

LANGUAGE & MIND: THE PHILOSOPHY OF CONCEPTS

Note: This syllabus was used in an 8-week course (Summer 2021) taught as lead instructor over Zoom at the University of Michigan. The course had a pre-requisite of one previous philosophy course. I have included the syllabus here in close to its original form, but it could easily be adapted to suit a standard 12 or 15-week semester.

Instructor: Rebecca Harrison

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Office Hours: Thursdays, 10am-12pm, @ [this Zoom link](#) (sign up for a spot [here](#))

Lectures: Tuesdays & Thursdays, 3-3:50pm @ [this Zoom link](#)

Discussion section: Tuesdays & Thursdays, 4-4:50pm @ [this Zoom link](#)

1. COURSE DESCRIPTION

Murphy (2002) describes concepts as “the glue that holds our mental world together.” Concepts like HUMAN, GENDER, TIME, JUSTICE, NUMBER, and KNOWLEDGE play a central role in how we think, what we think about, and how we communicate. In this course, we will explore how concepts mediate the relationship between language, our minds, and the world around us. Some of the questions we will examine include:

- What are concepts?
- Are some concepts innate?
- Do concepts shape how we perceive the world?
- Can animals have concepts? What about machines?
- Are concepts “in the head”, or out in the world?
- Can concepts be biased?
- Can we change our concepts? If we can, what kinds of concepts *should* we have?

Over the term, we will examine the tools and theories that philosophers of language and mind have developed to address these questions. We will also engage with research in cognitive science, psychology, and linguistics, and watch the 2016 film *Arrival*. The course will be relevant to students with interests in philosophy, cognitive science, linguistics, psychology, computer science, and philosophy, politics, & economics (PPE).

2. COURSE GOALS

Students in this course will develop and cultivate the following skills and forms of knowledge:

- An understanding of key theories of concepts and central debates in the philosophy of concepts.
- The ability to read and understand complex texts in philosophy, psychology, and cognitive science.
- The ability to critically examine, construct and defend philosophical arguments.

- The ability to engage in philosophical discussions in a thoughtful and considerate manner.
- The ability to clearly articulate and defend your ideas verbally and in writing.

3. A NOTE ON TEACHING/LEARNING IN A PANDEMIC

The past academic year has been incredibly stressful, exhausting, and challenging for many of us. Social isolation, mental health issues, personal and family health issues, and the ongoing stress of pandemic life have impacted the way we study and teach in various ways. My aim is to make this course the best it can be given these circumstances and given our online learning context. I'll do my best to make the course a supportive, interactive, and intellectually exciting space. But I'll need your help! It'll take time and commitment from all of us to make our online lectures and sections work well.

Doing well in your classes shouldn't come at the cost of your mental or physical well-being, so I encourage you to reach out to me and your other instructors if you are having health issues, feeling overwhelmed by course requirements or assignment deadlines, or are having personal difficulties that are affecting your ability to be fully engaged in this course (see Section 10). I will do my best to be flexible and accommodating and asking for help will not make me think any less of you as a student or as a person. If you have suggestions for how to improve online discussions or engagement, please let me know. I appreciate your feedback and will take it seriously.

4. GETTING IN CONTACT

Email is the best way to reach me if you have any quick questions or practical concerns. While I check my emails regularly, it will sometimes take **48 hours** to reply. If the email is sent over the weekend (after 5pm on Friday), I will respond by Monday morning.

- Please include [PHIL 345] in your email title.
- I will regularly use Canvas announcements to email important course information and reminders. Make sure your Canvas notification setting for announcements is set to “on” (go to “Account” -> “Notifications”).

5. OFFICE HOURS

My office hours are held weekly from **10am to 12pm on Thursdays**. Office hours provide an important opportunity for you to talk about course content in a one-on-one environment. You don't need to have a specific question or problem to discuss—we can talk about missed course content, questions we didn't get a chance to discuss in section or lecture, your assignments, how to access student resources, or any concerns you have about how the course is going.

- To sign-up for an office hours spot, put your name on [this sign-up sheet](#).

6. ASSESSMENT

Your grade for the course will be made up of the following pieces of assessment:

- **20%:** Participation (see below)
- **20%:** Twice weekly discussion posts, due Mondays by 5pm and Wednesdays by 5pm on the Canvas discussion board.
 - Discussion posts should raise a question or offer a comment about the upcoming reading/viewing. Posts should be around 3-4 sentences and should make it clear that you did the reading and thought about it. There will be 12 discussion posts in total. You can miss two discussion posts over the semester, no justification needed. Each discussion post is worth 2% of your final course grade. There will be no discussion posts for the first and last course meetings.
- **25%:** First paper (1,300-1,500 words), **due Monday July 26 by 11:59pm.**
- **35%:** Final paper (1,500-1,700 words), **due Wednesday August 18 by 11:59pm.**

See “Assignments” in Canvas for more information.

7. PARTICIPATION & ATTENDANCE

Participation

Even though this course will be remote, participation in discussion section and engagement with your classmates is a **key part** of this course—better discussions will make the class more fun and interesting, and will also help you get more out of the course. For this reason, you should come to class prepared to make an effort. To prepare for section meetings, you should complete the assigned readings, review the lecture notes, and view the lecture beforehand. Participation is also an important component of your final grade for the course (**20%**), and **you must earn a passing grade for section participation in order to pass the course.**

Some ways you can participate include:

- Contributing verbally in whole-class discussions (especially in a way that shows completion of the reading and critical reflection on the text and course concepts).
- Contributing verbally in break-out room discussions (especially in a way which helps others in your break-out room join the discussion).
- Bringing a specific question you have about the reading to class. You can ask it yourself or tell it to me individually or in writing.
- Coming to my office hours to have a discussion about the reading or course content.

Note: The quality of your participation (respectful, considerate, thoughtful, engaged with the readings) is more important than the quantity.

Attendance policy:

- Students are required to attend lectures and discussion sections. Lectures will be recorded, so that you can review content later on. Discussion sections will rely on content from the lecture, so you will need to view the lecture beforehand.
- If you will miss section, please notify me by email in advance (or soon afterwards, for an unexpected absence). **You can miss 2 discussion sections** without giving any reason/excuse.
- If you need to miss more than 2 sections because of family, medical, or other personal circumstances, **please email me**. Missing more than 2 sections without contacting me will lower your participation grade.

8. ZOOM NORMS

A few key logistical norms and expectations for our Zoom classes:

- I would greatly appreciate if you **keep your cameras on** during both lecture and sections. This will make an enormous difference to the quality and dynamics of our discussions over Zoom. I understand, though, that some of you may be working from environments where this isn't possible or may need a break from being on-camera. If you need to keep your camera off for part of our course meeting, please prioritize keeping it on for our discussion sections.
- If you are not talking, **mute** your audio.
- The **chat** function in Zoom should be reserved for asking content/course related questions, not for having side conversations with your peers.
- Make sure that you display your **preferred name and pronouns** on Zoom. You can do this either by clicking on your video or by clicking “More” next to your name in “Participants.”

9. ASSESSMENT POLICIES

Assignment submission: All assignments will be submitted through Canvas. Assignments are graded anonymously, so please make sure to include your UM Student ID (not your name) in each assignment.

Extensions & late assignments: If you need an extension for an assignment, please contact me at least 24 hours before the assignment is due. If you miss a deadline, you must contact me and arrange an alternate deadline (and stick to this new deadline).

Grade appeals: If you believe the work you submitted deserves a different grade than it received, you may ask in writing for reconsideration. Your request must be submitted within one week, but no sooner than two days after the assignment is returned. Your written request must explain why you believe the work deserves a different grade. Most appeals will not result in a change of grade, but if a change is made please note that the grade may be either higher or lower.

Academic integrity: Plagiarism is representing someone else's ideas or words as your own without proper acknowledgement or citation. It is a serious form of academic misconduct. You are responsible for making sure none of your work is plagiarized. Using the ideas or organization of a source without citing – even if you change the words – also counts as plagiarism. Be sure to cite work that you use, both direct quotations and paraphrased ideas. See [this link](#) for more information.

10. GETTING HELP, WELLBEING & ACCOMMODATIONS

If you need help or have questions, get in touch!

- Before getting in touch, check to see if the syllabus and other course documents can answer your question.
- Email me if you have a specific question which can be briefly dealt with. If you have longer questions or concerns, book a time to meet with me during my office hours.
- If you fall ill or face another unexpected challenge, email me or come along to my office hours. The sooner I know, the easier it will be for us to work on a plan to deal with it together.
- You can find a list of student support services & resources in the 'Pages' section.

Well-being and mental health: Your well-being is my priority and this year has brought up new sources of stress and anxiety for many people (and made existing stress and anxiety worse). I strongly encourage you to explore the free services offered at the University of Michigan [Counseling and Psychological Services \(CAPS\)](#). You can find an overview of their working-hours [clinical services for students here](#), including information about making an initial consultation, gender affirming services for trans and nonbinary students, couples counseling, and referral services. You can also look at [this listing](#) of mental health providers available off-campus.

Accommodations for students with disabilities: If you need an accommodation for a disability, let me know at your earliest convenience (preferably by **July 9**). Some aspects of this course, the assignments, the in-class activities, and the way the course is usually taught may be modified to facilitate your participation and progress. As soon as you make us aware of your needs, we can work with the Office of Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD) to help us determine appropriate accommodations. Any information you provide is private and confidential and will be treated as such. Contact SSD by calling 734-763-3000 or visiting [their website](#).

11. NAVIGATING CANVAS

On the left-hand menu panel:

- Under “Announcements” you can find all previous section announcements.
- Under “Zoom” you can find dates/times/log-in links for all of our Zoom sessions.
- Under “Assignments” you can find a list of the course assignments and a place to submit them.
- Under “Files” you can find copies of all course readings, handouts and other course materials.

- Under “Pages” you can find the “Course schedule & reading list” page, and other pages (including a list of student support services & resources).
- Under “Grades” you can find your grades!
- Under “Discussions” you can find the discussion posts for your twice weekly discussion questions/comments.
- Under “People” you can a list of the students in our course.

12. SCHEDULE & READINGS

Day 1: Introduction to the course

- Jesse Prinz, “Desiderata on a Theory of Concepts,” in *Furnishing the Mind*

Day 2: What are concepts?

- Eric Margolis & Stephen Laurence, “Concepts,” sections 1-2 & 4

Day 3: How are concepts structured?

- Gregory Murphy, “Typicality and the Classical View of Categories”

Day 4: Alien concepts

- Denis Villeneuve, *Arrival* (film)
- Lera Boroditsky, “How Language Shapes the Way We Think” (video)

Day 5: Translation & indeterminacy

- Ali Hossein Khani, “The Indeterminacy of Translation and Radical Interpretation”
- Additional reading: Willard Van Orman Quine, “Meaning”

Day 6: Do concepts shape perception?

- Chaz Firestone & Brian J Scholl, “Cognition Does Not Affect Perception: Evaluating the Evidence for ‘Top-Down’ Effects”

Day 7: Do animals and machines have concepts?

- W. Tecumseh Fitch, “Animal Cognition and the Evolution of Human Language: Why We Cannot Focus Solely on Communication”
- John Haugeland, “Understanding Natural Language”

Day 8: Are concepts in our minds or out there in the world?

- Hilary Putnam, “Meaning and Reference”

Day 9: Can concepts be biased or essentialist?

- Sarah-Jane Leslie, “Carving Up the Social World with Generics”
 - *Content note: discussion of racism*

Day 10: Hermeneutical injustice

- Miranda Fricker, “Hermeneutical Injustice,” in *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*
 - *Content note: discussion of sexual harassment, and homophobia.*

Day 11: Can we engineer our concepts?

- Matti Eklund, “Conceptual Engineering in Philosophy”

Day 12: Challenges to conceptual engineering—practicality and changing the topic

- David Chalmers, “Verbal disputes”
- Allison Koslow, “Conceptual Engineering: Problems and Prospects”

Day 13: Challenges to conceptual engineering—perversion

- Teresa Marques, “Amelioration vs. Perversion”

Day 14: Wrap-up

- No reading.

PAPER TOPICS (FROM “ASSIGNMENTS” SECTION OF CANVAS)

First paper: Alien concepts

- **Due:** Monday July 26 by 11:59pm.
- **Length:** 1300-1500 words

Humans have made first contact with a humanoid alien species. NASA have asked you, a philosopher of language, to help them try to communicate with the aliens. The aliens are humanoid (physically similar to humans), have a verbal language, and have been observed to use pointing as a method of indicating. You can stipulate the aliens' method of indicating “yes” and “no” - by nodding/shaking their heads, by saying specific words.

In your paper, you will:

- **Paragraph 1:** State your chosen concept.
 - Note: Can be stated in one sentence.

- **Paragraph 2:** Drawing on **one** of the theories we have explored (of what concepts are or how concepts are structured), explain how you might tell if an adult human (who can communicate in your language) understands this concept.
- **Paragraph 3:** Drawing on the film *Arrival*, explain how you would go about trying to communicate this concept to one of the aliens.
- **Paragraph 4:** Drawing on Quine’s paper “Meaning” or Khani’s summary or the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, discuss what **two** challenges you might face in attempting to communicate this concept to one of the aliens.

Final paper – Engineer this concept!

- **Due:** Wednesday August 18 by 11:59pm.
- **Length:** 1500-1700 words

Conceptual engineering is the project of critically evaluating our existing concepts and changing or replacing these existing concepts with better concepts. In this paper, your job is to create a proposal for a concept that you think should be conceptually engineered.

In your paper, you will:

- **Paragraph 1:** State your chosen concept.
 - Note: Can be stated in one sentence.
- **Paragraph 2:** Explain **how** you think your selected concept should be engineered (i.e. what about the concept will be changed?), and **why** you think this change would be important or valuable.
- **Paragraph 3:** Drawing on one (or more) thinker(s) from the course, explain what conceptually engineering your concept would involve. Consider whether your conceptual engineering project would involve introducing a new concept or altering an existing concept, and what kind of change would be involved.
 - Change in the definitional criteria of the concept?
 - Change in the prototype (or family resemblance structure) of the concept?
 - Change in the way the concept is mentally represented?
 - Change in the extension/reference of the concept?
 - Change in the way relevant abilities are applied?
 - Change in the inferences or associations connected to the concept?
 - A different kind of change?
 - Note: You should focus on **one or two** of these kinds of change.
- **Paragraph 4:** Drawing on **one or two** thinkers from the course (Eklund, Koslow, Chalmers, and/or Marques), discuss **two** challenges you might face in attempting to conceptually engineer your concept.

Grading standards:

- **Understanding:** Does the paper demonstrate a good understanding of relevant theory of concepts and Quine's theory of interpretation? Does the paper demonstrate a good understanding of the philosophical issues raised by *Arrival*?
- **Clarity:** Is the paper clearly written in a way someone unfamiliar with the relevant ideas could understand?
- **Relevance:** Does each section of the paper offer a specific answer to the relevant question?
- **Explanation:** Does the paper provide reasons in support of its claims?
- **Plus factor:** Does the paper engage with the relevant philosophical issues in a creative/original manner?