PHIL 4615/5615: Minds, Bodies, and Machines

Spring 2026 | Mon/Wed 1 – 2:15 pm | Blegen 225

Instructor:

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Office hours: Thurs 11:30 am – 12:55 pm

Course Description:

What is consciousness? Can machines such as AI be conscious, or is consciousness exclusive to biological organisms? If artificial consciousness were ever created, would this generate special moral obligations to protect its welfare? More generally, what should our relationships (if that is even the right word) with artificially intelligent machines be like? Could we be friends with robots, or even fall in love with them? Should we trust superintelligent machines, or do they pose serious existential risks to humanity?

This course explores these questions and many others at the intersection of philosophy, cognitive science, and artificial intelligence. A central theme throughout will be what the prospect of artificial minds reveals about our own minds. Are human beings machines too? Is human consciousness special, or does it only seem so from our all-too-human perspective? And what do we mean when we call ourselves conscious in the first place?

STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES:

Students in the course **can identify, define, and solve problems**.

Addressing the outcome

In this course, students will engage with deep questions of immense interest to philosophers, scientists, and technologists concerned about the future of AI. Students will be encouraged to solve these problems and consider how to propose them to the technological community as well as to the broader public.

Assessment of learning related to the outcome

This learning outcome will be assessed through class participation, a series of critical papers in which students articulate their reasoning on specific themes, and a final paper offering an extended critique of a central course issue.

Required Texts: There are no required textbooks for this course. All readings will be provided on Canvas.

Course Requirements for Undergraduate Students

1. Weekly Discussion Posts (10 total) 10%
2. Interview 1 (10-15 min) 10%
3. Critical Essay 1 (4-6 pages) 10%
4. Interview 2 (10 – 15 min) 10%
5. Critical Essay 2 (4-6 pages) 10%
6. Participation 50%
    a. Attendance
    b. Class Discussion
    c. Quality of Discussion Posts

Major Deadlines:

Discussion Posts	Tuesdays before midnight
Interview 1	Sat March 14
Critical Essay 1	Sat March 21
Interview 2	Sat April 18
Critical Essay 2	Fri May 8

Course Requirements for Graduate Students

Same as above, with the following exception. Graduate students have the option of writing one term paper (8 – 12 pages, 20%, due Fri May 8) rather than two critical papers.

Description of Requirements

1. Weekly Discussion Posts (10%): Weekly posts in which students will either respond to a prompt assigned by the instructor or raise a thoughtful question about the course material in preparation for class discussion.

Students are allowed to skip 2 of the assigned discussion posts. Since 12 discussion posts are assigned, students are required to complete 10 discussion posts throughout the semester.

2. Interview 1 (10%): Students are required to record and submit an audio or audio-video interview with someone outside class on the topic, "Will we someday create consciousness in AI?"

3. Critical Essay 1 (10%): Students are required to write a 1200 to 1800-word essay that critically addresses whether AI can be conscious.

4. Interview 2 (10%): Students are required to record and submit an audio or audio-video interview with someone outside class on the topic, "Can people fall in love with robots? Should they?"

5. Critical Essay 2 (10%): Students are required to write a 1200 to 1800-word essay that critically addresses our social relationships with, or obligations to, AI.

4. Participation (50%): Students are expected to attend all class meetings and actively participate in discussions. Participation grades are based on attendance, thoughtful contributions to discussions, and the quality of discussion posts. To succeed, students must complete assigned readings before each class. The instructor will provide participation grade estimates twice during the semester.

Electronic devices are not permitted in class unless the student has received special permission from the University and the instructor has been formally notified. You must bring a notebook and writing utensil to every class.

Course Schedule

* Schedule is subject to change. * Complete readings and films prior to class.

What is consciousness?

Wed Jan 21
"What Creates Consciousness?" (YouTube: David Chalmers, Anil Seth)

Mon Jan 26
Thomas Nagel, "What is it like to be a bat?"
& (*optional*) Jaegwon Kim, "What is Consciousness?)

Wed Jan 28
David Chalmers, "Consciousness and its Place in Nature"
& Interview, "David Chalmers Discusses the Hard Problem of Consciousness" (YouTube)

Mon Feb 2
Patricia Churchland, "The Hornswoggle Problem"
& Interview, "Patricia and Paul Churchland on Consciousness" (YouTube)
& (*optional*) Anil Seth & Tim Bayne, "Theories of Consciousness"

Wed Feb 4
Daniel Dennett, "Quining Qualia"
& Interview, "Daniel Dennett on Deflating Consciousness" (YouTube)

Mon Feb 9
Philip Bold, "Do I know that I am conscious?"
Philip Bold, "Consciousness Studies" (poem)
& (*optional*) Anita Avramides, "Other Minds"

Can a machine be conscious?

Wed Feb 11
Ex Machina (film)

Mon Feb 16
Alan Turing, "Computing Machinery and Intelligence"
& Barbara Montero, "AI is on its way to something even more remarkable than intelligence"

Wed Feb 18
John Searle, "Mind, Brains, and Programs"
& (*optional*) John Searle, "Consciousness in Artificial Intelligence" (YouTube)
& (*optional*) David Cole, "The Chinese Room Argument"

Mon Feb 23
David Chalmers, "Strong Artificial Intelligence"
& Terry Bison, "They're Made of Meat"
& (*optional*) Butlin et al, "Consciousness in Artificial Intelligence"

Wed Feb 25
Anil Seth, "Machine Minds"
& Ned Block "Can Meat Machines be Conscious?"
& (*optional*) Interview, "Could AI really achieve consciousness, with Anil Seth" (YouTube)

FRI FEB 27: Colloquium Event
Philip Bold, "Wittgenstein on the Question of Conscious AI"
3:30 PM
Location TBD

AI consciousness and AI welfare

Mon March 2
Tom McClelland, "Agnosticism about artificial consciousness"
& (*optional*) Jeff Sebo, "Taking AI Welfare Seriously" (YouTube)

Wed March 4 NO CLASS

Mon March 9 SPRING BREAK
Wed March 11 SPRING BREAK

Sat March 14
Interview 1 due by midnight ("Can we make a conscious machine?")

Wittgenstein on Language and Consciousness

Mon March 16
Murray Shanahan, "Simulacra as Conscious Exotica"

Wed March 18
Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations,* Language Games and Family Resemblance

Sat March 21
Critical Essay 1 due by midnight

Mon March 23
Philosophical Investigations, The Private Language Argument (Part 1)

Wed March 25
Philosophical Investigations, The Private Language Argument (Part 2)

Mon March 30
Philosophical Investigations, Confusions about Consciousness

Wed April 1
Peter Hacker, "Men, Minds and Machines"

Mon April 6
Arturo Hernández, "Wittgenstein, Psychological Language, and AI"

Life with AI: Relationships and Risks

AI Empathy
Wed April 8
Blade Runner (film)

AI Romance
Mon April 13
Her (film)

Wed April 15
Laura Kunze, "The Sad & Dangerous reality behind 'Her'",
& Anil Seth, "Why Conscious AI is a Bad, Bad Idea"
& Panel Discussion, "How can we harness AI for good?" (YouTube)

Sat April 18
Interview 2 due by midnight ("Can/should we be friends, or fall in love, with robots?")

AI Friendship
Mon April 20
Valerie Tiberius, *Artificially Yours*

Wed April 22
Valerie Tiberius, *Artificially Yours*, Special Guest Visit, Q&A

Super-intelligence & Existential risk
Mon April 27
Eliezer Yudkowsky & Nate Soares, *If Anyone Builds It, Everyone Dies*,
Part II: One Extinction Scenario
& Eliezer Yudkowsky, "Will Superintelligent AI End the World" (YouTube)

Wed April 29
If Anyone Builds It, Everyone Dies, Part III: Facing the Challenge
& "We're Not Ready for Superintelligence" (YouTube)

Mon May 4
Final Reflections

Fri May 8
Critical Essay 2 due by midnight

Course Policies

1. **No Technology in Class:** Students may not use electronic devices during class unless they have received special permission from the University and the instructor has been formally notified.

2. **Late Work:** Late work will be penalized unless permission has been granted from the instructor.

3. **Grading:** Final grades will be calculated as follows.

Letter Grades are translated to the following numerical scores.

A+ = 100	**C+** = 78
A = 95	**C** = 75
A- = 92	**C-** = 72
B+ = 88	**D+** = 68
B = 85	**D** = 65
B- = 82	**F** = 50

Final letter grades will be calculated using the following scale.

97-100 = **A+**	77-79 = **C+**
93-96 = **A**	73-76 = **C**
90-92 = **A-**	70-72 = **C-**
87-89 = **B+**	67-69 = **D+**
83-86 = **B**	60-66 = **D**
80-82 = **B-**	50 = **F**

Below is a list of general criteria that will be used to evaluate your writing assignments.

- Quality of ideas (50%)
  - *Range and depth of argument; fair representation of philosopher's position; logic of argument; quality and/or originality of thought; appropriate sense of the complexity of the topic; appropriate awareness of opposing views.*

- Organization and Argumentation (40%)
  - *Clarity of thesis statement in the introduction; logical and clear arrangement of ideas; effective use of transitions; unity and coherence of paragraphs; good development of arguments through supporting details and evidence.*

- Clarity, style, and grammar (10%)
  - *Ease of readability; appropriate voice, tone, and style for the assignment; clarity of sentence structure; grammatically correct sentences; accurate spelling; careful proofreading.*

4. **Plagiarism:** Plagiarism will result in a final grade of F for the course. If you have any questions about plagiarism or how to properly cite sources, do not hesitate to ask. According to the UMN Student Conduct Code: "Plagiarism shall mean representing the words, creative work, or ideas of another person as one's own without providing proper documentation of source."

5. **Use of AI:** Students are strongly discouraged from using AI platforms to complete any writing assignments.
6. **Disability Accommodations:** If you have, or think you have, a disability that would affect your performance in this course, please contact the Disability Resource Center (DRC) https://ars.unc.edu/ to arrange confidential discussion regarding equitable access and reasonable accommodations.

7. **Sexual Misconduct.** Sexual misconduct (sexual harassment, sexual assault, stalking, and relationship violence) includes unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and/or other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature. Such behavior is prohibited in the University setting.

   Per the U of M policy on sexual harassment, *I am required to share information that I learn about possible sexual misconduct* with the campus Title IX office. Within the requirements of my job, I will be as responsive as possible to your requests for confidentiality and support. You can also, or alternately, choose to talk with a confidential resource that will not share information that they learn about sexual misconduct. Confidential resources include:

   - The Aurora Center 24hr Helpline (612-626-9111)
   - Boynton Mental Health (612-624-1444)
   - Student Counseling Services (612-624-3323)

8. **Other Useful Resources:**
   - Technology resources for remote learning: https://it.umn.edu/working-learning-campus/get-internet-access-campus
   - University Policies: https://policy.umn.edu/
   - Student Writing Support: http://writing.umn.edu/sws/
   - Disability Resource Center: https://disability.umn.edu/

- Student Counseling Center: https://counseling.umn.edu/
- The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: https://plato.stanford.edu