

***Please Note: This is a tentative syllabus that may change between now and the time the semester starts in September.**

**PHIL 420 A01/Phil 521 A01:
What is Cognition?**

Instructor: Eric Hochstein

CRN: 22529/22532

Time: Wednesdays 2:30 PM – 5:20 PM

Location: Clearihue Building B315

Office Hours: (in Clearihue B330): Tuesday, 2:00-4:00 pm; and by appointment

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We acknowledge and respect the Lək'əŋən (Songhees and Xwsepsəm/Esquimalt) Peoples on whose territory the university stands, and the Lək'əŋən and W̱SÁNEĆ Peoples whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day.

Description: The terms “cognition” and “cognitive” are thrown around a lot in many domains, but receive particular attention in philosophy, and the sciences of the mind. Cognitive science, as a field, is dedicated to the study of cognition. But what exactly *is* cognition? While typically defined as the underlying physical processes responsible for human thought, there is a surprising lack of consensus among philosophers and scientists regarding what makes something cognitive exactly, and how we can tell. Are all cognitive processes mental processes, and vice versa? What sorts of things have cognition? Animals? Robots? Plants? This course examines foundational questions in what we take cognition to be, and how it can or should be studied in the context of the sciences of the mind.

The purpose of this course is to provide skills in evaluating primary sources in philosophy and cognitive science, and to provide high-level analysis of the philosophical arguments or the philosophical implications of these readings. It is also to provide training in writing article length philosophy papers that students can use as the foundation for writing samples, or conference presentations, in the future.

Structure: The course comprises 1 seminar per week, the contents of which will be based on the assigned external sources. The course will proceed primarily through discussions and presentations. Class participation in discussions is essential for this course.

Evaluation: The course will be graded as follows:

- **FOR GRAD STUDENTS:** 1 in-class presentation worth 15% (this will involve a summary and explanation of the key points of the reading for that day, how they tie into philosophical themes and topics we are discussing, and leading class discussion).
- **FOR UNDERGRAD STUDENTS:** 1 early draft of final paper worth 15% (the final paper will be graded on how you respond to comments and suggested revisions on this draft).
- 2 papers, one worth 35% the second 40%
- 10% Class participation and attendance. This includes a brief (one page max) summary of each course reading, **due in class** the day that reading is being covered, **as well as** frequent engagement in class discussion.

Policy on assignments, tests, and term papers: Late papers will receive a deduction of 5% per day until handed in. Summaries that are not handed in during class time will not be accepted.

Important to Note: It is expected that students will prepare for and attend class regularly. Students are encouraged to consult the instructor with any problems or concerns about the course early in the semester. Also, **constantly checking and using your cell phone during class is extremely distracting. Please refrain from doing so.**

Grading System:

Percentages	Letter Grade	Grade Point
90 – 100	A+	9
85 – 89	A	8
80 – 84	A-	7

An A+, A, or A- is earned by work which is technically **superior**, shows mastery of the subject matter, and in the case of an A+ offers original insight and/or goes beyond course expectations. Normally achieved by a minority of students

77 – 79	B+	6
73 – 76	B	5
70 – 72	B-	4

A B+, B, or B- is earned by work that indicates a **good** comprehension of the course material, a good command of the skills needed to work with the course material, and the student's full engagement with the course requirements and activities. A B represents a more complex understanding and/or application of the course material. Normally achieved by the largest number of students.

65 – 69	C+	3
60 – 64	C	2

A C+ or C is earned by work that indicates an **adequate** comprehension of the course material and the skills needed to work with the course material and that indicates the student has met the basic requirements for completing assigned work and/or participating in class activities

50 – 59	D	1
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A D is earned by work that indicates **minimal** command of the course materials and/or minimal participation in class activities that is worthy of course credit toward the degree.

0 – 49	F	0
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F is earned by work, which after the completion of course requirements, is **inadequate** and unworthy of course credit towards the degree.

Interpretation of these grade definitions is up to the discretion of the instructor. If you receive a grade during the course that you believe is unfair, please begin by discussing the matter with the instructor (or TA) in a respectful, open-minded manner. Rest assured that if you still believe the grade you received is unfair you can appeal the matter to the chair of the department.

For additional information regarding grades, please see the most recent (September 2021) edition of the Uvic Undergraduate Calendar.

All evaluations of tests and assignments will be calculated according to percentage scores. Letter grades and grade point scores are listed purely for reference.

Final examinations are the property of Uvic and are not returned. They are available for viewing at the Records Office according to Uvic procedures and regulations.

Uvic is committed to providing a safe, supportive learning environment for all members. Further information regarding Uvic policies on human rights, equity, discrimination and harassment are located in the Uvic calendar, but if you have any particular concerns in our course please do not hesitate to contact me.

Academic Integrity and Professional Conduct:

Chat GPT and similar technologies are not permitted for this course. Plagiarism and other forms of cheating will not be tolerated. It is each student's responsibility to know the University's regulations in this regard. The Policy on Academic Integrity is published in the [University Calendar](#). You can also consult the [Libraries' plagiarism guide](#) or the [Tri-Faculty Standards for Professional Behavior for Students](#), which draws together a number of existing UVic policies in one place for ease of reference. Professionalism is expected from all students enrolled in courses in the Faculty of Humanities. As part of professionalism, students, faculty and staff are expected to be familiar with University policies, including the Tri-Faculty Standards.

Tentative Schedule of Readings:

Week 1: Introduction

No Readings

Week 2: Where does the term "Cognition" Come From, and How is it Used?

Readings:

- Chaney, D. W. (2013). An overview of the first use of the terms cognition and behavior. *Behavioral Sciences*, 3(1), 143-153.
- Bayne, T., Brainard, D., Byrne, R. W., Chittka, L., Clayton, N., Heyes, C., ... & Webb, B. (2019). What is cognition?. *Current biology*, 29(13), R608-R615.

Week 3: Cognition as Computation

Readings:

- Newell, A. (1980). Physical symbol systems. *Cognitive science*, 4(2), 135-183.

Week 4: Is Computation Sufficient for Cognition?

Readings:

- Searle, J. "Minds, Brains, and Programs"
- Churchland, P.S, & Churchland, P.M. "Could A Machine Think?"

Week 5: Is Cognition Limited to the Brain?

Readings:

- Clark, A. (2012). Magic words: How language augments human computation. In *Language and meaning in cognitive science* (pp. 21-39). Routledge.
- Jane Foster & Karen-Ann Neufeld, "Gut-brain axis: how the microbiome influences anxiety and depression"
- Drayson, Z. (2009). Embodied cognitive science and its implications for psychopathology. *Philosophy, Psychiatry, & Psychology*, 16(4), 329-340.

Week 6 The Mark of the Cognitive

First Term Paper due Feb 14

Readings:

- Fred Adams & Ken Aizawa (2001) The bounds of cognition, *Philosophical Psychology*, 14:1, 43-64, DOI: 10.1080/09515080120033571
- Adams, F. (2010). Why We Still Need a Mark of the Cognitive. *Cognitive Systems Research* 11 (4):324-331.

Week 7: Reading Week

No Classes

Week 8: Dynamics as Cognition (i.e. Dynamical Systems Theory)

Readings:

- Van Gelder, T. "What Might Cognition Be, If Not Computation?"
- Barandiaran, X., & Moreno, A. (2006). "On what makes certain dynamical systems cognitive: A minimally cognitive organization program." *Adaptive Behavior*, 14(2), 171-185.

Week 9: Responses to Dynamical Systems Theory

Readings:

- Eliasmith, C. (2012). The complex systems approach: rhetoric or revolution. *Topics in Cognitive Science*, 4(1), 72-77.
- Howes, A. (2012). Useful theories make predictions. *Topics in cognitive science*, 4(1), 84-86.

Week 10: Cognition as Autopoiesis

For Undergraduate Students: Draft of Second Paper is due.

Readings:

- Bourguine, P., & Stewart, J. (2004). Autopoiesis and cognition. *Artificial life*, 10(3), 327-345."
- Boden, M. A. (2000). Autopoiesis and life. *Cognitive Science Quarterly*, 1(1), 115-143.

Week 11: The Cognition/Perception Distinction

Readings:

- Anders Nes, Kristoffer Sundberg & Sebastian Watzl (2023) The perception/cognition distinction, *Inquiry*, 66:2, 165-195, DOI: 10.1080/0020174X.2021.1926317
- Block, Ned, 'Introduction', *The Border Between Seeing and Thinking* (New York, 2023; online edn, Oxford Academic, 23 Mar. 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197622223.003.0001>, accessed 21 Nov. 2025.

Week 12: Basal Cognition

Readings:

- Bechtel, W. & Bich, L. (2021). Grounding cognition: heterarchical control mechanisms in biology. *Phil. Trans. R. Soc. B* 376: 20190751. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2019.0751>
- Hanson A. (2021). Spontaneous electrical low-frequency oscillations: a possible role in Hydra and all living systems. *Phil. Trans. R. Soc. B* 376: 20190763.

Week 13: Do We Need a Clear Definition of Cognition?

Second Term Paper Due April 10th

Readings:

- Akagi, M. (2018). Rethinking the problem of cognition. *Synthese*, 195(8), 3547-3570.

Note on Avoidance of Academic Offenses:

All students registered in the course are expected to know what constitutes an academic offence, to avoid committing academic offenses, and to take responsibility for their academic actions. When the commission of an offense is established, it will be acknowledged by disciplinary penalties. If you need help in learning how to avoid academic offenses such as plagiarism, cheating, and double submission, or if you need clarification of aspects of the discipline policy, ask your course instructor for guidance. You can find the university's Policy on Academic Integrity here:

https://www.uvic.ca/calendar/undergrad/index.php#/policy/Sk_0xsM_V

If you are seeking editing help, please note that the university has recently adopted a strict view about seeking the help of others for editing. They say (this can be found in the link above):

An editor is an individual or service, other than the instructor or supervisory committee, who manipulates, revises, corrects or alters a student's written or non-written work.

The use of an editor, whether paid or unpaid, is prohibited unless the instructor grants explicit written authorization. The instructor should specify the extent of editing that is being authorized. Review by fellow students and tutoring that do not include editing are normally permitted.

Note for students with disabilities:

The Centre for Accessible Learning (<http://www.uvic.ca/services/rcsd/>) is a fantastic resource that collaborates with all academic departments to help arrange appropriate accommodations for students with disabilities without compromising the academic integrity of the curriculum. If you

require academic accommodations to lessen the impact of your disability, please register with them at the beginning of each academic term.

Other Resources

Student Resources

- a. [UVic Learn Anywhere](#). UVic Learn Anywhere is the primary learning resource for students. It offers many learning workshops and resources to help students with academics and learning strategies.
- b. [Library resources](#). Information for students wishing to use the UVic library.
- c. [Indigenous student services](#)
- d. [Centre for Academic Communication](#)
- e. [Learning Strategist Program](#)
- f. [Academic Concession Regulations](#)
- g. [Academic Concessions and Accommodations](#)
- h. [Academic accommodation & access for students with disabilities – Policy AC1205](#) https://www.uvic.ca/universitysecretary/assets/docs/policies/AC1205_2340.pdf
- i. [Student wellness resources](#).
- j. [Ombudsperson](#). A resource to help resolve disputes or complaints.
- k. [Other student groups and resources](#).

University Statements and Policies

- a. [University Calendar – “Information for all students”](#)
- b. [Creating a respectful, inclusive and productive learning environment](#)
- c. [Accommodation of Religious Observance](#)
- d. [Student Conduct and Non-Academic Student Misconduct](#)
- e. [Accessibility](#)
- f. [Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion](#)
- g. [Equity and Human Rights](#)
- h. [Sexualized Violence Prevention and Response](#)
- i. [Discrimination and Harassment Policy](#)