

# Theory of Understanding

PHIL 185 / 285  
Stanford University – Autumn 2016  
MW 1:30 – 2:50  
Building 380 - 381U

## Instructor

Eli Alshanetsky

Email: elia@stanford.edu

Office Hours: Monday 3 - 5, or by appointment (Building 100 -102M)

## Description

This course will survey some of the ongoing work on understanding in philosophy and psychology. The questions considered will include: What exactly is understanding? How does understanding differ from knowledge of commonplace facts? What are the different forms understanding takes (e.g. scientific, social, historical, aesthetic, etc), and how are the different forms of understanding connected?

## Goals

- Getting acquainted with the current state of the field in the theory of understanding.
- Improving your ability to interpret and analyze philosophical texts, identifying arguments and their underlying presuppositions.
- Improving your ability to explain and critically respond to philosophical arguments, in writing and in discussion.
- Improving your ability to articulate your own positions, formulate your own arguments, and reply to objections.

## Course Requirements

Two Short (~1-2 pg.) Assignments (P/NP): 10%

Two Longer (~7-8 pg.) Papers: 60%

Participation: 30%

Graduate students enrolled in PHIL 285 will have the option of writing a single (~16 page) final paper in lieu of two papers. All students will be required to do a short class presentation on the topic of their final paper or on some other topic of their choice related to understanding, during the last week of class.

## Texts

There will be no textbook; all readings will be made available on Coursework.

## Tentative Schedule

### Week 1 - Introduction

Jenann Ismael, Why Study the Humanities?

Optional: Richard Mason, What We Understand

### Week 2 – The Unity/Disunity of Understanding

John Bengson, The Unity of Understanding  
Gilbert Ryle, Knowledge How  
Optional: Jason Stanley and Timothy Williamson, Knowledge How  
Optional: Alva Noë, Against Intellectualism

**Week 3 – Grasping**

Michael Patrick Lynch, Understanding and Coming to Understand  
Jerry Fodor, Having Concepts

**Week 4 – Understanding and Rule Following**

Saul Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*

**Week 5 – Understanding and Rule Following**

Paul Boghossian, The Rule Following Considerations  
Crispin Wright, Rule Following Without Reasons  
Optional: Hannah Ginsborg, Primitive Normativity and Skepticism about Rules

*Midterm Paper Due by Email (by midnight, Friday October 28)*

**Week 6 – Practical Understanding**

Peter Railton, Practical Competency and Fluent Agency  
How to Engage Reason

**Week 7 – Understanding and Knowledge**

Sabine Ammon, Explaining Understanding, Understanding Knowledge  
Christoph Baumberger, Claus Beisbart and Georg Brun, What is Understanding?  
Optional: Stephen Grimm, Understanding and Transparency  
Optional: Christoph Kelp, Towards a Knowledge-Based Account of Understanding

**Week 8 – Historical Understanding**

Karl-Otto Apel, Dilthey's Distinction between Explanation and Understanding  
Theodore Abel, On the Operation called Verstehen  
Peter Munz, Historical Understanding  
Optional: Peter Forrest, Aesthetic Understanding

**Week 9 – Religious Understanding, The Ethics of Understanding**

Fiona Ellis, Religious Understanding, Naturalism, and Desire  
Stephen Grimm, The Ethics of Understanding  
Optional: Remy Debes, Understanding Persons & The Problem of Power

**Week 10 – Skeptical Approaches, The Allure of Not-Understanding**

J.D. Trout, Understanding and Fluency  
Dan Sperber, The Guru Effect  
Optional: Bradford Skow, Against Understanding

*Student Presentations*

*Final Paper Due by Email (by midnight, Monday December 12)*

**Students with Documented Disabilities**

Students who may need an academic accommodation based on the impact of a disability must initiate the request with the Office of Accessible Education (OAE). Professional staff will

evaluate the request with required documentation, recommend reasonable accommodations, and prepare an Accommodation Letter for faculty dated in the current quarter in which the request is being made. Students should contact the OAE as soon as possible since timely notice is needed to coordinate accommodations. The OAE is located at 563 Salvatierra Walk (phone: 723-1066, URL: <http://oae.stanford.edu>).