

Can consciousness be explained? – Syllabus

(Last updated 9 Jan, 2020.)

Professor: Neil Mehta

Seminars: Tue/Fri, 4:00–5:30 PM, classroom 3, Saga (RC1)

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Office hours: Mon, 3:00–5:00 PM, Cendana (RC3) 02-02G

“Consciousness ... may be the largest outstanding obstacle in our quest for a scientific understanding of the universe.” – David Chalmers.¹

Overview. There is something it’s like for me to see red, for you to taste a durian, and for a bat to echolocate. In other words, there is something it’s like to be *conscious*. Here is a picture that we will discuss in seminar to help you grasp the concept of consciousness²:



In this course, we ask: can consciousness be explained, and if so, how?

Goals. This seminar has many intertwined goals. To begin with, you will learn a great deal about the philosophy of consciousness. For example, you will learn to:

- Explain key features of consciousness, including the apparent causal efficacy of consciousness and the apparent disconnect between consciousness and the physical world.
- Identify the core theoretical commitments of several major theories of consciousness, such as the identity theory, functionalism, representationalism, relationalism, neutral monism, and dualism.
- Explain which features of consciousness each of these theories can easily account for and which features they have difficulty accounting for.
- State your own objections to existing theories of consciousness, and begin to construct your own solutions to well-known problems about consciousness.

¹ 1996, p. x, *The Conscious Mind*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

² This image is taken from Byrne, A., 2015, “Inverted qualia,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/qualia-inverted/>.

It is an especially exciting time to be working on this topic, for we are in the midst of a scientific and philosophical renaissance in the study of consciousness.

In tandem with this, you will also develop many *argumentative skills* – for example:

- Using interpersonal evidence, working with good argument forms, and evaluating arguments.

But 50% of your grade in this course will be determined by oral activities! Thus, a central focus of this course will be on developing *oral skills*, such as:

- Structuring your ideas effectively.
- Using language that is ordinary, concrete, concise, and precise.
- Demonstrating confidence and expressiveness with your voice and body language.

The environment will be welcoming and supportive! Thus, this course is suitable for students with no prior experience in public speaking, and also for students with a fear of public speaking.

All of the skills taught in this course have very wide applications. Thus, the aim is not just to make you a better scholar. It is to make you a better person, and to help you live a better life.

Accommodations; mood; attendance. I will always do whatever I can to help you to learn. If you require any special accommodations, then please have CTL let me know.

Moreover, you are a mature adult, and I will treat you as such. As long as you are respectful towards others, you may behave in seminar as you wish. For example, you may stretch, leave to use the restroom without asking permission, and (quietly!) eat snacks. Similarly, the only penalty for missing seminar will be the learning opportunities that you forego. You will have *absolute freedom* – but also *absolute responsibility*.³

Pedagogy. Our seminars will be run on the model of the *dance class*.

Assessment. Note that final grades will be determined on a curve, as explained below.

- Homework (warm-ups and cool-downs): 50%.
 - You will have a homework assignment due at 11:59 PM before each seminar. The purpose of these assignments is for you to practice new skills, to fail, and to learn from your failures. For this reason, you will receive *100% credit* simply for completing all of the exercises carefully.
- First oral presentation: 20%. Second oral presentation: 30%.
 - Each of these oral presentations will be 10 minutes long. They will occur in my office, with an audience comprising a few other students and myself.

Screens; texts. We will want to stay engaged with the philosophical ideas and with each other. Thus, please do not use any personal screens (cell phones, laptops, tablets) in seminar. But do bring a printed copy of the relevant text(s) to each seminar. If you forget, then I will ask you to

³ And here I tip my hat to Spider-Man.

leave seminar to get the text. This is not a punishment! It is rather a way to give you the best possible learning opportunities.

Merriment. I will host a start-of-semester party on Fri, 31 Jan and an end-of-semester party on Sat, 18 Apr. These have no particular academic value, and you are not required to attend. However, there will be food, games, and glee!

Miscellaneous. Here are some further policies that you may review on your own.

Academic integrity. Academic integrity is required, as detailed in the College's policies (<https://studentlife.yale-nus.edu.sg/policies/academic-integrity/>). Any breaches of academic integrity will automatically be brought to the attention of a college-wide disciplinary committee. The consequences for academic dishonesty will be severe.

End-of-semester date. The last activity for this seminar is the second oral presentation, which will be completed by Thu, 30 Apr at 6 PM.

Grading. Your final grade for the semester will be determined on a curve. Likewise for grades on all assignments, except for the homework.

In particular, I will sort student scores from highest to lowest, and then map grades according to *roughly* the following distribution: 1/2 A- or higher, 1/3 B+ or B, and 1/6 B- or lower. I will make adjustments to this distribution as I deem appropriate.

Late work. All late work will be marked down by 1/3 of a letter grade (e.g., A- to B+) per day late. In addition, warm-up and cool-down assignments are intended to prepare you for seminar. Thus, these will be accepted only until 8 AM on the day of seminar.

Philosophy major. This course satisfies the following requirements for the philosophy major: skills dimensions – problem solving; historical – new.

Texts. The only text that you should purchase in hard copy for this course is *Philosophy of Mind: Classical and Contemporary Readings*, 2002, ed. David Chalmers, Oxford: Oxford University Press, ISBN 978-0195145816. All other readings will be made available on Canvas.

Schedule

Read each assigned text very carefully, perhaps several times. Really dig into them: take notes, highlight, make outlines. But do not expect to understand precisely what is going on before seminar – our discussions will clear up a lot of your confusions! If you still feel confused after our seminar discussions, then I encourage you to come to office hours.

Week 1, starting 13 Jan: The problem of consciousness.

Mon: No reading.

Thu: Read Thomas Nagel, “What is it like to be a bat?” Read handout on evidence; submit cool-down 1.

Week 2, starting 20 Jan: The identity theory.

Mon: Read J. J. C. Smart, "Sensations and brain processes." Submit warm-up 2.

Thu: Read handout on conditionals; submit cool-down 2.

Week 3, starting 27 Jan: Functionalism.

Mon: Read Hilary Putnam, "The nature of mental states." Skip sections 1 and 4. Submit warm-up 3. Since this is a public holiday, I will accept warm-ups until 9 AM Tue morning without penalty (but warm-ups submitted later will not be accepted).

Thu: Read handout on inference to the best explanation; submit cool-down 3.

Fri: (31 Jan.) Start-of-semester party, 7:30 PM-midnight.

Week 4, starting 3 Feb: Against functionalism.

Mon: Read Ned Block, "Troubles with functionalism." Submit warm-up 4.

Thu: Read handout on evaluating arguments; submit cool-down 4.

Week 5, starting 10 Feb: Against physicalism.

Mon: Read Frank Jackson, "Epiphenomenal qualia." Skip section II but do read the addendum. Submit warm-up 5.

Thu: Read handout on precision; submit cool-down 5. Receive topics for first oral presentations.

Week 6, starting 17 Feb: Neutral monism; synthesis.

Mon: Read David Chalmers, "Consciousness and its place in nature," sections 1-5 and 9-11. Submit warm-up 6.

Thu: Read midterm review handout; submit cool-down 6.

Recess week: Sat, 22 Feb to Sun, 1 Mar.

Week 7, starting 2 Mar: Physicalism defended.

Mon: Read David Lewis, "What experience teaches." Skip all six of the Ways to Miss the Point on pp. 282-4 and pp. 288-9. Submit warm-up 7.

Thu: Submit cool-down 7.

Throughout the week: First oral presentations.

Week 8, starting 9 Mar: Representationalism.

Mon: Read Michael Tye, *Ten Problems of Consciousness*, pp. 94-96, 100-105, 134-139, 171-174 (available on Canvas – **for all such texts, make sure to bring a non-electronic, printed copy to seminar**). Submit warm-up 8.

Thu: Submit cool-down 8.

Week 9, starting 16 Mar: Against representationalism.

Mon: Read Ned Block, "Mental paint and mental latex" (available on Canvas). Read only the introduction, §4, §6, and §7. Submit warm-up 9.

Thu: Submit cool-down 9.

Week 10, starting 23 Mar: Relationalism.

Mon: Read William Fish, "Relationalism and the problems of consciousness" (available on Canvas). Submit warm-up 10.

Thu: Submit cool-down 10.

Week 11, starting 30 Mar: Eliminativism.

Mon: Read Daniel Dennett, “Quining qualia.” Submit warm-up 11.

Thu: Submit cool-down 11.

Week 12, starting 6 Apr: Eliminativism, cont.

Mon: No reading (we will continue to discuss “Quining qualia”). Submit warm-up 12.

Thu: Submit cool-down 12. Receive topics for second oral presentations.

Fri: (10 Apr.) No seminar – public holiday.

Week 13, starting 13 Apr: Synthesis.

Mon: No reading. Submit warm-up 13.

Thu: Submit cool-down 13.

Sat: (18 Apr.) End-of-semester party, 7:30 PM-midnight.

Reading week: Sat, 18 Apr to Fri, 24 Apr.

Mon, 27 Apr to Thu, 30 Apr: Second oral presentations.
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