

University Wide Course

Tim Crane, Philosophy Department, CEU

I. Title of course

Belief

II. Instructors

Course leader	Tim Crane	Unit:	Philosophy
Guest lecturer	Katalin Farkas	Unit:	Philosophy, CEU
Guest lecturer	Botond Koszegi	Unit:	Economics & Business, CEU
Guest lecturer	Jozsef Fiser	Unit:	Cognitive Science, CEU
Guest lecturer	Vladimir Namaescu	Unit:	Sociology & Social Anthropology, CEU

Teaching assistant

Nikhil Mahant, 3rd year PhD student, Philosophy Department

III. Course information

Course level: MA or PhD elective

Credits: 2

Term: Fall 2020 (September to December 2020)

Time: 9am Wednesdays, Quellenstrasse 51, and online asynchronously

Role of faculty members participating in delivery:

The course will be mostly delivered by the course leader, Tim Crane, in conjunction with 4 guest lecturers from the departments of Philosophy, Economics & Business, Cognitive Science, and Sociology & Social Anthropology.

The course will be research-driven. Belief is a current research interest of Tim Crane's, and he (with Jozsef Fiser, Erno Teglas and Katalin Farkas) have received a CEU ITI research grant to work on this subject.

Short description:

The concept of belief is central to our self-conception as human beings. A person's beliefs are how they take the world to be: what someone believes is how they think things are. Our beliefs can be about matters of great significance — such as politics, or religion, or science, or morality — but they can also be about everyday matters, such as what you had for breakfast or where you will go shopping tomorrow. Beliefs

can be more or less correct, or true, but our beliefs about the world determine our actions regardless of whether they are actually true.

But the phenomenon of belief raises many questions. How should beliefs be distinguished from one another? How should we think of the distinction between the mental state of believing something and what it is that is believed (the 'content' of belief)? What is the relationship between belief and truth? And between belief and knowledge? How can beliefs be states of the brain? Does belief come in degrees? What does it mean for a belief to be rational? Can groups as well as individuals have beliefs? What is religious belief and how can it be studied?

This course will investigate the phenomenon of belief from a number of different perspectives. It will outline the main philosophical issues about belief and the relationship between these issues and issues in economics, cognitive neuroscience and anthropology.

It will be suitable for students from many departments: philosophy, economics & business, sociology & anthropology, gender studies, history, as well as cognitive science (if their students are in Vienna). It will be of particular interest to students on the religious studies programme.

Learning outcomes:

By the end of this course, students who have completed the reading and the assignments will have:

- understood the central questions in the philosophical investigation of belief
- understood some applications of these ideas in economics, cognitive neuroscience and anthropology

Prerequisites:

None. No background in philosophy is presupposed; all that is required is hard work, a willingness to engage with difficult texts, and an open mind.

Number of projected students:

30 maximum (online and in class together)

Class format:

- (i) In class: each class will consist of a lecture by the instructor of 50 minutes, followed by 50 minutes of guided discussion.
- (ii) Online (asynchronous): for most classes, there will be two short (20 min) videos per week, and one 60 minute zoom seminar with either Tim Crane or Nikhil Mahant. The seminar will be arranged at a mutually convenient time for online students.

ALL STUDENTS MUST READ THE ONE ASSIGNED READING FOR EACH WEEK, AND THEY WILL BE ASKED DIRECT QUESTIONS ABOUT THE READING IN THE CLASS

Assessment:

Two 1000 word (max.) submissions; the first to be submitted in the middle of term, on the philosophy of belief; and the second after the end of term, on the application of this concept to a problem in philosophy or in some other discipline(s). For the first

task, a series of short questions must be answered; for the second, students can choose their own topic or select one from a list given by the instructor.

Assessment for the course will be the same for in class and online students.

Grading guidelines will be provided with the assignments.

Detailed course description:

The first half of the course will be concerned with the philosophical background to the study of belief; in the second half, the course will examine the role of the concept of belief in economics, cognitive neuroscience, and anthropology (the latter in relation to religious belief). Week by week is as follows:

Week by week summary

(1) SEPTEMBER 30 The concept of belief: historical background

We will trace the development of the concept of belief or judgement — that is, the idea of a mental representation of the world that aims to represent it (roughly) as it is, to get the world right — from the 18th century discussions of David Hume and Immanuel Kant to the present day. The importance of belief in human and animal psychology will be explained. Key concepts here are: the distinction between a belief state and what is believed; the role of belief in producing behaviour; belief and consciousness.

READING: David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739-40) Book 1, Part 3, section 7, 'Of the Nature of the Idea or Belief'

(2) OCTOBER 7 Belief and truth

Beliefs can be correct or incorrect, reasonable or unreasonable, accurate or inaccurate; but one essential normative connection is with the idea of truth. To believe something is to believe it is true. This is shown by the fact that no rational person could ever say, 'I believe that X but X is not true'. Believing that something is true is not the same as being certain of it; you could believe something is true while still being open to doubt. The relevant concept of truth will be examined.

READING: Bernard Williams, 'Deciding to Believe' in *Problems of the Self* (CUP 1973) 13-151

(3) OCTOBER 14 Belief, perception and action

Belief seems to have an essential relation to action: what we do depends on what we believe and what we want. This class will look at the origins of this idea in 19th century psychology (Alexander Bain and James Mill) and its development in 20th century behaviourist psychology and the later functionalist philosophy of mind. The idea of beliefs as causal mediators between perception and action will be explained.

READING: D.M. Armstrong, *Belief, Truth and Knowledge* (1973) chapters 1 and 2.

(4) OCTOBER 21 Belief and knowledge: guest lecturer, Katalin Farkas (Philosophy)

What is the relationship between belief and knowledge? In philosophy, knowledge has traditionally been treated as some combination of belief, truth and an additional component (usually called 'justification' or 'warrant'). So if you know something, it is true, and you must believe it. Is this conception of knowledge correct? This class will assess this traditional view about the relationship between knowledge and belief.

READING: Katalin Farkas: "Belief may not Be a Necessary Condition for Knowledge" *Erkenntnis*, 2015, (vol. 80), pp. 185-200. Feel free to skip section 3.

(5) OCTOBER 28 Belief, thought and consciousness

Some mental states are conscious, some are not. Beliefs seem to be a paradigm of unconscious mental states: most of the things you believe about the world do not currently occupy your conscious mind. But some do: we can bring what we believe to consciousness, when we ask ourselves what we believe about some subject-matter, or we try and make up our mind about something. Does this mean that some beliefs are conscious events or states?

READING: Daniel Dennett, 'How to change your mind' in Dennett, *Brainstorms* (1978)

(6) NOVEMBER 4 Degrees of belief

We can believe things more or less strongly; alternatively, we can be more or less sure or certain of what we believe. A dominant tradition has proposed that this fact is accommodated by the fact that belief literally comes in degrees, and that these degrees of belief can be modelled by the probability calculus. For this reason, degrees of belief are known as 'subjective probabilities'. This idea lies at the heart of decision theory (rational choice theory) and game theory, which are part of the theoretical core of modern economics. This class will explain the basics of these ideas.

READING: David Papineau, *Philosophical Devices* (2012) chapters 7 & 8

(7) NOVEMBER 11 Belief and Economics (guest lecturer: Botond Koszegi, CEU Economics & Business)

This class will give an expert perspective on the use of the notion of belief in economic theory. Decision theorists have traditionally conceived of economic behaviour as the product of belief (understood as 'subjective probability') and desire ('subjective utility'): roughly, what people do is the product of how much they want something and how likely it is that they will get it. Economics has used decision theory, traditionally under idealising assumptions of perfect rationality (sometimes called 'homo economicus') but recently behavioural economics has made progress in understanding how decisions are made in real-world situations by limited, irrational agents.

READING: No assigned reading for this week.

ADDITIONAL BACKGROUND READING will be distributed before the class

(8) NOVEMBER 18 Belief and the Brain (guest lecturer: Jozsef Fiser, CEU Cognitive Science)

How are beliefs embodied in the brain? This class will give an expert perspective on the probabilistic ('Bayesian') framework which is widespread in contemporary cognitive science. In this framework, beliefs are modelled by networks of idealised brain activity, where probabilities evolve in accord with certain simple rules.

READING: Joshua B. Tenenbaum et al 'How to Grow a Mind' *Science* 2011

(9) NOVEMBER 25 Group belief

We have been assuming that belief is a property or state of individual thinkers; but can groups also believe things? We talk about the beliefs of religious groups or nations or corporations, but should this be taken literally, or is it just a way of speaking about the beliefs of individuals?

READING: Alexander Bird, 'When is there a Group that Knows?' in Jennifer Lackey (ed.) *Essays in Collective Epistemology* (OUP 2014)

(10) DECEMBER 2 Religious belief: philosophical perspectives

Any discussion of belief has to recognise the distinction between beliefs as mere psychological states with any content whatsoever, and beliefs that are of great significance to those who hold them (part of their worldview, so to speak). Of the latter, religious beliefs are perhaps the prime example. This class will begin the investigation of religious belief from a philosophical point of view.

READING: Richard Braithwaite, 'An Empiricist's View of the Nature of Religious Belief' in Basil Mitchell (ed.) *Philosophy of Religion* (1971)

(11) DECEMBER 9 Religious belief: anthropological perspectives (guest lecturer: Vladimir Naumescu, CEU Sociology & Social Anthropology)

This class will employ the expertise of an anthropologist of religion to explain religious belief from an anthropological point of view.

READING: TBC

(12) DECEMBER 16 Concluding session

This class will consider what we have learned about belief in this course, and attempt a summing-up.

READING: None