

Meaning, Intentionality, and Nature

(advanced undergraduate/MA course)

Instructor: Dr. Alessandra Buccella

Course description

Human minds are open to the external world in a way that allows them to, among other things, directly perceive objects and their properties, learn and use language, form beliefs, and acquire knowledge. This ‘openness’ has been historically explained through the notion of “Intentionality”, i.e. a feature of minds (generally human, but not necessarily) that allows them to be in states that are “about” things other than itself. The fact that minds can be in intentional states is essential to explain abstract thought and linguistic communication, which in turn are essential to understand how nearly any form of knowledge about the world can be collected, elaborated, and shared among humans. For this reason, tied to the notion of intentionality is also the notion of meaning: how is it that certain physical things like patterns of light on the retina end up “meaning” that there is a coffee cup in front of me? Or that three scribbles like “C”, “A”, and “T” read in succession “mean” one of philosophers’ favorite pets? Or that a pattern of neural firings in an area of the brain “means” that we are in pain, and another that we are thinking about math? In this course, we will start from the foundations of what intentionality and meanings are, to then work our way up to the more specific issue of how intentionality and meaning can possibly be part of nature and be explained as purely physical phenomena. Lastly, we will take a tour away from human minds, and briefly investigate whether other animals have intentional mental states, and how that impacts our relationship with them.

Course requirements

Students will write several (3-4) short papers throughout the semester, in addition to preparing a presentation on a reading of their choice.

Class structure

Lectures + in-class exercises (e.g. worksheets), to be completed in small groups or individually.

Tentative list of readings

Introduction: What is Intentionality?

SEP entry “Intentionality”, sections 1 & 10.

Louise Antony, “The Mental and the Physical”.

Introduction (continued): What is Naturalism?

Penelope Maddy, "Naturalism: friends and foes".

Thomas Polger, "Evaluating the Evidence for Multiple Realization".

Paul Churchland, "Eliminative Materialism and the Propositional Attitudes".

Functionalism meets Computer Science: Computational theories of meaning

Hilary Putnam, "The Nature of Mental States".

Zenon Pylyshyn, "What is Cognitive Science?"

Information theories

Paul Grice, "Meaning" .

Fred Dretske, "The Intentionality of Cognitive States".

Evolutionary approaches

Daniel Dennett, "Intentional Systems".

Kim Sterelny, Thought in a Hostile World, ch. 3

Teleosemantics

Ruth Millikan, "Language, Thought, and other Biological Categories" (excerpts) & "Pushmi-Pullyu Representations".

Karen Neander, "Content for Cognitive Science".

Critics of Naturalized Intentionality

Wilfrid Sellars, "Some Reflections on Language Games".

John McDowell, "Avoiding the Myth of the Given".

Recent approaches to Naturalized Intentionality and Representation

Frances Egan, "A Deflationary Account of Mental Representations".

Mazviita Chirimuuta, "The Reflex Machine and the Cybernetic Brain".

Daniel Hutto & Glenda Satne, "The Natural Origins of Content".

Alessandra Buccella & Alison A. Springler, "Perceptual Constancies and the Nature and Place of Robust Representation in Perceptual Science".

Animal Minds

Sections from Kristin Andrews, "The Animal Mind: an Introduction to the Philosophy of Animal Cognition".