

MBB Statement of Purpose (from a junior, so a more developed thesis topic needed)

My interest in psychology includes several aspects of social and cognitive psychology, a program that may be succinctly called “the evolution of the social mind – the mind that perceives other minds.” I am interested in what adaptive pressures are responsible for the ‘ornamentation’ of the human mind, namely those aspects involved in social cognition. Such features would include moral cognition, mind perception, creativity, supernatural belief, and mating strategies. I am also interested in the interplay between natural, social, and sexual selection with culture – that is, the evolutionary foundations of ubiquitous artifacts of human civilization; I hope to examine this interplay in the case of religious and supernatural belief, for my thesis topic. My attraction to MBB, rather than the general psychology track, stems from the ability to integrate different methodologies to help answer difficult questions. To this end, to the question of how selection pressures may have shaped human cognition, I am interested in the insight from topics such as evolutionary dynamics (e.g. Math 243) and game theory (Economics 1052), as well as questions derived from philosophy of biology and of mind and perception. I hope to work toward ‘naturalizing’ some major questions of philosophy and social psychology – what is (unique about) human consciousness?; how does human nature interact with an environment and other minds to create culture?; under what conditions do the assumptions of ‘folk’ psychology break down and (how) might we amend them?; to what respect can humans ‘know’ other kinds of minds? – by attaching a biological and cognitive lens to problems traditionally addressed from the viewpoint of the humanities and social sciences.

The coursework of my MBB program coheres intellectually around the topic of ‘mind perception,’ or the ability to understand other minds. A basal problem in this topic is this individual’s understanding of this own mind; ‘folk’ psychology often takes for granted cognitive

features such as consciousness, attention, and free will. My coursework in Psychology 2185 (Unconscious Processing) and Philosophy 253z* (Philosophy of Mind and Perception) address the non-obvious underpinnings of the ‘apparent mind.’ How we understand the minds of others (addressed in Psychology 1551), which may be wildly different from that of the perceiver, is the foundation of social behavior; I am interested in what innate assumptions underscore mind perception and how understand certain kinds of minds (enemies, God, mates) underlies certain human constructions (religion, communities, tradition). Understanding how this came to be – how we ‘know’ our own and others’ minds – is a work in progress. I think the nascent field of Evolutionary Psychology offers a promising framework for answering many questions in the social sciences; underrepresented within this field are the roles of sexual and social selection in shaping human ‘mind perception.’ I am interested in how these selection forces helped shape human social cognition and how their influence manifests itself in modern social behavior and thought; as a scientific basis for this framework, I plan to take the course ‘Human Sexuality’ as my MBB junior seminar.

* Philosophy 253z is a ‘new course’ and does not yet have a syllabus as is required for a non-departmental (‘expedited’) elective. Below is the official description.

Philosophy 253z: Philosophy of Mind and Perception: Seminar (Susanna Siegel)

Topics may include: cross-modal perception; whole-body illusions; temporal experience; the nature of perceptual contact with the world; the relationship between perceptual experiences and other cognitive states, such as mood, emotion, belief, and desire.