

PHIL 24: Theories of Consciousness in Early Modern Philosophy

Spring 2023 (2-Unit Class)

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Class meetings: Thu 4:30–5:20 pm, 260-012

Office hours: By appointment

| Course Description

What is consciousness? Are all thoughts conscious? Is consciousness the same as reflection? And what distinguishes conscious from unconscious mental states? This course explores how early modern philosophers—Descartes, Locke, Leibniz, and Kant—grappled with these questions and, in doing so, transformed our understanding of the mind. Through close reading of both primary texts and contemporary scholarship, students will examine how historical debates about consciousness anticipate and inform current discussions in philosophy of mind and cognitive science. The course is designed to engage a broad range of students, including those in philosophy, history, psychology, and cognitive science.

| Course Goals

By the end of this course, students will have developed the following knowledge and skills:

- **Historical understanding:** an in-depth grasp of how Descartes, Locke, Leibniz, and Kant theorized consciousness, including the central arguments, innovations, and debates of the early modern period.
- **Argument analysis:** the ability to reconstruct the structure of complex arguments—identifying premises, conclusions, and inferential steps—and to present them clearly.
- **Critical evaluation:** the ability to formulate focused objections to arguments, anticipate replies, and assess the strength of competing positions.
- **Comparative perspective:** the capacity to compare and contrast early modern theories of consciousness with contemporary debates in philosophy of mind and cognitive science.
- **Philosophical writing:** improved skills in writing clear, concise, and well-structured philosophical reflections, essays, and presentations.
- **Interdisciplinary connection:** the ability to connect historical insights to broader questions in psychology and cognitive science, seeing philosophy as part of a living interdisciplinary conversation.

| Course Requirements

Participation (30%)

Active engagement is essential. Students are expected to complete the required readings before each class and contribute to discussion. One unexcused absence is permitted; additional unexcused absences will lower the participation grade.

Written/Presentation Component (70%)

Choose one of the following tracks:

- Weekly Reflections: Seven short reflections (250 words each).
- Final Paper + Reflections: One short paper (1,000 words) plus three reflections.
- Presentation + Reflections: One 15–20 minute presentation plus four reflections.

Weekly Reflections: 250-word short reflection in response to one of the discussion questions assigned for that week (see below). Due Thursdays at noon on Canvas.

Final Paper: A 1,000-word essay responding to a chosen text or topic (approved by Week 7). Due on the last day of class.

Presentation: A 15–20 minute in-class presentation on a reading. Outline due the day before.

| Course Policies

Accessibility and Accommodations:

I am committed to making this course accessible to all students. If you have a disability or other condition that may affect your learning, please connect with the Office of Accessible Education (OAE: <http://oae.stanford.edu>) to arrange accommodations. I also encourage you to talk with me early in the quarter so we can work together to support your learning.

Academic Integrity:

Our class depends on honesty, trust, and fairness. All submitted work must be your own, and any sources you use must be properly cited. If you have questions about what counts as appropriate collaboration or citation, please ask—I would much rather clarify than have you worry. Suspected violations will be referred to the Office of Community Standards.

Respectful Participation:

This course is a space for open, thoughtful dialogue. I ask that we all approach our conversations with respect, generosity, and openness to differing perspectives. Listening carefully and interpreting others' contributions charitably are just as important as speaking. Disagreement is welcome, but it should always be expressed in a way that sustains a constructive and inclusive environment.

Wellbeing and Support:

Learning is challenging, and so is life. If you find yourself facing difficulties—academic, personal, or otherwise—please don't hesitate to reach out. I am happy to discuss adjustments or connect you with campus resources. Stanford also offers a range of support services, including Counselling and Psychological Services (CAPS: <https://caps.stanford.edu>). Taking care of yourself is an essential part of doing well in this class.

| Schedule & Readings

Week 1 – Descartes I

- *Discussion Question:* In Meditation II, Descartes argues that even if he doubts everything, he cannot doubt that he is a *thinking thing*. What exactly does Descartes mean by *thought* here? Why does he take consciousness of thought to be the essential characteristic of the mind?
- *Required:* Descartes, *Meditations* I & II; excerpts from *Objections and Replies*.

- *Optional:* Lilli Alanen (2014), “The Second Meditation and the Nature of the Human Mind”, in David Cunniff (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Descartes’ Meditations*, 88-106.

Week 2 – Descartes II

- *Discussion Question:* According to Simmons’ reading, what is the precise relationship between thought and consciousness in Descartes? Does it make Descartes’ position more plausible in light of contemporary debates about unconscious mental states, or does it create new problems for his theory of consciousness?
- *Required:* Alison Simmons (2012), “Cartesian Consciousness Reconsidered”, *Philosophers’ Imprint* 12(2): 1-21.
- *Optional:* Vili Lähteenmäki (2007), “Orders of Consciousness and Forms of Reflexivity in Descartes”, in Sarah Heinämaa, Vili Lähteenmäki, and Paulina Remes (eds.), *Consciousness: From Perception to Reflection in the History of Philosophy*, Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer, 455-484.

Week 3 – Locke I

- *Discussion Question:* Locke distinguishes between ideas of sensation, which arise from external objects, and ideas of reflection, which arise from the mind’s own operations. How should we understand this distinction, and what exactly is the nature of reflection?
- *Required:* Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book II, Chapters I–II, VI–VII, XXVII, XXIII.
- *Optional:* Gideon Yaffe (2011), “Locke on Consciousness, Personal Identity and the Idea of Duration”, *Noûs* 45(3): 387-408.

Week 4 – Locke II

- *Discussion Question:* How does Coventry and Kriegel’s interpretation help us understand why Locke introduces reflection as a distinct source of ideas, alongside sensation? Is consciousness of one’s mental operations the same as reflection?
- *Required:* Angela Coventry & Uriah Kriegel (2008), “Locke on Consciousness,” *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 25(3): 221-242.
- *Optional:* Shelly Weinberg (2016), “Consciousness in Locke’s Philosophical Psychology”, in *Consciousness in Locke*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 26-51.

Week 5 – Leibniz I

- *Discussion Question:* On several occasions, Leibniz describes consciousness as arising from reflective awareness of perceptions. Does this view make him an early advocate of a higher-order theory of consciousness (where being conscious requires being aware of one’s own mental states), or does his account point in a different direction?
- *Required:* Leibniz, excerpts from *New Essays on Human Understanding*, *Principles of Nature and Grace*, and *Monadology*.
- *Optional:* a) Christian Barth (2014), “Leibniz on Phenomenal Consciousness”, *Vivarium* 52: 333-357; b) Josh Weisberg (2020), “Higher-Order Theories of Consciousness”, in Uriah Kriegel (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Philosophy of Consciousness*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 438-457.

Week 6 – Leibniz II

- *Discussion Question:* Leibniz distinguishes between unconscious perceptions and conscious apperceptions. How, according to Jorgensen's account, should we understand the transition from one to the other? Does Leibniz think there is a sharp boundary between unconscious and conscious mental states, or a gradual unfolding?
- *Required:* Larry Jorgensen (2019), "Perception, Consciousness, and Continuity", in *Leibniz's Naturalized Philosophy of Mind*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 145-171.
- *Optional:* a) Alison Simmons (2001), "Changing the Cartesian Mind: Leibniz on Sensation, Representation and Consciousness", *The Philosophical Review* 110(1): 31-75; b) Alison Simmons (2011), "Leibnizian Consciousness Reconsidered", *Studia Leibnitiana* 43(2): 196-215.

Week 7 – Kant I

- *Discussion Question:* What is the transcendental unity of apperception? In what sense is apperception different from inner sense according to Kant?
- *Required:* Kant, excerpts from the *Critique of Pure Reason* (especially B-Deduction, Paralogisms) and the published *Anthropology*.
- *Optional:* Henry Allison (2004), "The Transcendental Deduction" and "The Paralogisms", in *Kant's Transcendental Idealism*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 159-201, 333-356.

Week 8 – Kant II

- *Discussion Question:* According to Boyle, Kant's account of apperception is not a matter of reflecting on our inner states but a structural feature of thought itself. How does this distinction help us understand why apperception is fundamental to the mind? Do you find Boyle's reading persuasive?
- *Required:* Matthew Boyle (2009), "Two Kinds of Self-Knowledge", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 78(1): 133-164.
- *Optional:* a) Patricia Kitcher (2010), *Kant's Thinker*, Oxford: Oxford University Press; b) Henry Allison (1996), "On naturalizing Kant's transcendental psychology", in *Idealism and Freedom: Essays on Kant's Theoretical and Practical Philosophy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 53-66.

Week 9 – Contemporary Issues I: The Unity of Consciousness

- *Discussion Question:* To what extent can Kant's notion of the transcendental unity of apperception be related to Bayne & Chalmers' distinction between access unity and phenomenal unity? Does Kant anticipate one of these notions, both, or neither?
- *Required:* Tim Bayne & David Chalmers (2010), "What is the Unity of Consciousness?", in Axel Cleeremans and Chris Frith (eds.), *The Unity of Consciousness*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 23-58.
- *Optional:* Farid Masrour (2020), "The Phenomenal Unity of Consciousness", in Uriah Kriegel (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Philosophy of Consciousness*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 208-229.

Week 10 – Contemporary Issues II: The Emergence of Consciousness

- *Discussion Question:* One feature of emergent systems is *gradedness*: complex properties (like consciousness) can appear gradually, rather than all at once. How might this help us think about Kant's or Leibniz's idea that consciousness arises by degrees? Does emergence provide a contemporary framework for making sense of "degrees of consciousness", or does it risk dissolving the phenomenon altogether?
- *Required:* James McClelland (2010), "Emergence in Cognitive Science," *Topics in Cognitive Science* 2: 751-770.
- *Optional:* a) Jorge Morales and Hakwan Lau (2020), "The Neural Correlates of Consciousness", in Uriah Kriegel (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Philosophy of Consciousness*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 232-260; b) Uriah Kriegel (2020), "Beyond the Neural Correlates of Consciousness", in Uriah Kriegel (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Philosophy of Consciousness*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 261-276.