Overview: the most astounding fact about the universe is that some bits of it are able to understand and be conscious of other bits of it. Consciousness is at once the most obvious thing in the world - there's no thinking without it! - and also the least obvious: we don't have any objective evidence that anything is conscious. Ask yourself how you might try proving that an entity (human or machine) is conscious, and not just acting as if it were conscious! In this class we will be exploring philosophical theories about what consciousness is, whether machines can be conscious, whether humans have free will, and so on.

Contact: I can be reached by email at charlie.huenemann@usu.edu. I also will have office hour conference sessions for drop-in chats. Office hours will be Wednesdays 1-2, on our recurring zoom link, and also by appointment.

Books: Just one book - Consciousness Explained, by Daniel Dennett, plus readings available on Canvas.

Papers: There will be one short paper (about 3 pages) and three mid-length papers (about 5 pages). Papers will be graded in terms of philosophical depth and mechanics. Mechanics means complete sentences, correct spelling, organization, etc. Philosophical depth means how earnest and intelligent is your attempt to get to the bottom of whatever you are discussing. It requires pushing your inquiry to the very limits of what you understand. There will be further details in the assignments, and we will spend time in class discussing what this means.

Papers can be rewritten in response to corrections/criticisms for an improved grade.

Here is the rubric I use in assigning grades to papers:
Tests: No tests, quizzes, or exams.

Attendance and participation: With all of the uncertainties and safety measures due to COVID-19, this will be an unusual semester for everyone. My general plan is for us all to meet each class day over Zoom and discuss the material. If this is not working out for you - if your life becomes unexpectedly complicated, or you become ill, or you simply are burning out from too much Zooming - please communicate with me, and we will see what we can work out. Don't disappear. Don't give up, or start to slide. Talk to me (or your other instructors); you will find we all want to help.

**Introduction to the philosophy of mind (2 weeks: 9/1 - 9/10)**

Why should consciousness be mysterious? What are the fundamental problems in trying to account for it?

(Open discussion, with some readings)

“They’re Made out of Meat”, Terry Bisson

“If I teleport from Mars, does the original me get destroyed?”, Charlie Huenemann

“What is it like to be a bat?”, Thomas Nagel

**The initial case for materialism (2 weeks: 9/15 - 9/24)**

What do we need to know about brains, and how they are organized? What is the motivation in explaining consciousness through materialism? What is materialism, anyway? How might such an explanation go?

Short paper: “What is the Mind-Body problem?”
Basic objections to a materialistic account of consciousness (2 weeks: 9/29 - 10/8)

What are the reasons for thinking consciousness simply cannot be explained through materialistic accounts?

Mid-length paper: What account of consciousness do you favor, and how might you defend it against its strongest objection?

A robust attempt to provide a materialistic explanation of consciousness (4 weeks: 10/13 - 11/5)

How can we “ramp up” our ideas of what physical systems can do, and “ramp down” what we think consciousness is, so that the two can meet somewhere in the middle?

Mid-length paper: What is Dennett’s explanation of consciousness?

Other interesting discussions having to do with mind (3 weeks: 11/10 - 11/24)

There are many further topics about mind that do not fit neatly in the debate we have spent 10 weeks studying. We will take up several in a disorganized way.

Mid-length paper: What are you, anyway?
(Readings and discussion)

- Are we thinking of materialism too narrowly? Galen Strawson’s “real materialism”, and panpsychism

- Are we thinking of consciousness too richly? Karl Friston, and the mind as a “predictive engine”

- To what extent might mind be a social construction?

- The realm of mind as distinct from consciousness