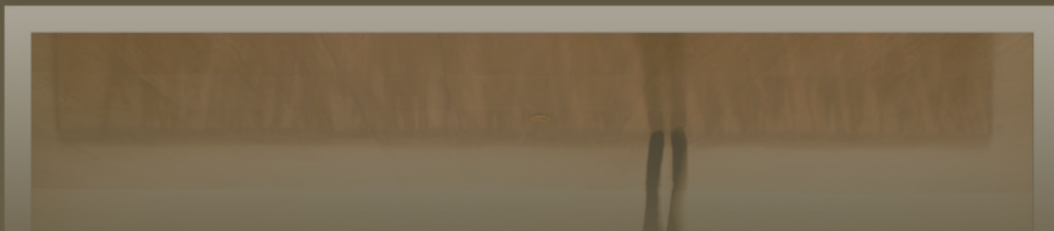


SKIDMORE COLLEGE

PH-328:

Metaphysics



Fall 2012

Prof. Larry M. Jorgensen

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Letter to my Students

I want to welcome you to this class; I am *genuinely* excited about the opportunity to work with each one of you. Before we start in earnest, I want to say a bit about how I will approach our time together this semester.

I approach **metaphysics** as one of my own mentors did, as a way of trying to “put the world together in our heads.” What we’ll discover is that this can be an exceedingly difficult task, taking us into rather heady abstractions or down promising paths that turn out to be dead ends. But when we *do* hit upon a genuine metaphysical possibility, in its complexity and richness, we will discover an object of great beauty. (This, you might notice, is a very Platonic conception of doing metaphysics.) As with many things worth discovering, this will take hard work.

I don’t claim to have it all figured out myself. I have my own views about the things we will be studying, some of which would probably (almost certainly!) surprise you. But I’m quite open to challenges to my own way of seeing things. I don’t expect you to agree with me by the end of this course; rather, I expect you to have thought for yourself and come to see things for yourself. By doing this, the course will be more valuable to you in the long run.

So, the work of this course is not the work of simply *understanding* what a text is arguing or *remembering* a particular set of arguments. Rather, you must *try out* the ideas, as if putting on a set of glasses, to see if they clear things up for you.

One of my goals for this class is to establish a *community of philosophers*. As a seminar, I hope that you will feel free to raise questions, to try out your own thinking, to make mistakes, and to challenge one another to go further. I will regularly raise questions and challenge your thinking as well, but that’s only out of respect for your ability to think hard and critically about your own positions. (I hope you will respect me in the same way!)

As a *community* of philosophers, I hope you will see that the values, attitudes, and expectations of a high-level of scholarship are not simply “handed down” from the top, but are mutually reinforced by each one of us. While I have planned our readings and activities this semester, it is essential that you take a moment at the beginning of this semester to reflect on how these readings and activities will achieve the goals of this course. I will ask you each to adopt these as our *collective strategy* to deepen our thinking on some difficult metaphysical issues.

I hope that this will be a challenging and enjoyable semester for you!

Yours,

Course Description

A real philosophical disposition consists above all in our ability to marvel at ordinary and everyday matters, leading us to make the general in phenomena into our problem.

(A paraphrase of Schopenhauer)

In this course, we will foster an amazement at ordinary things. We will questions some of the most general features of the world:

Why is there something rather than nothing?

What is the nature of time?

What is identity, self, personhood?

Are our actions ever genuinely free?

As we pursue these *general* questions, we will also consider *our own* relation to these questions. Are we capable of knowing the answers, and, if not, why ask?

Faculty Information

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Texts

1. Peter van Inwagen, *Metaphysics*, 3rd ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2009; ISBN: 978-0813343563).
2. John Perry, *A Dialogue on Personal Identity and Immortality* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publ., 1978; ISBN: 978-0915144532).
3. Susan Wolf, *Freedom Within Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990; ISBN: 978-0195085655).
4. Course Packet.

Expectations:

Background: Our readings will draw primarily from living philosophers. However, metaphysics has a long history, and since this is an upper-level course in philosophy, I will assume familiarity with the main outlines of the history of philosophy (especially Ancient Greek and 17th and 18th-century European philosophy). I may regularly make reference to historical figures and, if this is particularly relevant to understanding the way an author presents her or his arguments, I will expect that you will be able to follow these references and make connections among thinkers without too much additional work. If the historical references extend beyond Ancient Greek philosophy or 17th and 18th century European philosophy, I will provide more of the background or we will read the relevant texts together.

Reading: This course does involve **a lot of reading**; importantly, this reading should be done *actively*, thinking carefully about the arguments being presented and their implications. It is expected that you have made an effort to connect the readings with other things we have read or discussed *prior* to coming to class. By the time you get to class, we will all assume that you have already thought about the issues

raised in the readings so that we can focus on the pivot points or controversial implications of the various ideas. We won't spend a lot of time summarizing the arguments in class.

With that in mind, you should expect to spend 2-3 hours *per class* in preparation. Many of the readings could take much less time if you simply read through them quickly. But this would not prepare you for the discussion in class, and it is not likely to result in real engagement with the ideas. Rather, you should take the time to go over the passages carefully, noting any technical terms, identifying conclusions, making sure you follow the line of reasoning, and connecting the ideas with other things we've discussed or read.

Participation: As a seminar, it is expected that you will be **actively engaged in class discussions**, raising questions, presenting and defending your own arguments, and in general challenging us all to think hard about the topics we are discussing. Obviously, you cannot be doing this if you're not here, and so attendance is simply a necessity. Similarly, it would be disruptive to leave the classroom during class time (whether physically or virtually, by checking cell phones and the like).

Writing: Finally, since it is my belief that **writing** is often about *discovering* what you think (as opposed to merely *expressing* what you think), papers are one of the most significant ways I can evaluate your engagement with the issues in this course. I believe that students in general are *capable* of a very high quality of writing, and so that's what I'll be looking for. But to write in the way that you are *capable* of writing often requires hard work, revising, throwing out false starts, rewriting sections, and crafting your argument.

Course Objectives

As an advanced philosophy course in metaphysics, we will be targeting the following learning goals:

Content

By the end of this course, you will be able to

1. *identify* the main positions and trends in some areas of contemporary metaphysics, *articulate* the motivations and reasons supporting these positions, and *evaluate* the relative merits of the arguments given in their defense.
2. *formulate* your own views about topics in contemporary metaphysics (at least provisionally) and *defend* your views both orally and in writing.
3. *demonstrate an advanced understanding* of some of the main theories in the metaphysics of time, personal identity, and freedom and, with even greater penetration and to a wider extent, one particular topic in contemporary metaphysics that you have chosen as a research focus.

Skills

By the end of this course, you will be able to

4. *read* original and advanced philosophy texts actively and on your own, and come to class with an informed opinion about them.
5. *discuss* metaphysical topics and their implications with your classmates in a *sustained* and *increasingly independent* way.
6. *develop* an substantive research project, which will include *identifying* relevant secondary sources and *integrating* and *evaluating* them in a way that deepens your own thinking about the topic.

Affects

By the end of this course, you will

7. *demonstrate* intellectual patience and persistence.
8. *develop respect* for those with whom you disagree while *being confident* in the development and defense of your own views.
9. *begin to reflect* critically on the nature, limits, and purposes of philosophical engagement.

Grading

I will be using the grading scale established by Skidmore College, listed in our college catalog:

Distinguished	A+, A
Superior	A-, B+, B
Satisfactory	B-, C+, C
Passing, poor quality	C-, D+, D
Failing	F

A note about how I read this rubric: For “distinguished” to retain its meaning, it is likely that only a few students will achieve that mark. As a matter of historical fact, more students earn B’s than A’s in my classes, and there are almost always some in the “satisfactory” to “failing” categories. But I’m open to having a whole *class* distinguish itself and prove the exception to the historical trend. The take-away point is that a distinguishing mark is not automatic and will require doing greater than superior work.

The grading will be weighted in the following way:

1. 2 Short Papers (40% total; 20% each)
2. Presentations and Participation (20%)
3. Research Paper (40%; broken down as follows)
 - a. Proposal (5%)
 - b. Bibliography (5%)
 - c. Research Paper (30%)

Things that Have to be Said

1. Late assignments will not be accepted without approval *prior* to the deadline.
2. Missing more than 5 classes will result in failure of the course.
3. Violations of academic integrity (e.g., plagiarism) will result in failure of the course.

Assignments

1. 2 Short Papers

1,000-1,500 words; double-spaced; provide the word count at the top of the first page.
Submit via Blackboard on Oct. 5 and Nov. 9.

These papers should include the following

- A clear, focused, substantive thesis, of a scope appropriate for a short paper;
- A reasoned defense of the thesis; and
- A consideration of the strongest objection(s) to your reasoned defense.

Since these papers are short, you should strive for clarity and concision. Avoid digressions. As William Zinsser puts it, *"Fighting clutter is like fighting weeds—the writer is always slightly behind."* Be sure to weed your paper of clutter before handing it in.

(Note: Zinsser's book, *On Writing Well*, is a good guide for producing uncluttered prose. See especially part 1.)

For the first two papers, respond to something from our readings—no outside research is expected.

Revision: You *may* revise one of these two short papers for an improved grade, providing following conditions are met:

- (a) the original paper was handed in on time,
- (b) the revisions are significant and substantial, and
- (c) a one-page letter describing the improvements you made between the first and second version of the paper is included with your resubmission. (The letter should be on the last page of the document uploaded to Blackboard.)

Revisions must be submitted via Blackboard **within 1 week from the date the papers are returned.**

2. Research Paper

4,000-6,000 words; double-spaced; provide the word count at the top of the first page.
Submit via Blackboard by midnight on Dec. 17.

This paper may grow out of an interest sparked by work done in class, but I will expect you to do additional outside research. An initial proposal and bibliography will be due later in the semester.

Around mid-semester I will show you some of the better resources for doing philosophical research.

I advise you to begin your research early. You will need to develop an eye for *quality* sources on your topic, since there is a lot of lower-quality material out there. Don't rely only on what you can get online. You will likely need to request a source or two via ILL, and it takes time to work through this process.

3. Presentations

You will be asked to give two in-class presentations.

The first presentation will be on the readings for your assigned day. You should present an analysis of something in the readings that leads to a deeper understanding of the text. Plan to spend ~20 minutes for the main part of your presentation, and include questions designed to generate discussion. Your presentation will launch our discussion for that day and so you should try to focus the class on what you take to be the most interesting or salient aspect of the readings and frame it in a way that allows for a sustained conversation. Strategies might include

- analyzing a single, crucial, argument from the readings;
- tracing the implications of an argument from the readings;
- raising objections to the position being defended in the readings;
- providing independent arguments intended to support the conclusion in the readings; or
- synthesizing, comparing, or contrasting the readings with other things we've read or with historical antecedents.

The second presentation will be a short 15-minute précis of your research paper, followed by 5 minutes of Q&A. The final three class sessions will be dedicated to research presentations.

Tentative Course Schedule

1. Th/Sept. 6: Introduction to the Course

Things

2. Tu/Sept. 11: Why Metaphysics?
 van Inwagen, ch. 1
 Excerpt from Arthur Schopenhauer, "The Human Need for Metaphysics" (CP)
 Recommended: Jonathan Bennett and Samuel Gorovitz, "Improving Academic Writing" (CP)
3. Th/Sept. 13: How Many Things Are There?
 van Inwagen, Introduction to Part One and chapter 2
 Jonathan Schaffer, "On What Grounds What" (CP)
4. Tu/Sept. 18: If a Tree Falls in the Forest
 van Inwagen, ch. 3
 George Berkeley, *Principles of Human Knowledge*, I.1-31 (CP)

Time

5. Th/Sept. 20: The Time of Your Life
 van Inwagen, ch. 4, pp. 71-mid76
 Aristotle, *Physics* IV.10-14 (CP)
 Augustine, *Confessions*, ch. 11, focus especially on §§14-30, pp. 242-256 (CP)
 Optional: Alan Lightman, "Einstein's Dreams" (BB)

Notes about this unit on Time:

(a) *The physics of time*: Unless there are members of our class who know physics well, we will likely *not* spend a lot of time discussing the theory of relativity. For those who want to discuss the metaphysics of time as it relates to this theory, I'd recommend starting with the article below, which (in the second half) shows that many of the arguments about time that we are discussing can be reframed to make explicit reference to relativity:

Steven Savitt, "Being and Becoming in Modern Physics," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/spacetime-bebecome/> (BB)

(b) *The experience of time*: Additionally, if you're interested in reading more about the way time is *experienced* I recommend

Jenann Ismael, "Temporal Experience" (BB)

6. Tu/Sept. 25: The Unreality of Time
 van Inwagen, ch. 4, pp. mid76-end
 J.M.E. McTaggart, "The Unreality of Time" (CP)
7. Th/Sept. 27: The Reality of the Present
 A.N. Prior, "The Notion of the Present" (CP)
 A.N. Prior, "Thank Goodness That's Over" (CP)
 Optional: T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, "Burnt Norton" (BB)

8. Tu/Oct. 2: The Reality of Past and/or Future
D.C. Williams, "The Myth of Passage" (CP)
L.A. ("Laurie") Paul, "Temporal Experience" (CP)
9. Th/Oct. 4: Paradoxes of Time Travel
Robert Heinlein "—All You Zombies—" (CP)
David Lewis, Paradoxes of Time Travel (CP)

Short Paper 1 due Oct. 5 (by midnight)

10. Tu/Oct. 9: Objectivity: Could any of these answers be *true*?
van Inwagen, ch. 5

Mind and Self

11. Th/Oct. 11: Dualism/Physicalism
van Inwagen, ch. 10
Barbara Montero "What is the Physical?" (CP)
12. Tu/Oct. 16: Idealism
Robert Merrihew Adams, "Idealism Vindicated" (CP)
13. Th/Oct. 18: Personal Identity
van Inwagen, ch. 11
John Perry, *Dialogue*, First Night (pp. 1-18)
Optional: Daryl Gregory, "Second Person, Present Tense" (BB)

Note: We will *not* be covering dualist theories of personal identity (mainly due to time constraints). If you'd like to pursue this theory, feel free to take it up as a paper topic. The discussion of dualism from van Inwagen ch. 10 will give you some of the necessary background on dualism itself, and there is an article in the Course Packet by Richard Swinburne, entitled "Personal Identity: The Dualist Theory," that will help you get started.

14. Tu/Oct. 23: Physical Continuity
John Perry, *Dialogue*, Second Night (pp. 19-36)
Bernard Williams, "The Self and the Future" (CP)
Optional: Wallace Stevens, "The Snow Man" (BB)

Th/Oct. 25 **No Class (Prof. Jorgensen out of the country)**

15. Tu/Oct. 30: Psychological Continuity
John Perry, *Dialogue*, Third Night (pp. 37-49)
Jennifer Whiting, "Friends and Future Selves" (CP)
Optional: Daryl Gregory, "Petit Mal #2: Digital" (BB)

16. Th/Nov. 1: Deflationary ViewsDavid Hume, *A Treatise on Human Nature*, I.4.6 and Appendix (CP)

Derek Parfit, "Personal Identity" (CP)

17. Tu/Nov. 6: Reflections on the Possibility of Survival

No assigned readings. Instead, please do the following:

*Look up one religious or cultural account of life after death. I want you to have a clear handle on the view, so don't rely on what you think you know about that view—find something **authoritative** to read about your chosen account of survival. Then, answer two questions:*

- a. In what sense (if at all) does the *person* survive death, according to this view?
- b. In what way (if at all) is this view of survival compatible with the accounts of personal identity we've been studying?

Some possibilities (you are not limited to these):

- reincarnation
- immortality of the soul
- resurrection of the body
- cryonics
- chemical preservation of the brain
- mind-to-computer transfer

I will collect this assignment and grade it pass/fail and it will form a part of your participation grade. More importantly, you will be expected to be ready to discuss your findings in class.

Freedom18. Th/Nov. 8: Free Will and Neuroscience

van Inwagen, ch. 12

Alfred Mele, "Free Will and Neuroscience" (CP)

Optional:

1. "Is Free Will an Illusion?": <http://chronicle.com/article/Is-Free-Will-an-Illusion-/131159/> (brief statements from neuroscientists, philosophers, and psychologists in a popular medium)
2. "Questioning Willusionism": <http://www.3ammagazine.com/3am/questioning-willusionism/> (an interview with Eddy Nahmias, a philosopher who works on the issue of free will)

[Note: these links are available through Blackboard as well.]

Short Paper 2 due Nov. 9 (by midnight)19. Tu/Nov. 13: Free Will as a Philosophical ProblemSusan Wolf, *Freedom Within Reason*, ch. 120. Th/Nov. 15: Free Will: The "Real Self"Susan Wolf, *Freedom Within Reason*, Ch. 2

A representative compatibilist account:

Harry Frankfurt, "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person" (CP)

Proposal due Monday, Nov. 19 (by midnight)

21. Tu/Nov. 20 **(Yes—there *will* be class):** Free Will: Autonomy
 Susan Wolf, *Freedom Within Reason*, ch. 3

A representative libertarian account:

Jean-Paul Sartre, selection from “Existentialism is a Humanism” (CP)

Th/Nov. 22 **No Class (Thanksgiving Break)**

22. Tu/Nov. 27: Free Will: Normativity
 Susan Wolf, *Freedom Within Reason*, ch. 4

A representative normative account:

Iris Murdoch, “The Idea of Perfection” (CP)

Optional: Ha Jin, “A Good Fall” (BB)

23. Th/Nov. 29: Free Will: Which Determinism?
 Susan Wolf, *Freedom Within Reason*, ch. 5
 Leibniz, “Letter to Coste, on Human Freedom” (CP)

Note: If we had one more class day, I would end with a discussion of the relation of *metaphysics and the good*. Here are two suggested readings:

Iris Murdoch, “The Sovereignty of Good over other Concepts” (BB)

Plato, “The Allegory of the Cave” (BB)

I would be happy to host a discussion of these texts outside of normal class time with anyone interested.

Preliminary Bibliography due Friday, Nov. 30 (by midnight)

24. Tu/Dec. 4: Discussion of Research Projects
25. Th/Dec. 6: Discussion of Research Projects
26. Tu/Dec. 11: Discussion of Research Projects

Final Papers due Sunday, Dec. 16 (by midnight)

Planning Calendar for PH-328 – Metaphysics

Fall 2012

Week	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
1 Sept. 2				Sept. 5 Classes Begin	1 – Sept. 6		
2 Sept. 9			2 – Sept. 11		3 – Sept. 13		
3 Sept. 16			4 – Sept. 18		5 – Sept. 20		
4 Sept. 23			6 – Sept. 25	Sept. 26 No Classes (Yom Kippur)	7 – Sept. 27		
5 Sept. 30			8 – Oct. 2		9 – Oct. 3	Oct. 5 Short Paper 1 Due	
6 Oct. 7			10 – Oct. 9		11 – Oct. 11		
7 Oct. 14			12 – Oct. 16		13 – Oct. 18		
8 Oct. 21			14 – Oct. 23		Oct. 25 No Class (Prof. J. Traveling)	Oct. 26 No Classes (Study Day)	
9 Oct. 28			15 – Oct. 30		16 – Nov. 1		
10 Nov. 4			17 – Nov. 6		18 – Nov. 8	Nov. 9 Short Paper 2 Due	
11 Nov. 11			19 – Nov. 13		20 – Nov. 15		
12 Nov. 18		Nov. 19 Research Proposal Due	21 – Nov. 20	Thanksgiving Vacation			
13 Nov. 25			22 – Nov. 27		23 – Nov. 29	Nov. 30 Bibliography Due	
14 Dec. 2			24 – Dec. 4		25 – Dec. 6		
15 Dec. 9			26 – Dec. 11	Dec. 12 Last Day of Classes			
Dec. 16	Dec. 16 Research Paper Due						