

Syllabus

Issues in Contemporary Philosophy 480 — Time, Causality and Agency

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This course explores the situation of the agent in time, specifically the character and explanation of the various temporal asymmetries connected with the agent's relationship as knower and actor to past and future events.

Among the questions we will examine are the following: Does time flow? What do we mean when we say that the past is fixed and the future is not? Is causation intrinsically directed from past to future? What distinguishes the character of our knowledge of the future from the character of our knowledge of the past? How are we to understand an agent's capacity to initiate events in a universe in which all events and processes without exception are supposed describable in physical terms and governed by physical laws? How are the schemes of probabilistic, counterfactual, and causal dependency related? What relationship between actions and desired outcomes justifies the performance of the former for the sake of the latter? Are there fundamental logical limits in our capacity to predict the conclusions obtained in our own or in others' deliberations?

Weeks 1-3:	Introduction; The Flow of Time
J. McTaggart	The Unreality of Time
D. C. Williams	The Myth of Passage
Tim Maudlin	Remarks on the Passage of Time
Kurt Gödel	A Remark about the Relationship between Relativity Theory and Idealistic Philosophy
Weeks 3-5:	The Open Future and The Fixed Past
Richard Taylor	Fatalism
Bertrand Russell	On the Notion of Cause
Michael Dummett	Bringing About the Past
Hans Reichenbach	Intervention (<i>The Direction of Time</i> , ch.II, section 6)
Weeks 5 and 6:	The anisotropy of processes in time
Hans Reichenbach	<i>The Direction of Time</i> (ch. III, Section 13)
Weeks 6-8:	Causal, Probabilistic and Counterfactual Dependence
D. K. Lewis	Counterfactual Dependence and Time's Arrow
David Albert	<i>Time and Chance</i>
Weeks 9-11:	The Decision Problem and Causality
Allan Gibbard and William Harper	Counterfactuals and Two Kinds of Expected Utility
Paul Horwich	Decision (<i>Asymmetries in Time</i> , ch. 11)
Weeks 11-14:	Deliberation and Prediction
Henri Bergson	Real Duration and Prediction (<i>Time and Free Will</i> , ch. III)
Carl Ginet	Can the Will be Caused?
David Wiggins	Freedom, Knowledge, Belief and Causality
Frederic Schick	Self-Knowledge, Uncertainty and Choice
Alvin Goldman	Determinism and Predictability (<i>A Theory of Action</i> , ch. 6)
Haim Gaifman	Self-reference and the Acyclicity of Rational Choice

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A grasp of certain elements of logic, probability theory, physics, and decision theory is necessary for mastering the issues explored in this course. Although no substantial prior knowledge of these areas is assumed, a serious willingness to engage with some technical material is essential.

Note: The university has directed that all syllabi make note of the existence of The Rutgers Self-Reporting Absence Website (<https://sims.rutgers.edu/ssra>), as well as of the request that it be utilized by students to indicate the date(s) and reason for their absence from class.