

PHIL 250 (002)

Minds and Machines

Instructor: Logan Fletcher
logan.fletcher@ubc.ca

Readings: *All required readings will be made available online.*

This course will be organized around the question: *Could minds be machines?* We will approach this question from two opposite directions: First, could a *machine* — say, one made out of gears or pulleys or transistors or microprocessors — ever truly have (or be) a mind? Second, could our own minds be, in some important sense, machines of a certain kind? To many of us, it may seem obvious that there is a sharp divide between minds and machines. Even if we can't give an exact definition of 'mind' or 'machine', we may feel that we know the difference when it is in front of us. But are we right to be so confident? Can we be certain, from an outside perspective, that our friends and loved ones have *real* minds, as opposed to being clever mechanical simulations? For that matter, can we be sure, from the *inside*, that our *own* minds are not ultimately mechanical?

In considering these questions, we will look at the abilities of the mind that seem most decidedly *unmechanical*, and assess the prospects of artificial intelligence actually achieving those abilities. For instance, could a computer ever truly be conscious, have common sense, be creative, or fall in love? We will approach these questions from multiple angles, looking at thought experiments in science fiction alongside cutting-edge developments in artificial intelligence. In addition, we will look at a number of provocative cases from psychology and neurology showing that, as soon as we peer beneath the surface, human minds are seen to operate in ways that appear unsettlingly mechanical. This will be accompanied by demonstrations that will allow students to see, from the inside, that they might not know even their own minds nearly as well as they had imagined.