

HNRS 475 – Interdisciplinary Seminar - Time
Spring 2015 - Syllabus

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Schedule/Location: Wednesday 6:10-9:10, Sage 4212

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Office hours: MWF 2:00-3:00, Radford 327

Texts: (1) Le Poidevin, Robin, *Travels In Four Dimensions: The Enigmas of Space and Time*.
(2) Selected readings, available on our D2L site.

About the course

This interdisciplinary seminar, which fulfills the University Honors Program capstone requirement, focuses on the subject of *time*. Time is, of course, a very broad topic that relates in one way or another to *every* discipline (and every life), and looking deeply into at least one of the ways in which it relates to *yours* is one of the main features of this class. However, to provide ourselves with a common background, we will also talk each week about general issues related to time from philosophical and scientific perspectives. To this end, we will read much of Le Poidevin's *Travels In Four Dimensions: The Enigmas of Space and Time*. Other readings are posted online. We will also watch three feature films in class: "Looper", which relates to the possibility of time travel, "Minority Report", which relates to the question of whether the future can be changed (and hence whether we have "free will" or not), and "Memento", which vividly illustrates the importance of memory in daily life.

Seminar Projects

While we develop a general understanding of "time itself", students will branch out in their own disciplines to produce seminar projects that relate to the topic of time. The final *written* products of these projects, due the last night of class, should be 10-15 pages long and written in a style that is appropriate to your major discipline (e.g., MLA for English and Foreign Languages; APA for Social Sciences). The 12th and 13th weeks of class will consist entirely of *oral presentations* of these projects. In these presentations, edited versions of your written work may be read aloud, but I would encourage you to explore alternative forms of presentation (such as PowerPoint presentations and handouts). Questions and feedback from your fellow students at the end of your presentation should help you polish your final draft.

When doing independent research, "time management" (a worthy topic in itself!) is essential. As listed in the lesson plan below,

- general topics** are due by the 3rd week;
- specific project proposals** are due by the 6th week;
- partly annotated bibliographies** are due by the 8th week;¹
- first drafts of project abstracts** are due by the 11th week;
- essays in response to one of our common readings** are due by the 12th week;
- oral presentations** are due by the 12th, 13th, or 14th week (determined by lottery);
- final research papers** are due by the 14th week.

¹ For tips on how to write an annotated bibliography (and other valuable insights into the research process, see <http://olinuris.library.cornell.edu/ref/research/skill28.htm>).

Grading Basis

1) Attendance & Participation (30%). Since this is a seminar and not a lecture course, *your engagement with the material* will be crucial to its success. For this reason, **30% of your final grade will depend on your regular attendance and participation.** “Participation” includes making cogent comments about the readings, student work in progress, and other matters under discussion, but it also includes asking incisive questions. Some of our common readings are challenging and not always clear; by asking relevant questions, students can help the whole class understand them. Of course, not everyone will always have an equal opportunity to participate during each class meeting. For this reason, ***half of your participation grade will depend on your submitting (in writing) at least one question or comment per required reading, via our D2L Dropbox.*** These will be **due 24 hours in advance of each class meeting**, and graded on a pass/fail (0 or 1 point) basis. Adequate questions or comments will provide a clear indication of your having read *and thought about* the readings. Superior questions or comments will receive an extra point and will count as extra credit; such questions must demonstrate a deeper-than-necessary engagement with the material (e.g., questions that are set up by a close analysis of a sentence or passage; questions that suggest interesting connections between different readings; etc.). Your final participation grade will be calculated as a function of both this *pre-class* and *in-class* participation. A paucity of in-class participation can be partly offset by the submission of superior pre-class work, and *vice versa*. Of course, the easiest way to receive an ‘A’ for participation is simply to be diligent in both areas.

2) Essay in Response to a Reading (20%). Prior to the 12th week of class, you are to submit a 4-6 page essay in response to one or more of the assigned readings. This paper will be graded on the basis of your ability to write and reason clearly about your chosen topic.

3) Oral Presentation of Your Research (20%). This portion of your grade requires that you come to designated classes prepared to discuss (1) your general topic, (2) your more specific project proposal, (3) your partly annotated bibliography, (4) your abstract (a one-paragraph summary of your topic, methodology, and conclusion), and (5) your final project itself.

4) Research Paper (30%). An in-depth, 10-15 page research paper on your chosen topic, preferably within your major discipline.

Letter grades will be assigned to each of the four components. At the end of the course, these letter grades will be translated into grade points (on a 4-point scale). Your final grade will be calculated as the average – weighted according to the percentages above – of these component grade points.

Important Note: In most of your majors, I qualify merely as an educated bystander. Therefore, it is crucial that you write your research papers in a way that can readily be understood by someone with little expertise in your field (unless you are a philosophy major). A similar point applies, of course, to your in-class presentations, which you should address to an intelligent but “uninitiated” audience. (By the way, being able to present technical information *accessibly* is a mark of high quality academic writing; you should strive for this even when communicating with other specialists in your field).

Weekly Lesson Plan

Week 1 (2/4)- Introduction to the course.

Readings: None.

Discussion of course content and methodology.

“Brainstorming” session on possible research topics in various disciplines.

Film: *Looper* (first half)

Week 2 (2/11)- Presentism, Eternalism, and The Possibility of Time Travel

Reminder: questions/comments on readings are **due by Tuesday, 2/10, at 8:00 pm.**

Film: *Looper* (second half).

Required Reading-

Robin Le Poidevan, Chapter 10: “Interfering with History”.

Optional Readings-

Ned Markosian, SEP article on *Time*, Section 6, “Presentism, Eternalism, and The Growing Universe Theory”.

David Lewis, “The Paradoxes of Time Travel”, article available on D2L.

Week 3 (2/18)- Time and Change

Reminder: questions/comments on readings are **due by Tuesday, 2/17, at 8:00pm.**

Also due at this time: research project topics.

Required Reading-

Robin Le Poidevan, Chapter 2: “Change”.

Optional Readings-

Ned Markosian, SEP article on *Time*, Section 2, “Reductionism and Platonism with Respect to Time”.

Sydney Shoemaker, “Time Without Change”, article available on D2L.

Discussion of student research project topics.

Week 4 (2/25)- The Reality or Unreality of Time

Reminder: questions/comments on readings are **due by Tuesday, 2/24, at 8:00pm.**

Required Reading-

Robin Le Poidevan, Chapter 8: “Does Time Pass?”

Optional Readings-

Ned Markosian, SEP article on *Time*, Section 4, “McTaggart’s Argument”, and Section 5, “The A Theory and The B Theory”.

J.M.E. McTaggart, “The Unreality of Time”, article available on D2L.

Film: “Minority Report” (first half).

Week 5 (3/4)- Fatalism, Determinism, Free Will, and Time

Reminder: questions/comments on readings are **due by Tuesday, 3/3, at 8:00 pm.**

Film: “Minority Report” (second half)

Required Readings-

William James, “The Dilemma of Determinism”, available on D2L.

Optional Reading-

Bradley Dowden, “Fatalism, Free Will, and Foreknowledge” (a dialogue), available on D2L.

Week 6 (3/11)- Did Time Ever Begin? Will it ever end?

Reminder: questions/comments on readings are **due by Tuesday, 3/10, at 8:00 pm.**

Also due at this time: student project proposals (more detailed than just topics).

Reading-

Robin Le Poidevan, Chapter 5: “The Beginning and End of Time”.

Discussion of student project proposals.

Week 7 (3/18)- Zeno’s Paradoxes and the “micro-structure” of time

Reminder: questions/comments on readings are **due by Tuesday, 3/17, at 8:00 pm.**

Also due at this time: partially annotated bibliographies of books or journal articles that are likely relevant to your project.

Required Reading-

Bradley Dowden, “Zeno’s Paradoxes and Supertasks” (a dialogue), available on D2L.

Optional Reading-

Robin Le Poidevan, Chapter 9: “The Cinematic Universe”.

Discussion of initial, partly annotated bibliographies.

SPRING BREAK

Week 8 (4/1)- The Arrow of Time

Reminder: questions/comments on reading are **due by Tuesday, 3/31, at 8:00 pm.**

Also due at this time: initial, partly annotated bibliographies.

Required Reading-

Bradley Dowden, “The Arrow of Time”, (a dialogue), available on D2L.

Optional Reading-

Robin Le Poidevan, Chapter 12: “The Arrows of Time”.

Discussion of initial, partly annotated bibliographies.

Week 9 (4/8)- Space, Time, and Spacetime

Reminder: questions/comments on reading are **due by Tuesday, 4/7, at 8:00 pm.**

Required Readings:

(1) Russell Stannard, “Relativity: a very short introduction”, Part I, available on D2L.

(2) Wikipedia article on Spacetime: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spacetime> (up to the section entitled “Mathematics of spacetimes”).

Film: Memento (first half)

Week 10 (4/15)- Memory

Reminder: questions/comments on reading are **due by Tuesday, 4/14, at 8:00 pm.**

Film: Memento (second half)

Required Readings:

(1) John Sutton, SEP article on *Memory*, Sections 1, “The Concept of Memory”, and Section 2, “Memory and Representation”.

Week 11 (4/22)- Anticipation, Memory, and Utility

Reminder: questions/comments on reading are **due by Tuesday, 4/21, at 8:00 pm**

Also due at this time: first drafts of project abstracts.

Required Reading-

Jon Elster and George Loewenstein, “Utility from Memory and Anticipation”, available on D2L.

Discuss first drafts of research project abstracts.

Week 12 (4/29)- Student Research Oral Presentations

DUE (in D2L Dropbox): 4-6 page response paper to a course reading or readings.

Student research oral presentations #1-5.

Week 13 (5/6)- Student Research Oral Presentations (Continued)

DUE (in D2L Dropbox): Final Draft of Research Paper

Student research oral presentations #6-11.

Week 14 (5/13)- Student Research Oral Presentations (if any remain to be done)

Complete any delayed oral presentations.

Discuss your research experiences (focusing on any issues that arose).

Take student surveys.

Celebrate!

*If we take eternity to mean not infinite temporal duration but timelessness,
then eternal life belongs to those who live in the present.*

-Ludwig Wittgenstein