Philosophy of Time Travel (PHIL10127) Course Guide 2018/19

Course Organiser:
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Office hours (term time): Mondays 3-5 pm Thursdays 1–3 pm

Course Secretary:

Department of Philosophy
School of Philosophy, Psychology and Language Sciences
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Course Aims and Objectives

This course will offer detailed seminars on key philosophical issues in the philosophy of time travel, largely with an analytical slant. Students should end this course conversant with a range of significant metaphysical (and other) issues surrounding time travel. No detailed logical, scientific or metaphysical expertise will be assumed, and the course is intended to be accessible to students with a wide range of philosophical interests and aptitudes.

Intended Learning Outcomes

To develop further the philosophical skills, and to extend and deepen the philosophical knowledge, acquired in previous philosophy courses. Transferable skills that students will acquire or hone in taking this course should include the following:

- written skills (through summative essays)
- oral communication skills (through lecturer-led and/or student-led seminar discussions)
- presentation skills (through giving and criticising student presentations)
- analytical skills (through exploring a carefully-chosen series of philosophical texts)
- ability to recognise and critically assess an argument.

Lecture Times and Locations

First semester: Fridays 09.00 – 11.00 David Hume Tower, 7.01

Lecture Content and Readings

Asterisked items below are available from JSTOR. All other journal items should be available via the electronic journals access facilitated by the Library / MyEd. Any problems, do please let me know.

Main texts:
This is a research-led course, driven by my ongoing monograph and spin-off articles on sundry aspects of time travel.

Just this year (2018), the Oxford University Press have published Ryan Wasserman’s *Paradoxes of Time Travel*, the first full-length book on the philosophy of time travel. Wasserman’s (excellent) book can be recommended in its entirety and should be available (again in its entirety) electronically via the Main Library.

This next is still probably the best available introduction to space and time in general:
Durham Acumen 2010, multiple copies should be available in the Library Hub
Reserve (at shelf-mark BD632 Dai).
I spent academic years 2008-2009 and 2016-17 on research-leave, working on a raft
of time-travel related articles plus a book. On request, I am happy to circulate draft
papers and other works-in-progress of my own. (Just please don’t post my draft stuff
anywhere – I’ll just end up looking silly / even sillier.)

Please note that the following lists of readings are prioritised, with the most
important / useful readings at the top. So the recommended way to tackle the
suggested readings is to start at the top of each list and work downwards. If
you read only one thing for each seminar, read the top one.

**Week 1**
Introducing the Debate – What is Time Travel?
The Lewisian Analysis.
Recommended reading:

Useful background / of related interest:

**Week 2**
Developments of, and Objections to, the Lewisian Analysis.
Recommended reading:

Useful background / of related interest:

**Week 3**
A) Introducing Relativity.

Further reading:

**B) Gödel and the Unreality of Time**

Recommended reading:

Useful background / of related interest:

**Week 4**

The Cheshire Cat Problem and Other Spatial Perplexities.

Recommended reading:

Useful background / of related interest:
**Week 5**


Recommended reading:

Useful background / of related interest:

**Week 6**


Recommended reading:

Useful background / of related interest:

B) Time Travel and Non-Turing Computation.

Recommended reading:
- AR, ‘The Big Pitowsky: Doing Infinitely Many Tasks in (Less Than) No Time At All’, MS still in progress.

Useful background / of related interest:

**Week 7**

Branching-Histories Time Travel.

The Autonomy Principle.

Recommended reading:

Useful background / of related interest:

**Week 8**
The Nomological Contrivance Problem.
Bananas-Skins and Tomato-Rolling.
Recommended reading:

Useful background / of related interest:

**Week 9**
A) Travel in Multi-Dimensional Time.
Recommended reading:
• G. C. Goddu, ‘Time Travel and Changing the Past (or How to Kill Yourself and Live to Tell the Tale)’, *Ratio*, 16, 2003: 16-32.

Useful background / of related interest:

B) Testimony to Time-Travel.
Recommended reading:

**Week 10**
A) Free Will and Determinism
Recommended reading:
• Stephanie Rennick, ‘Things Mere Mortals Can Do, But Philosophers Can’t’, *Analysis* 75, 2015:22-26

B) Personal Identity
Recommended reading:
Useful background / of related interest:

Week 11
Recapitulation / Revision.

Assessment Information
This course will be assessed by means of two essays per student.

1. A short (no more than 1,500 word) essay (40% overall mark):
Due no later than 12 pm on Thursday 25th October 2018

2. A final long (no more than 2,500 word) essay (60% overall mark):
Due no later than 12 pm on Thursday 13th December 2018

OR:

Only for students doing a long essay for the coursework dissertation option:

A 5000 word essay (100% of the overall mark):
Due no later than 12 pm on Tuesday 18th December 2018
Essay Questions

Below are some suggested questions for the short mid-term (no more than 1,500 word) essay. The same questions may be used for the longer final (no more than 3,000 word) essay but please note that for long essay purposes, students will be expected to supplement the suggested readings above, either though their own research and/or through consultation with course organiser.

Additional / alternative readings and/or questions can be provided on request.

1) Did David Lewis successfully establish the logical possibility of backward time travel?
   Reading as for week 1.

2) Discuss at least three objections to time-travel and explain which you find most convincing.
   Reading as for week 2.

3) Did Gödel successfully argue that time is ideal?
   Reading as for weeks 3.

4) Are any of the following philosophically intolerable: a) information loops, b) object loops, c) both, d) neither?
   Reading as for week 5 and week 6 A).

5) Would time travel oblige us to accept the existence of many histories?
   Reading as for week 7.

6) Would time travel worlds necessarily have peculiar physical laws?
   Reading as for week 8.

7) Would impact might time travel have on our conceptions of freedom and personal identity?
   Reading as for week 10.
Selected Additional References / Further Reading

- John W. Carroll, ‘Self Visitation, Traveler Time and Non-Contradiction’, MS available online at: [http://www4.ncsu.edu/~carroll/SVTTNC.pdf](http://www4.ncsu.edu/~carroll/SVTTNC.pdf)


• Roger Penrose, ‘Space-time and Cosmology’, *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*,


Peter J. Riggs, 'The Principal Paradox of Time Travel', Ratio, 10, 1997: 48-64.


Leo Sartori, Understanding Relativity: A Simplified Approach to Einstein’s Theories, California, University of California Press, 1996.


Steven S. Savitt, 'Time Travel and Becoming', The Monist, 88, 2005.


Mathew H. Slater, 'The Necessity of Time Travel (On Pain of Indeterminacy)',
• Peter B. Vranas, ‘Do Cry Over Spilt Milk – Possibly You Can Change the Past’, *The Monist*, 88, 2005
• James F. Woodward, ‘Making the Universe Safe for Historians: Time Travel and the

- Christian Wüthrich, 'Does Modern Physics Permit the Operation of Time Machines?', MS available online at: [http://aardvark.ucsd.edu/grad_conference/wuthrich.pdf](http://aardvark.ucsd.edu/grad_conference/wuthrich.pdf)

**Selected on-line resources:**


**Some articles of mine:**

Over the last eighteen years or so, I've published a few things on the philosophy of time travel, mainly academic articles but some popular too, as follows:

Some fictions and films:

A short word on historical precedence first: Unlike most metaphysical topics, time-travel has drawn forth rather a large fictional literature too. I used to think that H. G. Wells or Mark Twain had invented time travel fiction between them with *The Chronic Argonauts* (1888) and *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889) respectively. Well, how wrong I was. A special mention goes to Edward Page Mitchell (1852 - 1927), who I reckon for the first writer (in English at any rate) to pen an unequivocal time travel story, complete with causal loop. The story in question was first published in 1881 and it's called ‘The Clock That Went Backward’, available online at:

http://www.forgottenfutures.com/game/ff9/tachypmp.htm#clock

Another interesting Page Mitchell nugget is ‘An Uncommon Sort of Spectre’, from 1879 which features what I think is the first appearance in fiction of a ghost from the future and is available here: http://www.horrormasters.com/Text/a2228.pdf

Both the above Page Mitchell stories can be found in a fascinating anthology edited by Chad Arment, called *About Time: The Forerunners of Time Travel and Temporal Anomalies in Science Fiction and Fantasy* (Coachwhip Press, Landisville, Pennsylvania, 2009). This anthology also includes what may be (setting definitional subtleties to one side) an even earlier tale of backward time travel, ‘An Anachronism, or Missing One’s Coach’, published anonymously in the *Dublin University Magazine* for 1838.

Completeness and fairness alike demand that I acknowledge Enrique Gaspar, and his 1887 story *El Anacronopete*. Although not yet available in English translation (hence I haven’t been able to read it, monoglot Anglophone as I regrettably am), *El Anacronopete* is due to appear in the English for the first time next year under the title *The Time Ship: A Chrononautical Journey*. See BBC News item at: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-12900390

Anyway, the following list cannot possibly claim to be exhaustive but here are a few stories I found interesting, (although I don’t necessarily claim literary merit in all cases):

- John Crowley, ‘Great Work of Time’, (1989), reprinted in Crowley’s collection *Novelty*. Pushes the notion of changing history about as far as it can possibly go … and a bit further.
- Lester Del Rey, ‘My Name is Legion’, (1942), reprinted in *The Best of Lester Del Rey*. Perhaps the pinnacle of multi-occupancy stories – also contains some
intriguing advice on what to do with (the obviously then still-living) Adolf Hitler.

- Michael Moorcock, Behold the Man, (1969), original short story version appears in Moorcock’s Book of Martyrs. Centred on a remarkable feat of historical impersonation. (I say no more.)
- Audrey Niffenegger, The Time Traveler’s Wife, (2004). Very intriguing attempt at depicting (with complete consistency) a life whose personal time is very convoluted indeed. Lewis might well have applauded.
- Christopher Priest, ‘Palely Loitering’, (1979), reprinted in Priest’s collection An Infinite Summer. Poignant tale of revisited chances that also oddly anticipates real physical speculation about (e.g.) time-travel by Alcubierre warp-tube (of which more anon).
- Mark Twain, A Connecticut Yankee at King Arthur's Court, (1889). Transmigration of epochs, no less – transplants a then-contemporary American to the British Dark Ages, and all quite independently of Wells’ efforts.

Likewise, a few time-travel films seemed interesting to me too:

- La Jetée, (1962), written and directed by Chris Marker. Beautiful, haunting short film told almost (but not quite) entirely in stills.
- Primer, (2004), written, directed and produced by Shane Carruth. Not at all Lewisian but thoroughly intriguing – watch it at least twice, ideally the second time with director’s commentary, some string and a notepad handy
- Time Crimes (Los Cronocrimenes), (2007), written and directed by Nacho
Vigalondo. Also thoroughly Lewisian, albeit to some very strange, film noir-ish, ends. Another “watch at least twice” job.

I am always in the market for more recommendations however.

Feedback

It’s very important that you should know what sort of standard of feedback you can expect on my courses and how quickly I aim to turn work around. I aim to make my feedback as useful as I can and to help you pinpoint not only those areas where improvement might be indicated but also those areas where you’ve done well. Please note that besides written feedback on summative work and draft work, you can also obtain feedback by making an appointment to see me, by sending me questions or concerns via e-mail.

For short or long essays, I aim to complete coversheets and return work electronically within three working weeks of initial submission.

If you’ve any questions relating to feedback or any other aspect of the course, please don’t hesitate to get in touch.

Please Note

This course is completely independent of my Honours core course ‘Metaphysics (Philosophy of Time)’. Some topics inevitably may reflect each other across the two courses but neither course is required for the other.