Syllabus for Consciousness: The Webcourse

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January 22 to April 9, 2007

Oral discussions among course leaders and participants will be webcast Tuesdays, 11:00 a.m.-2:00 p.m. Pacific Time, 2:00 p.m.-5:00 p.m. Eastern Time (USA), 8:00 p.m.-11:00 p.m. Central European Time.
Or GMT plus one hour.

Basic readings from:


William James, Psychology: Briefer Version. (1894) Free on the web.


We will recommend others as we go along.

Course Description.

We can explore our own consciousness (First Person); share our experiences with others (Second Person); and look at conscious beings from the outside (Third Person). These three basic perspectives organize our course. Weekly Phenomenology Labs will adopt the First Person perspective, using personal consciousness diaries and experiential demonstrations. Our Lectures will add new scientific findings about everyday consciousness, and explore what we know about altered conscious states. The Second Person emerges in ethical relations to others, interpersonal experiences, and the brain regions involved in romantic love and parent-infant attachment. Discussion Groups will encourage participants to engage with the course leaders and with each other.

This year we will start using the Adobe Connect (formerly Macromedia Breeze) system for live online conversations. Each week lectures will be posted. For those unable to “attend” live, we will support email interactions “asynchronously.”
The three basic perspectives on consciousness are compatible with Global Workspace Theory, a well-known scientific approach to consciousness. Other theoretical views will also be included. We will not settle the philosophical question “what is consciousness?” but we will acquire a better understanding of consciousness in modern science and the great wisdom traditions.

We aim to make this WebCourse fun and exciting for you, as well as thought-provoking.

Webcourse Details.

Each Sunday we will post powerpoint lectures, readings, slide-shows and movies. We hope to have our online conversations on Sundays as well. This is the first time we are trying out the Breeze system for online conversations – so please bear with us if we have some early bugs in our learning curve! If you can’t make it to the live online conversation, we encourage you to join in “asynchronously” whenever you have the opportunity.

On Tuesdays the Phenomenology Lab activities will be posted for the week. You are strongly encouraged to keep a Consciousness Diary, and to base your own discoveries and ideas on your Consciousness Diary.

We encourage you to join in discussions as much as possible. Don’t be shy! (And if you do feel shy, make your shy thoughts part of your Consciousness Diary!)

Dr. Bernard Baars – US      Thomas Ramsoy – Denmark

Week 1.

First, second and third person: Approaches to the evidence.

Explorations of consciousness are very ancient. Science is a late-comer!
How can we explore our own experience without first solving metaphysical questions that nobody has been able to find a consensus on?

“Reportability” as the standard for 2nd and 3rd person explorations of consciousness. What if you can’t describe your experience? Psychophysics and contrastive analysis.

The Theater of Consciousness: A helpful metaphor. Metaphors are not facts!

What do we lose when consciousness is lost or reduced? The puzzle of the Minimally Conscious State (MCS): Terry Schiavo.

Meditation and higher or altered states. Other ways of altering conscious experience.

Readings:
Baars (1997), Prologue and Chapter One.
James (1890). Chapter on The Stream of Thought.

Phenomenology Lab I:


Discussion Groups.

Your first thoughts on your personal experiences. Meeting other conscious people via the web versus meeting each other in person. Your thoughts on our encounters.

Note: We want to express our warm appreciation to Professor Katie McGovern, who helped to develop this course!

Week 2.

In the Theater:

The bright spot of consciousness has limited capacity from moment to moment.

Why multi-tasking has limits. Some interesting implications.
Reading: Baars, Chapter 2.

Phenomenology Lab 2: Your Consciousness Diary: – what happens when you are loading your mental capacity? Slips and automatisms during mental tasks. The convergence between personal experience and scientific studies.

Discussion Groups. Your Consciousness Diary. Exploring variations of multitasking in everyday life. Do you notice slips, automatisms and speed changes when you are multitasking? What else do you notice?

Week 3:

In spite of its limited capacity from moment to moment, consciousness enables vast access to the mind-brain.

The astonishing amount of knowledge that we can access by way of conscious experiences.

Brain evidence for “broadcasting” of conscious contents. The thalamo-cortical brain core as the basis of global “broadcasting.” Why this part of the brain is believed to underlie conscious experiences.

Baars (1997) summary article in Journal of Consciousness Studies

Phenomenology Lab 3:

Your Consciousness Diary: Exploring personal memories --- true ones, false ones and “creative” reconstructions. Taste preferences or aversions --- one kind of powerful learning in everyday life.

Week 4:

In the light of consciousness: Sensation, imagination and ideas.


Plato’s difficulty with abstract ideas. Plato as a psychologist. The Hindu-Buddhist psychology of subtle experiences. Semantic satiation and meditation.
Where in the brain does visual consciousness first become unified?
Top-down and bottom-up processing: Cooperation in the creation of conscious contents.


Phenomenology Lab 4:


Life is full of ambiguities: Ambiguous and multiple meanings, figures and words. Feelings and fringe consciousness: The tip of the tongue and other feelings.

Connotation and allusion, meaningfulness and meaning.

Illusions of conscious continuity: The blind spot, reading in peripheral vision, and eye fixations in reading.

Week 5.

Elsewhere on the theater stage:

Working memory as extended consciousness.

How focal consciousness interacts with working memory. What is working memory?

Inner speech and the visuospatial sketchpad. The “magic number” 4 thru 9.

The front half of the brain: working memory and extended consciousness.


Phenomenology Lab 5:
Demonstrating the magic number to yourself. Memory load in everyday life.

Is mental effort like a muscle?
The visuo-spatial sketchpad in everyday life: visual imagination. Inner speech, inner humming, inner actions, and inner music.

Week 6.

Aiming the spotlight: Attention, absorption

Selection biases in opinion formation, cults and indoctrination. The amazing stability of belief systems.

**Reading:** Baars (1997). Chapter 4.

**Phenomenology Lab 6:** Dan Simons’ demonstrations of inattentional blindness.

Absent minded or other-minded? The Stanford Hypnosis Scale. Attention and absorption.

**Week 7.**

**It is dark backstage:**

The unconscious context of conscious experiences.


“Current concerns” and “Unfinished business” as active contexts in the stream of consciousness.

Interpreting “projection” in scientific terms. Unconscious activation of moods. Emotional trauma as an active context.


**Phenomenology Lab 7:** Fixedness: being blind to the obvious. Priming conscious thoughts. Breaking rigid contexts for creativity. Unconscious contexts and interpersonal activities.

**Week 8:**

**Volition:** Conscious goals can guide actions.

Errors of volition: thought and action. Errors of action and slips of the tongue.

Competing plans. Automatisms and mental effort.
Unconscious influences on our actions.

Paradoxes: Ironic effects. Inner conflict and the anterior cingulate cortex.


Phenomenology Lab 8: Your Consciousness Diary. What’s free about free will? The devil made me do it! Counter-voluntary acts. Collecting errors of action and speech. Everyday dissociation: accidents, earthquakes. William James on fugue and hypnosis.

Week 9:

The Stage Director in the Theater of Consciousness.


Phenomenology Lab 9: Your Consciousness Diary: Marcel Proust waking up at night. Experimenting with a shifting sense of self. A dialogue with Buddhist psychology.

Week 10:

What is conscious about our emotions?

The interplay of conscious and unconscious processes in emotion. The controversy over Freudian repression: New brain evidence?

Feelings, emotions, and moods --- regulating the contents of consciousness. The mammalian core of the human brain.


Week 11.

Sharing our consciousness with others.
Reading: Baars, Chapter 8, 9, and Appendix.

**Intersubjectivity.** About age three or four, toddlers begin to share their experiences. “Look, Mommy, airplane!” The origins of shared consciousness: developing empathy. Theory of Mind. Why doesn’t your dog look to where you point? Do ravens have a Theory of Mind? Autism as a disorder of interpersonal empathy. Temple Grandin and Asperger’s Syndrome. We need shared contexts of communication.

The ethical contract: Person-to-person relationships.

Consciousness at the beginning and end of life. When does a fetus become conscious?

Consciousness as a standard for ethical personhood. The growing evidence for animal consciousness.

**Phenomenology Lab 11:**

**Your Consciousness Diary.** Imagining how the world seems to others. The pitfalls of mindreading. Take a look at your Consciousness Diary from Week 1 to Week 11.

**Concluding Thoughts: What is it good for? Functions and theories of consciousness.**

The biological roots of the conscious brain. Some brain theories Converging ideas about conscious experience. The brain evidence for consciousness in mammals.

Your thoughts about the course. Possibilities for the future.

**Registration**

Register online with our secure server with VISA or Mastercard. You can obtain an ID and password at:  
https://sbs.arizona.edu/project/consciousness/login.php

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Student Registration Fee  $115  $145

Full refunds can be made minus a $25 processing fee if notification is received by January 20.

Questions?

Please direct questions to the Center for Consciousness Studies at center@u.arizona.edu.

System requirements for Acrobat Connect/Breeze

Acrobat Connect Professional requirements for:

- Acrobat Connect Professional presenters
- Acrobat Connect Professional participants
- Acrobat Connect Collaboration Builder SDK

Acrobat Connect Professional presenters

Windows 98 SE, 2000, XP (Win XP recommended)

- Internet Explorer 5.0 or higher
  - Mozilla Firefox 1.5
  - Netscape Navigator 7.1

Mac OS X 10.2, 10.3, 10.4 (PPC/Intel)

- Safari 1.1 or higher
- Mozilla Firefox 1.5

Additional requirements

- Adobe’s Macromedia Flash Player 6.0.79 or higher
- Minimum bandwidth requirement is DSL/Cable (wired connection recommended)
- Minimum 1 GHz processor recommended when screen sharing

Acrobat Connect Professional participants
Windows 98 SE, 2000, XP

- Internet Explorer 5.0 or higher
  - Mozilla Firefox 1.5
  - Netscape Navigator 7.1
  - AOL 9

Mac OS X 10.2, 10.3, 10.4

- Safari 1.1 or higher
- Mozilla Firefox 1.5

Linux

- Mozilla Firefox 1.5

Solaris

- Mozilla 1.7

Additional requirements

- Adobe’s Macromedia Flash Player 6.0.79 or higher
- Adobe’s Macromedia Flash Player 7 or higher for Linux and Solaris
  - Minimum bandwidth requirement is 56 kb/sec