

PHIL 250 - Minds and Machines Syllabus
Summer 2025

Meetings: Tue Thu | 10:00 a.m. - 1:00 p.m. BUCH-Floor 2-Room B218

Instructor Information

Instructor: Ella Zhang

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Office Hours: Tues Thu 1- 2 pm, Buchanan E274 or by appointment

General Information

Description: This course offers an introduction to philosophical issues concerning the nature of the mind and the conceptual foundations of cognitive science. We'll explore the assumptions about the mind that shape theories in psychology, neuroscience, and artificial intelligence, and critically examine key questions in these areas. Topics will include: Is the mind like a computer? Can mental processes be understood in computational terms? Can AI be conscious? Is cognition confined to the brain, or does it extend into the body and environment? What is the role of embodiment in cognition? In the second half of the course, we'll also turn to questions in AI ethics, including the moral and political implications of emerging technologies. What responsibilities do we have when designing or deploying AI systems? Can machines be moral agents — or moral patients? How should we respond to issues like bias in algorithms, surveillance technologies, or the use of AI in decision-making?

There are no prerequisites for this course and no prior experience with philosophy will be assumed.

Expectation and Goals:

- **Participate and engage.** Discussion is at the heart of philosophy, and we'll get more out of the course if we're actively working through ideas together.
- **Be open and respectful.** We'll be engaging with challenging and sometimes unfamiliar ideas. The goal is to create a space where everyone feels comfortable exploring, questioning, and building arguments — even when we disagree.
- **Expect your ideas to be constructively challenged.** My aim is to explore these questions with you, not to test you on having the “right” answers. If I ask questions or press a point, it's not to suggest you're wrong — it's an invitation to think more deeply and clarify your view.
- **Focus on the reasoning.** We'll practice looking at arguments as more than just conclusions we agree or disagree with. Our focus will be on evaluating structure, identifying strengths and weaknesses, and learning how to refine or defend a view.

By the end of the course, you'll be working toward:

- Understanding core philosophical concepts
- Reading and thinking critically
- Clearly explaining arguments in your own words
- Evaluating and supporting claims with care
- Developing and defending your own philosophical position

It takes practice — especially to speak up in class or form a view on the spot — so we'll go at a pace that makes room for everyone. Patience and curiosity will go a long way.

Course Materials

No textbook is required. All readings will be provided online via Canvas. You can find the readings listed in chronological order in the “Course Readings” section in the “Modules” tab.

Assessment

Grade Distribution:

(10%) Attendance

(20%) In-class participation – group discussion and presentation

(15%) Paper - First attempt (due **June 2nd**)

(30%) Paper - Revised (due **June 20nd**)

(25%) Final Exam (during finals, exact day **TBA**)

Attendance: Because this is a condensed summer course with only twelve meetings, attendance is **mandatory**. The material builds quickly, and in-class discussion is essential to developing your understanding of the readings and arguments. Students will sign in at the beginning of each class using **iClicker**. Everyone is allowed one unexcused absence; additional unexcused absences will result in a reduction in your final grade. If you have extenuating circumstances, please communicate with me as early as possible.

Participation: **Participation** will be assessed through a combination of **in-class engagement** and **presentations**. Students are expected to actively contribute to both full-class and small-group discussions throughout the term. In addition, each student will give a short presentation, which offers an opportunity to demonstrate engagement with the material in a structured format. If you're less comfortable speaking up spontaneously in class, a strong presentation can help balance your participation grade — the goal is to reward thoughtful engagement in a way that accommodates different communication styles.

Paper: There will be **one paper assignment** for this course, but you will submit **two versions** of it. The **first draft** is due at the end of **Week 4**, and you will receive detailed feedback from me. You'll then have time to revise and submit a **final version** by the end of the course. Since this may be the first time many of you are writing a philosophy paper, the focus is on developing your philosophical thinking and writing through revision. To reflect that, the first attempt will be worth 15% of your final grade, and the revised version will be worth 30%.

Final Exam: Format and date to be announced.

Course Schedule

The schedule of readings and topics listed in this syllabus is subject to change based on the interests and needs of the class. The pace and number of readings may be adjusted to ensure the material is accessible and appropriately challenging for everyone. Any changes to the schedule will be reflected in the updated “Course Schedule” posted under the Information module in the Modules tab on Canvas. I will also announce all changes through Canvas Announcements to keep you informed.

Week 1 – Introduction

May 13

- Jen McWeeny, “Princess Elisabeth and the Mind-Body Problem”
- Louise Antony, “The Mental and the Physical”

May 15

- Andy Clark, *Mindware*, chapter 1
- Andy Clark, *Mindware*, Appendix 1.

Week 2 – Functionalism

May 20

- Hilary Putnam, “The Nature of Mental States”
- Jaegwon Kim, “Mind as a Computing Machine”

May 22

- John Searle, “Minds, Brains, and Programs”
- Ned Block, “Troubles with Functionalism”

Week 3 – Consciousness

May 27

- Zoe Drayson, “The philosophy of phenomenal consciousness”
- Thomas Nagel, “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?”
- Frank Jackson, “What Mary Didn’t Know”

May 29

- David Chalmers, “Facing Up to the Problem of Consciousness”
- Patricia S. Churchland, “The Hornswoggle Problem”

****June 2 –Paper First Attempt Due****

Week 4 – The Extended Mind and Feminist Philosophy of Mind

June 3

- Andy Clark & David Chalmers, “The Extended Mind”
- Andy Clark, *What Is Extended Mind?* (video) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kc-TdMjuJRU>

- Frederick Adams & Kenneth Aizawa, “Why the Mind Is Still in the Head”

June 5

- Jennifer McWeeny, “Which Bodies Have Minds? Feminism, Panpsychism, and the Attribution Question”
- Naomi Scheman, “Against Physicalism”

Week 5 – Machine, Intelligence, and AI

June 10

- Alan Turing, “Computing Machinery and Intelligence” [1950]
- Terry Winograd, “Thinking Machines: Can There Be? Are We?” [1990]

June 12

- John Haugeland, *Artificial Intelligence: The Very Idea*, Introduction [1985]
- Stephen Cave, “The Problem with Intelligence: Its Value-Laden History and the Future of AI” [2020]
- David Chalmers, “Could a Large Language Model Be Conscious?” (Boston Review) <https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/could-a-large-language-model-be-conscious/> [2022/2023] or “The Singularity: A Philosophical Analysis” [2010]

Week 6 – AI Ethics

June 17

- Joan Llorca Albareda, Paloma García, and Francisco Lara, “The Moral Status of AI Entities”
- F. M. Kamm, “The Use and Abuse of the Trolley Problem: Self- Driving Cars, Medical Treatments, and the Distribution of Harm”

June 19

- Cathy O’Neil and Hanna Gunn, “Near-Term Artificial Intelligence and the Ethical Matrix”
- Adam Bales, William D’Alessandro, and Cameron Domenico Kirk-Giannini, “Artificial Intelligence: Arguments for Catastrophic Risk”

****June 20 – Revised Paper Due****

****Final Exam:** Date TBD (Exam period: June 23–27)**

Policies

Late Assignment

Submitting your work on time is important. However, I am happy to consider reasonable extension requests, provided they are made in advance of the deadline and receive approval. Requests made after the due date will not be considered. Unless an extension has been granted, late assignments will be penalized by a deduction of one full letter grade (e.g., B+ to B) for every 24-hour period past the deadline.

Recording Lectures

Lectures will not be recorded. Attendance is required to hear the lecture material and participate in class discussions. Students may not record any part of a lecture without the explicit permission of the instructor.

Emails

When emailing me about this class, please write “Phil 250” in the subject line so that I can quickly identify your message within the daily deluge of emails. I will endeavor to reply to all course emails within 48 hours. If I do not manage to do this, it’s okay to email again to remind me – but please wait 48 hours first.

Technology Use in the Classroom

Laptops, tablets, and smartphones with university Wi-Fi access are permitted in this class, as they are essential for certain activities. During specified periods, you may be asked to use these devices for class-related tasks. Outside of those times, laptops may be used for note-taking only. Even when devices are allowed, please remember that non-class-related use (e.g., web browsing, messaging, social media) can be distracting to those around you. I ask that you use your devices respectfully and responsibly, with consideration for your peers’ learning environment.

Academic Accommodations

Academic accommodations are designed to support students with a disability or ongoing medical condition in overcoming challenges that may impact their academic success. Students seeking accommodations must register with the Centre for Accessibility (<https://students.ubc.ca/about-student-services/centre-for-accessibility/registering-centre-accessibility/>), which will determine eligibility in accordance with UBC Policy 73: Academic Accommodation for Students with Disabilities. Please note that accommodations are not determined by your instructor, and instructors should not request or receive information about the nature of your condition or documentation. However, your instructor may consult with the Centre for Accessibility if an accommodation request intersects with the essential learning outcomes of the course.

Academic Concession

If unexpected circumstances—such as illness, injury, personal or family emergency, or other serious and unforeseen events—affect your ability to meet a course requirement, you may be eligible for an **academic concession**. Academic concessions offer flexibility (e.g., extended deadlines, deferred exams) while maintaining academic standards. These concessions are granted on a case-by-case basis and must be based on legitimate, documented reasons.

To request a concession:

- **Contact your instructor as soon as possible**—ideally before the due date or missed activity.
- For issues related to final exams or prolonged absences, submit a formal request through **Arts Academic Advising** (<https://students.arts.ubc.ca/advising/academic-concession/>).
- For **short-term illness**, a self-declaration may be accepted (<https://www.arts.ubc.ca/wp-content/uploads/sites/24/2019/10/Student-Self-Declaration-Form-1.6-Arts.pdf>). More serious or ongoing situations may require documentation.

Note: If no concession has been approved in advance, **late assignments will be subject to the late policy stated in this syllabus**. For full details, please see UBC's [Academic Concession Policy](https://vancouver.calendar.ubc.ca/campus-wide-policies-and-regulations/academic-concession) (<https://vancouver.calendar.ubc.ca/campus-wide-policies-and-regulations/academic-concession>).

Academic Integrity

All students are expected to uphold the highest standards of academic honesty. As outlined in UBC's [Academic Honesty and Standards policy](https://vancouver.calendar.ubc.ca/campus-wide-policies-and-regulations/academic-honesty-and-standards) (<https://vancouver.calendar.ubc.ca/campus-wide-policies-and-regulations/academic-honesty-and-standards>), academic integrity involves completing your work independently, citing sources appropriately, and avoiding any form of plagiarism, cheating, or misrepresentation. **The use of generative AI tools (e.g., ChatGPT or similar) is strictly prohibited in the paper writing process for this course.** This includes using AI to draft, edit, rewrite, outline, or otherwise shape your written work. All writing must reflect your own original thinking and expression. Any assignment found to violate this policy will be treated as academic misconduct and may be subject to serious consequences, including a failing grade on the assignment, a failing grade in the course, or further disciplinary action through UBC's academic misconduct procedures.

Academic Misconduct:

As a student at UBC, you are expected to adhere to the highest standards of academic integrity. Academic misconduct is a serious offense and includes, but is not limited to:

- Plagiarism – presenting another person's work or ideas as your own, without proper acknowledgment
- Cheating – using or attempting to use unauthorized materials, information, or devices in academic work
- Fabrication or falsification – inventing data, sources, or citations
- Facilitating academic dishonesty – helping another student commit any form of misconduct
- Impersonation – submitting work or writing an exam on someone else's behalf
- Reuse of past work – submitting your own work from another course without permission (self-plagiarism)

Violations will be reported and handled in accordance with UBC's procedures. Penalties for academic misconduct may include a **zero on the assignment**, a **failing grade in the course**, a **notation on your academic record**, or **suspension or expulsion** from the university. If you are unsure whether something might constitute misconduct, especially regarding **citation, collaboration, or appropriate use of sources**, it is your responsibility to ask the instructor in advance. For more information, visit: <https://vancouver.calendar.ubc.ca/campus-wide-policies-and-regulations/student-conduct-and-discipline/discipline-academic-misconduct/3-academic-misconduct-ubc-students>

Academic Citation

There is no required citation method for this course. Please feel free to use whichever method you are most comfortable with. Here is UBC's guide on citation: (<http://help.library.ubc.ca/evaluating-and-citing-sources/how-to-cite/>)