

**‘Philosophy on the Spectrum:
Philosophy of Autism and Autistic Philosophy’**

(ABRIDGED) COURSE OUTLINE

Detailed course description.

This course is about autism and philosophy. Owing to the nature of the subject, the presentation will not be structured like a ‘typical’ philosophy course. Because of the stigma, misinformation, and confusion surrounding autism, we will begin (Weeks 1-3), with an historical overview of autism as a diagnosis in the early-mid twentieth century, to the present day. The first three weeks will be structured as *lectures* on this history. To gain a better understanding of autism from within autism, the ‘readings’ for these weeks will consist in videos and stories, told from autistic perspectives. The rest of the semester (Week 4+) will be conducted in a seminar format.

The second part of this course opens with a recent question, posed by Sven Bölte and Kenneth A. Richman: *Does autism need philosophy?* We will see that autism provides a philosophically rich vehicle for considering philosophical perspectives in a wide array of subfields and topics, including the philosophy of science and the metaphysics of kinds; the philosophy of language; social cognition and the philosophy of mind; epistemology and testimony; and, of course, ethics. A key focus of this section of the course will be in answering the question of how *neuroatypicality* comes to bear on extant philosophical theories, which have historically been approached from a neurotypical point of view. For example, what do linguistically competent autistic individuals tell us about philosophical theories of linguistic meaning which rely on appeal to higher-order thought (such as those of Paul Grice and David Lewis). How does non-verbal autism come to bear on philosophical questions surrounding the connection between language and thought? How do certain characteristics of autism spectrum disorder call into question supposed necessary and sufficient conditions for moral agency, such as reasons-responsiveness, communicative ‘moral responsibility’ exchange, or exemplar models of moral conceptual representation.

In the third part of the course, we will turn to problems central to normative and applied ethics that autism brings to light, which will refer frequently to many of the concepts and analyses discussed in the prior parts of the course. Drawing upon our investigations in the previous two parts, we will discuss philosophical and ethical issues that are of pressing concern for autistic people, parents, professionals, and policymakers. For example, moral questions in biomedical ethics about early detection, and possible future gene editing technologies. Is autism primarily to be treated as a disorder, or an identity, and what are the ethical implications of requiring a formal diagnosis in order to ‘identify’ as autistic?

We will see that all aspects of the ‘philosophy of autism’ are bound up in ethics (applied-, normative-, and meta-ethics). Some of the questions we discuss will not be obviously related to ethics; however, even rich epistemological and metaphysical questions surrounding the autism spectrum have significant consequences for, e.g., social justice and stigma.

Learning Outcomes.

- Deep knowledge of autism, including its history, characteristics, stigmas, and applicability to philosophical questions.

- Ability to identify and articulate questions for discussion and investigation.
- Ability to critically digest, interpret, and analyze complex, multi-disciplinary sources.
- Ability to write a convincing argument that takes adequate account of alternative positions.
- Ability to engage in constructive, respectful, oral, and written discussion.
- Ability to use feedback about one's work to improve one's arguments and writings.
- Development of practical skills in professional philosophy (graduate section).

2. COURSE ASSESSMENT AND EVALUATION

The assignments for this course differ depending on whether you are registered in the graduate or undergraduate section. If a student registered in the undergraduate section is so inclined, it is possible for them to be graded according to the graduate scheme. In this case, they should state these intentions via email before the end of Week 3. Details for each of the sections are given below.

2.1 Grading (undergraduate only)

2.1.1 Participation. (10 marks total) Timely arrival, attendance, and engagement in class will count toward the participation mark. It is expected that your contributions will be respectful and constructive. See ground rules below.

2.1.2 Epistemic Reflection. (10 Marks Total) On the first day of class, after having a short group discussion, you will write down a brief reflection on your current beliefs about autism, to be handed in at the end of the class. More details will be given on the first day of class. This constituted 'Part 1' of the epistemic reflection assignment. On the final day of class, I will return your reflection to you. The second part of this assignment, to be handed in during the exam period, is to read your initial reflections from the start of the course, and write a brief statement (around 500 words) of how or whether your beliefs have changed, what surprised you, what you learned, etc. This constitutes 'Part 2' of the assignment. The two parts together will be worth 10% of your final grade.

2.1.3 Weekly Reading Responses. (20 marks total) Starting in Week 2, students are required to write and submit a question or reflection on one of the assigned readings for the week by 1 pm the day before our meeting. Specific instructions will be available on the course webpage. Weekly questions and their explanations/context should not generally be longer than 250 words. Over the 12 weeks of the term for which there are readings assigned, you must submit **ten** (10) weekly questions or reflections; **and** you must submit **ten** (10) substantive responses to other student's reflections. Which weeks you submit is up to you. Submission of more than ten weekly reading responses and more than ten substantive response to your peers will be considered for the participation grade.

2.1.4 Short Paper 1. (25 marks) A short paper on one of the topics covered in Part 2 of the course, up to Week 8, inclusive. A detailed rubric will be provided on The course webpage. The paper has a soft-deadline immediately before the Fall Break. It is strongly recommended that you meet this deadline; however, submissions up to Friday during Fall Break will be accepted if you need more time to work on this.

2.1.5. Short Paper 2. (35 marks) A short paper on one of the topics covered in Part III of the course. A detailed rubric will be provided on The course webpage. The paper has a soft-deadline in the first week of

the exam period. It is strongly recommended that you meet this deadline; however, submissions up to the last day of the exam period will be accepted if you need more time to work on this.

2.1.6. Bonus Marks. There will be two opportunities for obtaining bonus marks in this course. One bonus mark will be awarded for a perfect score on a quiz on the content of this syllabus (completed on the first day of class). A second bonus mark will be awarded to everyone registered just in case a quorum (at least 2/3) of students completes the year-end course evaluations. More details for each of this are given below.

2.2. Grading Overview (undergraduate only). The grading for the undergraduate section of this course is broken down as follows:

Participation		10 %
Epistemic Reflection Part 1		5 %
Epistemic Reflection Part 2		5 %
Weekly Reading Responses		20 %
Short Paper 1 (up to 1000 words).....		25 %
Short Paper 2 (up to 2000 words).....		35 %
Bonus Marks		2 %
TOTAL	 	100 %

2.3. Grading (graduate only)

2.3.1 Participation. (0 marks total) You will not be formally graded for participation, but registration in the graduate section of this course come with an expectation that you will be an active contributor to the discussion in the weekly meetings. It is also expected that your contributions be respectful and constructive. See ground rules below.

2.3.2 Weekly Reading Responses. (10 marks total) Starting in Week 4, graduate students are required to write a short (~500 words) response to a reading. The responses will receive a grade of 0 for *unacceptable*, 1 for *good*, and 2 for *exceptional*. Each point you receive will be converted to 1% of your grade, up to 10%. So, you will be required to do a minimum of five (5) reading responses to get complete marks for this assignment (though, you should be prepared to do around ten).

2.3.3 Epistemic Reflection. (10 Marks Total) This assignment is identical to the undergraduate assignment described in the previous section.

2.3.4 Discussion Curation. (20 marks total) Twice in the semester, each graduate student will be required to ‘curate’ the discussion for at least half of one seminar (i.e., at least one reading). This will involve, first, a five-minute presentation summarising the reading in question, and then facilitating the group discussion on that reading. The discussion forum posts may be used as a resource to guide the discussion. More details will be given in class.

2.3.5 Term Paper. (60 marks total) The term papers will be broken up into several components, including a proposal (5 marks), a first draft of the paper (15 marks), a paper-presentation (10 marks), and

a final draft of the paper (30 marks - 5 for the abstract and 25 for the paper). More details for each of these components will be given on The course webpage, but a short explanation is given below.

Proposal. (5 marks) One way to think of this assignment is as though you are submitting a 500-word abstract to a conference. In order for the organisers of the conference to accept your paper based on this abstract, you must provide sufficient detail to display the topic of your proposal, and a sense of what your main contribution will be.

First Draft. (15 marks) The first draft should be around 2000 words and it should be on the topic that you proposed in the first part of this assignment. (Although, this is not, strictly speaking, necessary: you are allowed to change your mind about the topic of your paper between submitting the proposal and submitting the first draft of the paper.)

Paper Presentation. (5 marks) In our final meeting, all of the graduate students will give a (very) short presentation on the topic of their research paper. They should prepare to present for no more than five minutes, after which there will be around 5-10 minutes for Q & A. (*Note:* time allotted for presentations is tentative, and will be based on course enrolment. More details will be given in advance of the date.)

Final Draft. (30 marks total) The final draft of the paper will be due on the last day of the exam period. The final paper should be a concise research paper of around 3000 words (no more than 3500) on a topic of your choosing; and, it should include an abstract of around 250 words (no more than 300 words). 5 marks will be allocated to the abstract, and the remaining 25 marks will be allocated to the rest of the paper. One way to think of this assignment is as though you are submitting a short research paper to the *American Philosophical Association*.

2.4 Grading Overview (graduate only). The grading for the graduate section of this course is broken down as follows:

Reading Responses		10 %
Epistemic Reflection Part 1		5 %
Epistemic Reflection Part 2		5 %
Two ‘Discussion Curation’ Assignments (presentations)		20 %
Final Paper (3000 words).....		60 %
TOTAL		 100 %

The final paper has several components, and the grade for the final paper will be broken down as follows:

Proposal (500 words)		5 %
First Draft (2000 words)		15 %
Paper Presentation (in Class)		10 %
Abstract of the Final Paper (250 words)		5 %
Revised final Draft (3000 words)		25 %
TOTAL		 60 %

Topic Overview

PART I: History of Autism

Week 1: Course Introduction, 'Discovery' (1930s-40s)

Week 2: 1950s to 1980s

Week 3: 1990s to present

PART II: Philosophy and Autism

Week 4: Does Autism *Need* 'A Philosophy'?

Week 5: The Metaphysics of Autism

Week 6: Autism and Philosophy of Language

Week 7: Social Cognition and Other Minds

Week 8: Epistemology and Testimony

Week 9: Ethics

Week 10: *Fall Break* (No Class)

PART III: Ethics and Autism

Week 11: Disability and Diversity

Week 12: Biomedical Ethics

Week 13: Agency, Responsibility; Reasoning, Emotion

Week 14: Flourishing

Week 15: *Exam Period I* (No Class)

Week 16: *Exam Period II* (No Class)

Detailed Course Schedule

PART I: History of Autism

Week 1	Course Introduction, Childhood Schizophrenia in the 1930s and '40s
Tues.	Selection of short videos, posted on course webpage
Thurs.	Hannah Gadsby. 2020. 'Douglas', Netflix. (Dir. Madeleine Perry).
	Note: If you do not have access to this video, a complete transcript can be found on the course webpage. As an alternative, you can watch an interview with Hannah Gadsby on SVT/TV 2/Skavlan; a link will be posted on the course webpage.
Week 2	'Refrigerator Mothers' - 1950s and '60s
Tues.	Ludwig Wittgenstein. 1921. <i>Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus</i> . [Selections from the C. K. Ogden Translation]
Thurs.	Selection of short stories, posted on course webpage
Optional	Evans, Bonnie. 2013. 'How autism became autism: The radical transformation of a central concept of child development in Britain' <i>History of the Human Sciences</i> 26(3): 3-31.

Week 3 Measles, Mumps Rubella; an Epidemic in Silicon Valley! 1990s - present

- Tues. Steve Silberman. 2001. 'The Geek Syndrome' *Wired*. 12.01.2001 12:00 pm. <https://www.wired.com/2001/12/aspergers/>
- Thurs. Greg Burns. 2020. 'What it's like to be autistic' <https://embraceasd.com/what-its-like-to-be-autistic/>.
- Fred Day. 2021. 'What it's like to be autistic II' <https://embraceasd.com/what-its-like-to-be-autistic-ii/>.
- Emily Willingham. 2013. 'Why Autism Speaks Doesn't Speak for Me' *Forbes*. 13 Nov. 2013, 09:24pm EST. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/emilywillingham/2013/11/13/why-autism-speaks-doesnt-speak-for-me/?sh=753f8f453152>
- 'I am Autism' [Retracted commercial produced by *Autism Speaks*, to be shown in class]

PART II: Philosophy and Autism

Week 4 Does Autism Need Philosophy?

- Tues. Sven Bölte and Kenneth A. Richman. 2018. 'Does Autism Need Philosophy?' *Autism* 23(1): 3-7.
- Thurs. Kristien Hens, Ingrid Robeyns, Katrien Schaubroeck. 2019. 'The Ethics of Autism' *Philosophy Compass* 14 (1):e12559.

Week 5 Autistic Kinds - The Metaphysics of Autism

- Tues. Daniel A. Weiskopf. 2017. 'An ideal disorder? Autism as a psychiatric kind' *Philosophical Explorations* 20(2): 175-190.
- Robert Chapman. 2020. 'The reality of autism: On the metaphysics of disorder and diversity' *Philosophical Psychology* 33(6): 799-819.
- Thurs. Sam Fellowes. 2021. 'How Autism shows that Symptoms, like Psychiatric Diagnoses, are "Constructed": Methodological and Epistemic Consequences', *Synthese*. Forthcoming. 1-24.

Week 6 Linguistic Idiosyncrasies and the Philosophy of Language

- Tues. Kathrin Glüer and Peter Pagin. 2003. 'Meaning Theory and Autistic Speakers' *Mind & Language* 18(1): 23-51.
- Mila Vulchanova, Evelyn Milburn, Valentin Vulchanov, and Giosuè Baggio. 2019. 'Boon or Burden? The Role of Compositional Meaning in Figurative Language Processing and Acquisition' *Journal of Logic, Language and Information* 28(2): 359-387.
- Thurs. Daniel. A. Wilkenfeld. 2020. 'Living With Autism: Quus-ing in a Plus-ers World' *Res Philosophica* 97(1): 53-68.

Week 7 Social Cognition and 'Other Minds'

- Tues. Wolfram Hinzen, Dominika Slušná, Kristen Schroeder, Gabriel Sevilla, and Elisabet Vila Borrellas. 2020. 'Mind–Language = ? The significance of non–verbal autism' *Mind & Language* 35(4): 514-528.
- Joel Krueger. 2019. 'Enactivism, Other Minds, and Mental Disorders' *Synthese* 198(Supplement 1): 365-389.
- Thurs. Sarah Arnaud. 2020. 'Emotional Consciousness in Autism' *Journal of Consciousness Studies*. 27(9-10): 34-59.

Week 8 Epistemology and Testimony

- Tues. Janette Dinishak. 2019. 'The value of giving autistic testimony a substantial role in the science of autism' *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 42: e87.
- Thurs. Nick Leonard. 2016. 'Testimony, evidence and interpersonal reasons' *Philosophical Studies* 173(9): 2333-2352.

Week 9 Ethics

- Tues. Nathan Stout. 2016. 'Autism, episodic memory, and moral exemplars' *Philosophical Psychology* 29(6): 858-870.
- Nathan Stout. 2016. 'Conversation, Responsibility, and Autism Spectrum Disorder' *Philosophical Psychology* 29(7): 1-14.
- Thurs. Nathan Stout. 2016. 'Reasons-Responsiveness and Moral Responsibility: The Case of Autism' *The Journal of Ethics* 20(4): 401-418.

Week 10

- Tues. *Fall Break (No Class)*
- Thurs.

PART III: Ethics and Autism

Week 11 **Disability and Diversity**

- Tues. Christopher Mole. 2017. 'Autism and "disease": The semantics of an ill-posed question' *Philosophical Psychology* 30(8): 1126-1140.
- Dinishak Janette. 2016. 'The Deficit View and Its Critics' *The Disability Studies Quarterly* 36(4).
- Thurs. Lidia Ripamonti. 2016. 'Disability, Diversity, and Autism: Philosophical Perspectives on Health' *The New Bioethics* 22(1): 56-70.

Week 12 **Biomedical Ethics**

- Tues. Jo Bervoets and Kristien Hens. 2020. 'Going Beyond the Catch-22 of Autism Diagnosis and Research. The Moral Implications of (Not) Asking "What Is Autism?"' *Frontiers in Psychology*. 11(529193): 1-15.
- Rosemarie Garland-Thomson. 2020. 'How We Got to CRISPR: The Dilemma of Being Human' *Perspectives in Biology and Medical Science* 63(1): 28-41.
- Thurs. Kenneth Shields and David Beversdorf. 2020. 'A Dilemma for Neurodiversity' *Neuroethics*: 1-17.
- Kristien Hens, Hilde Peeters, and Kris Dierickx. 2016. 'The ethics of complexity. Genetics and autism, a literature review' *American Journal of Medical Genetics Part B: Neuropsychiatric Genetics* 171(3): 305-316.
- Optional* Jennifer C. Sarrett. 2016. 'Biocertification and Neurodiversity: the Role and Implications of Self-Diagnosis in Autistic Communities' *Neuroethics* 9(1): 23-36.

Week 13 Agency and Responsibility'; Reasoning and Emotion

Tues. McGeer. Varieties of Moral Agency: Lessons from Autism (and Psychopathy)
Mara Bollard. 2013. 'Psychopathy, Autism and Questions of Moral Agency', in Alexandra Perry and C. D. Herrera (eds.) *Ethics and Neurodiversity*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing. 238-259.

Thurs. Janette Dinishak. 2015. 'Empathy, Like-mindedness, and Autism' in Mark Risjord (ed.) *Normativity and Naturalism in the Philosophy of the Social Sciences*. Routledge. 113-134.

Optional Erick Ramirez. 2019. 'Psychopathy, autism, and basic moral emotions: Evidence for sentimentalist constructivism', in Serife Tekin and Robyn Bluhm (eds.) *The Bloomsbury Companion to Philosophy of Psychiatry*. Bloomsbury.

Nathan Stout. 2019. 'Emotional Awareness and Responsible Agency' *Review of Philosophy and Psychology* 10(2): 337-362.

Mathieu Garon, Baudouin Forgeot D'Arc, Marie M. Lavallée, Evelyn V. Estay, and Miriam H. Beauchamp. 2018. 'Visual Encoding of Social Cues Contributes to Moral Reasoning in Autism Spectrum Disorder: An Eye-Tracking Study' *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* 12.

Pier Jaarsma. 2013. 'Cultivation of Empathy in Individuals with High-Functioning Autism Spectrum Disorder' *Ethics and Education* 8(3): 290-30014

R. v. Minassian, 2021 ONSC 1258.

Week 14 Flourishing

Tues. Raffaele Rodogno, Katrine Krause-Jensen, and Richard E. Ashcroft. 2016. 'Autism and the good life: a new approach to the study of well-being' *Journal of Medical Ethics* 42(6): 401-408.

In-Class Presentations

Thurs. *In-Class Presentations* (Graduate Section Only)

Week 15 Exam Period I

Week 16 Exam Period II