Current Controversies in Philosophy of Perception*, Bence Nanay (ed.). London: Routledge.

Week 10 (11/7): Causation

Saxe, R. and Carey, S. (2006). "The Perception of Causality in Infancy". *Acta Psychologica* 123, 144-165.

Roser, M., Fugelsang, J., Dunbar, K., Corballis, P. and Gazzaniga, M. (2005) "Dissociating Processes Supporting Causal Perception and Causal Inference in the Brain". *Neuropsychology* Vol. 19, No. 5, 591-602.

Week 11 (11/14): Faces, **Paper 3 Due, Final Paper Assignment Distributed**

Block, N. (2014). "Seeing-as in the light of vision science", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 89, 560-572.

Sacks, O. (2010). "Face-blind" *The New Yorker*, August 30th Issue.

Week 12 (11/21): No Class (Thanksgiving)

Week 13 (11/28): Presentations

Week 14 (12/5): Wrap Up

12/11: **Final Paper Due**