Animal Minds vs Human Minds
PHIL 878C – Seminar in Cognitive Studies
Mondays, 4.30 pm to 7.00 pm in the Seminar Room (Sk 1116)

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Course Outline
Everyone allows that human and animal minds are distinctively (indeed, massively) different in their manifest effects. Humans have been able to colonize nearly every corner of the planet, from the arctic, to deserts, to rainforests (and they did so in the absence of modern technological aids); they live together in large cooperative groups of unrelated individuals; they communicate with one another using the open-ended expressive resources of natural language; they are capable of cultural learning that accumulates over generations to result in agriculture, art, and science; and they are remarkably thoughtful and inventive. There is much less agreement about how these manifest differences should be explained, however.

This seminar will examine some proposed explanations. For example: that natural language transforms human thought capacities; that humans are unique in their mindreading and social abilities; that they are unique in their capacity for cumulative cultural learning; that only humans are capable of “mental time-travel”; and others. Special attention will be paid to an idea endorsed by many philosophers, which is that humans are unique in possessing a set of “inferentially promiscuous” propositional attitudes, which can interact with one another and with a variety of inferential and decision-making systems within a central cognitive workspace, resulting in our distinctive cognitive flexibility. This idea will be subjected to sustained critique, drawing on recent work in cognitive science on the nature of working memory.

Note that this will be an opinionated introduction to the debates about human uniqueness rather than a dispassionate survey. It represents the instructor’s first attempt to think through the issues for his next major project. 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 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 member 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 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 soon and posted on the ELMS site. (Initial topics and some readings have already been posted.)

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.) Many are experimental studies of animal cognition. Don’t get too bogged down in the technical details, and don’t be afraid to skim where necessary. (There is rather more reading than you might normally expect in a philosophy seminar. But reading philosophy is so much harder!) Our task is to try to figure out what the results mean for the differences between human and animal minds, as well as to consider how some of these results challenge commonly-held philosophical assumptions.

**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 Friday December 21. I shall return these with comments before the New Year, and final versions should be submitted for grading (again by email attachment) by January 23 (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. The philosophy grads among you might be well-advised to focus more on the philosophy and less on the cognitive science.

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.