PHIL 26S: Other People's Minds

Summer 2025 (3-Unit Class)

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Class meetings: TBA
Office hours: TBA

| Course Description

How do we know what others think, feel, or experience? And what does it even mean to "understand" another mind? This course explores the philosophical problem of other minds through a distinctly interdisciplinary lens, bringing together classic philosophical arguments, cognitive science, the phenomenology of embodiment, and contemporary debates in artificial intelligence. We will examine how we attribute mental states to others, how empathy and perception shape social understanding, how habits and biases influence interpretation, and whether advanced AI systems genuinely "understand" or merely simulate understanding. Along the way, students will develop skills in philosophical analysis, learn to connect philosophical texts with empirical research, and reflect critically on the nature of consciousness, agency, and interpersonal understanding. No prerequisites; all are welcome.

| Course Goals

By the end of this course, students will have developed the following knowledge and skills:

- Explain major philosophical approaches to other minds, including classical skepticism, phenomenology, theory-theory, simulation theory, and the intentional stance.
- Analyze how empirical research in psychology and cognitive informs (and sometimes challenges) philosophical accounts of other minds.
- Reflect on the phenomenology of interpersonal experience, including empathy, embodiment, and affective communication.
- Evaluate and construct clear philosophical arguments, demonstrating skill in identifying theses, reconstructing reasoning, and formulating objections.
- Apply course concepts to real-world cases, such as bias in social cognition, human-AI interaction, and everyday interpersonal interpretation.
- Develop their own perspective on what it means to understand another mind, synthesizing insights across philosophy, psychology, phenomenology, and technology.

| Course Requirements

Participation (25%)
Active engagement is essential. Students are expected to complete the required readings **before** each class and to participate thoughtfully in discussion. One unexcused absence is permitted, and each student is allowed up to two excused absences. Any additional absences will result in a reduction of the participation grade.

Weekly "Mind Logs" (25%)
Short weekly reflections (150-200 words) in one of three formats:

- **Analytical**: interpret a key argument from a reading.
- **Phenomenological**: apply a concept to lived experience.
- **Comparative**: relate the reading to how contemporary sciences model the mind.

Please post your reflection to the Discussion tab on Canvas and respond to one post by another student. You may skip one week of reflections without penalty.

Final Paper (50%)
A 5–7 page paper on a central theme from the course. Proposed topics must be approved by Week 6. Papers should primarily address a philosophical question, but you are welcome to draw on insights from related disciplines such as psychology, cognitive science, phenomenology, and/or AI research.

| Course Policies

Accessibility and Accommodations:
I am committed to making this course accessible to all students. If you have a disability or other condition that may affect your learning, please connect with the Office of Accessible Education (OAE: http://oae.stanford.edu) to arrange accommodations. I also encourage you to talk with me early in the quarter so we can work together to support your learning.

Academic Integrity:
Our class depends on honesty, trust, and fairness. All submitted work must be your own, and any sources you use must be properly cited. If you have questions about what counts as appropriate collaboration or citation, please ask—I would much rather clarify than have you worry. Suspected violations will be referred to the Office of Community Standards.

Respectful Participation:
This course is a space for open, thoughtful dialogue. I ask that we all approach our conversations with respect, generosity, and openness to differing perspectives. Listening carefully and interpreting others' contributions charitably are just as important as speaking. Disagreement is welcome, but it should always be expressed in a way that sustains a constructive and inclusive environment.

Wellbeing and Support:
Learning is challenging, and so is life. If you find yourself facing difficulties—academic, personal, or otherwise—please don't hesitate to reach out. I am happy to discuss adjustments or connect you with campus resources. Stanford also offers a range of support services, including Counselling and Psychological Services (CAPS: https://caps.stanford.edu). Taking care of yourself is an essential part of doing well in this class.

| Schedule & Readings

Week 1 – What is the Problem of Other Minds?

Introduction

We begin by situating the philosophical puzzle: how can we know that other minds exist at all, and what counts as evidence for consciousness? In the first week, we will encounter the classical formulations of skepticism and the early analytic attempts to solve (or dissolve) the problem.

Discussion Questions

- Is the existence of other minds something we *infer*, *perceive*, or simply *assume*?
- If consciousness is inherently private, can the problem ever be solved?

Readings

- Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy*, Chapter II
- A. J. Ayer, *The Problem of Knowledge*, Chapter V

Week 2 – The Phenomenology of Other Minds

Introduction

This week challenges the idea that minds are hidden "behind" behavior. Phenomenological thinkers argue that we often grasp others' emotions and intentions directly through their expressive bodies, gestures, and actions.

Discussion Questions

- When you see someone in pain or joy, do you infer their state or *feel it directly*?
- Does embodiment make the problem of other minds disappear or deepen?

Readings

- Edith Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy* (excerpt)
- Shaun Gallagher, "Direct Perception in the Intersubjective Context"

Week 3 – The Psychology of Mindreading

Introduction

How do humans actually understand one another? Developmental psychology suggests we use implicit "theories" about others' beliefs and desires or internally simulate their mental states. This week, we will explore the connection between philosophical puzzles about other minds and empirical mindreading research.

Discussion Questions

- Do we understand others by *reasoning like scientists* or by *imaginatively simulating them*?
- What do infants teach us about the origins of understanding other minds?

Readings

- Alison Gopnik, "The Scientist as Child"

- Ian Ravenscroft, "What is it like to be someone else? Simulation and empathy"

Week 4 – Biases, Heuristics, and Social Cognition

Introduction

Our understanding of others is not always rational. Cognitive biases shape how we interpret behavior, form judgments, and attribute intentions. This week, we will explore how heuristics can distort or facilitate interpersonal understanding.

Discussion Questions

- Are biases bugs in the system or essential shortcuts for understanding others?
- How do heuristics complicate philosophical accounts of rational agency?

Readings

- Tversky & Kahneman, "Judgment under Uncertainty"
- Tamar Gendler, "Alief and Belief"

Week 5 – Habits, Skills and the Structure of Action

Introduction

Actions reveal minds, but how? This week contrasts intentional, reflective action with habitual or skilled behavior. We will examine how habits shape agency, and whether interpreting others' actions requires understanding their dispositions.

Discussion Questions

- Do habits express the mind or bypass it?
- How do habits complicate the distinction between rational and irrational action?

Readings

- William James, "Habit" (excerpt from *The Principles of Psychology*)
- Gilbert Harman, "Practical Reasoning"

Week 6 – Agency and the First-Person Perspective

Introduction

This week focuses on how agents understand their own actions and how others interpret them. We will examine classic arguments about intention, reasons, and rational explanation that illuminate the differences between first-person and third-person understanding.

Discussion Questions

- Can we ever explain another person's action in the same way they explain it themselves?

- What is the difference between giving a reason and giving a cause?

Readings

- G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention* (excerpt)
- Donald Davidson, "Actions, Reasons, and Causes"

Week 7 – AI, Mindreading and the Intentional Stance

Introduction

We now turn to artificial intelligence. Can machines understand minds or even have minds? We will explore when and why we attribute beliefs, desires, or consciousness to AI systems.

Discussion Questions

- If we treat an AI system *as if* it has beliefs and desires, does that mean it does?
- What would count as genuine machine understanding?

Readings

- Daniel Dennett, *The Intentional Stance* (excerpt)
- John Searle, "Minds, Brains, and Programs"

Week 8 – Odds and Ends

Introduction

The final week synthesizes philosophical, psychological, and AI-based approaches. We will examine ethical implications, the future of social cognition, and what we ultimately mean when we say someone (or something) has a mind.

Discussion Questions

- What *is* a mind, after eight weeks of study?
- Should advanced AI systems be treated as moral patients or moral agents?

Readings

- Thomas Nagel, "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?"
- Neil Rabinowitz et al., "Machine Theory of Mind"