The Consciousness Revolutions*

Mondays 11:20am – 1:50pm

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Mariposa clavada que medita su vuelo
(A pinned butterfly contemplating its flight)

Oda a Salvador Dalí
— FEDERICO GARCÍA LORCA

Voluula barchin heman la lauoluola dramme pagloni. [Utopian]
Libenter impartio mea, non grauatim accipio meliora. [Latin]
Willingly I share what I have, not unwillingly I accept what is better. [English]
— PETER GILES
(From his addendum to Thomas More’s Utopia, 1516)

1 Motivation and overview

Consciousness is all that you have in this world. Indeed, in a sense it is the world: when you descend into dreamless sleep, you vanish, and so does the world. This seminar focuses on a selection of topics arising from contemporary consciousness research. It starts by pointing to the key characteristic of consciousness, without realizing which it cannot be understood: like everything else about the mind, it is fundamentally a kind of computation. Among many other matters, this explains: how it is that we share some aspects of consciousness with bacteria; how it can arise in artificial machines and not just living ones; how the empty cocoon of the self that it spins ends up pretending to be the butterfly; and how consciousness dooms this virtual butterfly to the splendor and the suffering of being awake and aware. Unlike most other treatments of consciousness, this one concludes with a discussion of some possible ways whereby the pinned butterfly can, with a little help from its friends, do something about its condition.

2 Notes for participants

This section contains essential information for participants: format description, inclusion statement, ground rules for discussion, and credit requirements.

2.1 Format

Note: in distinction from the typical Topics seminar, in this one will the students will not have to present papers. Instead, at each weekly meeting the instructor will give an overview of the material and lead the discussion.

2.1.1 The prerequisites

At least one course in a social science (psychology, sociology, anthropology), or permission of instructor.

2.2 Diversity, inclusion, and ground rules for discussion

Unlike in a large-enrollment lecture-based course, in which some students may choose, and succeed, to remain virtually anonymous, in a small-class seminar setting you are expected to contribute to the discussion at every weekly meeting. Because your informed opinion on every aspect of the material is unique and valuable, I shall strive to facilitate the conversation so as to make all voices heard. In this, I’ll be counting on your help, and on the help of your classmates.

Even matters of “consensus” are not always easy to talk about, as the rare dissenters who dare voice their opposition know full well; how then should we approach potentially controversial topics? With care and compassion, diligence, openness, and daring: care for our shared humanity; diligence with regard to the relevant knowledge and findings; openness to informed dissent; and daring to venture into uncharted territory, as befits good education.

If at any point during the semester (no matter whether in class or after hours) you feel that you need to talk about any of these things, please let me know immediately — doing so will be my top priority.

1The remarks in section 2.2, which are specific to this course, are intended to supplement the official Cornell statement on diversity and inclusion, which covers dimensions such as gender, race, socio-economic background, etc., and which can be found here: http://diversity.cornell.edu/
2.3 Credit and grading

There are three components to getting credit for this course:

1. Attend the lecture and contribute to the discussion during the **weekly meetings**.

2. **No later than 9am on the Monday** for which readings have been assigned, post on the Canvas discussion board **questions** on the material. Be prepared to raise these questions in class. At least 10 questions should have been submitted by the end of the semester.

3. One week after the last class, submit an **essay** (approximately 1000-1500 words) on a consciousness-related topic chosen in consultation with the instructor.

**Final grade components** (for reference only; no numerical assessment of anything will be made in this seminar):

- Weekly questions 40%
- Participation in the discussions: 10%
- Final essay: 50%

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3 Weekly topics and readings

- **(January 31) Prelude. The First Revolution.**


- **(February 7) The Tower of Power.**


- **(February 14) The Brain’s VR Engine: Vision.**

• (February 21) THE BRAIN’S VR ENGINE: LOCATION.


• (February 28) [February break — no class]

• (March 7) THE BRAIN’S VR ENGINE: MEMORY AND TIME TRAVEL.


• (March 14) THE BRAIN’S VR ENGINE: EMBODIMENT.


• (March 21) THE BRAIN’S VR ENGINE: SELF-MODEL.


- **(March 28)** PAIN.

- **(April 4)** [Spring break — no class]

- **(April 11) SPECIES OF SUFFERING.

- **(April 18) FALSE CONSCIOUSNESS. ALIENATION.


- **(April 25) Personal Palliatives.**


- **(May 2) The Roads to Freedom. The Last Revolution.**


- **(May 9) Closing General Discussion.**


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**References**


