

Final Paper Topics
PHIL 1480 Metaphysics
Cian Dorr
April 8, 2006

Due date: Tuesday, April 25th.

Length: 1500-2000 words.

Note on secondary readings: You are encouraged but not required to consult other relevant works on your topic; I will be happy to provide advice. But please do not use other readings as a crutch. However much you have read, you are expected to spend a reasonable proportion of your paper doing something that goes beyond merely reporting or rehearsing the contents of the readings.

If this is your first time writing a full-scale term paper in philosophy—or even if it isn't—I recommend you peruse Jim Pryor's useful website 'Guidelines on Writing a Philosophy Paper': <http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html>.

ZERO-TOLERANCE POLICY ON PLAGIARISM: The penalty for plagiarism in any degree is failing the course. Plagiarism occurs when you borrow someone else's words or thoughts without acknowledgment.

1. According to C.D. Broad, McTaggart's argument for the unreality of time is a 'philosophical howler'. Is he right?

The bulk of your answer should be devoted to considering in detail the question how one phase of McTaggart's argument (either the argument for the unreality of the A-series, or the argument from this to the unreality of time) is actually supposed to work, with close reference to the text. As part of this, you should clearly explain some reason for thinking that the relevant phase of the argument is a failure, and consider whether McTaggart has any workable response to this objection.

Relevant readings: McTaggart, Broad, van Inwagen (chapter on Temporality).

2. Is there good reason to believe the 'growing block' theory of time?

At least half of your answer should be devoted to considering in detail the question how Broad's argument for this view is supposed to work. At some point in your answer, you should consider some objection to Broad's argument, and consider whether the growing block theorist has any workable response to this objection.

Relevant readings: Broad, Williams, Prior, Sider (*Four-Dimensionalism*, chapter 2).

3. Are there things that do not exist right now?

In your answer, you should *at least* (i) clearly explain one line of argument for or against the claim that there are things that do not exist right now; (ii) present one objection to this argument; and (iii) consider one rejoinder to this objection. You may consider more than one argument if you wish, but at least half your paper should be spent considering one line of argument.

Relevant readings: Williams, Prior, Markosian, Sider (*Four-Dimensionalism*, chapter 2).

4. 'The claim that one is doing a certain thing entails, and is entailed, by the claim that it was true a million years ago that one would be doing that thing a million years later. But facts about the distant past, and their logical consequences, are not up to us. So nothing we do is ever up to us.' Discuss.

In your paper, you should (i) succinctly present one argument for the claim that it is impossible for anything to be up to anyone (or equivalently, for anyone to be able both to do something and to refrain from doing that thing); (ii) explain at least two strategies for resisting this argument; and (iii) present and critically discuss at least one objection to each of these strategies.

Relevant readings: van Inwagen, Aristotle, Williams.

5. Are ordinary objects composed of temporal parts?

In your paper, you should *at least* (i) explain what it means to claim that ordinary objects are composed of temporal parts; (ii) clearly explain one argument for the claim that they are; (iii) present one objection to this argument; and (iv) consider one rejoinder to this objection. You may consider more than one line of argument if you wish, but at least half your paper should be spent considering one line of argument.

Relevant readings: Sider's paper 'Temporal Parts' and relevant sections of his book *Four-Dimensionalism* (on reserve). The last chapter of that book is a good survey of arguments against temporal parts.

6. What is it for a person to continue to exist through some period of time?

In your paper, you should *at least* (i) present and motivate one answer to this question, or at least one general approach to answering this question; (ii) present one objection to this answer or approach; (iii) consider and

critically assess one strategy for responding to this objection (which could take the form of a modification of the original answer). You don't have to defend any answer of your own.

Relevant readings: Have a look at the endnotes and bibliographical references in the relevant chapters of Parfit. (You'll have to go to the library to get these as I didn't put them online.) The article 'Personal Identity' in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* contains a useful overview, with further bibliographic pointers. If relevant, Lewis's paper 'Survival and Identity' is on the website; Williams' classic paper 'The Self and the Future' is available on JStor.

7. Does personal identity *matter*, in Parfit's sense? That is, does the fact that, of two outcomes, one involves a person ceasing to exist while the other does not, of itself, have rational and/or moral significance?

In your paper, you should *at least* (i) clearly explain one argument that personal identity does not matter; (ii) present one objection to this argument, and (iii) consider and critically assess one response to this objection.

Relevant readings: Parfit, including notes; conceivably also Lewis, 'Survival and Identity'.

8. Later events are often caused by earlier events; the reverse never happens, at least in our experience. Why?

In your paper, you should *at least* (i) present one answer to this question; (ii) explain one objection to this answer, and (iii) consider and critically assess one strategy for responding to this objection (which could take the form of a modification of the original answer). You don't have to defend any answer of your own.

Relevant readings: Lewis, Elga, Field. If you want to talk in detail about the counterfactual analysis of causation, look at some of the papers in *Counterfactuals and Causation*, ed. Ned Hall and L.A. Paul: the introduction to that volume gives a useful overview. Another interesting book advocating a different approach from Lewis's is Paul Horwich, *Asymmetries in Time* (on reserve). If you want to learn more about the issues in statistical mechanics mentioned by Elga, the best philosophical introduction is David Albert's *Time and Chance*; this also contains some intriguing suggestions about the form an explanation of the asymmetry of counterfactual dependence might take.

9. Is time travel possible?

In your paper, you should *at least* (i) present one argument that time travel is impossible; (ii) clearly explain one objection to this argument; (iii) present one rejoinder to this objection; and (iv) critically evaluate this rejoinder. You may consider more than one argument if you want, but at least half your paper should be spent on one.

Relevant readings: Lewis, 'The Paradoxes of Time Travel', and if relevant, readings on causation, counterfactual dependence, personal identity, temporal parts and philosophy of tense. If you are interested in pursuing objections that focus on challenging Lewis's assumption that the B-theory is true, have a look at 'Presentists should believe in time-travel', by Simon Keller and Michael Nelson (online at <http://people.bu.edu/stk/Papers/Timetravel.pdf>).

10. Wildcard question. In consultation with me, formulate your own paper topic, dealing with any of the issues we discussed in the course. If you want to take this option, you must contact me with a proposal by Tuesday, April 18th.