

# Consciousness and Language

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**Office Hours:** by appointment, and, at least for now, via Zoom (or Skype, if that works better for you). Just send me an email and we can schedule a virtual meeting.

## 1 Course Overview

Contemporary philosophers of mind often speak of the “phenomenal character” of different sorts of conscious experiences. This phrase is meant to express “what it’s like” to have an experience of a particular sort. For instance, when you see something red—a tomato, say—there’s something that it’s like to have an experience of the sort that you’re having. Someone who is color blind from birth might know a lot of things about how color vision works, but they won’t know what it’s like to see something red; that is, they won’t know what the phenomenal character of an experience of seeing something red is.

In this class, we will explore both a negative and a positive thesis about the relationship between this aspect of conscious experience and language. We will start by considering the claim that the phenomenal character of a conscious experience is really “ineffable”—it cannot be expressed in public language. We will consider strategies for trying to make sense of this idea as well as arguments, both belonging to and influenced by Ludwig Wittgenstein, to the effect that there is no way to make sense of it. We will then turn to a corresponding positive thesis that we cannot make sense of phenomenal character of conscious experiences *apart from* its expression in public language, focusing particularly on the development of this thesis by Wilfrid Sellars and those influenced by him in various ways. In addition to Wittgenstein and Sellars, readings will be from contemporary philosophers including, among others, Frank Jackson, Thomas Nagel, David Chalmers, Paul Horwich, Daniel Dennett, John McDowell, Susanna Schellenberg, Robert Brandom, David Rosenthal, and Paul Churchland.

## 2 Course Requirements

**Paper(s):** There will be one shorter paper (6-8 pages), due at the end of 6<sup>th</sup> week and one slightly longer paper (8-10 pages) due at the the end of 11<sup>th</sup> week. If you want to revise and expand your first paper, incorporating some of the material from the second half of the course, you can turn it into a longer research paper (15-20 pages) instead of doing a second paper. If you want to do this, email me sometime before the end of 9<sup>th</sup> week to arrange a meeting to discuss your ideas for the paper. The first paper is 30% of the grade for the course, and the second paper (whether it is a new 8-10 page paper or an expanded 15-20 page paper) is 50% of the grade.

**Participation:** You're expected to participant in the course, in some ways or others, and participation is 20% of the grade. I'd like to give everyone the full participation grade. The main way to earn your participation grade is to participate in class discussions. However, I understand that some people like to talk in class more than others, so there are other opportunities to satisfy the participation requirement if you don't like talking as much as some other people do. Before every class, you'll have the opportunity to post a discussion question, asking something about something in the reading. These can be very simple like "What's Frege's distinction between 'thoughts' and 'ideas'?" or "When Wittgenstein says 'blah blah blah,' is he endorsing that claim, or is he stating it to criticism it?" If you post this before I wake up on the day of class (assume I wake up very early), I'll address it in class and potentially make it a topic of discussion. Everyone should submit questions occasionally (say, five to ten times), but, the more you do it, the more it contributes to your participation grade. Additionally, meeting with me to discuss topics from class or optional/background readings that were not discussed in the class is a way to earn your participation grade. I'm happy to meet to talk about anything anytime. Just shoot me an email.

## 3 Course Expectations

This course is on something called the "hard problem of consciousness." Philosophers have been trying to solve this problem for decades and there's still no agreed upon solution. As the name suggests, the problem is hard! So don't think this course going to be easy! Our main readings are all primary sources, articles and excerpts of books, written by professional philosophers primarily for other professional philosophers. Some of these readings, especially in the second half of the course, are extremely difficult to understand, and have frustrated some very good philosophers who have tried to understand them. Many of the readings presuppose a lot of background knowledge of philosophy. I will do my best to make them accessible, giving necessary background ahead of time and including helpful secondary sources on the Canvas site, but, if you don't have some substantial background in philosophy, many of these readings are going to be a real struggle. Additionally, though all of our readings (with a single exception) are coming from the so-called "the analytic tradition" in philosophy, we're still

going to be reading things from a very wide range of sources, so, no matter what your background is, there will be at least some things that are going to be very difficult. So, this course really is intended for advanced philosophy students, and, even at that, it's going to be a challenge. But I hope it'll be a fun challenge!

All of the readings will be available for download on the Canvas site, organized by class number. You're not expected to read anything but the main readings. However, in addition to the main readings, there will sometimes be secondary readings, which may be necessary to understand the main readings, and a number of related supplementary readings. Basically, there is a main trajectory of the course, which goes through the main readings, but, for each of the main readings, there is a whole literature of related readings that we will not dive into in the course, but which you might want to dive into yourself if you're interested in the topic or writing a paper on it. If you do want to dive into any these sets of supplementary readings, feel free to shoot me an email to arrange a meeting to talk about it. In addition to these readings, there will also be a separate folder on the Canvas site of the full articles and books that are excerpted for main readings.

You should try to tune in to class, but, in case you do miss a class, for whatever reason, or you want to look and listen back on a class that you did attend, I will upload recordings of each class after that class. I'll also upload the handouts. I may or may not also upload lecture notes, depending on how much of a mess they are.

#### 4 Diversity and Accessibility

**Diversity:** As an instructor, I am actively committed to creating an inclusive classroom environment where diverse backgrounds and viewpoints are recognized, respected, and valued. If there is anything you believe I should be doing differently, I welcome any feedback both during and outside of class. I pledge to take any comments regarding my teaching or content seriously and without defensiveness.

**Accessibility:** The University of Chicago is committed to ensuring equitable access to our academic programs and services. Students with disabilities who have been approved for the use of academic accommodations by Student Disability Services (SDS) and need a reasonable accommodation(s) to participate fully in this course should follow the procedures established by SDS for using accommodations. Timely notifications are required in order to ensure that your accommodations can be implemented. Please meet with me to discuss your access needs in this class after you have completed the SDS procedures for requesting accommodations.

Phone: (773) 702-6000

Email: [disabilities@uchicago.edu](mailto:disabilities@uchicago.edu)

## 5 Class Schedule

### **Class 1: Introducing the “Hard Problem”**

*In this class, we introduce the hard problem of consciousness—the idea of the “qualitative character” of consciousness which seems to resist physical or functional explanation.*

#### **Main Reading:**

David Chalmers, *The Conscious Mind*, pages 4-11

#### **Supplementary Readings:**

Thomas Nagel – “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?”

Hans-Urlich Schnitzer and Elisabeth Kalko – “Echolocation by Insect-Eating Bats”

#### **Historical Context:**

C.I. Lewis – *Mind and the World Order*, Chapter 1

Roderick Firth – “Lewis on the Given”

C.I. Lewis – “Reply to Firth”

### **Class 2: The Knowledge Argument**

*In this class, we consider the Knowledge Argument insofar as it lends support to the ineffability thesis, involving the idea that there is something that Mary doesn’t know and that she couldn’t in principle come to know through reading a book.*

#### **Main Readings:**

Frank Jackson – “Epiphenomenal Qualia”

David Chalmers – *The Conscious Mind*, pp. 93-106

#### **Secondary Readings:**

Paul Churchland - *The Engine of Reason, The Seat of the Soul*, pp. 191-202

Michael Tye – “Qualia” (SEP entry)

### **Class 3: Indexicals and Direct Reference**

*In this class, we consider the theory of direct reference, as worked out by Perry and Kaplan, that figures as background in the account of phenomenal concepts to follow.*

#### **Main Readings:**

Gottlob Frege – “Thought” (short excerpt, pp. 331-336)

John Perry – “Frege on Demonstratives”

David Kaplan – “Demonstratives” (excerpt)

#### **Supplementary Readings:**

Gottlob Frege – “On Sense and Reference”

Sebastian Rodl – *Self-Consciousness*, Chapter 1

David Lewis – “Attitudes De Dicto and De Se”

Andy Egan – “Secondary Qualities and Self-Location”

**Secondary Reading:**

David Braun – “Indexicals” (SEP entry)  
Eliot Michaelson – “Reference” (SEP entry)

**Class 4: Phenomenal Concepts**

*In this class, we discuss David Chalmers’s account of phenomenal concepts, focusing particularly on the way in which it is supposed to make sense of the idea that they cannot be expressed in public language.*

**Main Reading:**

David Chalmers – “The Content of Phenomenal Concepts”

**Supplementary Readings:**

David Chalmers – “Two Dimensional Semantics”  
Scott Soames – *Reference and Description*, Chapter 9

**The Contemporary Debate:**

Janet Levin – “What is a Phenomenal Concept?”  
John Hawthorne – “Direct Reference and Dancing Qualia”  
Michael Tye – “More Troubles for the Qualia Freak”

**Class 5: The Private Language Argument**

*In this class, we consider the sections of Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* where he mounts an attack on “private language.”*

**Main Readings:**

Ludwig Wittgenstein – *Philosophical Investigations*, sections 28-38, 239-308.

**Secondary Reading:**

Marie McGinn – *Wittgenstein and the Philosophical Investigations*, Chapter 4

**Class 6: The Private Language Argument (Continued)**

*In this class, we continue our discussion of Wittgenstein’s private language argument, drawing on commentary by Barry Stroud.*

**Main Reading:**

Barry Stroud – “Wittgenstein’s ‘Treatment’ Of the Quest for ‘A Language Which Describes My Inner Experiences and Which Only I Myself Can Understand’”

**Supplementary Readings:**

John Cook – “Wittgenstein on Privacy”  
James Conant – “Why Worry about the *Tractatus*”

### **Class 7: Negative Applications of the Private Language Argument: Dennett's Wittgenstein-Influenced Qualia Skepticism**

*In this class, we consider Daniel Dennett's way of bringing (what he takes to be) Wittgenstein's insight to bear on the debate about the hard problem of consciousness.*

#### **Main Reading:**

Daniel Dennett – “Quining Qualia”

#### **Supplementary Readings:**

Daniel Dennett – *Sweet Dreams*, Chapter 2

Daniel Dennett – *Sweet Dreams*, Chapter 4

John Searle (with Daniel Dennett) – *The Mystery of Consciousness*, Chapter 5

### **Class 8: Negative Applications of the Private Language Argument (Continued): Brandom's Wittgensteinian Hegel**

*In this class, we consider Robert Brandom's very different way of making a Wittgensteinian critique of the sort of immediate apprehension of conscious experience that would make private language possible.*

#### **Main Readings:**

G.W.F. Hegel – *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Sense Certainty (just for reference with the Brandom—don't worry about understanding this on its own terms)

Robert Brandom – *A Spirit of Trust*, Chapter 4

#### **Supplementary Readings:**

Robert Brandom – “An Untimely Review of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*” (note: this is a joke, but it is helpful)

Willem deVries – “Hegel on Reference and Knowledge”

Robert Brandom – *Making It Explicit*, pp. 449-473

### **Class 9: Positive Applications of the Private Language Argument: Experience as Conceptual**

*In this class, we begin to turn to the positive thesis of the course, considering John McDowell's reading of Wittgenstein's private language argument, according to which the upshot is that experience must be understood as conceptual.*

#### **Main Readings:**

John McDowell – “One Strand in the Private Language Argument”

John McDowell – *Mind and World*, Lecture 1

#### **Supplementary Reading:**

Bill Brewer – “Perceptual Experience has Conceptual Content”

David Finkelstein – *Expression and the Inner*, Chapter 3

**Class 10: Positive Applications of the Private Language Argument (Continued): Conceptualist, Disjunctivist Accounts of Qualia**

*In this class, we consider the development of the conceptualist conception of phenomenal experience proposed by Susanna Schellenberg.*

**Main Reading:**

Susanna Schellenberg – “Ontological Minimalism about Phenomenology”

**Supplementary Reading:**

William Fish – *Perception, Hallucination, and Illusion*, Chapter 4

**Class 11A: Wittgenstein and Sellars Against the Augustinian Picture**

*In this class, we explicitly turn to the positive thesis of the course by considering the potential connection between conscious awareness of the world and language highlighted by Wittgenstein and Sellars.*

**Main Readings:**

Ludwig Wittgenstein – *Philosophical Investigations*, sections 1-32.

Wilfrid Sellars – *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, section VII, pp. 64-68

**Secondary Reading:**

Marie McGinn, *Wittgenstein and the Philosophical Investigations*, Chapter 1

**Supplementary Reading:**

James Conant, *The Logical Alien*, pp. 923-932

**Class 11B: Sellars on Conceptual Content and Language**

*In this class, we consider Sellars’s theory of conceptual content, according to which grasp of a concept is mastery of the use of a word.*

**Main Reading:**

Wilfrid Sellars – “Meaning as Functional Classification”

**Secondary Readings:**

James O’Shea – *Wilfrid Sellars*, Chapter 3

Willem deVries – *Wilfrid Sellars*, Chapter 2

**Supplementary Readings:**

Gilbert Harman – Three Levels of Meaning

Daniel Dennett – Comment on Wilfrid Sellars

Sellars – Some Reflections on Language Games

## **Class 12: Brandom on Conceptual Content and Language**

*In this class, we discuss Robert Brandom's development of Sellars's inferentialist theory of conceptual content.*

### **Main Reading:**

Robert Brandom – *Articulating Reasons*, Chapter 1

### **Secondary Reading:**

Jeremy Wanderer – *Robert Brandom*, Chapters 1 and 2

### **Supplementary Readings:**

Robert Brandom – “Precis of *Making It Explicit*”

Jay Rosenberg – “Brandom's *Making It Explicit*: A First Encounter”

Robert Brandom – *Making It Explicit*, Chapters 3 and 4 (if you really want to dive in)

John McDowell – “Motivating Inferentialism”

## **Class 13: Sellars (according to Brandom) on “Looks” Talk**

*In this class, with the Sellarsian/Brandomian theory of conceptual content now at hand, we now turn back to see how qualia might be understood on a language-first account through an expressivist analysis of “looks” talk.*

### **Main Reading:**

Wilfrid Sellars – *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, section III, pp. 32-46

Robert Brandom – “The Centrality of Sellars's Two-Ply Account”

### **Secondary Reading:**

Robert Brandom – “Study Guide,” pp. 134-152

## **Class 14: McDowell vs. Brandom on “Looks” Talk**

*In this class, we look at McDowell's critique of Brandom's reductive analysis of “looks” talk which lacks any reference to conscious experience.*

### **Main Readings:**

John McDowell – “Brandom on Observation”

Robert Brandom – “Reply to John McDowell”

### **Supplementary Readings:**

William deVries and Paul Coates – “Brandom's Two-Ply Error”

Ryan Simonelli – “The Normative/Agentive Correspondence” (if you want my take on this dispute)

### **Class 15: Sellars's Analogy Thesis**

*In this class, we turn to Sellars's own account of conscious experience, developed by neither Brandom nor McDowell, according to which sensory episodes are essentially understood by analogy to linguistic expressions.*

#### **Main Reading:**

Wilfrid Sellars – *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, sections X-VII, pp. 85-117

#### **Secondary Reading:**

James O'Shea – *Wilfrid Sellars*, Chapter 4

### **Class 16: Sellars's Analogy Thesis (Continued)**

*In this class, we continue the discussion of Sellars's analogy thesis, considering the more direct presentation of the view in *Science and Metaphysics*.*

#### **Main Reading:**

Wilfrid Sellars – *Science and Metaphysics*, Chapter 1

#### **Optional Reading:**

Jay Rosenberg – "Perception vs. Inner Sense"

### **Class 17: Quality Space Theory**

*In this class, we consider a contemporary development of the Sellarsian view by David Rosenthal.*

#### **Main Reading:**

David Rosenthal – "How to Think about Mental Qualities"

#### **Optional Reading:**

Jacob Berger – "The Sensory Content of Perceptual Experience"

David Rosenthal – "Quality Spaces, Relocation, and Grain"

### **Class 18: Identity Theory After All?**

*In this class, we conclude the course by considering a theory that may have looked very implausible at the beginning of class, a version of identity theory in which the sensory episodes originally posited by analogy to linguistic expressions are ultimately identified with functionally characterized brain states.*

#### **Main Reading:**

Paul Churchland – "Reduction, Qualia, and the Direct Introspection of Brain States"

#### **Background Reading:**

Paul Churchland – *The Engine of Reason, the Seat of the Soul*,  
chapter 2

**Optional Readings:**

Jerry Fodor and Ernest Lepore – *Holism, A Shopper's Guide*,  
Chapter 7

Paul Churchland – “State-Space Semantics and Meaning Holism”