PHIL408C — Self-knowledge and Other-knowledge (3 credits).

Prerequisite: six credit hours in philosophy.

MW: 2.00-3.15 pm, Skinner 1115.

Instructor: Peter Carruthers. pcarruth@umd.edu
Office: 1122B Skinner Building.
Office hours: Thursdays 12.00-2.00 pm, or by appointment.

1. Course description

Philosophers have traditionally been troubled by the problem of other minds. This is the problem of how one can have knowledge of the mental states of other people, given that all one can observe are their circumstances and behavior. Correspondingly, philosophers have traditionally believed that self-knowledge is especially direct and reliable. (Recall Descartes’ belief that his own thoughts are the only things that he can initially be completely certain of.) More recently, cognitive science has taken up the question of other-knowledge under the heading “theory of mind” or “mindreading.” And cognitive scientists have likewise challenged the transparency of our own minds. This course will examine some of these debates and their underlying theories. As we will see, some accounts of other-knowledge presuppose specific theories of self-knowledge, and vice versa.

The aim of the course is to introduce you to these debates, and to encourage you to engage with them in a sophisticated and knowledgeable way. By the end of the course you should have an understanding of the main positions in the field, and should have begun to develop your own views. You should also have improved your communication and writing skills.

2. Course texts and expectations of students

All of the primary readings for the course are made available via ELMS. Other papers may need to be consulted when writing the term papers or preparing for the final exam. (Use Google Scholar or search the data-base at http://philpapers.org/ to locate relevant writings.)

The course will follow the tentative schedule outlined in #5 below. The readings associated with each week should be studied in advance of the Monday of that week. The instructor will have presented some of the background and highlights on the previous Wednesday, and will explain some of the more difficult ideas. (Powerpoint slides will be posted on ELMS under “Files” after each Wednesday lecture.) The Monday sessions will be devoted to class discussion. To be
effective, this requires advance reading and thinking. All students should bring with them to each Monday class (except the first) one typewritten question about the readings and/or material covered in the previous lecture. This will need to be handed in to the instructor at the end of the class (even if you don’t have a chance to ask it during the discussion).

Students are expected to attend regularly, and to be actively involved throughout. All laptops, cellphones, and other electronic devices will need to be turned off during classes. This is both to facilitate active learning and as a courtesy to other learners. Readings should be printed and brought with you to Monday class. (Note that this is the only expense involved for this course.)

Some of the readings are published and unpublished articles by the instructor. These are legitimate targets of disagreement and criticism. You should not be afraid to take a contrary line.

3. Course requirements

Grades for the course will be based on four components, as follows:
(1) Two 1000-word summary discussions of key theories (10% each; 20% of the total);
(2) Two 3000-word term-papers (20% each; 40% of the total);
(3) Final exam (25%);
(4) Contributions to class discussion (15%).
Details and deadlines are given below.

(a) Friday February 20th at 5.00 pm — 1000-word summary and discussion (10%) emailed to the instructor in Word or PDF. Late submissions will be penalized by one full letter-grade immediately, with a further letter-grade lost after each 24-hour interval.
   
    Either: explain the problem of other minds and discuss the presuppositions that it makes concerning the nature of self-knowledge. Or: select one of the theories of self-knowledge discussed already in class / in the readings and explain its motivations, together with its main strengths and weaknesses.

(b) Friday March 13th at 5.00 pm — 3000-word term-paper (20%) emailed to the instructor in Word or PDF. Late submissions will be penalized by one full letter-grade immediately, with a further letter-grade lost after each 24-hour interval.

    Select one of the theories of self-knowledge discussed in class and in the readings, and subject it to evaluation and critique. Explain what the theory is and how it contrasts with its competitors, and outline its strengths and weaknesses, reaching an overall verdict on the acceptability of the theory.

(c) Friday April 10th at 5.00 pm — 1000-word summary and discussion (10%) emailed to the
instructor in Word or PDF. Late submissions will be penalized by one full letter-grade immediately, with a further letter-grade lost after each 24-hour interval.

Select one of the theories of other-knowledge discussed already in class / in the readings and explain its motivations, together with its main strengths and weaknesses.

(d) Friday May 1st at 5.00 pm — 3000-word term-paper (20%) emailed to the instructor in Word or PDF. Late submissions will be penalized by one full letter-grade immediately, with a further letter-grade lost after each 24-hour interval.

Select one of the theories of other-knowledge discussed in class and in the readings, and subject it to evaluation and critique. Explain what the theory is and how it contrasts with its competitors, and outline its strengths and weaknesses, reaching an overall verdict on the acceptability of the theory.

(e) Monday May 18th, 1.30-3.30 — Final exam (25%). You will be asked to write 4 essays (of 3-4 pages each) selected from a larger number of questions. The questions will be released in the final regular class of term (Monday May 11th). This will give you a full week to prepare your answers. You may not, however, bring any papers or books into the exam. Exam answers will be graded anonymously (by folding back the cover sheet and shuffling). You may utilize material from your summaries and term papers if you wish, but this material must be targeted at the question asked. At least some of the questions will require you to link together material from the two halves of the course.

(f) Class contribution (15%). This will take into account both the number and (especially) the quality of your questions, comments, suggestions, and arguments presented in class over the course of the term. Note that the printed question you hand in at the end of each class will count towards your class contribution, even if you didn’t actually get to ask it (perhaps because someone else asked the same question first, or because time ran out discussing other questions – but I will try to make the time to call on everyone). Note, too, that expressions of puzzlement / lack of understanding can qualify as useful contributions to discussion, and should not be discouraged.

4. Assessment policy

Grades will be assigned in accordance with the following criteria. There are five broad dimensions of assessment:

1. Presentation, literacy, and organization (including spelling, grammar, and punctuation; answers should have a beginning, middle, and end, and should work towards a clear goal in a systematic fashion);
2. clarity and relevance (ideas and arguments should be explained clearly and fully; all and
only material relevant to answering the question should be included);

3. knowledge and understanding (how much you know about the subject matter and how well you have researched it; a good understanding of the material under discussion also needs to be displayed);

4. quality of argument (give strong arguments, and avoid invalidity);

5. independence, critical stance, and creativity (the extent to which you evaluate and discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the ideas under discussion for yourself).

For purposes of averaging and calculating final grades, the following conversion will be used:

You should note that undergraduate grades at the University of Maryland have recently followed roughly the following distribution at levels 300/400:
A: ±45% B: ±35% C: ±10% Other (D, F, W): ±10%
This normal distribution will be borne in mind when assigning the grades for this course.

5. Schedule and readings

The course will follow the tentative schedule outlined below. (Changes will be announced on ELMS and via email.) The reading listed for each Monday should be studied in advance. All readings are accessible through ELMS (under “Files”).

Jan 26 & 28 — no reading: introductions, course business, and introduction to the problem of other minds and its relationship to theories of self-knowledge.

http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/other-minds/


1000-word summary & discussion due on Friday February 20th at 5.00 pm.


3000-word term paper due on Friday March 13th at 5.00 pm.

SPRING BREAK


1000-word summary & discussion due on Friday April 10th at 5.00 pm.


3000-word term paper due on Friday May 1st at 5.00 pm.


Monday May 18, 1.30-3.30 pm — FINAL EXAM.

6. **Students with Disabilities**

If you have a disability of any sort that requires an accommodation to be made in the arrangements for the course, you should inform the instructor at the start of the course, who will then consult with the University’s Disability Support Service.

7. **Religious Observances and other Absences**
It is the student’s responsibility to inform the instructor of any intended absences for religious observances *in advance*.

Students who need to be absent for personal reasons should seek permission *in advance* from the instructor.

For every medically necessary absence from class, a reasonable effort should be made to notify the instructor in advance of the class. When returning to class, students must bring a note identifying the date of and reason for the absence, and acknowledging that the information in the note is accurate. If a student is absent more than twice, the instructor may require documentation signed by a health care professional.

If a student is absent on days when work is due for submission, he or she is required to notify the instructor in advance, and upon returning to class, bring documentation of the illness, signed by a health care professional.

**8. Academic Integrity**

All students are expected to comply with the University’s code of academic integrity. Academic dishonesty of any kind will automatically result in a grade of XF for the course.

The following statement is from the University: The University of Maryland, College Park has a nationally recognized Code of Academic Integrity, administered by the Student Honor Council. This Code sets standards for academic integrity at Maryland for all undergraduate and graduate students. As a student you are responsible for upholding these standards for this course. It is very important for you to be aware of the consequences of cheating, fabrication, facilitation, and plagiarism. For more information on the Code of Academic Integrity or the Student Honor Council, please visit:

http://www.shc.umd.edu/SHC/

**9. Emergency weather plan**

If the University is closed due to bad weather on a Monday we will hold a shortened version of the discussion of that week’s reading on the Wednesday instead (with the instructor’s introduction of the next week’s material being similarly curtailed).

If the University if closed due to bad weather on a Wednesday the instructor will email out some notes on the next week’s readings within a day or two to help you prepare.
Deadlines for summaries and term papers will not be affected by University closures or bad weather.

*Enjoy!*