

The Mind–Body Problem

[semester]

[meeting times]

Zach Blaesi (instructor)

zblaesi@utexas.edu

[office address]

[office hours]

Course Description

Recall the last time you stubbed your bare toe on a piece of furniture. Millions of insentient neurons came together to generate the subjective feeling of a sharp flash of pain in your foot. But how could that be? In 1896, English biologist Thomas Henry Huxley wrote, “[H]ow it is that anything so remarkable as a state of consciousness comes about as a result of irritating nervous tissue, is just as unaccountable as the appearance of the djinn when Aladdin rubbed his lamp.” Many philosophers and scientists agree that consciousness is a mystery. But in what sense is consciousness a mystery, and if it is, how do we solve it?

In this course, we will aim to make progress on these questions by exploring some influential positions on the place of consciousness in the physical world. Along the way, we will consider issues such as the following: What is consciousness? Is consciousness physical? What can the empirical sciences tell us about consciousness? Do our experiences ever cause our behavior? Are electrons conscious? How might thought experiments involving zombies or a brilliant color scientist trapped inside a black-and-white room help us answer these questions?

We will also work toward cultivating a number of practical philosophical skills, such as:

- Understanding and expositing philosophical positions
- Critically evaluating arguments and viewpoints
- Assessing the philosophical significance of scientific research
- Communicating complex ideas in a clear and economical manner
- Presenting works-in-progress in a way that stimulates discussion and generates constructive feedback

Assignments & Grading

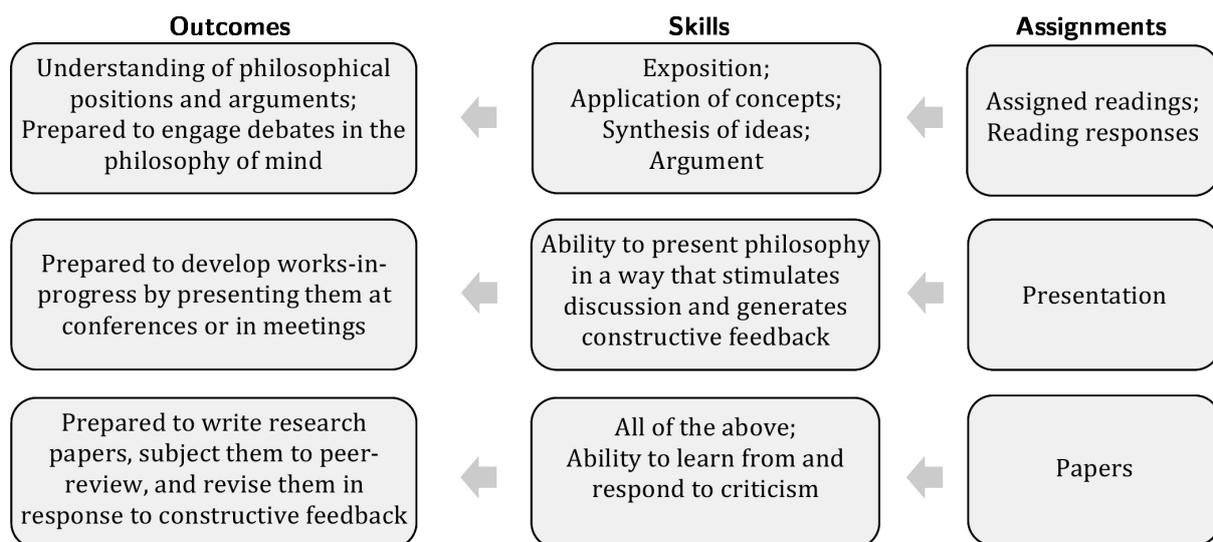
READING RESPONSES

- The course is divided into several units. You are required to submit one reading response per unit until you have completed a total of 5.
- Each reading response should be **500–700 words** in length (roughly one single-spaced page) and will be worth **2%** of your final grade. However, they will be graded as Pass, Half-credit, or Fail.
- To receive credit, you must upload your response as a PDF to Dropbox no later than 5:00 PM two days before the lecture for the assigned reading discussed in your assignment. For example, if you wrote on a reading assigned for Wednesday, September 5, you should upload your assignment no later than 5:00 PM on Monday, September 2.
- Everyone is encouraged to read each other’s submissions before coming to class. I may reference them during class discussions and invite students to discuss their submissions in class.

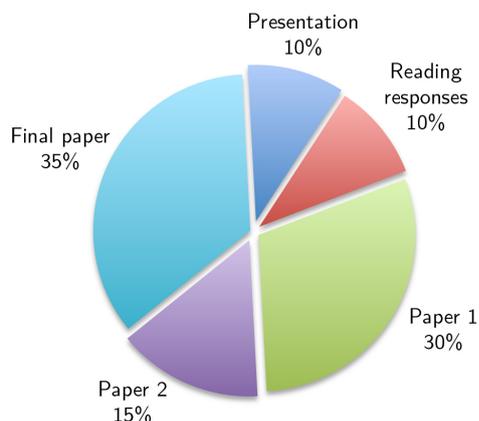
PAPERS & PRESENTATION

- You will write a total of three papers throughout the semester in response to pre-assigned prompts. The prompts (together with a grading rubric) will be administered through Canvas and discussed in class.
- Papers 1 and 2 should be **1,500–1,800 words** in length (roughly 5–6 double-spaced pages).
- You will complete Paper 1 in two stages by (i) writing and submitting a rough draft for feedback and grading and (ii) revising and resubmitting your paper as a final draft together with a cover letter explaining where, how, and why you revised it. You are required to revise your paper even if you receive an A on the rough draft. The final draft will be held to a higher standard than the rough draft. Each stage is worth **15%** of your final grade.
- You will write and submit Paper 2 in one stage for final grading. Paper 2 is worth **15%** of your final grade.
- During Week 14, you will give a **7–10 minute presentation** in which you will introduce the central thesis of your final paper and discuss how you plan to argue for it. The presentation is worth **10%** of your final grade.
- Your final paper should be **2,000–2,500 words** in length (roughly 7-10 double-spaced pages). It is worth **35%** of your final grade.

COURSE OBJECTIVES



GRADE DISTRIBUTION



GRADE SCALE

100.0–93.0	= A
92.9–90.0	= A–
89.9–87.0	= B+
86.9–83.0	= B
82.9–80.0	= B–
79.9–77.0	= C+
76.9–73.0	= C
72.9–70.0	= C–
69.9–67.0	= D+
66.9–63.0	= D
62.9–60.0	= D–
59.9–0.0	= F

LATE ASSIGNMENTS & ACADEMIC DISHONESTY

Failure to meet assignment deadlines will result in the subtraction of half a letter grade from the assignment per day—in the case of Pass/Half-credit/Fail, that means a potential Pass turns to a potential Half-credit after the first day late and a Fail after the second day late.

Any assignment that exhibits plagiarism or any form of academic dishonesty whatsoever will be given an automatic 0, and the student will be reported to the Office of the Dean of Students. **For the purposes of this course, co-authoring with or copying from a classmate counts as academic dishonesty.** Students who are uncertain as to what constitutes academic dishonesty are encouraged to meet with me. **All suspicious submissions will be thoroughly investigated.**

For general information on plagiarism, visit the following webpage:

<http://legacy.lib.utexas.edu/services/instruction/learningmodules/plagiarism>

Expectations

- You are expected to show up to class on time and to stay for the entirety of each session.
- You are expected to show up to class prepared. That means working through the assigned readings and reading yourself to ask questions, make comments, and discuss your reading responses with the rest of the class.
- You are expected to be ready to move into groups, interact with other students, and/or participate during activities.
- You are expected to show respect to other students and myself and be sensitive to viewpoints and experiences that may differ from your own.
- You are expected to be responsible for your own education, which means keeping track of your assignment deadlines and grades, submitting assignments on time, requesting outside help when you need it, and not waiting until the last minute to ask assignment-related questions.

Contacting the Instructor

I am happy to respond to emails to answer questions about course content or to schedule a meeting. I am also happy to discuss course content (and philosophy in general) during office hours. However, before asking questions concerning course material, assignments, or grades, please double check the syllabus to make sure that I haven't already answered them. Finally, while I will try my best to respond to emails in a timely manner, I may not respond to emails received after 10:00 PM and/or over the weekend until the next business day. Please do not email me with assignment-related questions except **at least three days in advance** of the assignment due date; in general, I will not respond to last minute emails to answer assignment-related questions.

Policy on Electronic Devices

Students are **prohibited** from using their phones in class and during discussion sections. Laptops and tablets may be used for note-taking purposes, but in most cases, that shouldn't be necessary. There is empirical evidence that laptops and tablets are not effective learning tools in the classroom (see <https://tinyurl.com/y8puxjl4>). More importantly, the point of this class is not to memorize a bunch of information for exams, but rather to critically engage with the material and enter into philosophical dialogues. So, rather than attempting to copy down everything I say verbatim, you should instead ready yourself to ask questions, draw connections, and share your thoughts. If you are caught using electronic devices for any purpose other than taking notes or completing in-class activities, half a letter grade will be deducted from your final grade.

Special Accommodations

Accommodations need to be formally approved by the Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD), and students with accommodations will need to provide me with a letter of verification from the SSD. While no student is required to provide me with any details concerning their disability, students are encouraged to meet with me the first week of class to discuss what I can do to ensure that their learning needs are met throughout the semester. For example, for students who are entitled to extra time on assignments/exams or who anticipate that their disability may cause them to miss a number of classes, I am happy to discuss the possibility of extensions and/or strategies for staying up to date with the course. We can also discuss options for keeping your accommodations private. I understand that some students might be reluctant to take advantage of these accommodations, but please keep in mind that they exist to ensure that students are afforded equal educational opportunities. In general, I am committed to ensuring that students get the most out of this course; providing all the appropriate accommodations is an important part of that.

For information on UT Austin's guidelines for students with disabilities and accommodations, visit the following webpage: <http://diversity.utexas.edu/disability/accommodations-and-services>

Mental Health

College can be extremely stressful, not only academically but also socially, emotionally, and physically. The UT Counseling and Mental Health Center (CMHC) has a number of resources designed to help you cope with these stresses, from groups, classes, and workshops to short-term individual counseling.

You can learn more about these resources by visiting the CMHC's website: <https://cmhc.utexas.edu>

Title IX

Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 is a federal law that prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex in education. Prohibited conduct includes sexual discrimination, sexual harassment, sexual assault, sexual misconduct, relationship (dating or domestic) violence, and/or stalking. Pregnant and parenting students are also protected from discrimination and guaranteed equal educational opportunities under Title IX; it is advised that they contact a Title IX coordinator (titleix@austin.utexas.edu) to learn more about their rights as pregnant or parenting students. As a Responsible Employee of UT Austin, I am required to support any individual who comes to me to report an alleged violation of the Title IX policy, offer that individual options and resources, and accurately report the alleged misconduct to the correct people in a timely fashion. Students can also report possible misconduct directly to Title IX Training and Investigations, either online, in person, or by phone.

For more information on Title IX or to report possible misconduct, please visit the following website: <https://titleix.utexas.edu>

Names & Gender Word-Forms

I once asked Derek Parfit, a renowned and [saintly](#) philosopher [who recently passed away](#), to sign his book for me. Even though I was in Parfit's class and had interacted with him for months, he responded, "Sure! But you shall have to remind me of your name, because I simply cannot remember them. I much wish people would consider names like they do phone numbers—no one would fault you for not remembering their phone number." I later told this story to [Ruth Chang](#), a philosopher at Rutgers University, and she told me that, despite knowing Parfit for years, he still had no idea what her name is.

I may not be as bad as Parfit, but I am very bad with names, in terms of both pronouncing them and remembering them. Having said that, I will try my best to remember your name. But if for some reason I resort to pointing at you, calling on you by some description, or simply asking you for your name, please do not take this personally—it's not you, it's me, really.

For the record, I go by “Zach” and use masculine word-forms (e.g., “he/his/him/himself” pronouns in English). I encourage you all to meet with me the first week of class to let me know how the other students and I should refer to you—for example, by a nickname or specific gender word-forms or pronouns. I will be sure to make note of this information to ensure that it is respected in class. You can also let me know through the following Google form: <https://goo.gl/forms/fzntgyEZUkgmxWMB2>

Additional Resources

Philosophy Undergrad Advising:	https://liberalarts.utexas.edu/philosophy/undergraduate/advising.php Kevin Pluta (WAG 313, kpluta@austin.utexas.edu)
Center for Teaching & Learning:	http://ctl.utexas.edu
Division of Student Affairs:	http://www.utexas.edu/students
UT's guidelines for attendance:	http://catalog.utexas.edu/general-information/academic-policies-and-procedures/attendance
Philosophy resources:	http://www.iep.utm.edu http://plato.stanford.edu http://philosophy.hku.hk/think
Movie resources:	https://utexas.kanopystreaming.com/frontpage

Course Schedule (subject to revision!)		
WEEK/UNIT	READING	DEADLINES/NOTES
Week 1 (Aug. 29–31) Introduction	Pryor, “Guidelines on Reading Philosophy”	
Week 2 (Sep. 5–7) What does “mind” mean? – PHENOMENAL CONSCIOUSNESS – INTENTIONALITY	Siewert, “Consciousness and Intentionality”	Mon., Sept. 3: No class, Labor Day Holiday
Week 3 (Sep. 10–14) What is physicalism? – CHARACTERIZING THE PHYSICAL	Ney, “Defining Physicalism”	Fri., Sept. 14: Last day to drop a class for a possible refund
Week 4 (Sept. 17–21) – LOGICAL BEHAVIORISM	Putnam, “Brains and Behavior”	
Week 5 (Sept. 24–28) – THE MIND–BRAIN IDENTITY THEORY – THE MULTIPLE REALIZABILITY THESIS	Smart, “Sensations and Brain Processes” Putnam, “Psychological Predicates”	

Course Schedule (continued)		
WEEK/UNIT	READING	DEADLINES/NOTES
Week 6 (Oct. 1–5) – FUNCTIONALISM – THE CHINA–BODY PROBLEM	Levin, “Functionalism” Excerpts from Block, “Troubles with Functionalism”	Due: Paper 1 (rough draft)
Week 7 (Oct. 8–12) What is dualism? – SUBSTANCE DUALISM – PROPERTY DUALISM	Excerpts from Descartes, <i>Meditations on First Philosophy</i> McWeeny, “Princess Elisabeth and the Mind–Body Problem” Gertler, “In Defense of Mind–Body Dualism”	
Week 8 (Oct. 15–19) Is the mind physical? – THE CAUSAL ARGUMENT	Papineau, “The Case for Materialism”	
Week 9 (Oct. 22–26) – CONCEIVABILITY ARGUMENTS	Excerpts from Kripke, <i>Naming and Necessity</i> Kind, “Chalmers’ Zombie Argument”	Due: Paper 1 (final draft)
Week 10 (Oct. 29–Nov. 2) – THE KNOWLEDGE ARGUMENT	Jackson, “Epiphenomenal Qualia”	
Week 11 (Nov. 5–9) – THE EXPLANATORY GAP – THE PHENOMENAL CONCEPT STRATEGY	Levine, “Materialism and Qualia: The Explanatory Gap” Balog, “Phenomenal Concepts”	
Week 12 (Nov. 12–16) Is everything fundamentally mental? – PANPSYCHISM – RUSSELLIAN PHYSICALISM	Strawson, “Realistic Monism: Why Physicalism Entails Panpsychism” Montero, “Russellian Physicalism”	Due: Paper 2
Week 13 (Nov. 19–23)		Thanksgiving holidays, no class
Week 14 (Nov. 26–30) Presenting in philosophy	Workshop on how to present works-in-progress in the field of philosophy	
Week 15 (Dec. 3–7)	Student presentations	
Last class day (Dec. 10)	Paper workshop	Final paper due Dec. 13 at 11:59 PM