Course Syllabus: This is the Syllabus from Fall 2020. It will change some.

Phil 4843: Philosophy and Visual Perception (Fall 2023)

Hatfield / TR 10:15am–11:45am

After some initial reflections on seeing and theories of seeing, the course is divided into three units. The first is color perception, which is a microcosm of issues. We will consider color phenomenology, evolution, epistemology, and metaphysics. What is color? How do we perceive it? How do we experience it? What is it to be a thing that has a color? The second unit concerns theories of spatial perception, object perception, and perceptual realisms. We will start from theories of perception in psychology and cognitive science, and then move into questions of phenomenology, perceptual constancy, and the implications for perceptual realisms. Do we see things directly, or only via mental contents? What is the nature of this content? Is spatial perception in some ways mind-dependent for its character, or does the content of successful perception simply present the spatial world as it is? The third unit concerns the role of top-down factors in perception. What are instances of top-down effects? Is perception dominated by cognition? Among the examples considered will be some from social perception, leading us to reflect on types of evidence for implicit bias.

The course should be accessible given a previous course in philosophy, psychology, or visual studies. Format is lecture and discussion; do reading prior to class. I will provide framing discussion for the readings each week (over the weekend). As we proceed through each unit, my opening remarks for each class session will get shorter and we will rely more on discussion among all participants. All readings will be available online (usually on Canvas).

In order to facilitate consolidation of knowledge, there will be a midterm (Oct. 27, in class) and a final examination, essay format (Registrar's schedule). Other requirements: two papers (5–6 pp., assigned topics, Oct. 12; 10–12 pp., Dec. 22; topic proposal by Dec. 4); some reader-response paragraphs; a group presentation in a debate (Sept. 22, Nov. 10); and participation in discussion. Weighting: participation, 25%; first paper, 10%; midterm exam (15%), longer paper 25%; final exam 25%. The paragraphs and presentations count under participation.

Recommended Book (available from online booksellers):

Wolfgang Metzger, Laws of Seeing, MIT Press, 2009. Also available online through Franklin.

All readings are online; links are found in this syllabus on the Page for each week.

Some course policies:

My availability, office hours: I'll set up office hours and be available by apptmt.

Student time use: The readings should be done each week in a timely manner and each student should participate in discussion on a regular basis. There will be paragraphs, presentations, a short paper, a longer paper, and midterm and final exams.

A sample work schedule:

Saturday-Monday: Read week's materials, using the framing prompt from the professor. Formulate response to prompt, questions, elaborations.
Monday: Submit writing if required, or prepare in-class presentation if required. (Or do the reading.)
Tuesday: In class, participate in a discussion of the material.
Wednesday: Review readings as needed; submit writing, prepare presentation, if required. (Or do the reading.)
Thursday: In class, participate in a discussion of the material.
Friday: Think about your visual experience; notice and perhaps note down examples of perceptual principles or perceptual effects as relevant.
Attendance: attendance is required. If you are in a time zone such that our synchronous meeting (10:30-11:45am ET) does not fall between 7am and 12 midnight, please let me know (and we can discuss options). Also, let me know if you must miss a class. Acceptable reasons are: religious holiday, internet trouble, illness, family emergency. Course absence reports should be filed.

Late work, etc.: If you are having a problem with a deadline, please write to me directly (via email) to request an extension; if appropriate, also complete a course absence report.

Weekly Schedule (links are to a Page with prompts, readings, links to lecture slides)

Week 1, Sept. 1, 3: Philosophy and Visual Perception

Weeks 2–6: Color science; Color Metaphysics

Week 2, Sept. 8, 10: Color Science: Light and Pigments

September 15, First paragraph assignment due

Week 3, Sept. 15: Color theory; Sept.17: Constancy; metamers

Week 4, Sept. 22: Color Terms (with debate, Groups 1 and 2); Sept. 24: Intro to Color Metaphysics

September 25, Second paragraph assignment due

Week 5, Sept. 29: Color metaphysics: physical realism; Oct. 1: Evolution

Week 6a, October 6: Relationalism and perceptual systems

Weeks 6-9: Philosophical and psychological theories of spatial perception

Week 6b, Oct. 8: History and philosophy of visual theory

October 12, First (short) paper due

Week 7, Oct. 13: Psychology and philosophy of spatial perception: Main traditions; Oct. 15: Gestalt theory

Week 8, Oct. 20: Constructivism information processing; Oct. 22: Gibson: ecological optics and "direct theory"

Weeks 9–12: Perceptual phenomenology and perceptual realism

Week 9, Oct. 27: Russell and sense data

Oct. 29, Midterm exam, "in class"

Week 10, Nov. 3: Brewer and naïve realism; Nov. 5, Intentionalism

Week 11, Nov. 10: Granrud-Wagner debate; Nov. 12: Hill, appearance and content

Weeks 12-15: Top-down influences in visual perception

Week 12, Nov. 17: Top-down influence case study (Proffitt and Durgin); Nov. 19: Top-down influence: Firestone and Scholl

Week 13, Nov. 24: Firestone and Scholl, attention and organization

Week 14, Dec. 1, Dec. 3: Social Perception & Race

Week 15, Dec. 8: Reflections and review

Final examination (essay format), Registrar's schedule

Dec. 24, 3pm, Longer paper due