Metaphysics Meets Cognitive Science:  
Objects, Causation, Time, and Self  

(Spring 2020) — [Provisional Syllabus Draft 8.17.19]

What, When, & Where

Course #s: CGSC 492b, PHIL 492b/692b, PSYC 492b/692b  
Distro Groups: Humanities + Social Sciences  
When: Spring 2020, Thursday afternoons, 1:30 - 3:20 pm  
Where: TBA  
Webpage: http://perception.yale.edu/MetaphysicsSem/  
To download readings and other materials, you must be logged in to Canvas via CAS.

Who

Instructors: Laurie Paul (Professor of Philosophy and Cognitive Science)  
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Emails: la.paul@yale.edu, brian.scholl@yale.edu  
Web: http://www.lapaul.org/ + http://perception.yale.edu/  
Office Hours: Just after each class, or by appointment

Seminar Description

The premise (and promise) of cognitive science is that we will come to understand ourselves better by integrating the insights and contributions from multiple fields of inquiry. This interdisciplinary project has been especially vibrant when it has explored the intersection of Philosophy and Psychology (for example when work in ethics integrates empirical work from moral psychology, or when work in the philosophy of mind integrates neuroscientific studies of consciousness). But cognitive science has interacted far less with the study of metaphysics — the philosophical exploration of topics such as time, causation, and possibility. This may seem surprising, since there has been a great deal of fascinating empirical research on the mental representations and cognitive processes involved in such topics. Accordingly, this seminar will attempt to bridge this gap, exploring potential interactions between these fields. In particular, we will explore the possibility of a cognitive metaphysics, in which each field is enriched by consideration of the other. How might metaphysical theories raise questions or identify concepts of interest to working cognitive scientists? How might empirical studies from cognitive science on the nature of seeing and thinking contribute to the study of metaphysics? Specific topics will likely include the ways in which we understand the nature (in both the mind and the world) of space, time, objects, events, causality, persistence, and possibility. (And along the way, we’ll also consider some more particular topics, such as the asymmetry between past and future experience, the apparent backwards causation in the context of Newcomb’s puzzle, and why the present seems special.)
**Course Format, Prerequisites, and Selection Process**

This course will be run as an interdisciplinary reading and discussion seminar. Though there may be occasional mini-lectures and guest presentations, the usual format will involve an extended group discussion of a set of weekly readings focused on a particular aspect of ‘cognitive metaphysics’. The exact topics that we cover will depend on the interests of the seminar attendees and the interest generated about specific research ideas. In almost all cases, however, the majority of the readings will be drawn from the primary research literatures in both philosophy (including both classical and contemporary work on metaphysics) and psychology (including cognitive psychology, psychophysics, neuroscience, and infant cognition).

The seminar is intended for graduate students and advanced undergraduates in Philosophy, Psychology, and Cognitive Science. There are no specific prerequisites, but we expect that students will have prior background in either philosophy or psychology. To ensure a relatively intimate forum for in-depth discussion, the seminar will be capped at approximately 20 students, so instructor permission will be required to attend after the first meeting. All participants should be prepared to discuss the material for each day of class in detail, and students will frequently be asked on the spot for their opinions and analyses.

If there are more interested students than available spots, then we’ll detail a process for making the decisions during the first session (asking everyone to send us some information over the weekend), and we’ll have the decisions made before the second session. So, to be considered, you must show up to (or contact us before) the first session.

**Requirements and Evaluation**

You will be expected to carefully study the background reading for each meeting, and to discuss the material in class. In addition, you’ll submit brief (~ 1-2 page) weekly reading responses, and will complete a final seminar paper or project on a relevant topic of your own choosing. In more detail:

1. **(20%) Participation in Discussions**
   Your major task: just come to class each week prepared to actively and thoughtfully discuss the day’s topic(s)!

2. **(25%) Weekly Reading Responses**
   For each class, the next week’s readings will be distributed along with a question to which you’ll have to respond in a short (~ 1-2 page) essay. These questions will typically involve your own views on various theoretical issues involved in the readings, and they will often serve as the jumping-off point for the ensuing seminar discussion. Essay responses will be due no later than **5 pm on Tuesday** before the meeting when the relevant readings will be discussed — by email to both brian.scholl@yale.edu and la.paul@yale.edu (with no attachments, please!).

3. **(55%) Final Paper or Project**
   The only other requirement for the seminar will be a final paper or project, due at the very end of the semester (typically a week before the final grades are due
— a date that may differ for different classes of students). This requirement is flexible: it can be met by a standard research paper (roughly 15-20 double-spaced pages), by a proposal for some experiments you think it would be interesting to run (also roughly 15-20 pages), or perhaps by actually constructing and running a pilot experiment (with a brief write-up and/or class presentation). (For senior Psychology majors taking the seminar to fulfill part of their senior requirement, the minimum limit will be 5000 words, and the due dates may be a bit different.) In all cases, though, your final paper should somehow integrate work and themes from both philosophy and cognitive science. We will discuss the nature of this paper more fully in class, and we will frequently highlight potential topics as we encounter them. And at some point near the end of the semester, we will also ask you to submit a brief list of brainstormed ideas for the paper. We invite you to view this paper not as an irritating course-specific requirement, but rather as an opportunity to integrate the seminar with your own more general research goals beyond this seminar (e.g. forming the foundation of a senior thesis or even a published paper, as has often happened in previous seminars).

**Tentative Schedule**

The schedule below may change, since the topics we cover (and how much time we spend on them) will depend on your interests — especially toward the end of the seminar. But this may serve as a rough guide to the kinds of topics we’ll discuss:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Topic</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Jan 16th</td>
<td>Introductions and case studies: Metaphysics and cognitive science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Jan 23rd</td>
<td>Time and temporal experience #1</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Jan 30th</td>
<td>Time and temporal experience #2</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Feb 6th</td>
<td>Objects and events #1</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Feb 13th</td>
<td>Objects and events #2</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Feb 20th</td>
<td>Causation, causal perception, and causal reasoning #1</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Feb 27th</td>
<td>Causation, causal perception, and causal reasoning #2</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Mar 5th</td>
<td>Persistence over time and change #1: Object persistence</td>
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<td>-</td>
<td>Mar 12th</td>
<td>[No class: Spring break; go crazy]</td>
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<td>Mar 19th</td>
<td>[No class: Try to recover from poor decisions made the previous week]</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Mar 26th</td>
<td>Persistence over time and change #2: The self</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>Apr 2nd</td>
<td>Possibility and modality #1</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>Apr 9th</td>
<td>Possibility and modality #2</td>
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<td>12</td>
<td>Apr 16th</td>
<td>Wildcard #1 (TBA depending on our collective interests)</td>
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<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Apr 23rd</td>
<td>Wildcard #2 (TBA depending on our collective interests)</td>
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**Readings**

A finalized reading list for the seminar as a whole is not possible, for a few reasons. In particular, we will try to let our seminar discussions determine our future foci to some degree — such that we might introduce new topics that come up organically, or we might end up spending more time on a few topics that we collectively find to be especially fascinating and/or difficult. The exact readings for each meeting will always be
distributed at least one week in advance (e.g. announced during the previous session), and will typically involve several papers, with a total of perhaps 30-60 pages per week.

Although we expect the brute amount of reading to be in line with most seminars, you might need to devote more time and study to these readings compared to some of your previous seminar experiences — if only because most of us might be rather less familiar with one of the relevant subfields, and we expect to assign readings from both philosophy and psychology for most meetings. (We expect to have many students with considerable background in either Philosophy or Psychology in our group, but we also expect there to be relatively few students with a great deal of background in both disciplines.)

The readings themselves will be drawn from several sources, including classical philosophical texts (e.g. by David Lewis, Derek Parfit, and Peter van Inwagen), contemporary articles from the philosophical literature (including book excerpts, but also articles from journals such as the Journal of Philosophy, Nous, and The Philosophical Review), and articles reporting empirical studies from leading psychology and cognitive science journals (e.g. Cognition, Perception, Trends in Cognitive Sciences).

Occasionally, different students may be asked to complete different auxiliary readings, so that we can cover more ground. Other times — quite often, actually — you may also be asked to read an additional paper of your own choosing, based on citations and discussions in the main assigned papers (or, better, based on your own literature search). In either case, you should be prepared to summarize your auxiliary reading during our class meeting, and we will typically ask you to send it to us ahead of time, along with a 1-paragraph summary of what piqued your interest about it.

There will be no reading packet. All of the readings will be available online, and will be posted on our class webpage, where you can print them out at your leisure, or read them on your computer/tablet/phone/watch, etc.

Sample Readings

Though the specific topics that we cover (and how much we cover them) are subject to change based on our collective interests, here are some of the sorts of readings we may explore together — with a few sample papers listed per topic:

Discussion #1: Time and Temporal Experience

Sample Philosophical Readings

Sample CogSci Readings


**Discussion #2: Objects and events**

**Sample Philosophical Readings**

Kim, J. (1975). Events as property exemplifications. In M. Brand & D. Walton (Eds.), *Action Theory* (pp. 159-177). Dordrecht: D. Reidel.


**Sample CogSci Readings**


**Discussion #3: Causation, Causal Perception, and Causal Reasoning**

**Sample Philosophical Readings**


**Sample CogSci Readings**


Kominsky, J., & Scholl, B. J. (under review). Retinotopic adaptation reveals distinct categories of causal perception.

**Discussion #4: Persistence over Time and Change (Object Persistence)**

**Sample Philosophical Readings**


**Sample CogSci Readings**


**Discussion #5: Persistence over Time and Change (The Self)**

**Sample Philosophical Readings**

**Sample CogSci Readings**

**Discussion #6: Possibility (Modality)**

**Sample Philosophical Readings**

**Sample CogSci Readings**