Minds and Machines

Spring 2020
TR 9:30 - 10:45
CI 107

http://philosophy.tamucc.edu

Professor:

Don Berkich, Ph.D.

Office: FC-280
Hours: TR 11:00 – 2:00
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Course Description:

Early projections at the dawn of computing technology that computers would soon match and exceed humans in intelligence are now seen as quaint, if not ridiculous. Despite enormous gains in computing power, genuine artificial intelligence has proven entirely elusive. To be sure, computer scientists have had some modest successes. Yet capturing human-level intelligence in a machine has thus far proven to be an intractable problem. At best, we seem to have achieved insect-level intelligence in some of our more complicated robots. The fact that projections about Artificial Intelligence have proven false begs an important question:

What is it about human intelligence that makes the creation of human-level artificial intelligence so problematic?

This question is especially important in light of the fact that modern neuropsychology assumes the human brain is itself a kind of biological computer. That is, researchers operate on the assumption
that we are meat machines. In light of this assumption, we consider some of the most important questions in Philosophy, Psychology, and Computer Science:

- What is the place of the mental in a physical universe?
- How does the human brain underwrite the human mind, if it does?
- Are artificial minds possible, and if so, how?
- Are computational models of perception, intention, and action useful or deceptive?
- Is intentionality compatible with mechanism?
- Is autonomy compatible with mechanism?
- Is consciousness compatible with mechanism?
- Is identity compatible with mechanism?
- Are emotions compatible with mechanism?

It is not our goal in this course to argue that Artificial Intelligence is impossible. Rather, it is our goal to understand what makes human intelligence such an extraordinary and astonishing phenomenon by carefully considering some of the more important skeptical challenges to the possibility of artificial intelligence. Along the way, we learn a great deal about machines, on the one hand, and human minds, on the other.

Topics include:

- Dualism, Idealism, and Materialism
- Functionalism and Computational Psychology
- The Turing Test
- Computability and the Church/Turing Thesis
- Searle’s Chinese Room Thought Experiment
- The Frame Problem
- Representationalism and Connectionism
- Mechanism and Autonomy
- Robot Intentionality
- Personhood and Personal Identity
- Consciousness

**Topic Schedule:**

- **Week 1**  Cognition in Ancient and Modern Philosophy
- **Week 2**  Cognition in Contemporary Philosophy
- **Week 3**  Artificial Intelligence and the Turing Test
Week 4  Computability and Complexity Theory
Week 5  The Church-Turing Thesis and the Chinese Room Thought Experiment
Week 6  Robot Intentionality
Week 7  Robot Intentionality
Week 8  The Frame Problem
Week 9  Machine Consciousness
Week 10 Machine Consciousness
Week 11 Autonomous Machine Agency
Week 12 Personal Identity
Week 13 Connectionism, Situated Robotics, Genetic Algorithms, and A-Life
Week 14 Course Summary

* Tentative, pending class pacing and interest.
Student Learning Outcomes:*  

Students will

1. Learn the names of at least three important philosophers who have written on these topics--e.g., Plato, Putnam, and Turing.

2. Learn the names of at least three important arguments on these topics--e.g., The Chinese Room Thought Experiment, the Modal Argument, and the Knowledge Argument.

*A requirement of the University for accreditation purposes only. A result of the contemptible commodification of education and the corporatization of its institutions. Used as the basis for a pre- and post-test in a facile attempt to demonstrate quality in teaching and learning. Fails to reflect any grasp of the distinction between training and education by presupposing that understanding, discovery, and knowledge can be precisely measured, economized, and thereby controlled. An embarrassing academic fad and an affront to the towering intellects whose investigations we have the privilege of pursuing this semester. As proof, please note the quite deliberate vacuity of the above Student Learning Outcomes.*

† The professor whose course this is has been informed by the administration that the above statement repudiating Student Learning Outcomes is both "uncivil" and "sets a poor example for students". The professor is deeply grateful and takes no small pride in the administration’s echoing (albeit unwittingly and however distantly) Meletus’ charges against Socrates. Frankly, there can be no greater honor for those who find inspiration in Socrates the gadfly, Socrates the midwife, and, above all, Socrates the self-stinging stingray.

Texts:*  


* Useful but not required--selections from these and other sources will be provided as necessary.

Requirements:

Term Paper:
There will be a single, substantial paper due at the end of the term. The term paper will be developed in four stages: Proposal, Annotated Bibliography, Rough Draft, and Final Draft, due dates to be announced. Specific content and format instructions will be provided as each stage is assigned and completed.

Problem Sets:

Problem sets will be assigned approximately every week. The problem sets will be front-loaded in the course so as to leave time at the end of the semester for the term paper. There are a total of ten problem sets. The two lowest-scoring problem sets are dropped.

Participation:

Students should be prepared to contribute to class discussion. Students should also be prepared to answer specific questions about the reading material and should be able to outline key elements of the assigned readings for the class. See below.

Attendance:

Attendance is mandatory. See below.

Policies:

The professor has assumes that students enrolled in this course are sincere student-scholars. That is, the professor shall treat them with the respect due scholars, and, as scholars, they should do their best to live up to the standards of scholars. To wit,

Preparation:

Scholars carefully read assignments in advance of class, take notes on their reading, explore specific issues in discussion with fellow scholars, and follow-up class by re-reading portions of the required readings and exploring suggested readings.

Participation:

Scholars are eager to respectfully, openly, and critically discuss arguments and issues raised by the readings. Scholars are adept at following a line of reasoning wherever it may lead. Most importantly, scholars welcome the insights and
criticisms of their peers: A scholar understands that it is possible to entertain a proposition without believing it, just as it is possible to present an argument without personally endorsing the argument. Scholars enjoy vigorous deliberations and are always careful to treat fellow scholars with patience and good humor.

Assignments:

Scholars fully immerse themselves in assignments and never assume that an assignment is only legitimate if it will be covered on a test. Scholars are naturally curious and see every assignment as an opportunity to explore new issues, see old issues in new light, and hone their growing skills.

Cheating:

Scholars are very careful to give proper credit and maintain the highest standards of scholarly conduct. Thus, subject to university guidelines, any instance of cheating (including plagiarism) will be vigorously prosecuted.

Attendance:

Scholars always attend class barring serious injury, illness, or disaster. Scholars view class-time as rare and valuable for the thought it evokes and the opportunities it presents. Scholars arrive early for class and never leave class early without obtaining prior approval from the professor. Scholars who miss class are responsible for obtaining class-notes, completing the readings, and getting any missed assignments submitted in a timely manner.

Screens:

In light of a raft of recent research revealing that screens (watches, phones, tablets, computers, etc.) serve only to distract and obstruct lecture and discussion, no scholar will ever use a screen in class unless directed to do so by the office of student disabilities. Scholars will respectfully excuse themselves from class to attend to emergency calls only. Any student violating this policy will result in that day being taken as an unexcused absence.

Grading Formula:

There are 1000 points possible as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Points</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Problem Sets</td>
<td>50 points each</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Term Paper Prospectus</td>
<td>50 points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critically Annotated Bibliography</td>
<td>100 points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rough Draft</td>
<td>200 points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final Draft</td>
<td>250 points</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total Points = sum of the best eight problem sets + prospectus + bibliography + draft + term paper
Course Grade is determined by the following scale:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Score Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>900-1000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>800 - 899</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>700 - 799</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>600 - 699</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>000 – 599</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Additional Notes:**

Any change in the above will be announced in class. No change will be made which would be detrimental to the student's grade.

This syllabus is *not* authoritative. That is, the syllabus as it appears on the course website or as it is distributed in class supersedes this syllabus wherever they differ. The professor and the students are only responsible for the syllabus as it is given in class, including the schedule of topics and readings.

Any student missing a due date must provide a documented, acceptable reason according to university guidelines. Students with a proper excuse for missing a due date will be given a reasonable extension.

**Required University Note to Students with Disabilities:** The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) is a federal anti-discrimination statute that provides comprehensive civil rights protection for persons with disabilities. Among other things, this legislation requires that all students with disabilities be guaranteed a learning environment that provides for reasonable accommodation of their disabilities. If you believe you have a disability requiring an accommodation, please call or visit Disability Services at (361) 825-5816 in Corpus Christi Hall 116. If you are a returning veteran and are experiencing cognitive and/or physical access issues in the classroom or on campus, please contact the Disability Services office for assistance at (361) 825-5816.

**Required University Note on Dropping a Class:** I hope that you never find it necessary to drop this or any other class. However, events can sometimes occur that make dropping a course necessary or wise. Please consult with your academic advisor, the Financial Aid Office, and me, before you decide to drop this course. Should dropping the course be the best course of action, you must initiate the process to drop the course by going to the Student Services Center and filling out a course drop form. Just stopping attendance and participation WILL NOT automatically result in your being dropped from the class. The last day to drop a class for the spring semester is April 10, 2020.

*Please note that the professor whose course this is did not write the above note, despite its having been written in the first-person. Whoever it was meant well, no doubt. It is not what this professor would have written.

**Required College of Liberal Arts Note on the Grade Appeal Process:** As stated in University Procedure 13.02.99.C0.03, Student Grade Appeal Procedures, a student who believes that he or she has not been held to appropriate academic standards as outlined in the class syllabus, equitable evaluation procedures, or appropriate grading, may appeal the final grade given in the course. The burden of proof is upon the student to demonstrate the appropriateness of the appeal. A student with a complaint about a grade is encouraged to first discuss the matter with the instructor. For complete details, including the responsibilities of the parties involved in the process and the number of days allowed for completing the steps in the process, see University Procedure 13.02.99.C0.03, Student Grade Appeal Procedures. For assistance and/or guidance in
the grade appeal process, students may contact the Dean’s office in the college in which the
course is taught or the Office of the Provost. These documents are accessible through the
University Rules Web site at:

**Required College of Liberal Arts Note on Academic Advising:** The College of Liberal Arts requires
that students meet with an Academic Advisor as soon as they are ready to declare a major.
Degree plans are prepared in the CLA Academic Advising Center. The University uses an online
Degree Audit system. Any amendment must be approved by the Department Chair and the Office
of the Dean. All courses and requirements specified in the final degree plan audit must be
completed before a degree will be granted. The CLA Academic Advising Office is located in
Driftwood #203. For more information please call 361-825-3466.

By accepting this syllabus the student indicates that the syllabus has been read, all requirements
are understood, and all policies are acknowledged.