

PHIL 26S: Other People's Minds

Summer 2026 · 3 Units

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Meetings	Mondays & Wednesdays, 3:00–5:00 PM
Office hours	By appointment

Course Description

How do we know what others think, feel, or experience? And what does it even mean to “understand” another mind? This course explores the philosophical problem of other minds through a distinctly interdisciplinary lens, bringing together classic philosophical arguments, cognitive science, the phenomenology of embodiment, and contemporary debates in artificial intelligence. We will examine how we attribute mental states to others, how empathy and perception shape social understanding, how habits and biases influence interpretation, and whether advanced AI systems genuinely “understand” or merely simulate understanding.

The course is organized into four modules: the classical problem and its history; the psychology of mindreading; the phenomenology of interpersonal experience; and social and artificial minds. Along the way, students will develop skills in philosophical analysis, learn to connect philosophical texts with empirical research, and reflect critically on the nature of consciousness, agency, and interpersonal understanding.

Course Goals

By the end of this course, students will be able to:

- Explain major philosophical approaches to other minds, including classical skepticism, phenomenology, theory-theory, simulation theory, and the intentional stance.
- Analyze how empirical research in psychology and cognitive science informs—and sometimes challenges—philosophical accounts of other minds.
- Reflect on the phenomenology of interpersonal experience, including empathy, embodiment, and affective communication.
- Evaluate and construct clear philosophical arguments: identifying theses, reconstructing reasoning, and formulating objections.
- Apply course concepts to real-world cases, such as bias in social cognition, human–AI interaction, and everyday interpersonal interpretation.
- Develop their own view of what it means to understand another mind, synthesizing insights across philosophy, psychology, phenomenology, and technology.

Course Requirements

Participation (25%)

Active engagement is essential. Students are expected to complete the required readings before each class and to participate thoughtfully in discussion. **One unexcused absence** is permitted, and each student is allowed up to **two excused absences**. Additional absences will reduce the participation grade.

Weekly Reading Responses (25%)

We meet twice a week, with assigned readings for both the Monday and Wednesday sessions. Each week, write one short response (~200 words) that engages one of that week's readings. A response may take any of the following forms:

- *Analyze an argument*: reconstruct and examine a complex argument from a reading.
- *Offer a critique*: identify a weakness, ambiguity, or unwarranted assumption.
- *Raise a challenge*: pose a counterexample, objection, or hard question for discussion.

Post your response to the Discussion tab on Canvas and reply substantively to at least one classmate's post. Both your response and your reply are **due Sunday at midnight**. You may skip one week without penalty.

Capstone Group Project & Presentation (50%)

In place of a traditional term paper, you will work in a group of 2 to complete a capstone in one of two formats and present it to the class in Week 8.

- *Research project*: investigate a focused question in the philosophy of other minds, building an argument that draws on at least two course frameworks (and, where relevant, empirical work).
- *Case study*: take a real or fictional case (e.g. a film scene, an animal-cognition study, an LLM conversation, a clinical or everyday "misreading") and analyze it through at least two course frameworks.

Proposal: A 1-2 pages group proposal—that includes your question, chosen format, plan, and division of labor—is **due by Week 6**. It is required and graded (see grading rubric).

Presentation: A 10–15 minute group presentation **in Week 8** (about 5 minutes per student), followed by 5 minutes of Q&A. Every member presents.

Grading rubric (50 points)

Assesses	Criterion	Points
Proposal	Clear question, chosen format, a workable research/analysis plan, and a clear division of labor	10
Presentation	Framing: a clear, well-motivated question or case	8
	Use of course material: at least two frameworks, used accurately	10
	Analysis & objection—reply: reasoning that anticipates pushback	12
	Delivery & Q&A: clear, well-paced delivery and thoughtful responses	10

Course Policies

Accessibility & Accommodations

I am committed to making this course accessible to all students. If you have a disability or other condition that may affect your learning, please connect with the Office of Accessible Education (oea.stanford.edu) to arrange

accommodations. I also encourage you to talk with me early in the term so we can work together to support your learning.

Academic Integrity

Our class depends on honesty, trust, and fairness. All submitted work must be your own, and any sources you use must be properly cited. If you have questions about what counts as appropriate collaboration or citation, please ask—I would much rather clarify than have you worry. Suspected violations will be referred to the Office of Community Standards.

Respectful Participation

This course is a space for open, thoughtful dialogue. I ask that we all approach our conversations with respect, generosity, and openness to differing perspectives. Listening carefully and interpreting others' contributions charitably are just as important as speaking. Disagreement is welcome, but it should always be expressed in a way that sustains a constructive and inclusive environment.

Wellbeing & Support

Learning is challenging, and so is life. If you find yourself facing difficulties — academic, personal, or otherwise — please don't hesitate to reach out. I am happy to discuss adjustments or connect you with campus resources. Stanford also offers a range of support services, including Counselling and Psychological Services (caps.stanford.edu). Taking care of yourself is an essential part of doing well in this class.

Schedule & Readings

MODULE I · THE CLASSICAL PROBLEM OF OTHER MINDS

Week 1: The Cartesian Background & the Argument from Analogy

Module I sets the agenda for the whole course around a single fork: is our knowledge of other minds indirect—an inference from behavior—or could it be direct? Monday traces the Cartesian route into doubt and the worry that the bodies around me might “conceal automata.” Wednesday turns to the classic inferential reply—the argument from analogy—and the objections that sank it.

Discussion questions

- Is the existence of other minds something we infer, perceive, or simply assume?
- Is the argument from analogy a sound inference, or an over-hasty generalization from a single case?

Required

- **Mon** · No required reading; see the recommended Descartes selection below.
- **Wed** · J. S. Mill, the argument-from-analogy passage from *An Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy* (1865); with Alec Hyslop & Frank Jackson, “The Analogical Inference to Other Minds,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* (1972).

Optional

- Recommended (background for Monday): René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*: Meditation I and the “men crossing the street/automata” passage of Meditation II (selections).
- A. J. Ayer, “One's Knowledge of Other Minds,” *Theoria* (1953).
- Bertrand Russell, “Analogy,” *Human Knowledge* (1923).

Week 2: Best Explanation, Criteria & Perceptual Knowledge

We now complete the classical menu of answers. Monday weighs two further inferential or quasi-inferential options—inference to the best explanation and Wittgensteinian criteria. Wednesday reaches the hinge of the course: the idea that we can sometimes just see that another is angry or in pain—direct, perceptual knowledge—and the question of whether “indirect vs. direct” even exhausts the options. This is the springboard for the phenomenology and AI modules to come.

Discussion questions

- Is believing in other minds like believing in electrons—simply the best explanation of the evidence?
- Can we literally perceive that another is in pain, or only infer it from what we perceive?

Required

- **Mon** · Robert Pargetter, “The Scientific Inference to Other Minds,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* (1984); with Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §§243–246 (the private-language sections) and §580; the Blue Book, selections.
- **Wed** · Fred Dretske, “Perception and Other Minds,” *Noûs* (1973).

Optional

- Crispin Wright, “Second Thoughts about Criteria” (1984).
- John McDowell, “Criteria, Defeasibility, and Knowledge” (1982).
- Fred Dretske, “Conclusive reasons,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* (1971).

MODULE II · THE PSYCHOLOGY OF OTHER MINDS

Week 3: Mindreading, Theory-Theory & Simulation

Where Module I asked whether knowledge of other minds is inference or perception, we now take that question into the lab. Developmental psychology suggests we understand others either by deploying an implicit “theory” of their beliefs and desires (a descendant of inference to the best explanation) or by internally simulating their mental states.

Discussion questions

- Do we understand others by reasoning like scientists, or by imaginatively simulating them?
- What do infants and chimpanzees teach us about the origins of understanding other minds?

Required

- **Mon** · Alison Gopnik, “How Babies Think,” *Scientific American* (2010); with Andrew Meltzoff, “‘Like me’: a foundation for social cognition,” *Developmental Science* (2007).
- **Wed** · Robert Gordon, “Folk Psychology as Simulation,” *Mind & Language* (1986).

Optional

- Alison Gopnik, “The Scientist as Child,” *Philosophy of Science* 63 (1996).
- Andrew Meltzoff, “Imitation and Other Minds: The ‘Like Me’ Hypothesis,” in S. Hurley and N. Chater (eds.), *Perspectives on Imitation: From Neuroscience to Social Science* (2005).
- Ian Ravenscroft, “What Is It Like to Be Someone Else? Simulation and Empathy,” *Ratio* 11 (1998).

Week 4: Bias and Heuristic in Mindreading

Our reading of others is not always rational. Fast, automatic, sometimes habitual processes shape how we interpret behavior, form judgments, and attribute intentions. We ask whether these shortcuts are bugs or features of social understanding.

Discussion questions

- Are biases bugs in the system, or essential shortcuts for understanding others?
- How do automatic, habitual responses complicate philosophical accounts of rational agency?

Required

- **Mon** · Nicholas Epley et al, “Perspective Taking as Egocentric Anchoring and Adjustment,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (2004).
- **Wed** · Shannon Spaulding, “Expanding the scope of mindreading: Social categorization, stereotypes, social bias, and situational context,” in *How We Understand Others: Philosophy and Social Cognition* (2018).

Optional

- Amos Tversky & Daniel Kahneman, “Judgment under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases,” *Science* 185 (1974).
- Shannon Spaulding, “The goals of mindreading,” in *How We Understand Others: Philosophy and Social Cognition* (2018).

MODULE III · THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF OTHER MINDS

Week 5: Empathy, Interaction & Direct Enacted Perception

Here we press the “direct” horn of the Module I dilemma as far as it will go. Phenomenological thinkers challenge the idea that minds are hidden “behind” behavior, arguing that we often grasp others’ emotions and intentions directly—in their expressive bodies, faces, gestures, and actions—rather than inferring them from neutral evidence.

Discussion questions

- When you see someone in pain or joy, do you infer their state or feel it directly?
- Does embodiment make the problem of other minds disappear, or deepen it?

Required

- **Mon** · Thomas Szanto and Dermot Moran, “Edith Stein,” *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (2024).
- **Wed** · Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahavi, “How we know others,” in *The Phenomenological Mind* (2007).

Optional

- Edith Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy* (1917).
- Shaun Gallagher and Anika Fiebich, “Being Pluralist about Understanding Others,” in Anita Avramides and Matthew Parrott (eds.), *Knowing Other Minds* (2019).

MODULE IV · SOCIAL & ARTIFICIAL MINDS

Week 6: Reading Machine Minds, the Intentional Stance & the Chinese Room

The other-minds question now meets the machine. When and why do we treat a system as having beliefs and desires? Is reading a mind into a chatbot an inference, a perception, or a projection—the very options we weighed in Module I? And could a system that behaves intelligently genuinely understand, or only manipulate symbols?

Discussion questions

- If we treat an AI system as if it has beliefs and desires, does that make it so?
- Is “understanding” something a program could have, or only something we project onto it?

Required

- **Mon** · Daniel C. Dennett, “True Believers: The Intentional Strategy and Why It Works” (1981), in *The Intentional Stance* (1987).
- **Wed** · John Searle, “Minds, Brains, and Programs,” *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 3 (1980).

Optional

- Alan M. Turing, “Computing Machinery and Intelligence,” *Mind* 59 (1950).
- Thomas Nagel, “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?,” *Philosophical Review* 83 (1974).

Week 7: Do Large Language Models Understand? Minds, Morals & Machines

We bring the classic debates to today's AI. Recent systems pass many theory-of-mind tests yet fail trivial variations of them. What would count as genuine machine understanding or machine theory of mind, and if a system had it, what would follow ethically?

Discussion questions

- What would count as genuine machine understanding—and how could we test for it?
- Should advanced AI systems be treated as moral patients, moral agents, both, or neither?

Required

- **Mon** · Melanie Mitchell & David C. Krakauer, “The Debate Over Understanding in AI’s Large Language Models,” PNAS 120 (2023). [open access]
- **Wed** · David J. Chalmers, “What We Talk to When We Talk to Language Models” (2025). [open access]

Optional

- James W. A. Strachan et al., “Testing Theory of Mind in Large Language Models and Humans,” Nature Human Behaviour 8 (2024).
- Neil C. Rabinowitz et al., “Machine Theory of Mind,” Proceedings of ICML (2018). [arXiv]

Week 8: Project Presentations & Synthesis

No assigned readings. Students present their capstone projects, and we close by synthesizing across the four modules.

Discussion questions

- What is a mind, after eight weeks of study?
- Which framework changed your view of other people the most, and why?

Bring your project. Come ready to ask good questions of your peers.