Description of the Course
Madonna was right! I am a material girl living in a material world. How then do we account for the conscious mind? Consciousness is like air or oxygen, it flows through you at every moment of your existence. You rarely take notice of it. Of course there are conscious experiences you do take notice of. When you bite into a piece of dark chocolate and taste the cocoa bitter-sweetness. When Jimi Hendrix sees a purple haze as he is playing his guitar. (This is why he gave the song the name, Purple Haze. This is what he saw when hearing the sound coming from his guitar). I definitely take notice of what it is I am experiencing when I drink a glass of Château Latour Grand Vin. This might suggest that conscious experience is something that is turned on and off like water flowing from a spigot. And that is an inaccurate picture. You are in the midst of a conscious experience for most of your existence. (That is, if you are fortunate. Or perhaps unfortunate depending on how you look at it. There are some who would say consciousness is a curse. Craig in Being John Malkovich seems to be of this opinion. And at times in life it can certainly seem that way). The only time when you are not conscious is when you are in the dreamless stage of sleep and when you are dead. (Well, as far as we know. There is the view that consciousness continues on after death. And perhaps it does. Though it is difficult to understand how that is possible without the existence of the brain. But we will put that issue aside for the moment, and no doubt, come back to it). My point: you are having a conscious experience right now as your eye follows these black marks which comprise English words and sentences. You will be in the midst of consciousness when entering class on the first day and you will still be in its midst when leaving. I’m hoping you will be in its midst during the entire length of this course. And no doubt the brain is responsible for this. But how does squishy grey matter get us the purple haze, the cocoa bitter sweetness, that sublime velvety experience? How does this collection of cells produce that? For the most part when we look about the world, collections of cells don’t produce that. If we were to look at all our body parts (apart from the brain) we would come to the conclusion that body parts (material matter like rocks) do not produce the mental experience we call consciousness. And then we look at the brain. And this throws us for a loop. Throw a stone down a hill and it rolls down the hill. They all do. But suppose you throw one that suddenly (seemingly of its own accord) flies up into the air. The brain is that stone, it has the power to produce consciousness. And yet it is only material matter and in that respect no different from all the other mindless material matter rocking and rolling about the world. Could I then have been a rock? Once upon a time? Perhaps my earliest descendants were rocks? (I confess that sometimes I feel as though some of my relatives are rocks when we meet for family gatherings). How do we get from the rock to the mental? We are up against something, which seems to be a magic trick. Like Aladdin we rub the lamp and out comes the genie. What does Christina Aguilera say? “If you wanna be with me, Baby. There’s a price to pay. I’m a genie in a bottle. You gotta rub me the right way.” Who knew Madonna and Christina were philosophers? So maybe electricity is the rub. Get an electrical current running through some cellular grey matter and out comes the genie (or your mental life). But how to get from here to there? Where is that genie in all that grey matter?

As you may have suspected, this course will begin and end with consciousness. I am with the philosopher David Chalmers: I view consciousness as the hard problem. In entering into this grey matter mystery, we will explore the question about mind, matter and how we fit mind into matter, a question that has puzzled philosophers for centuries.
It is ultimately a question about where we fit in this material world. We will raise some fundamental questions and investigate the possible answers. Our enterprise of question and answer will inevitably produce more questions than answers. In my experience, the questions are always more interesting (especially in the case of Mind). We may well find that the puzzle emanates from our inability to even formulate the right questions (at least in the right way). Our object then will be to look as critically at the questions as we do the answers.