

## **Social Cognition**

PHIL 878J – Seminar in Cognitive Studies

Tuesdays, 4.30 pm to 7.00 pm in the Seminar Room (Sk 1116)

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### **Course Outline**

Philosophers have traditionally been worried by the problem of other minds: how do I know that other people have minds like mine, given that all I ever observe is their behavior? More recently philosophers have become interested in the prior descriptive question: in what ways do people actually form their beliefs about the mental states of others? Where do their mental-state concepts come from, and how do they actually get from observations of behavior to the relevant mental states? Moreover, for the last 30 years this has also been an active area of scientific inquiry, pursued by researchers in developmental psychology, cognitive psychology, and cognitive neuroscience. Anyone hoping to contribute to the debates now cannot be other than highly interdisciplinary.

This course will review some of the theories that have been proposed to explain human mindreading abilities, and some of the data that are thought to support or adjudicate between those theories. Among the topics to be discussed will be child-as-scientist and simulation-based accounts, modularity views, interactionist views, contributions made by so-called “mirror neurons”, connections between mindreading, language, and executive function, the question whether mental states can be perceived, and (most centrally) competing explanations of the 3-year gap between infants’ capacities to pass non-verbal, spontaneous-response, tasks and the age at which children first become capable of passing verbal, elicited-response, tasks.

Note that this seminar will be an opinionated introduction to the debates about human mindreading abilities, rather than a dispassionate survey. It represents the instructor’s attempt to think through the alternatives afresh, especially in light of recent data and new theoretical claims. But this does *not* mean that students are required (or indeed pressured) to share his vision. In particular, you should not be afraid to defend conflicting views in discussion and in your term-papers.

### **Course arrangements**

During the first ten or twelve weeks or so of the course (depending on the number of students registered for credit), classes will have the following format: the first two-thirds of each session will be devoted to student-led discussion of the reading material for that week. One or more

members of the class will be designated to lead and chair the discussion. But everyone will need to read the material carefully, and everyone will need to cooperate to make it work. In the concluding part of each session the instructor will introduce the material to be read for the week following. The instructor's powerpoint slides will (where possible) be published in advance in ELMS, so that you can take notes directly onto your own copy as the lecture proceeds.

The remainder of the course will be reserved for presentation and discussion of draft student term-papers. Depending on the number of students registered for credit, a schedule will get finalized early in the Fall and posted on the ELMS site.

Copies of all the basic readings for the course will be posted on the ELMS site. (More may need to be researched for purposes of writing your term-paper.) Some are experimental in nature. Don't get too bogged down in the technical details, and don't be afraid to skim where necessary. (In some weeks there is rather more reading than you might normally expect in a philosophy seminar. But then reading philosophy is so much harder!) Our task is to try to figure out what the results mean for different theories of the nature of human social cognition.

### **Assessment**

Assessment for the course will be driven almost entirely by the final term paper. This will need to be drafted in outline in time for oral presentation to the class during the final few sessions of term. Plan on 25 minutes for presentation and 20 minutes for discussion. (Generally three presenters per class.)

All for-credit students should make an appointment to meet with me to discuss an abstract of the intended term paper, as well as plans for your oral presentation, sometime during the two weeks prior to your scheduled presentation.

Following your oral presentation, **initial drafts** of your paper will then need to be submitted to me (by email attachment please) for critical comment by **Wednesday December 24**. I will return these with comments before the New Year, and **final versions** should then be submitted for grading (again by email attachment) by **January 26** (the first day of Spring Semester).

The final version of the paper should be of normal article length (between 7,000 and 9,000 words inclusive of all notes and references). Your first draft should be a bit shorter, to allow for expansion in response to feedback.

You can set your own question for the term paper, provided that it is drawn from among the topics covered by the seminar. You could either choose a question that is covered in one or two sessions, or a question that links together different elements of the course, or runs as a theme throughout it.

Grading for the course will be 20% for the oral presentation and subsequent handling of class discussion (judged both for content and for presentational skills), 80% for the final term paper.