

# Philosophy 250A: Philosophy of Cognitive Science (Perception)

Where: Philosophy seminar room  
(H&SS 7077)

When: Fridays 1-3:50

Instructor: Jonathan Cohen

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Office hours: Thursdays 10-11:30, in  
H&SS 8072 (and by appointment; please  
feel free to call/email)



This seminar will be organized around two important and influential recent books that lie right smack in the middle of central debates in philosophy of perception, philosophy of mind, epistemology, and metaphysics: Tyler Burge's *Origins of Objectivity* and Susanna Siegel's *The Contents of Visual Experience*. Compressing greatly, Burge's book offers an account of what it takes for minds to represent the world objectively. He criticizes huge swathes of twentieth century philosophy for making the requirements on objective representation either overintellectualized (Strawson, Evans, Quine, Davidson) or too thin to distinguish perception from "mere" sensory registration (Dretske, Millikan, Fodor). Instead, he proposes an account of objective representation grounded in in the phenomenon of perceptual constancy, and argues that this avoids the problems that beset alternatives. Siegel's book opens by arguing that despite a recent resurgence sympathy for "direct realist" views, (almost) everyone should accept that perceptual states have representational contents. She then goes on to argue that the representational contents of perceptual states include not just low-level properties like color, form, and motion, but also high-level properties including kind properties (being a dog/person/bicycle/Scottish Pine, being a word of Russian), as well as action properties (carrying a dog/person/bicycle/Scottish Pine), causation, and particular objects (John Malkovich), among other things. Finally, the book also offers and defends a method for adjudicating disputes about what is perceptually represented --- Siegel's "method of phenomenal contrast". Both of these books offer striking and novel arguments for controversial claims about perception, the mind, and the relation between mind and world that have already exerted and will continue to exert substantial influence in many areas of philosophy. If you have interests in philosophy of mind, representation, perception, objectivity, or related topics, you'll need to figure out your views about these books and allied matters. The seminar is intended as an occasion for you to do that.

This seminar will count as a core course in philosophy of mind, and will count toward the distribution requirement in either philosophy of mind/language or epistemology/metaphysics.

## Texts

Our reading will be mostly from the Siegel and Burge books, which are available at the UCSD bookstore (but probably cheaper at Amazon). I'll make supplementary readings available electronically.

## Requirements

The seminar requirements are of two main kinds: presentations, and papers.

**Presentation:** All attendees (including auditors) will be required to lead a seminar discussion (or maybe more than one, depending on our numbers). A presentation should be a critical discussion rather than a summary or book report (the presenter can assume that other participants have done the reading, and the other participants will make it the case that such an assumption is correct), and should contain a thesis and arguments for that thesis. It can concern any topic connected with the week's reading that is of interest to the presenter. You must discuss your presentation with me sometime before the session in which you present, just to make sure we're on the same page. Seminar presentations may be given using notes or slides, but they may not be read aloud from a pre-written paper.

**Papers:** Students taking the course for credit will be asked to write papers for the course; but there are two different formats that that could take.

The first option involves writing shortish, weekly homework papers. Students electing this option will have to do all of the homework assignments (I predict there will 7-8 of them), but won't be asked to write a term paper at the end of the quarter. The second option is to write a traditional (circa 15 page) term paper at the end of the quarter on some issue raised during the quarter and (mandatorily) discussed with me by the 7th week of the quarter. Advantages of the first option: it is a low-risk way of getting acquainted with the material, and makes receiving an incomplete for the course unlikely. Advantages of the second option: it allows you the opportunity to dig more deeply into some issue that you care about, and you'll end up with a stand-alone philosophical paper of which you can be proud.

## Grading

I will determine your grade based on the following breakdown:

25% seminar presentations and participation (very much including weeks in which you are not leading the course)

75% paper(s)

## Tentative Schedule

| Week        | Topic  | Reading         | Presenter     |
|-------------|--|-----------------|---------------|
| 5<br>April  | Introduction, representation, anti-individualism | Burge, ch 1-3.  | Jonathan      |
| 12<br>April | Individual representationalism, I                | Burge, ch 4-5   | ?             |
| 19<br>April | Individual representationalism, II               | Burge, ch 6-7   | ?, Rick Grush |
| 26<br>April | Perception and objective reference               | Burge, ch 8-9   | ?             |
| 3<br>May    | Body, number, space, and scaling up              | Burge, ch 10-11 | ?             |
| 10          | Preliminaries:                                   |                 |               |

|           |                                 |                                      |         |
|-----------|---------------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------|
| May       | experience, content             | Siegel, intro, ch 1-2                | ?       |
| 17<br>May | Methodology, kind<br>properties | Siegel, ch3-4                        | ?       |
| 24<br>May | Causation, objects              | Siegel, ch5-6                        | Susanna |
| 31<br>May | Subject and object              | Siegel, ch7-8                        | ?       |
| 7<br>June | Catch up, party                 | to be determined by student interest | ?       |

## Extra materials

John Campbell's [review of Burge](#) (Journal of Philosophy)

Endre Begby's [review](#) of Burge (Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews)

James Genone's [review](#) of Siegel (Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews)

Barry Maund's [review](#) of Siegel (Analysis)

Susanna has also posted a number of [responses](#) to her critics.

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