

PETER F. EPSTEIN
TEACHING PORTFOLIO

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While at UC Berkeley, I served as a Graduate Student Instructor (GSI) in twelve classes, covering an unusually broad assortment of topics across three main areas: philosophy of mind and metaphysics; logic and formal epistemology; and history of philosophy. I considered teaching central to my role as a graduate student, and, in 2014, I was proud to be recognized as an “Outstanding GSI,” a campus-wide honor.

My first goal, in every class I teach, is to get students to see themselves as active *participants* in philosophical debates, not just as passive absorbers of information. The pedagogical task here takes various forms. If students are reading historical texts, they need to get used to the idea that they are free to *disagree* with famous philosophers of the past. In one of my first sections, a student found herself unconvinced by Socrates’s central argument in the *Crito*. The student took her disagreement with Socrates as an indication that she had simply failed to understand the text. This is a crucial moment that arises in many classes: the key idea I convey to my students is that their disagreement with an argument’s conclusion (even if the argument is made by Socrates!) need not signal a lack of understanding; it may mean that they have (perhaps inchoately) detected a flaw in the argument itself. I help students to develop such intuitive responses into arguments of their own, by working through the steps of the reasoning that has failed to convince them and seeing where it falls short. It often takes several iterations, but eventually students begin to feel the thrill of *engaging* with Socrates, rather than merely treating Plato’s text as a source of *information* about a famous dead philosopher.

In classes with more technical material, getting students to engage in this way is often a matter of overcoming anxieties brought on by texts full of unfamiliar symbols and terminology. Here, I work to present the basic concepts in a variety of less abstract formats. This can be as simple as transposing the formal structure of a game-theoretic puzzle into a familiar context. In one section, I presented students with a so-called “credible threat” puzzle—a scenario in which an agent must be prepared to follow through on a threat in order to deter attacks from other agents, even when doing so has negative utility—within the context of a popular video game. I then assigned students to play each of the various roles in the game, and had them act out the scenario. With the structure of the game-theoretic puzzle embodied by familiar video game characters, students were able to produce subtle arguments about what to count as rational behavior in such scenarios.

Other kinds of abstract material can be helpfully conveyed using visual learning techniques. In teaching the method of Bayesian inference, for example, I have found that a pictorial representation of “possibility space” helps students grasp the key notions. We start with a simple problem: What is the probability that a given card, randomly drawn from a standard deck, is a spade, conditional on the evidence that the card is black? I first have students draw a two-by-two grid depicting our initial information, where each suit is represented by one of the four squares. We then represent the Bayesian inference rule by shading out the portions of the grid inconsistent with our new evidence – namely, the squares representing the red suits. This leaves only the possibility space consistent with our evidence – the squares representing the black suits. Since half the remaining space is in the “spade” portion of the diagram, the answer—50%—now leaps out of the pictorial representation: students can *see* what we are doing when we use the Bayesian inference rule.

I also constantly seek to improve my teaching, by experimenting with new techniques and strategies. Last fall, I used one of my two weekly section meetings for Introductory Logic as a “flipped classroom,” in which, rather than lecturing, I had students work on their problem sets in class, as I circulated around. By working through the problems with me there for guidance, students gained confidence in their ability to tackle difficult questions. And, perhaps most importantly, this format encouraged students themselves to act as teachers, when, for example, they advised their classmates on how to approach particularly challenging proofs.

By using such techniques, I strive to make the classroom a supportive environment, so that students are willing to share their thoughts; but I also emphasize that not every thought is equally good. That often means telling students that a claim they have made has not been adequately defended; it means using the word “no,” in response to the very kind of engagement I seek to cultivate. It is not always comfortable to give a negative assessment of students’ arguments; but, by expressing my assessment along with a clear and sympathetic explanation of the *reason* behind it, I have found it possible both to encourage student participation and to demand a degree of rigor in their philosophical efforts. I apply a similar strategy in grading written work: I give students a full page of comments on their papers, evaluating the content of their arguments as I would in giving feedback to a peer. By treating every claim a student makes as a serious philosophical thought, I have found that I can simultaneously achieve my two fundamental pedagogical goals: to encourage students to offer their own views on the material, and to demand that they defend their claims with reasoned arguments.

I served as a graduate student instructor (GSI) in twelve courses at the University of California, Berkeley, from 2009 to 2017. These courses can be divided into three broad categories: (1) philosophy of mind and metaphysics; (2) logic, methodology, and formal epistemology; and (3) history of philosophy. In my capacity as GSI, I held weekly discussion sections, graded and commented on papers and exams, held office hours, worked with students on their writing, and (in the case of courses in category (2)) provided instruction in the formal methods needed to complete problem sets and exams.

I was awarded the Outstanding Graduate Student Instructor prize, a University-wide honor, for the 2013-2014 academic year.

LIST OF COURSES TAUGHT AS GRADUATE STUDENT INSTRUCTOR

(1) PHILOSOPHY OF MIND AND METAPHYSICS

Theory of Meaning (Prof. John Campbell), Spring 2012

Metaphysics (Prof. Barry Stroud), Spring 2013

Philosophy of Mind (Prof. John Searle), Fall 2013

Metaphysics (Prof. Geoffrey Lee), Spring 2015

Nature of Mind (Prof. John Campbell), Spring 2017

(2) LOGIC, METHODOLOGY, AND FORMAL EPISTEMOLOGY

Philosophy and Game Theory (Prof. Lara Buchak), Fall 2010

Introduction to Logic (Prof. Paolo Mancosu), Spring 2011

Philosophical Methods (Prof. Daniel Warren), Fall 2011

Introduction to Logic (Prof. Seth Yalcin), Fall 2016

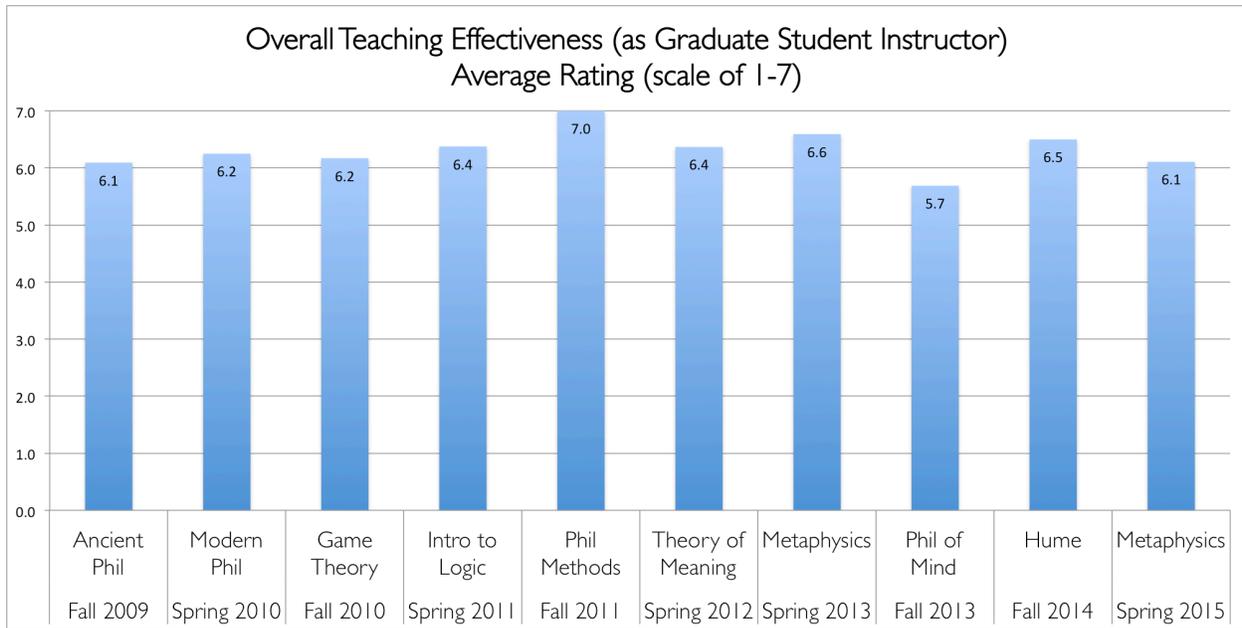
(3) HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY

Ancient Philosophy (Prof. John MacFarlane), Fall 2009

Early Modern Philosophy (Prof. Hannah Ginsborg), Spring 2010

Hume (Prof. Michael Martin), Fall 2014

The table below summarizes data from students' evaluations of my teaching as a Graduate Student Instructor. Evaluations are made on a scale ranging from 1 (not at all effective) to 7 (extremely effective).



Complete teaching evaluations can be obtained from:

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Instead of a collection of “cherry-picked” examples from my student evaluations, I have transcribed below *every* student comment from two courses in which I served as a Graduate Student Instructor (GSI). By including the complete set of comments, rather than a pre-selected subset, I hope to provide a more accurate impression of my capacities as a teacher.

[Note: The comments below are students’ responses to the three prompts included on the GSI Evaluation form distributed at the end of the semester; under each course heading, I have transcribed both the prompts and students’ comments.]

METAPHYSICS (SPRING 2013)

Prompt 1: *A good GSI knows the course material, is prepared for sections, presents material clearly, facilitates class discussion, and is responsive to students. A good GSI also provides students with clear assessments of their written work, and helps them to develop their philosophical writing skills. Please comment on the extent to which your GSI displayed these and any other relevant qualities.*

“Peter is the best GSI I’ve had. His biggest strength I think is the care he takes to figure out exactly what we’re trying to ask, and then guiding it to touch on the most important topics. The preparation Peter does is also great: coming in with quotes, scenarios on the board to bring out the issues, etc.”

“Peter did a phenomenal job in clarifying the ideas expressed in class. His modesty and honesty were conducive to open-minded and critical thought about the issues.”

“Probably the only reason I knew what was going on in this class. Great at breaking down ideas and guiding thought while keeping the discussion open. Thorough feedback on papers. Office hours for paper prepping was helpful; he was willing to put in time.”

“I appreciate that Peter introduced various angles at which to approach this difficult material, which was not discussed (at least not explicitly) in class. He was very helpful in office hours and was receptive to students’ questions in discussion. His assessments of our essays were extremely helpful, and I appreciate the time he took to give such extensive feedback.”

“Excellent on all counts. You clearly know the material really well and you did a great job facilitating discussion and being responsive to our questions.”

“I would say Peter did all those things, with the possible exception of helping us develop our philosophical writing skills (this only because we got our papers back so late in the course – not Peter’s fault), extremely well. Especially impressive was his responsiveness to questions, and his ability to really understand what students were asking.”

“Peter was very responsive to questions, knew the course material and was able to discuss it clearly. He was also noticeably respectful of different opinions and gave me helpful input on my essay.”

“Peter delivered well. Very concise and consistent. He was timely and easy to understand. Discussion became necessary in order to comprehend [the professor].”

“He was always impressively prepared and well-versed in the issues. He was adept at responding to both difficult or somewhat obtuse questions from students, sympathizing with our concerns or hesitations, and pushing us further. His comments and criticisms of my writing were very insightful and helpful, well thought out and detailed.”

“I feel like Peter did all this! He was super helpful, I really appreciate how responsive he was.”

“Peter always had a plan for section, but was still flexible and responsive. He used a lot of accessible and illustrative examples, and was nurturing and encouraging. He also made sure to use scarce section time for going over critical elements of the course material. Paper feedback was helpful and penetrating.”

“Peter knows the course material extremely well, he prepared his sections by giving general areas of reflection and altered his plan depending on our questions and remarks. He presented the issues clearly and answered all the questions as much as he could (given the fact that our questions were very general and difficult to handle. His assessments of my written work were VERY detailed and helpful.”

“He was an amazing grader. He took a little longer than some GSIs, but it was totally worth the wait!”

“I believe that Peter was an extremely good GSI. Peter was very knowledgeable about the material and helped extensively when anyone had any questions.”

“He is always pretty well prepared. He is attentive to comments and questions. His feedback on papers is thorough and helpful.”

“You were great in your comments on my essay. The comments helped me a lot. Plus you were very prepared for section which was awesome.”

“I'd say Peter measured up well to all these standards. He was prepared and organized, knowledgeable, and certainly responsive. Expectations and evaluations were clear, and he provided helpful insight in section. The contrasting views to those of the professor, when present and explicated, were particularly useful.”

“He was very knowledgeable about the course materials and satisfactorily answered nearly all questions asked. He provided helpful comments on my written work, but more depth would have improved those comments. Why he commented the way he did, examples (even brief ones) on how to improve.”

“The comments I received on the paper returned to me were helpful in getting an understanding of why my view or argument was problematic, but not helpful in getting an understanding of what I could do to improve my writing and hence to improve in grade on the next paper.”

“Peter has clear knowledge of the course material and was very prepared for sections. Sections were well organized as well. Not as responsive via email.”

“Peter helped make sense of a very confusing topic.”

“It was obvious Peter was extremely familiar with the course and the field generally. Great job overall.”

“Knew all material well and explained it clearly. Answered questions clearly and thoroughly while leaving room for students to respond. Very detailed and extensive and helpful comments on papers.”

Prompt 2: *How do you think the GSI could improve sections for this course?*

“I don’t know, this is pretty much exactly what I want out of philosophy section. Great mix of clarifying concepts and creating a forum for us to work in our own thoughts and put out our own ideas.”

“No improvement.”

“He might take a drawing class. But in all seriousness, I had no substantive criticisms.”

“Philosophy is a rather competitive major and many including myself might feel self-conscious about speaking up. Perhaps facilitating a ‘talk to your neighbor’ about the material could help warm things up. I wish this was present in all philosophy classes.”

“Maybe even more of this would be cool? [Arrow pointing to previous comment: “The preparation Peter does is also great. Coming in with quotes, scenarios on the board to bring out the issues, etc.”] But really no suggestions.”

“He could perhaps ask for questions before section in order to prepare for them, but they do not have to be mandatory.”

“I want to say that I wish he was [illegible] in guiding the direction of section. I felt like I couldn’t always understand why certain questions were raised, but this is less a problem about the direction of our section and more a problem with being able to clearly understand the relevance of certain issues that we discussed. So it would have been nice to maybe hear him reformulate certain questions that we asked and then respond to our questions.”

“I do not know: These were exemplary sections.”

“Be more clear what readings were important.”

“I don’t know.”

“Having slightly more structure, but at the same time the lack of structure worked for this class.”

“Maybe make handouts but he was great, there really isn’t much he could improve on.”

“I don’t believe that the section could be any better.”

“Nothing you’re [expletive] awesome.”

“Nothing comes to mind.”

“Perhaps more clearly going premise-by-premise through an argument, and seeing at which points [the professor] breaks from traditional/others’ views.”

“Some review notes of material from lectures is helpful.”

“Nothing much, I liked them.”

“I think the only way to improve would be to give students a sense of the argument trajectory of [the professor’s] arguments. [The professor] can move methodically over a large number of tiny steps and it is easy to get lost in the dialectic.”

“Given the nature of the texts we were reading, I wish I had some sense of what section was going to cover before I attended so that I could reread that part of [the professor’s] argument more closely.”

“I don’t know. I can honestly say that Peter has been the best GSI I’ve ever had, and I’ve had some pretty good ones.”

Prompt 3: *What was most distinctive about the way the GSI taught in this course? What, if anything, was particularly helpful? What, if anything, was especially unhelpful?*

“Peter made sections about the material, and the students. Very responsive, very helpful, very encouraging. I always enjoyed section, and got a lot out of it.”

“Did an excellent job of understanding student questions and responding to them. Asked the right questions to promote discussion.”

“I was really impressed by how he was able to get exactly what people were saying, something I think is hard in philosophy. His answers to questions were always very helpful.”

“Great Clarity!!”

“I thought Peter’s presentation of important and relevant supplementary material uncovered in the main course was particularly helpful.”

“Clear, respectful, good examples, funny illustrations. UC Berkeley very lucky!”

“I rarely see GSIs preparing this way for class. [Arrow pointing to previous comment: “The preparation Peter does is also great. Coming in with quotes, scenarios on the board to bring out the issues, etc.”]”

“You did a really good job distilling the material presented in lecture into more focused arguments. This was particularly impressive because you at the same time kept the floor open for us to jump in and ask questions and even guide the discussion. Great job.”

“Helpful: Clearly set the issues. Unhelpful: Nothing.”

“As said above, he took a stance that was open-minded and thought-provoking.”

“He was very down to Earth and understanding, and explained the topics clearly.”

“I think what was most helpful was his ability to explain the text in detail. I think what was most distinctive was his understanding of the material.”

“Your knowledge. Plus it was cool that you let me come to office hours all the time.”

“The drawings (and correlated sense of humor) were perhaps the most distinctive. They were also helpful for that matter. The introduction of non-curriculum material might have confused some people a little bit (but was still worthwhile, I thought).”

“He was always to the point and clear.”

“I thought sections were helpful. Doing as he did, taking an argument and analyzing its merits and problems, was (I think) a good strategy.”

“Friendly disposition and did a good job explaining material.”

“Peter is funny. I like how he made a joke about wanting to shake the tortoise when we were discussing necessity, I had the same feeling on that. Also, Peter was accessible and approachable outside of class which was very helpful.”

“He follows lecture while still touching on aspects that do not necessarily pertain to the current material, in a good way.”

“Peter is super nice. The material was dense and could be intimidating, but the way he responded to all of us made it a lot easier to talk.”

PHILOSOPHY AND GAME THEORY (FALL 2010)

Prompt 1: *A good GSI knows the course material, is prepared for sections, presents material clearly, facilitates class discussion, and is responsive to students. A good GSI also provides students with clear assessments of their written work, and helps them to develop their philosophical writing skills. Please comment on the extent to which your GSI displayed these and any other relevant qualities.*

“Excellent GSI, one of the best I’ve had. Very knowledgeable and clear in his explanations. Wrote such lengthy, in-depth comments on our written work it was almost absurd. I’ve never had such extensive feedback on my papers, but it was greatly appreciated.”

“Peter has provided an awesome amount of feedback on written work. Meanwhile, he is very responsive to questions, available outside of section, and covers a couple topics in each section in-depth.”

“Very helpful in and out of class, especially with writing skills. Very knowledgeable about course material.”

“Peter was a great, clear, and prepared GSI. He gave very detailed explanations about essays and was always available for questions.”

“Peter was a great GSI. He was well prepared/organized. Peter was able to take our confusing questions and get to the root of the issue.”

“Peter holds sections in which he not only reviews material reviewed in lecture but also adds new content in creative ways. Amazing/extensive comments on written work. Always willing to meet out of class accommodating students who couldn’t attend section.”

“Peter was very good in that he was definitely always prepared and responsive in section. He brought in engaging handouts to stimulate class discussion. He also returned the philosophy paper with a full page of comments to help improve philosophical thought.”

“Peter did a great job in all conditions above.”

“Good discussion of topics. Help on formulating argument in written form would have been great, i.e. some sort of essay workshop.”

“Peter was very knowledgeable about the topics covered, and made section quite interesting.”

“He knew all the material and led interesting sections... and then was eaten by a Tyrannosaurus Rex, as detailed here. [Sketch of dinosaur eating stick figure included!]”

“To a large extent. Discussions are not very formal but still structured enough to be fruitful.”

“This GSI gives very extensive (and useful) feedback on written work. He knows the material very well and is always well prepared for section with interesting examples and puzzles that illustrate the concepts from class.”

“Extremely detailed comments on submitted papers. Well organized sections. Covered material in sections that complements material covered in lectures. Helpful and responsive to questions.”

“I didn’t like that Peter wasn’t grading my problems sets. [Explanatory note: As GSI, I was not the person responsible for grading problem sets in the course.] Aside from that, Peter was excellent.”

“Peter was well aware of the material and brought in additional hand outs to make the section and course more interesting and helpful to understand. Discussion was highly encouraged.”

“The sections each week were very helpful in helping us understand the material, as well as being engaging.”

“Peter was well prepared for sections and presented the material very clearly.”

“Epstein did know the comments and presented them clearly. While he was approachable, I think he could have facilitated the discussions better by not waiting for a response to questions he posed but also to prompt students to respond.”

“He did really good in all that. For developing philosophical writing skills, the essays could be evaluated twice: first as a draft and then as a final version.”

“Peter was well prepared for sections and capable of giving insightful, satisfying answers to all questions asked. He provided me with a detailed (1 page) analysis/assessment of my written work and made suggestions to improve it. Moreover, he knew the course material and supported the points of the lectures with a good choice of materials.”

“Peter gives page long evaluations of the written work which helps in evaluating how I should try to improve. He is also quite easy to find and get ahold of when there are questions. His sections are very helpful as a forum to make sense of confusing subjects, and are not as much lecture based (which is nice).”

“He was always well prepared for section and could synthesize information well. He also provided very detailed and insightful criticisms of written work.”

“Peter presents material clearly and is very comfortable with the material. I found his comments on my paper to be helpful and thoroughly considered.”

“Did a good job explaining concepts in office hours. Did facilitate discussions, but often I didn’t get everything that was discussed by peers.”

“Prepared: Good preparation. Class material: Presented it clearly and effectively. Class discussion: Always asked for class’s comments, concerns and inputs and addressed them well.”

“He was well prepared and knew the course material. The sections were interesting and provided lots of information.”

“Pretty awesome. Brings the concepts learned in class down to earth, makes it easy to understand.”

Prompt 2: *How do you think the GSI could improve sections for this course?*

“He really did do very well. I can’t think of anything he can do significantly better.”

“Go a little faster.”

“Remind us of concepts a bit more before bringing it up as a topic, otherwise we are digging through notes and memory to remember – a refresher is always nice.”

“More convenient office hours that do not overlap with the professor’s.”

“More review of specific topics rather than always introducing new topics.”

“Improve public speaking ability.”

“N/A. It is already perfect. Maybe, be a little more open minded about the arguments presented in papers.”

“More about actual argument formulation.”

“Cite text to link readings.”

“Cover more material.”

“Not really, they were pretty good.”

“Fine as is.”

“More structure maybe?”

“More help on the problem sets.”

“It’s awesome as it is.”

“No suggestions, he did a good job.”

“I think he could have used more examples and diagrams. Additionally, it would have been helpful to know what material was going to be focused on in section.”

“They are good enough already.”

“I don’t know. He seemed to cover all the material well.”

“Discuss/review ideas from class a bit more.”

“Maybe have an outline, but other than that, it was great.”

“Nothing comes to mind.”

Prompt 3: *What was most distinctive about the way the GSI taught in this course? What, if anything, was particularly helpful? What, if anything, was especially unhelpful?*

“Awesome explanations. Really detailed feedback on papers.”

“Taking questions and bringing in examples that explained the material in a way we could relate really made things more interesting.”

“The puzzles presented were very unique and interesting.”

“Good handouts, well organized.”

“Very accessible.”

“Ability to incorporate interesting problems and paradoxes into section and tie them back to course material.”

“Friendly and approachable. Always willing to help.”

“The comments on my paper. Also, examples that were used in sections.”

“Good riddles.”

“For me at least, he used interesting puzzles and games to illustrate the concepts, which was fun. He was also very good at considering and responding to students’ questions and comments.”

“The detailed comments on papers were impressive and helpful.”

“Starbursts were a good incentive for the games.”

“He was very helpful with our assignments.”

“The most helpful was getting the comments on papers in a timely manner. It would have been nice to have gone over what was expected for the midterm and what is/was a sufficient response.”

“The games played were really helpful.”

“Games and activities.”

“There were good illustrations of problems with sample ‘games’ in section. These make a nice way to remember the problems.”

“Using interesting examples to explain concepts.”

“The way he explained the core concepts so that we could fully understand how to apply them and utilize them.”

INTRODUCTION TO PHILOSOPHY OF MIND

Through modern science, we have achieved an incredible level of understanding of the world around us. Yet when it comes to the *source* of that understanding—our own minds—we have struggled to find any illumination through the methods that have achieved so much in other domains. In this course, we will investigate the central question of contemporary philosophy of mind: How, if at all, can we understand our own mental life as part of the world described by natural science? Beginning with the first articulation of this question in the Western tradition—Descartes’s argument that the mind is not part of the material world at all—we will examine various philosophical views about the nature of consciousness, and we will ask how much we can explain about the mind through scientific investigation. Readings will cover central philosophical arguments and will also touch on contemporary views about the mind in psychology and cognitive neuroscience.

This is an introductory class; there are no prerequisites. Instruction will include basic training in philosophical argumentation and writing.

TEXTS

Block, Ned, Owen Flanagan, and Guven Guzeldere (eds.). *The Nature of Consciousness: Philosophical Debates*. MIT Press, 1997.

Descartes, Rene. *Meditations on First Philosophy (with Selections from the Objections and Replies)*. John Cottingham (trans. and ed.). Cambridge University Press, 1996.

(Other readings to be provided.)

PAPERS

First Paper (due Week 4, Friday): 3 pages (15% of final grade)

Second Paper (due Week 7, Friday): 5 pages (25% of final grade)

Third Paper (due Week 10, Friday): 5 pages (25% of final grade)

Final Paper (due exam week): 7 pages (35% of final grade)

COURSE SCHEDULE

PART I: INTRODUCTION – DESCARTES AND THE MIND-BODY PROBLEM

Week 1

M - Introduction

W – The Cogito 1

Reading: Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy, I, II*

F – The Cogito 2

Reading: Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy, I, II*

Week 2

M – The Real Distinction Between Mind and Body

Reading: Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, VI

W – Conceivability and Possibility

Reading: Arnauld and Descartes, *Fourth Objections and Replies*

F – Mind-Body Interaction

Reading: Princess Elizabeth and Descartes, *Correspondence*

PART II: MIND-BODY IDENTITY – A STRAIGHTFORWARD SOLUTION TO THE PROBLEM?

Week 3

M: Materialism

Reading: Papineau, “The Case for Materialism”

W: The Identity Theory

Reading: Smart, “Sensations and Brain Processes”

F: Multiple Realizability

Reading: Putnam, “Psychological Predicates”

PART III: BEHAVIORISM – CHALLENGING THE TERMS OF THE DEBATE

Week 4

M: Mind and Behavior

Reading: Ryle, “Descartes’ Myth”

W: The Turing Test

Reading: Turing, “Computing Machinery and Intelligence”

F: Beyond Behavior

Reading: Block, “Psychologism and Behaviorism”

PART IV: FUNCTIONALISM – CAN BEHAVIORISM BE SAVED?

Week 5

M: Functional Roles

Reading: Fodor, *Psychological Explanation* (excerpts)

W: The Functional Analysis

Reading: Lewis, “Mad Pain and Martian Pain”

F: Objections

Reading: Block, “Troubles with Functionalism”

Week 6

M: The Chinese Room

Reading: Searle, “Minds, Brains, and Programs”

W: Zombies

Reading: Dennett, “The Unimagined Preposterousness of Zombies”

F: The Inverted Spectrum

Reading: Shoemaker, “The Inverted Spectrum”

PART V: THE HARD PROBLEM OF CONSCIOUSNESS – THE LINGERING MIND-BODY PROBLEM

Week 7

M: Subjectivity and Science

Reading: Nagel, “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?”

W: Qualia

Reading: Jackson, “Epiphenomenal Qualia”

F: The Ability Hypothesis

Reading: Lewis, “What Experience Teaches”

Week 8

M: Locating Qualia

Reading: Harman, “The Intrinsic Quality of Experience”

W: Inverted Spectrum 2

Reading: Block, “Inverted Earth”

F: The Hard Problem

Reading: Chalmers, “Facing Up to the Problem of Consciousness”

Week 9

M: Conceivability and Possibility, Again

Reading: Papineau, *Thinking About Consciousness* (excerpts)

W: Consciousness Without Qualia?

Reading: Dennett, “Quining Qualia”

F: The Explanatory Gap

Reading: Levine, “The Explanatory Gap”

PART VI: PROSPECTS FOR A SCIENCE OF CONSCIOUSNESS – DESCARTES’S PROBLEM IN THE LAB

Week 10

M: Science and the Unknown

Reading: Patricia Churchland, “Can Neurobiology Teach Us Anything about Consciousness?”

W: Neuroscientific Approaches

Reading: Crick and Koch, “Towards a Neurobiological Theory of Consciousness”

F: Consciousness in Cognitive Science

Reading: Farah, “Visual Perception and Visual Awareness after Brain Damage: A Tutorial Overview”

Week 11

M: Empirically-Informed Philosophical Accounts

Reading: Prinz, “Is Attention Necessary and Sufficient for Consciousness?”

W: Empirically-Defended Philosophical Theses

Reading: Block, “Consciousness, Accessibility, and the Mesh Between Psychology and Neuroscience”

F: What Science Can Tell Us, and What It Can’t

Reading: Chalmers, “On the Search for the Neural Correlate of Consciousness”

Week 12

M: Review 1 – The Mind-Body Problem, Then and Now

W: Review 2 – The Options, and the Objections

F: Review 3 – Questions Left to Explore

PHILOSOPHY AND DECISION THEORY

What does it mean for a decision to be *rational*? How does the rationality of a decision relate to the rationality of the beliefs, desires, and preferences of the person who makes the decision? In this course, we will explore the philosophical underpinnings of *decision theory*, an attempt to answer these questions that has been developed by a motley collection of philosophers, economists, mathematicians, computer scientists, and evolutionary biologists. The first part of the course introduces the formal tools of the theory, along with the rationale behind it. The second part of the course examines various applications of the theory, challenges to it, and puzzles that arise within it. If a decision is one that most people consider reasonable, can it nonetheless be irrational? Can the rational course of action be one that results in a worse outcome for a single agent, or a group of agents? Is it possible to commit to courses of action that will require sub-optimal choices in the future? We will look at classic decision theoretic puzzles (including Newcomb's problem, the prisoner's dilemma, the toxin puzzle, the Sleeping Beauty problem, and the surprise exam paradox), in an effort both to deepen our understanding of the theory, and to examine whether it provides an illuminating picture of human rationality.

This is an upper-division philosophy course; students who wish to enroll should have taken at least two previous philosophy courses. No background in decision theory is required, but students should be comfortable with mathematical subject matter.

TEXTS

Axelrod, Robert. *The Evolution of Cooperation*. Basic Books, 1984.
Lewis, David. *Convention: A Philosophical Study*. Harvard University Press, 1969.
Resnik, Michael. *Choices: An Introduction to Decision Theory*. University of Minnesota Press, 1987.

Other readings can be found in the course pack.

ASSIGNMENTS

Problem Sets (weekly, due at the beginning of class on Thursday): 20% of final grade
Midterm Exam (Week 6, Thursday): 10% of final grade
1st Paper (8-10 pages, due Week 7, Thursday): 25% of final grade
2nd Paper (8-10 pages, due Week 12, Thursday): 25% of final grade
Final Exam: 20% of final grade

COURSE SCHEDULE

PART I: THE NUTS AND BOLTS OF THE THEORY

Week 1

Tu – Introduction

Th – Decision Theoretic Rationality 1

Reading: Resnik, pp. 3-20, pp. 47-54

Week 2

Tu – Decision Theoretic Rationality 2

Reading: Resnik, pp. 3-20, 47-54

Th – Dominance Reasoning

Reading: Resnik, pp. 81-101

Week 3

Tu – The Expected Utility Theorem

Reading: Resnik, pp. 81-101

Th – Allais’s Paradox

Reading: Resnik, pp. 103-109; Savage, “Allais’s Paradox”

Week 4

Tu: Games with Multiple Agents

Reading: Resnik, pp. 121-127

Th: Game Strategies and Solutions

Reading: Resnik, pp. 127-147

PART II: PUZZLES, PARADOXES, APPLICATIONS

Week 5

Tu: Newcomb’s Problem

Reading: Resnik, pp. 101-120; Lewis, “Why Ain’cha Rich?”

Th: The Toxin Puzzle

Reading: Kavka, “The Toxin Puzzle”

Week 6

Tu: Deterrence

Reading: Kavka, “Some Paradoxes of Deterrence”

Th: MIDTERM EXAM

Week 7

Tu: The Prisoner’s Dilemma

Reading: Resnik, pp. 147-151; Lewis, “Prisoner’s Dilemma is a Newcomb Problem”

Th: Iterated Prisoner’s Dilemma 1 (prisoner’s dilemma tournament rules distributed)

Reading: Axelrod, pp. 1-55

Week 8

Tu: Iterated Prisoner’s Dilemma 2 (prisoner’s dilemma tournament programs due)

Reading: Axelrod, pp. 56-108

Th: Iterated Prisoner’s Dilemma 3 (prisoner’s dilemma tournament results announced)

Reading: Axelrod, pp. 109-191

Week 9

Tu: Convention 1

Reading: Lewis, pp. 36-51, 68-76

Th: Convention 2

Reading: Lewis, pp. 83-107, 118-121

Week 10

Tu: Common Knowledge

Reading: Lewis, pp. 52-68; Stewart, “I Know That You Know That...”

Th: Surprise Exam! (Paradox)

Reading: Quine, “On a So-Called Paradox”

Week 11

Tu: Reflection Principles

Reading: Van Fraassen, “Belief and the Will”

Th: Sleeping Beauty

Reading: Elga, “Self-Locating Belief and the Sleeping Beauty Problem”; Lewis, “Sleeping Beauty: Reply to Elga”

Week 12

Tu: Imprecise Credences

Readings: Elga, “Subjective Probabilities Should Be Sharp”; White, “Evidential Symmetry and Mushy Credence”

Th: Review – Decision Theory as a Theory of Rationality

Reading: Dreier, “Rational Preference: Decision Theory as a Theory of Practical Rationality”; Sen, “Behavior and the Concept of Preference”

SEMINAR: SPACE-TIME AND THE EXPERIENCE OF SPACE AND TIME

Minkowski famously said that, given Einstein's special theory of relativity, "space by itself, and time by itself, are doomed to fade away into mere shadows, and only a kind of union of the two will preserve an independent reality." On this picture, the objects of the world are not themselves to be characterized in terms of purely spatial properties, like shape; the events of the world are not to be understood as having purely temporal features, such as determinate duration and before-and-after ordering. Instead, reality itself is fundamentally to be understood in terms of a set of *spatiotemporal* relations, which are not uniquely decomposable into separate spatial and temporal elements.

But our *experience* of the world we live in paints a very different picture: we seem to perceive a spatial world, which evolves as time passes. Objects appear to have shapes: they occupy space in particular ways, which have nothing to do with their temporal features. Events proceed over time: both worldly events, like football games, and episodes in our own conscious lives, like headaches, seem to have determinate temporal duration, which can be isolated from any of their spatial components.

Thus, there would seem to be a fundamental conflict between our primary means of access to the world—our perceptual experience—and our best scientific theories of what that world is really like. In this course, we will explore several questions about the relationship between scientific theories of space-time and our experience of the spatial and temporal features of the world around us.

The first set of questions concerns the interpretation of empirical evidence about the geometry of space. We will look at arguments made by Poincaré, Reichenbach, and others about how—and whether—scientific findings can provide evidence that space (or space-time) is non-Euclidean, and we will consider how these arguments relate to the actual historical development of space-time theories, beginning with Einstein's own work.

The second set of questions concerns the nature of spatial and temporal representation in perception. The seeming conflict between our perceptual representation of space and time and our current scientific theories has led many to propose a reinterpretation of the nature of spatial and temporal experience. We will look at recent arguments by Chalmers and others that spatial and temporal representation should be understood in "functional" terms: on this proposal, our experience takes no determinate stand on the underlying spatial and temporal features of the world, and so it runs into no conflict with science. We will also look at related arguments about the structure of "visual space," which suggest that findings in empirical psychology can give us insight into the nature of spatial representation in perception.

This seminar will require working through the basics of Einstein's special theory of relativity. We will utilize simple pictorial representations and basic algebra and geometry (not exceeding high school level math) to understand the central concepts. We will also engage in close reading of historical texts, in order to understand the scientific and philosophical context in which the theory was formulated. Finally, we will study the historical and contemporary philosophical debates about space, time, and perception that Einstein's theories have engendered. The course is primarily directed at students in philosophy, but it may also be of interest to students in physics and history.

READINGS

- Chalmers, David. (forthcoming). "Three Puzzles about Spatial Experience." In *Themes From Block*, D. Stoljar and A. Pautz (eds.). Oxford University Press.
- Descartes, René (1620/1996). *Meditations on First Philosophy*, J. Cottingham (ed.). University of Cambridge Press.
- DiSalle, Robert (2006). *Understanding Space-Time: The Philosophical Development of Physics from Newton to Einstein*. Cambridge University Press.
- Einstein, Albert (1905). "On the Electrodynamics of Moving Bodies." Available at: http://hermes.ffn.ub.es/luisnavarro/nuevo_maletin/Einstein_1905_relativity.pdf
- (1922). *Sidelights on Relativity*, G.B. Jeffery and W. Perrett (trans). Available at: http://www.ibiblio.org/ebooks/Einstein/Sidelights/Einstein_Sidelights.pdf.
- Geroch, Robert (1981). *General Relativity from A to B*. University of Chicago Press.
- Hatfield, Gary (2012). "Phenomenal and Cognitive Factors in Spatial Perception." In *Visual Experience: Sensation, Cognition, and Constancy*, G. Hatfield and S. Allred (eds.). Oxford University Press.
- Hopkins, James (1973). "Visual Geometries." *Philosophical Review*.
- Kant, Immanuel (1781/1787/2007). *Critique of Pure Reason*, N. Kemp Smith (trans.). Palgrave MacMillan.
- MacCumhail, Clare (2011). "Specular Space." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*.
- Masrour, Farid. (2015). "The Geometry of Visual Space and the Nature of Visual Experience." *Philosophical Studies*.
- Minkowski, Hermann (1908/2012). In *Space and Time: Minkowski's Papers on Relativity*, V. Petkov (ed.). Minkowski Institute Press.
- Maudlin, Tim (2012). *Philosophy of Physics: Space and Time*. Princeton University Press.
- Poincaré, Henri (1902/2011). *Science and Hypothesis*. Dover Publications.
- Reichenbach, Hans (1927/1957). *The Philosophy of Space and Time*. Dover Publications.
- Reid, Thomas (1785/2002). *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, D. R. Brookes (ed.). Edinburgh University Press.
- Sklar, Lawrence (1977). *Space, Time, and Space-Time*. University of California Press.
- Strawson, P. F. (1966). *The Bounds of Sense: An Essay on Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*. Methuen.
- Thompson, Brad (2010). "The Spatial Content of Experience." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*.

ASSIGNMENTS

A paper of 15-25 pages, topic to be determined in consultation with the instructor.

COURSE SCHEDULE

PART 1: EINSTEIN'S SPECIAL AND GENERAL THEORIES OF RELATIVITY

Background reading: Disalle, *Understanding Space-Time*

Week 1: Historical Background – *A Priori* Conceptions of Space in the Early Modern Period
Reading: Descartes, "Meditation VI"; Reid, Essay II, Chapter XVII, Section I; Kant, "Transcendental Aesthetic," A 23-30/B 37-45

Week 2: Einstein's Special Theory of Relativity I

Reading: Geroch, *General Relativity*: Chapters 1-4

Week 3: Einstein's Special Theory of Relativity II

Reading: Einstein, "On the Electrodynamics of Moving Bodies"

Week 4: Einstein's Special Theory of Relativity III

Reading: Mermin, *Space and Time*: Chapters 1-6

Week 5: Einstein's Special Theory of Relativity IV

Reading: Minkowski, "Lecture 3: Space and Time"; Maudlin, *Space and Time*, Chapter 4

Week 6: Einstein's General Theory of Relativity

Reading: Maudlin *Space and Time*, Chapter 6; Geroch, *General Relativity*, Chapters 5-7

PART 2: GEOMETRY AND EMPIRICAL SCIENCE

Week 7: Empirical Geometry in the Positivist Era

Reading: Poincaré, *Science and Hypothesis*, Chapter 5; Reichenbach, *Philosophy of Space and Time*, Chapter 1

Week 8: Empirical Evidence About the Geometry of Space

Reading: Sklar, *Space, Time, and Space-Time*, "The Epistemology of Geometry"

PART 3: GEOMETRY AND PERCEPTUAL EXPERIENCE

Week 9: Experience and STR

Reading: Thompson, "Spatial Content of Experience"; Chalmers, "Three Puzzles," Sections 1 and 3; Mermin, *Space and Time*, Chapters 8-9

Week 10: Experience and GTR

Reading: Einstein, "Geometry and Experience"; Strawson, *Bounds of Sense*, Chapter 5; Hopkins, "Visual Geometries"

Week 11: The Geometry of "Visual Space" I

Reading: Masrour, "The Geometry of Visual Space and the Nature of Visual Experience"

Week 12: The Geometry of "Visual Space" II

Reading: MacCumhail, "Specular Space"; Hatfield, "Phenomenal and Cognitive Factors in Spatial Perception"