

The Philosophy of Time

Introductory Lecture

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Introductory Lecture

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This Too Shall Pass

There was once a powerful king, who asked his wise men to create a ring that would make him happy when he was sad. After some thought, the wise men presented him with a plain ring, on which they had etched the words: This too shall pass. The king was pleased, because the ring always did manage to make him happy when he was sad. Unfortunately, it also made him sad when he was happy.

Why Study the Philosophy of Time?

- This fable gets at a simple truth which shapes everything about the human experience
- We live our lives in time
- We are constantly being hustled along by time, never allowed to stop and take a breath
- Everything about the way we think and live is built around that fact
- Bearing all of that in mind, if time is not a worthy subject for philosophical reflection, then nothing is

Two Big Questions

- In this course, we are going to focus on two big questions about time
 - (1) Is time real?
 - (2) Does the past exist? Does the future exist? Or is the present moment all that is real?
- We will focus on (1) in Lectures 1–4, and (2) in Lectures 5–8

Is Time Real?

- This can seem like a silly question: Of course time is real, just count the seconds as they pass by!
- But many of great philosophers have argued that time is an illusion
 - (And in fact, some **scientists** have offered similar arguments, sometimes based on General Relativity, and sometimes based on Quantum Mechanics)
- We will focus on a deeply influential, deeply interesting and deeply puzzling argument by McTaggart which was meant to show that time was not real
- Now, you may not find yourself convinced by McTaggart's argument, but showing what is wrong with it is not easy!

Is the Present Moment All that is Real?

- **Presentism** is the idea that only the present moment is real
- **Eternalism** is the idea that all times are real
- Presentism can seem very natural and intuitive
 - The future has yet to be, and the past has been and gone
- But it has its problems
 - If the past does not exist, then what makes claims about the past true?
 - If the future does not exist, then what makes claims about the future true?
 - Just when is the present, anyway?
- As we will see, presentists have offered ingenious responses to these questions, but then we come up against a new question:
 - Are presentists really disagreeing with eternalists, or are they just using different ways of speaking to say the same thing?

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Discussion in the Lectures

- The lectures are every Wednesday, 10:00–11:00
- These ‘lectures’ will be halfway between lectures and seminars
- You will be welcome, and encouraged, to ask questions and engage with discussions
- You should prepare for lectures in much the same way that you prepare for seminars
 - Read the set reading in advance
 - Bring notes and questions

Lecture Timing

- If we have dialogues in the lectures, you will understand the material better, and do better in the exams
- **But:** if we talk, then we won't always get through all of the slides, and you may need to read the slides independently
- The slides will always be made available on the VLE, and will go up before the lecture, in case you want to bring them along

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Seminars

- There will be four seminars in total, held on Weeks 3, 5, 7 and 9
- There are three different seminar groups (make sure you know which one you are in!)
 - Group 1: 10:30–12:00
 - Group 2: 13:30–15:00
 - Group 3: 16:30–18:00

Make the Best of Them!

- Seminars are key opportunities to get feedback from me
- But more important, they are an opportunity to discuss and explore the topics we are covering with your peers
- So it is important that you make the most of them!
 - Prepare for your seminars (more on that in a moment)
 - Speak in the seminars (I know that can be difficult!)
 - Listen in the seminars (I know that can be just as difficult!)
 - Be friendly, open and encouraging to your peers
 - **Follow up on seminars** by revising and adding to your notes

Seminar Preparation

- Make sure you do all of the required reading
- Take careful notes, and bring written questions to the seminar
- Be prepared to present your own explanations of:
 - The key issues/questions
 - The positions on those issues/questions
 - Any problems/puzzles you've encountered
- Never be scared to bring up what **confused** you in a seminar; everyone will be confused about something (even if they don't admit it), and everyone will benefit from discussing these issues

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- VLE — lecture slides etc.
- The reading pack
- Online resources — Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, library e-journals, etc.

The Reading Pack

- Not just 'seminar readings', but a broader selection of high quality articles on the issues
- Why?
 - To help encourage exploration and development of study skills
 - To provide a convenient study resource to everyone on the module

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Procedural Requirements

- You must attend all lectures and seminars
- You must prepare for those seminars and lectures in the ways described above
- You must complete the assessments (more on them shortly)

Rate of Work

- In addition to the lectures and seminars, you should do 9 hours of private study per week for this module
- This is based on University recommendations

Working Together

- I very strongly recommend that you all work **together** in this module
- If you do, you will undoubtedly do better than you would otherwise, and will enjoy the module more
- So get together informally to discuss the issues!
- I would suggest you try to meet before and/or after the seminars

E-Mail Partnerships

- In order to encourage this co-operation, we will set up e-mail partnerships
- On the VLE you will find a photo sheet for this module. There are four photos per row on this sheet. The first person on each row is partnered with the second, and the third is partnered with the fourth
- You should have a brief e-mail exchange with your partner after each lecture
 - Write about what you were most puzzled by and/or check you understand key points
 - If you disagree about something, try to persuade each other
- You may want to bring questions arising from e-mail discussion to the next lecture or seminar

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Formative Assessment

- Task: *What puzzles me most is...*
- From the topics you're preparing for the exam, select the issue/some material that gives you most difficulty, then:
 - (i) lay out the material
 - (ii) identify your problem/difficulty
 - (iii) **present your best shot at resolving it**

Important Notes on the Formative Assessment

- (1) The short essay must **not** be about a whole assessment question — pick on a key point that you're particularly interested in or is giving you particular trouble
- (2) You **must** include (iii) — your own best attempt at finding a resolution

The Practical Details

- Word limit: 500 words
- Submission
 - The deadline is Noon, Monday Week 7
 - You should **not** submit your assessment **before** Monday Week 6
- Submit your assessment via e-mail to me at:
rob.trueman@york.ac.uk
- Subject head for e-mail: 'Time Short Essay' + your name

The Exam

- The Summative Assessment for this module will be a **one hour exam**, held in the Summer Exam Period
- You will answer **one** question from a selection of four
- The questions that come up will not be neatly pigeonholed into particular lectures — one question might cover material from various lectures
- It is **not** guaranteed that there will be questions on each topic covered in lectures and seminars
- You will need to ensure you understand a good range of the material

Preparing for the Exam

- Get to grips with all of the module content during teaching
- Think hard about the key questions, and how points from different elements in the material covered might bear on them
- Work on answers to likely assessment questions **as we go through the module**

How to Write a Good Exam Essay

- A good essay always starts with a **clear statement** of your answer to the question
 - If you think the question is unclear, or ambiguous, explain why you think this, and how you will understand it right at the start
- The whole essay will then be one long **argument** for your answer
 - Pretty much every step in the essay should be a step **towards** your answer
 - The only exception is when you need to stop to defend a step you have already made

How to Write a Good Exam Essay

- Before you start writing your essay, you should always write an **essay plan**
- This will give your essay structure, and help it avoid slipping into a ramble
- You should also always “signpost” what you are doing: explain why you are doing what you are doing — how does it fit into your argument?
 - Never leave it up to your examiner to guess!
- If it helps, feel free to include section headings in your essay

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- Seminars (and lecture discussions)
- Office hours
- E-mail
- Formative assessment

Office Hours

- I will have a weekly office hour on Tuesday, 14:30–15:30, SB/A/119
 - If you want to meet me outside of that time slot, then please just e-mail me and we will arrange a time and date
- Office hours are opportunities for feedback and advice
- They are terribly underused
- They are not just for problems — they are a chance for you to discuss the material in the module
- You can come in groups if you like (up to 4 people)

E-Mail

- Please feel free to e-mail me with **any questions** at:
rob.trueman@york.ac.uk
- These e-mails do not have to be about problems or difficulties you are having (although please do e-mail me with those): they can just be about something in the module you are interested in
- Please mark the subject: Time
- If I think they might be helpful, I may post **anonymised** versions of people's e-mails on the VLE