

Philosophy 1320: Theories of the Mind, Stern College - Yeshiva University, Spring 2007
Russell Marcus, Instructor
email: philosophy@thatmarcusfamily.org
website: <http://www.thatmarcusfamily.org/philosophy/Mind/MindHome.htm>

Lecture Notes, January 15

I. Review of syllabus and requirements

Organizing theme of the course: What is a mind?

Philosophers and scientists have studied the nature of the mind, and its relation to the body, throughout the entire history of philosophy.

But, from the 1940s through the 1980s, there was an explosion of interest in this question.

Four distinct positions were carefully described and circumscribed.

In the first part of this course, we will examine the historical positions.

In the second part, we will look at the more contemporary work.

Reviewing syllabus:

The on-line version of the syllabus has tentative dates for the readings and the first paper assignment.

Most materials, other than the readings, including lecture notes, are available on line.

The assigned work will all come out of the Morton collection.

He has long, and often helpful, introductions to each section.

I will note when I think that any of those sections are particularly recommended.

The Churchland book is popular, and may be the source of some of my lecture notes.

Additional readings will be available on line, or at the Stern College library.

The final exam will be based on the reading guides.

The paper assignments will be detailed.

If I feel that students are not keeping up with the reading, I might assign some quizzes, and adjust the weights for the other assignments.

Office: ???

Office hours: Mondays will be difficult. Wednesdays from noon, and after class.

Class hours: Mon 1:25pm – 2:30pm; Wed 1:25 – 2:50pm.

General Grading Guidelines:

C: What the philosophers say.

B: Why they say it.

A: Whether they are right or wrong, and why.

II. Preliminaries: metaphysics, epistemology, and semantics

‘What is a mind?’ is a metaphysical question.

Note my use of single, or scare, quotes ‘’.

We use scare quotes to indicate that we are referring to the words, or the sentence itself, rather than the meanings of those words or their referents.

Thus, ‘‘Dog’ has three letters’ is true.

‘Dog has three letters’ is nonsense, but has four English words.

Metaphysics is, generally, the study of existence.

We want to know, for example, whether minds exist independently of bodies.

Another question would be whether there are mental properties, and whether they are different in kind from physical properties.

For example, is the red of an apple, or its size, a different kind of property from my red experience, or quale?

We should observe the distinction between metaphysical questions and epistemological ones.

Epistemology is the theory of knowledge.

If we claim that minds exist independently of bodies, it would be natural to ask how we know about these minds.

A lot of what we seem to know about our minds comes from introspection, from thinking about our own minds.

If we think that minds are just brains, then our knowledge of minds seems to come from the outside.

We would know all there is to know about the mind by examining the brain: mapping it, indicating which regions are responsible for which mental processes.

Here's a really good place to learn about the brain:

<http://thalamus.wustl.edu/course/>

It is easy to confuse metaphysical questions with epistemological ones, since every claim about what exists will beg the question of how one knows.

For example, if I claim to know that the exterior angle of a triangle is equal in measure to the sum of the two remote interior angles, you might want to know how I know that, since I've never seen a triangle.

Ultimately, any claim about what exists (metaphysics) should be justified (epistemology).

Philosophers and scientists have always wondered about the nature of mind.

Much of the contemporary discussion of the nature of mind repeats the historic discussion.

Aristotelian and Cartesian views have held particular sway.

So, we will look for the first part of the course at the different historical perspectives.

In the twentieth century, philosophers of mind, and philosophers in general, started to look more closely at language.

Twentieth century philosophy is probably best characterized by its focus on language.

One of the ideas of the linguistic turn in philosophy was that if we could determine what the meanings of our words are, we could solve all philosophical puzzles, like the questions of what a mind is.

Wittgenstein, for example, claimed that all philosophical puzzles are conceptual confusions.

If we figure out the correct usages of our words, the philosophical puzzles will disappear.

So, the question 'What is a mind?' became replaced, in some work, by the question, 'What does 'mind' mean?'

Philosophy of language has two branches: sense and reference.

The sense of 'duck' might be something like web-footed water fowl.

The reference of 'duck' are actual ducks.

Senses are most closely linked to concepts, and the thoughts we have.

References are more naturally tied to the world, the objects we indicate by our terms.

So, the reference of our terms is actually a metaphysical question, about the words-worlds connection.

Meaning theories are sometimes called semantic theories.

A generally (but not universally) accepted semantic principle is that the sense of a term determines its reference.

So, if we can define 'mind', then we could know what minds are.

Some philosophers thus approach the metaphysical question of what minds are in a semantic way.

If we are going to define 'mind', or 'pain', which refers to a mental state, we must know something about definition.

A definition properly should provide necessary and sufficient conditions.

So, for example, 'Bachelor' means, in English, unmarried man.

In order to be a bachelor, one must be (it is necessary that you be) both unmarried and a man.

If either of these conditions are missing, one is not a bachelor.

Additionally, it is sufficient for being a bachelor that you are an unmarried man.

No other conditions are required.

[Do it first-order, and define iff]

Now, consider: 'Mind' means that which has mental states.

[Do it first-order]

This definition of 'mind' provides necessary and sufficient conditions.

But, it is circular.

Compare it to: 'Philosophy is what philosophers study'.

Plato, who worked a bit before the linguistic turn in philosophy, has some interesting comments about definition in the *Euthyphro*.

We might eliminate the circularity by defining mental states without referring to the mind.

III. Minds and mental states

There are two general approaches to defining mental states.

A. Via consciousness

This is the Cartesian route.

For Descartes, anything that is a mental state has to be conscious, and the only conscious things are mental states/minds.

The problem with Descartes's approach is that there seem to be unconscious mental states.

Some of my feelings might be unconscious.

Less contentiously, my non-occurrent beliefs seem to be unconscious, as well.

I believe that the square root of two is irrational, even if I'm not thinking about it.

If we examine our mental states, they all seem to all be one of either of two kinds, which leads to the second kind of approach.

B. Via sensations and intentions

This is the Aristotelian route.

A lot of the papers we will read with focus on the nature of pain.

Pain is used to stand for any kind of mental state.

Sometimes, philosophers also write about color perception.

Both of these are pretty good examples of sensations.

But, there are also intentions: beliefs, desires, emotions.

Intentions are mental states that have some content, that are about something, that represent.

We will look at both approaches.

But, even if we settled the matter of how to characterize mental states, it seems that more work will have to be done.

For, we still might want to know why I am conscious, or why I have perceptions and beliefs.

We might want to connect the answers to these questions with others of my beliefs.

We will return to this question on Wednesday, before we start talking about Plato's *Phaedo*.

IV. Some attempts to define the mind

Here are some terms which can be applied to the different views about the nature of the mind that we will explore in this course.

1. The mind is a non-physical substance: dualism, or idealism.

Plato, Descartes, Berkeley, maybe Nagel

2. The mind is behavior: behaviorism.

Skinner, Hempel, Ryle

3. The mind is the brain: materialism, or physicalism, which I will take as synonyms.

Aristotle, Hobbes, Armstrong, Smart, Searle

4. The mind is the functional organization of our behavior: functionalism.

Putnam, and almost every one today in philosophy

5. There are no minds: eliminativism.

Churchland

The most popular position, today, among philosophers is functionalism.

Dualism is making a comeback, though not in its original, Cartesian, form.

Plato and Descartes, as well as others, were substance dualists.

Contemporary dualists are often property dualists.

They agree with the materialist that there is only one kind of substance.

But, they argue that there are irreducible, ineliminable, mental properties.

I went very quickly through some topics today.

Mostly, I was providing a bit of a preview.

We will return to the important issues in the philosophy of mind, in greater depth and specificity, as the course progresses.

On Wednesday, I will start with some comments on how we might make our theory of mind continuous with other intellectual endeavors.

Then, we will discuss Plato's *Phaedo*.