PHIL 359: Animal Minds

RICE UNIVERSITY, FALL 2016 — COURSE SYLLABUS

| Time & Location: | MWF 2:00-2:50pm, SEW 305 |
| Instructor:      | Alex Morgan |
| Contact:         | alex.morgan@rice.edu |
| Office Hours:    | W 3:30-5:00pm, or by appointment |
| Office Location: | Humanities 214 |

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Philosophers of mind seek to understand the fundamental nature of mental phenomena such as consciousness, perception and rational thought. However, they tend to focus on the kinds of minds that are most familiar to us, namely our own, human minds. This is understandable, since arguably we don’t have the kind of introspective access to non-human minds that we have to our own. However, over the last few decades, the science of animal cognition has made great progress. This hasn’t overcome all the epistemic barriers to our understanding of non-human minds, but it has stretched our ordinary ways of understanding the mind, and allowed us to view issues in the philosophy of mind from a broader perspective.

In this course, we will explore some of the philosophical issues about the nature of the mind that arise when we look at the results and methods of the science of animal cognition. For example: How we really understand animal minds given that we can only ever grasp them from our own anthropocentric point of view? Do animals have a rich conscious experience of the world around them, or some form of self-awareness? How would we find out? Can animals conceptualize the world and engage in rational thought? What is rationality, anyway? And what does all of this tell us about the nature and value of animal — including human — minds?

LEARNING OUTCOMES

The questions we’ll explore in this course involve a combination of conceptual and empirical issues. To understand whether non-human animals are capable of rational thought, for example, we need a clear understanding what rational thought requires, as well as an understanding of whether certain animals in fact satisfy these requirements. In taking this class, you will learn about some fascinating empirical research into the various cognitive feats that non-human animals are capable of, as well as some foundational philosophical skills of conceptual clarification and argumentative analysis. You will also learn how to synthesize the knowledge and skills you’ll acquire from this course into a broad
and nuanced understanding of various fundamental aspects of the mind. Ultimately, you’ll gain a deeper understanding of what it is to be a thinking, feeling organism with a rich inner life.

By the end of the course you will be in a position to think more carefully and critically about the various claims about the relation between human and non-human animals you encounter in your daily life, as well as about your own actions towards animals. The thinking skills you will have developed will be of use not just in the context of thinking about animal minds, but in any domain in which it is important to reason carefully about complex issues.

**STUDENT RESPONSIBILITIES**

*Discussion & Participation*

To achieve the learning outcomes of this course, you will need to be an active participant in a community of inquiry, in which we hold up ideas to critical scrutiny as we try to make progress in solving complex empirical and conceptual puzzles together. Participating actively requires that you come to class ready to discuss readings, share relevant experiences, and reflect on what others say. Be prepared for me to call on you to say what you think. Perhaps more importantly, though, active participation requires that you risk what you believe and how you define yourself — that you open yourself to other points of view and allow yourself to be persuaded by rational argument. Rich discussions about disputed philosophical issues will sometimes involve disagreements about basic convictions or values. To foster an environment in which such discussions are possible, you are expected to be respectful towards others and their views, even if they radically oppose your own.

*Attendance*

Because of the importance of participation in this course, you are expected to attend every session, and attendance will be recorded. You are allowed two unexplained absences without penalty; any absences after that will affect the participation component of your grade. If you have a legitimate reason for not being able to attend class, please let me know and we can work something out.

*Communication & Electronic Devices*

Please be reasonable and courteous when it comes to using electronic devices in the classroom. To avoid disturbing the rest of us, your phone shouldn’t ring, and you should only use your laptop for legitimate academic purposes. If you want to look at some fascinating feat of animal cognition on Youtube, be prepared to show the rest of us!

*Disabilities*

If you have a disability that may affect your academic performance, please let me know and make
sure the relevant documentation is on file with Disability Support Services (Allen Center, Room 111 / adarice@rice.edu), so we can ensure you have the accommodations you need.

**Academic Integrity**

I trust you to avoid all forms of dishonest academic conduct in this course, such as plagiarism or cheating. It’s not only unfair to your fellow students, it’s really not a strategy that will help you in the long run. It’s also a serious academic offense, and I’ll treat it as such. The norms around plagiarism can be a bit fuzzy, so if you have any questions about what constitutes plagiarism, please talk to me or take a look at the Rice honor system handbook (http://honor.rice.edu/honor-system-handbook/).

**RESOURCES**

The textbook for the course is ‘The Animal Mind’, by Kristin Andrews (Routledge, 2015). The textbook will be supplemented by several other readings and audiovisual resources, which will be made available via the Canvas site for the course (available at https://canvas.rice.edu). Assigned readings for each week are listed under the schedule at the end of the syllabus.

The Canvas site contains a variety of important resources, such as a discussion board, lecture slides, and an up-to-date schedule of readings, and will function as a central hub for information about the course. Please familiarize yourself with the site as soon as possible, and make the email account registered with Canvas is one that you check regularly.

**GRADING**

**Discussion board posts (15%)**

Each week, you’ll be required to post a short discussion note to the discussion board on the Canvas site. The purpose of the post is to demonstrate that you’ve read and thought about the material assigned for that week, and to provide a springboard for discussion on the Wednesday classes. Your post should be roughly half a page in length, and should address the following questions: What is the central point (or points) the author is trying to make in this text? What are the central claims the author uses to support these points? What did you find most confusing or questionable about how the author used these claims to support his/her point, and why? Alternatively, your post may reply to another student’s post, in which case you should try to answer the student’s question, citing any evidence or reasons that you think are relevant and reliable. To receive credit for your post, you must submit it by noon on Tuesday (starting the second week of class), so we can discuss it during the Wednesday class. Posts will be graded as ‘Great’, ‘Acceptable’, or ‘Unacceptable’. You must submit at least one post a week. If you miss the deadline for a given week due to illness or other
unforeseeable circumstances, you may submit up to two posts retroactively. You are encouraged to submit more than one post in a given week, and any additional posts will contribute to the ‘Participation’ component of your grade.

**Argumentative paper (30%)**

You will be required to write a 7-8 page argumentative paper on a topic of your choice. Papers will be due on the last day of class, **December 2nd**. Paper topics and instructions will be made available in a separate handout.

**Writing exercises (10%)**

You will be required to complete 4-5 writing exercises, each focusing on a specific skill associated with writing your paper. The exercises will be assigned in class and will vary from week to week. Each will be the equivalent of about 1-2 pages of writing.

**Research project (20%)**

Take some time to observe the behavior of a specific animal (but please don’t disturb or interfere with it in any way). We will visit the Houston zoo later in the semester for this purpose, but you may also observe the behavior of an animal at your home or on the Rice campus. Develop a hypothesis about a specific mental capacity that animals of that species might plausibly possess or lack, and sketch an idea for a scientific experiment to test that hypothesis. For example, you might hypothesize that squirrels have a capacity for episodic memory, and come up with an idea for testing this. Further instructions will be made available in a separate handout.

**Show & tell (10%)**

Give a brief (15-20) minute presentation on an object, idea, argument, article, or experiment of your choice. The topic of your presentation might be related to something that you discussed in another class, or that you have an independent interest in. You should ‘show’ the topic of your presentation in some form — e.g. as a concrete object, or a movie, or a summary of an experiment — and then ‘tell’ how the topic relates to some of the issues we have been discussing in class. Please do not bring any living animals into class if it will involve distressing them in any way! Presentations will be held on Friday classes throughout the semester, and I will begin asking students for their preferred presentation dates on the first day of class.

**Attendance and Participation (15%)**

You will be graded on the extent to which you are an active and engaged participant in the course. This does not depend simply on the quantity of your contributions — you will not gain credit by rambling on in class or posting nonsense to the discussion board. Rather, you will be graded on the
quality of your contributions, where quality is based on the extent to which you are making an honest, informed, and thoughtful attempt to contribute to a communal understanding of the difficult issues we’ll be discussing. Note that quality is not based on ‘insight’ or being ‘correct’. Sometimes simple and apparently naive questions are the most helpful in getting to the heart of difficult philosophical problems. If you’re not puzzled or bemused by some of the issues we’re discussing, you’re probably not thinking hard enough!

Your total % grade will be assigned a letter grade on the basis of the following scale:

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**SCHEDULE**

This schedule might change over the semester, depending on the pace at which we move through the material and the interests of the participants. Any changes will be announced on Canvas.

**WEEK 1 (08/22): INTRODUCTION & HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES**

*Required:*  
- Andrews (2015), The Animal Mind (Ch.1)  
- Harrison (1992), Descartes on Animals

**WEEK 2 (08/29): THE SCIENCE OF ANIMAL MINDS: ANTHROPOCENTRISM & MORGAN’S CANON**

*Required:*  
- Keeley (2004), Anthropomorphism, Primatomorphism, Mammalomorphism

*Optional:*  
- Andrews (2015), The Animal Mind (Ch.2)

**WEEK 3 (09/05): CONSCIOUSNESS**

*NOTE:*  
NO CLASS ON 09/05 (LABOR DAY)

*Required:*  
- Tye (1997), The Problem of Simple Minds: Is There Anything it is like to be a Honey Bee

*Optional:*  
- Andrews (2015), The Animal Mind (Ch.3)  

**WEEK 4 (09/12): RATIONAL THOUGHT I**

*Required:*  
- Chadha (2007), No Speech, Never Mind!
Optional:  • Davidson (1982), Rational Animals  
• Andrews (2015), The Animal Mind (Ch.4)

WEEK 5 (09/19): RATIONAL THOUGHT II

Required:  • Beck (2012), Do Animals Engage in Conceptual Thought?  
Optional:  • Andrews (2015), The Animal Mind (Ch.4)  
• Beck (2013), Why We Can’t Say What Animals Think

WEEK 6 (09/26): COGNITION VS. ‘MERE’ ASSOCIATION?

NOTE:  ALTERNATE CLASSES ON 09/21 & 09/22, TBA

Required:  • Buckner (2011), Two Approaches to the Distinction between Cognition and ‘Mere Association’

WEEK 7 (10/03): INTENTIONAL AGENCY

Required:  • Glock (2009), Can Animals Act for Reasons?

WEEK 8 (10/10): FORESIGHT & PLANNING

NOTE:  NO CLASS ON 10/10 (MID-TERM RECESS)

Required:  • Hills & Butterfill (2015), From Foraging to Autonoetic Consciousness  
Optional:  • Roberts and Feeney (2009), The Comparative Study of Mental Time Travel  
• Buckner & Carroll (2007), Self-Projection and the Brain

WEEK 9 (10/17): CAUSAL LEARNING & INFERENCE

Required:  • Waldmann (2009), Causal Thinking  
• Taylor et al. (2012), New Caledonian Crows Reason about Hidden Causal Agents

WEEK 10 (10/24): SOCIAL COGNITION: COMMUNICATION & CULTURE

Required:  • Andrews (2015), The Animal Mind (Ch.5)  
• Laland & Hoppitt (2003), Do Animals Have Culture?

WEEK 11 (10/31): SOCIAL COGNITION: THEORY OF MIND

Required:  • Martin & Santos (2016), What Cognitive Representations Support Primate Theory of Mind
Optional:  • Andrews (2015), The Animal Mind (Ch.6)
  • Bugnyar et al. (2016), Ravens Attribute Visual Access to Unseen Competitors

**Week 12 (11/07): Social Cognition: Morality**

*Required:*  • Andrews (2015), The Animal Mind (Ch.7)
  • Allen & Bekoff (2005), Animal Play and the Evolution of Morality

**Week 13 (11/14): Our Moral Obligations to Animals**

*Required:*  • Jones (2013), Science, Sentience, and Animal Welfare


*NOTE:*  NO CLASS ON 11/25 (THANKSGIVING)

*Required:*  • Sterelny (2013), The Informational Commonwealth

*Optional:*  • Herrmann et al. (2007), Humans Have Evolved Specialized Skills of Social Cognition

**Week 15 (11/28): What Makes Humans Different? Language as a Tool for Thought**

*Required:*  • Martínez-Manrique & Vicente (2010), What the...! The Role of Inner Speech in Conscious Thought

*Optional:*  • Clark (2006), Language, Embodiment, and the Cognitive Niche