

PHIL 250 002 – MINDS AND MACHINES

Winter Term 2, 2026

1. CONTACT

INSTRUCTOR

Name: Tyeson Davies-Barton

Office Hours: Tues., 4-5pm, Zoom

Lecture Location: BUCH D221

Lecture Times: Mon., Wed., & Fri., 10-11am

Email: tyeson.daviesbarton@ubc.ca

E-mail policy: E-mails must be sent from your UBC e-mail address and must include the course code (PHIL 250) in the subject line. I aim to reply to e-mails within one or two business days.

2. COURSE DESCRIPTION

OVERVIEW

This course will be an introduction to a broad range of philosophical issues through the lens of modern technology. We will focus in particular on virtual reality and artificial intelligence. The course will be divided into two parts. In part one, we will focus on virtual reality in order to grapple with perennial questions in philosophy such as “Can we know anything about the world around us?”, “What makes a life good for the one who lives it?”, and “What makes it the case that a person in the past or future is the same as a person existing now?”. Virtual reality casts these questions in a new light. We can now ask, “Can you know that you’re not living in a simulation?”, “If possible, would it be in your best interest to live in a simulation?”, and “Could you be uploaded to a computer?”. In part two, we will focus on artificial intelligence in order to grapple with central philosophical issues concerning the nature of the mind. We will begin with the ‘mind-body problem’: the question of how your mind is related to your body. For example, is your mind an immaterial soul that can (at least in principle) survive the death of your body, as René Descartes believed? If not, is your mind nothing more than your brain, or perhaps something more like a computer program running on the hardware of the brain? If your mind is a computer, does it follow that we can not only simulate intelligence artificially but create *genuine* artificial intelligence? Is it really possible for a computer to understand the symbols that it processes? In part two, we will ask these and other questions, focusing in particular on the promise and hurdles confronting the computational theory of mind. Other questions to be covered include: “Are AI art generators—such as DALL-E and Midjourney—genuinely creative?”, “Can an external object, like a notebook, be a part of your mind?”, and “Can we imagine what it is like to be animals very different from ourselves?”. There are no prerequisites for this course and no prior experience with philosophy or AI will be assumed.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this course, you will . . .

- Be able to explain philosophical arguments and concepts, in writing and in person, in the areas of philosophy that we will cover.
- Be able to formulate, defend, and critique philosophical arguments, in writing and in person, in the areas of philosophy that we will cover.
- Appreciate the difficulties in explaining some features of the mind scientifically, and the advantages and disadvantages of using the theory of computation to overcome these difficulties.

TEXTS

All readings will be available online through our Canvas course page (see §4 for details). You can find the readings listed in chronological order under the “Modules” section of our Canvas course page.

3. ASSESSMENT

Class Participation	15%	
Midterm	15%	In class on February 6th
Video Essay One	20%	Due: February 20th
Video Essay Two	20%	Due: March 23rd
Final Exam	30%	TBD

CLASS PARTICIPATION

Class participation will have two components: attendance and class contribution. Attendance will account for 10% of the participation grade. There are 36 lecture days (not taking into account the in-class midterm). I will take attendance each day. To receive full marks for attendance, you will need to attend at least 30 of those days. If you attend between 25-29 of those days, you will receive 8/10 for attendance. If you attend 20-24 of those days, you will receive 6/10 for attendance. If you attend 15-19 of those days, you will receive 4/10 for attendance. If you attend 14 or fewer, you will receive 0/10 for attendance. Class contribution will account for 5% of your participation grade. Contributing to the class means participating in discussions and learning activities.

VIDEO ESSAYS

There will be two video essay assignments. A video essay is like a written essay in that you will be expected to present an argument in response to one of the writing prompts provided. But instead of writing an essay, you will deliver an oral presentation without relying on either a script or detailed notes. You will record this presentation at home and submit it to Canvas. These are meant to deepen your understanding of particular philosophical concepts and arguments, to help you develop your critical thinking skills, to help you develop your oral presentation and communication skills, and to give you the experience of working out your own response to a philosophical debate.

EXAMS

There will be a midterm and a final exam. The midterm will cover material from the first part of the course (virtual reality), and it will be completed in class on February 6th. The final exam will cover material from the second part of the course (mind), and it will be completed in-person during the final exam period (April 14th-25th). Both exams will include a mix of multiple choice, short answer questions, and long answer questions.

4. POLICIES

LATE ASSIGNMENTS

Assignments will be penalized 5% for each day that they are late. If you anticipate that a paper will be late and if you have an acceptable excuse, please contact me as soon as possible. It is your responsibility to contact me before the due date has passed to receive an extension. Extensions will not be granted after the due date.

TECHNOLOGY IN THE CLASSROOM

The use of laptops, tablets, and smart phones will be essential for certain components of this class. So, laptops, tablets, and smart phones are permitted during the class, as long as they are used for class-related purposes and only during specified periods. Outside of these specified periods, you may use a laptop for note-taking purposes. Lectures will not be recorded. You will need to attend in person to hear the lecture. No student may record a lecture without permission of the instructor.

AI ASSISTANCE

AI can be used as a great learning tool. That said, the misuse of AI can also degrade the quality of learning. In this course, I will classify the use of AI as follows:

Acceptable: Using AI to help with research, brainstorming, and background learning.

Unacceptable: Using AI to generate an entire script (including an explication and an argument) that you either memorize or read for your video essay.

For each video essay assignment, you are required to include a statement in which you explain whether and how you used AI. If you didn't use any AI, you may simply say "No AI was used". If you did use AI, then you should explain in detail exactly how it was used. Place your statement in the assignment test box. If you appear to be using AI in unacceptable ways, I may ask to meet with you to test your understanding of the relevant material. Lastly, you will be held responsible for all aspects of the work you submit. So if you use AI and if it produces plagiarized text or material that is incorrect, misleading, or irrelevant, this will be treated as if you have committed plagiarism or said something that is incorrect, misleading, or irrelevant.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

Academic integrity is essential to the pursuit of learning and scholarship in a university, and to ensuring that a degree from the University of British Columbia is a strong signal of each student's individual academic achievement. Accordingly, the University treats cases of cheating and plagiarism very seriously. Plagiarism, which is intellectual theft, occurs where an individual submits or presents the oral or written work of another person as his or her own. Scholarship quite properly rests upon examining and referring to the thoughts and writings of others. However, when another person's words (i.e. phrases, sentences, or paragraphs), ideas, or entire works are used, the author must be acknowledged in the text, in footnotes, in endnotes, or in another accepted form of academic citation. Where direct quotations are made, they must be clearly delineated (for example, within quotation marks or separately indented). Failure to provide proper attribution is plagiarism because it represents someone else's work as one's own. Plagiarism should not occur in submitted drafts or final works. A student who seeks assistance from a tutor or other scholastic aids must ensure that the work submitted is the student's own. Students are responsible for ensuring that any work submitted does not constitute plagiarism. Students who are in any doubt as to what constitutes plagiarism should consult their instructor before handing in any assignments. Here is a link about academic misconduct: <http://www.calendar.ubc.ca/Vancouver/index.cfm?tree=3,54,111,959>

ACCESSIBILITY NEEDS

Academic accommodations help students with a disability or ongoing medical condition overcome challenges that may affect their academic success. Students requiring academic accommodations must register with the Centre for Accessibility (<https://students.ubc.ca/about-student-services/centre-for-accessibility/registering-centre-accessibility>). The Centre will determine that student's eligibility for accommodations in accordance with Policy 73: Academic Accommodation for Students with Disabilities. Academic accommodations are not determined by your instructors, and instructors should not ask you about the nature of your disability or ongoing medical condition, or request copies of your disability

documentation. However, your instructor may consult with the Centre for Accessibility should the accommodations affect the essential learning outcomes of a course.

5. SCHEDULE

Please note that this schedule may change to suit the pace of the course and the interests of the students (regularly check the Canvas course page for an updated schedule). Please also note that all readings are to be read *before the class* that will take place on the date listed.

PART ONE: VIRTUAL REALITY

DATE	UNIT	TOPIC/QUESTIONS	READING
Week 1: Jan. 5th-9th.	Unit 1: Knowledge & Virtual Reality	<p>Introduction to the course.</p> <p>The standard definition of knowledge, Descartes' definition of knowledge, and external world skepticism.</p> <p>1: What is knowledge?</p> <p>2: Can we know anything about the world around us?</p> <p>3: Can we know whether we're living in a simulation?</p>	<p>David Chalmers (2022). Excerpt from chapter 3 "Do we know things?" from <i>Reality+: Virtual Worlds and the Problems of Philosophy</i>. (pp. 43-58).</p>
Week 2: Jan. 12th-16th.	Unit 1 Cont.	<p>Responses to external world skepticism, the simulation argument, and responses to the simulation argument.</p> <p>1: Is certainty necessary for knowledge?</p> <p>2: Is it likely that we're living in a simulation?</p>	<p>David Chalmers (2022). Excerpt from chapter 5 "Is it likely that we're living in a simulation?" from <i>Reality+: Virtual Worlds and the Problems of Philosophy</i>. (pp. 81-102).</p>

<p>Week 3: Jan. 19th-23rd.</p>	<p>Unit 2: Value & Virtual Reality</p>	<p>The experience machine, prudential hedonism, and mental statism about well-being.</p> <p>1: What makes a life good for the one who lives it?</p> <p>2: Is well-being simply a matter of having the right mental states (e.g., pleasurable ones)?</p> <p>3: If possible, would it be in your best interest to live in a simulation?</p>	<p>Robert Nozick (1974). Excerpt from <i>Anarchy, State, and Utopia</i>. (pp. 42-45).</p> <p>Aaron Smuts (2017). Chapter 4 “A mental statist account of welfare” from <i>Welfare, Meaning, and Worth</i>.</p>
<p>Week 4: Jan 26th-30th.</p>	<p>Unit 3: Personal Identity & Virtual Reality</p>	<p>The persistence question and theories of personal identity.</p> <p>1: What makes it the case that a person in the past or future is the same as a person existing now?</p> <p>2: Are you a body, a brain, a collection of memories, a soul?</p>	<p>Harold W. Noonan. (1989). Excerpt from chapter 1 “An Initial Survey” from <i>Personal Identity</i> (pp. 1-19).</p>
<p>Week 5: Feb. 2nd-6th.</p>	<p>Unit 3 Cont.</p>	<p>Mind-uploading.</p> <p>1: Could you be uploaded to a computer?</p>	<p>Susan Schneider. (2019). Excerpt from chapter 6 “Getting a Mindscan” from <i>Artificial You: AI and the Future of your Mind</i> (pp. 82-94).</p> <p>David Chalmers. (2010). Excerpt from “Uploading: A Philosophical Analysis” (pp. 102-103 & pp. 108-114).</p> <p>In-class Midterm on February 6th</p>

PART TWO: MIND

DATE	UNIT	TOPIC	READING
Week 6: Feb. 9th-13th.	Unit 4: General Theories of Mind	<p>Dualism, behaviourism, identity theory, and functionalism.</p> <p>1: What is the mind?</p> <p>2: What is a mental state?</p> <p>3: What is the relationship between mind and body?</p>	<p>Jerry Fodor. (1980). Excerpt from “The Mind-Body Problem” (pp. 114-119).</p> <p>John Heil. (1998). Chapter 6 “Functionalism” from <i>Philosophy of Mind: A Contemporary Introduction</i> (pp. 87-104).</p>
Week 7: Feb. 16th-20th.	Reading week.		Video Essay 1 due on February 20th
Week 8: Feb. 23rd-27th.	Unit 5: Thought & AI	<p>The puzzle of representation and classical AI.</p> <p>1: What are thoughts?</p> <p>2: Can computers think?</p> <p>3: Is AI genuinely intelligent?</p>	TBD.
Week 9: Mar. 2nd-6th.	Unit 5 Cont.	<p>Two objections to classical AI: Dreyfus and Searle.</p> <p>1: Does AI understand the symbols that it processes?</p> <p>2: Is thinking simply a matter of manipulating symbols in accordance with a set of rules?</p> <p>3: Can AI determine what is relevant in a given situation?</p>	John Searle. (1980). “Minds, Brains, and Programs”.
Week 10: Mar. 9th-13th.	Unit 6: The Extended Mind Hypothesis	<p>The extended mind hypothesis.</p> <p>1: Is cognition confined to the brain or does it extend into the environment?</p> <p>2: Can an external object, like a notebook, be a part of your mind?</p>	Andy Clark and David Chalmers. (1998). “The Extended Mind”.

Week 11: Mar. 16th-20th.	Unit 7: Creativity & AI	Theories of creativity and artificial neural networks. 1: What is creativity? 2: Is generative AI genuinely creative?	Berys Gaut. (2010). Excerpt from “The Philosophy of Creativity” (pp. 1034 & 1038-1044). TBD.
Week 12: Mar. 23rd-27th.	Unit 8: Consciousness	The hard problem of consciousness, the zombie argument, and the hornswoggle problem. 1: Would a complete functionalist analysis of consciousness leave anything out?	David Chalmers. (1995). Excerpt from “Facing Up to the Problem of Consciousness”. Patricia Churchland. (1996). “The Hornswoggle Problem”. Video Essay 2 due on March 23rd.
Week 13: Mar. 30th-Apr. 3rd.	Unit 8 Cont.	The subjective character of consciousness and the potential limits of objectivity. 1: If one knew all the physical facts about bats, would one thereby know what it is like for a bat to echolocate? 2: Can we imagine what it is like to be animals very different from ourselves? 3: Can the subjectivity of experience be reconciled with the objectivity of scientific explanation?	Thomas Nagel. (1974). “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?”.
Week 14: Apr. 8th-10th.	Review.		