

PHI 5935 Proseminar

Section 5000 Class Number 16397 Fall 2023

1. Basic information
 - 1.1 Meeting times and location
 - 1.2 Instructor and contact information
 - 1.3 Office hours
 - 1.4 Required texts
 - 1.5 Schedule
 2. Course overview
 - 2.1 Course description
 - 2.2 Subjects and readings
 - 2.3 Learning objectives
 3. Requirements
 - 3.1 Overview
 - 3.2 Short papers, handouts, and presentations
 - 3.3 Revised & expanded paper
 - 3.4 Final paper
 4. Grading information
 5. Policies
 - 6.1 Attendance
 - 6.2 Academic honesty
 - 6.3 Academic honesty and collaboration
 - 6.4 Outside sources
 - 6.5 Disability accommodations
 - 6.6 Course evaluations
 6. Resources
 - 6.1 Technical support
 - 6.2 Other support services
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1. Basic information

1.1 Meeting times and location

Wednesdays, periods 8-10 (3:00 PM – 6:00 PM)
Griffin-Floyd Room 200

1.2 Instructor and contact information

Instructor:	Dr. D. Gene Witmer
Office	330A Griffin-Floyd Hall
Office phone	352-273-1830
Email	gwitmer@ufl.edu
Webpage	https://people.clas.ufl.edu/gwitmer/

1.3 Office hours

Tuesdays 2:00PM to 5:00PM
And by appointment

Note that regular office hours are not held during holidays, spring break, or after the last day of classes (during reading days and exam week). Appointments might still be made during those times. If a class is cancelled any office hours on that day are cancelled as well.

1.4 Required texts

There are no texts required for purchase for this class. All assigned readings will be made available for you as PDF documents on the Canvas site.

1.5 Schedule

The initial schedule is found on a separate document that is also available on the Canvas site. Any updates will be published on the Canvas site as well, so you can always check there to make sure you know what is expected.

Meetings are on Wednesdays. For every week up to October 11th, you will have an assignment due that week — either a handout, a short paper, or a short presentation on a paper project. Those assignments are always due in to Canvas no later than the end of the day Tuesday before class. So, for example, for Wednesday, September 6, your assignments for that day are due in to Canvas by 11:59PM on Tuesday, September 5th.

We have one meeting that is not scheduled for the Wednesday 3:00PM - 6:00PM slot. This is a special "Library Research Tools Session" with Megan Daly, one of the Library West bibliographers, over in Library West. This is a meeting during which Megan will go over various resources for research with you. It has already been scheduled for **THURSDAY AUGUST 31ST, from 9:00AM to 10:00AM** in Room 211 in Library West. We will meet together at the main office in the Philosophy Department at 8:50AM to walk over as a group for that session.

2. Course overview

2.1 Course description

The proseminar, required of all new graduate students, is intended to ensure students have the fundamental skills needed for the successful advanced study of philosophy. This iteration of the course will be split into two parts. In the first part, we will discuss some material from each of three important areas — epistemology, ethics, and metaphysics — where students are required either to write a short paper or prepare a handout for presentation every week. At the end of this period students are required to produce a longer paper built atop some of the work they've already done. In the second part, students will be grouped into pairs of people with similar interests to select a specific question they're interested in and locate two readings on that question which (pending my approval) will be assigned to the whole class for discussion. Following such discussion each student devises a plan for a final paper and makes a presentation on that paper in progress in the last few sessions of the class. The proseminar is graded on a pass/fail basis.

2.2 Subjects and readings

Given the nature of this course, there is no particular area of philosophy it need focus on, and different versions of it have used different selections of readings. This semester the strategy I am using is to dedicate the first half of the semester to a few readings each from three different areas: epistemology, ethics, and metaphysics. During the second half of the semester readings will be assigned on the basis of students' own projects.

The readings for the first part of the semester are as follows.

Epistemology

- Stroud, Barry. 1984. "The Problem of the External World." Chapter 1 from his book *The Significance of Philosophical Skepticism*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Van Cleve, James. 1979. "Foundationalism, Epistemic Principles, and the Cartesian Circle." *Philosophical Review* 88: 55-91.
- Pryor, James. 2004. "What's Wrong with Moore's Argument?" *Philosophical Issues* 14: 349-378.

Ethics

- Foot, Philippa. 1972. "Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives." *The Philosophical Review* 81 (3): 305-316.
- Brink, David. 1992. "A Puzzle about the Rational Authority of Morality." *Philosophical Perspectives* 6: 1-26.

Metaphysics

- deRosset, Louis. 2009. "Possible Worlds I: Modal Realism." *Philosophy Compass* 4 (6): 998-1008.
- deRosset, Louis. 2009. "Possible Worlds II: Non-Reductive Theories of Possible Worlds." *Philosophy Compass* 4 (6): 1009-1021.
- Thomasson, Amie. 2013. "Norms and Necessity." *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 51 (2): 143-160.

These are readings chosen on the grounds that they are sophisticated, important, and provide plenty of interesting ideas to think through. You may have read some of them before, as several are very influential.

Take note that the very first reading (Stroud) is one that must be completed prior to the first class session on Wednesday, August 23rd. That first session will be devoted to three things: a general introduction and overview of the class; a general discussion of background interests and where you feel you need work; and (this is what requires reading the Stroud ahead of time) a discussion of Stroud that I lead using a handout of a sort that exemplifies what I'm assigning you to do on a regular basis.

2.3 Learning objectives

Students who successfully complete this course should be able to

1. write critically about a variety of core philosophical issues in a clear fashion that attends to relevant matters in the debate;
2. present philosophical arguments to a critical audience and lead discussion of those arguments in a fair, organized, and useful fashion; and
3. actively engage in philosophical research by identifying relevant literature, recognizing pressure points in debates, and planning a research project.

3. Requirements

3.1 Overview

You can think of the semester as broken into two parts. In the first part, I determine the readings; you complete either a short paper or handout for presentation every week for about six weeks, at the end of which you write a somewhat longer paper that will be based on one of the previous things you wrote in the class; for convenience we can think of it as a "revised and expanded" work, even if it is only a rather distant relative to the original paper and/or handout that inspired it. In the second part, you determine the readings with an eye towards a final paper you'd like to write; several class sessions are devoted to discussion of those readings; and each of you prepares a handout for presentation near the end of the term where you present your paper's ideas and get feedback in advance of completing the actual final paper.

3.2 Short papers, handouts, and presentations

For the first part of the course, you will be preparing either a short paper or handout every week. I will divide the class into two groups — Group A and Group B — where members of those groups alternate between doing a paper and doing a handout, so that in any given week some of you will be doing a paper and some of you will be doing a handout.

Whether your assignment is the short paper or the handout, the work is due in to Canvas by the midnight before class. During that class meeting, I select some of you to present your work. You will not know ahead of time who will be selected, so you need to be ready every time. If you have a paper and are selected, you will present your paper to the class, following which we will discuss the material critically. If you have a handout and are selected, you will use that handout to present the issues and lead a discussion using the handout.

In either case, the class will as a group assess not only the philosophical claims and arguments presented but also (to a lesser extent) how well the paper or handout was written and how good a job the student did in presenting and/or leading a discussion. This is, then, a highly critical class, but in criticizing each other and yourself, you are expected to be not only collegial but also constructive; we are all helping each other become better philosophers.

While we will discuss selected papers and handouts in class, I will also provide feedback on your work after class; these will be returned to you before the next class session — hopefully earlier.

Now for some details on these. First, the short papers should not be very long. I suggest aiming at something in the range of 1250 - 1750 words, but this is not by any means a strict limit. You will likely find it to be a challenge to avoid writing too much, as opposed to writing too little; one of the skills you want to work on is the ability to write in a way that is both efficient and clear. But these are papers written in a short period of time and if they are longer than they should be, that is not a terrible problem. I prefer you upload these to Canvas as Word documents using either single or single-and-a-half spacing.

For each of these short papers the assignment is to identify some argument in the reading that is significant enough to spend time assessing, set it out as clearly as you can, make clear its significance, and subject it to a critical assessment. The argument you focus on need not be "the" argument of the paper in question, but it should be significant for the thesis the author is arguing for. Your own short paper must itself have a thesis; that thesis can take any number of forms, ranging from "So-and-so's argument is best understood in such-and-such a way, but it fails," to "So-and-so's

claim is apparently meant to be supported by such-and-such argument, but a better way to support it is by means of the following argument," and so on.

If you are selected during class and have a short paper ready, I will have a printed copy to give you, so you don't need to worry about having that on hand. If you are selected, you will read your paper for the class as if at a conference. If it seems appropriate, I might even ask you to present the paper without having it in front of you — relying on your own memory. This can be a useful exercise as a way to focus your understanding of what you are up to in the paper.

Turning to the handouts, there is a strict size limit. Your handout must take up no more than two pages, single spaced, so that it can be printed on two sides of a single piece of paper. The point of the handout is to be something you can use in presenting on an issue in a paper and leading a discussion about it that might last anywhere from 20 to 40 minutes. I will provide the hard copies of handouts chosen for use in class.

The handouts differ from the short papers in that they are much more flexible and open-ended. The instructions are similar to that for the short papers; the main difference is that the handouts do not present an argument that you yourself defend. They are, rather, meant to help everyone in the class think about the argument from the paper that you want to focus on. So, you should see the assignment for these as follows: the handout should identify some argument in the reading that is significant enough to spend time assessing, set it out as clearly as you can, make clear its significance, and raise several questions about it. The questions may be questions about interpretation (is this a fair representation of the argument?), about how best to present it (is this representation of the argument useful?), about how much it matters to the central question of the paper (could the author's main claims stand even if this argument fails?), or, of course, about whether it is a cogent argument (how convincing should this argument be?).

In the handouts it will likely be essentially useful to set out the argument under discussion in a somewhat formal way—that is, with numbered premises explicitly leading to the conclusion. If it helps to set out more than one version, that is fine too. In setting out the questions about the argument at issue, you should aim for questions that may be fruitful in the sense of suggesting lines of thought that might be developed into a complete paper. Overall, you should think of the handouts as notes you might draw up for yourself while brainstorming for a paper. Of course, they need to be more than just notes to yourself, as you want them to be accessible to others. But in fact notes to yourself are best when they are written in that accessible way, too.

In our first class session I will use a handout myself of the sort I want to see from you and lead a discussion on the first reading.

3.3 Revised & expanded paper

After we have done six weeks of this routine of using your short papers and handouts to drive class discussion, you will have your next assignment you can think of as a revised & expanded paper. More precisely, it must be a somewhat longer paper that concerns one of the issues discussed in the previous weeks; it can be based on one of your shorter papers or handout materials, though it need not be in any strict sense a revision. Insofar as it is based on your previous work, keep in mind it does need to be a substantial *improvement* on that work. It needs to be relevant to issues raised in class discussion about these papers or one you raised in work you did up to that point, even if it wasn't brought up in class.

These "revised and expanded" papers should be "more substantial than than the shorter papers (hence the "expanded"). You should aim for something between 2000 and 3000 words, but do not be

overly concerned with length. They will not be presented by you in class but simply handed in via Canvas for my feedback.

3.4 Final paper

The week after we finish up the paper-or-handouts routine we will have a class session devoted to group brainstorming and pairing up. During this session, we will have a rather open-ended session during which you bring to class ideas about what you might like to do in a final paper. The final paper must be related in some non-trivial way to the issues discussed in class; my hope is that the issues discussed up to that point are rich enough to give you plenty of room to be interested in something relevant to them.

In that brainstorming session, each student will present some rough ideas and questions to be discussed by the whole group. In that discussion, we'll consider questions about how to make the topic appropriately narrow, what questions are pertinent, and suggestions about readings or philosophers whose work seems likely relevant. By the end of the class I want to have every student paired with at least one other student who has some similar interests so that each group can work together to identify relevant readings.

The next week there will be no class, as this will be a busy period during which you need both to finish the revised & expanded paper and work with your partner(s) to identify some suggested readings for your issue of interest. Once you and your group have identified one or two such papers, you should send that information to me by email (including the pdf of the papers themselves). The day after these are due in, I will (hoping appropriate suggestions have been made) make a final determination on which papers will be used in class for the next three weeks, putting those on the Canvas website and announcing the schedule.

The next several sessions are then devoted to a discussion of those new readings. These sessions will be more relaxed in the sense that you do not need to prepare material to present for those classes. But you will also be thinking at that time about the final paper and how the current discussion will be relevant to that final paper. And there is an important sense in which sessions will be determined by your own participation; I may in fact decide to turn over control of the class to one of you for certain periods of time, only butting in when it seems necessary.

Finally, the last few sessions of the semester will require each of you to prepare a handout summarizing your final paper project in progress to present to the class. The goal at that point is to get helpful feedback for that final paper, which is then due during the exam week.

The overall final paper project thus involves three distinct assignments:

- (1) Reading identification
- (2) Presentation of paper in progress
- (3) Final paper itself

For (1), the requirement is that you and your partner(s) identify at least one and at most two readings that you think relevant to the papers you're interested in writing and which are accessible to those in the class given the previous readings discussed. The readings should not be extraordinarily long, since it needs to be reasonable to expect your fellow classmates to read each one in a week. (Think of the length of the papers we've already discussed in class as examples of appropriate lengths.) You and your partner(s) work together to locate such readings, but only one of you needs to upload the assignment to Canvas. When you do so, you should identify the one or two readings by giving complete bibliographic information and include for each reading a PDF file of that reading. If you cannot acquire a PDF file of the reading, you should look for other readings or do a xerox of the

hard copy followed by a scan to acquire a PDF. I will review the identified readings quickly so as to be able to approve at least one from each group to assign to the entire class.

For (2), you should present a handout somewhat similar to those you did earlier in the course. The same size limitation applies: the handout must take up no more than two pages, single spaced, so that it can be printed on two sides of a single piece of paper. The difference is that in this case, you present a definite thesis and your main argument or arguments for that thesis, even if in a rather rough form. The handout will include the thesis and those arguments and a series of questions and concerns—questions about how the argument might be attacked or improved, questions about how to understand key moments in the argument, and so on. Every student will have a limited amount of time to present these and seek feedback and suggestions from the rest of the class. All of these are due in at the same time, though you may not have a chance to present yours right away.

For (3), you should not feel as if the final paper must be some enormous project. It may be of a similar size to the revised & expanded paper (2000-3000 words), though if you feel something significantly longer is needed, that would not necessarily be a problem. As usual, I advise you not to worry too much about length; concentrate instead on clarity, comprehension, and cogency of argument.

The final paper will be due in during the exam week after classes end and will be returned to you with feedback the following week via Canvas.

4. Grading information

The Proseminar is graded on a pass/fail basis. Passing the course is required to continue past your first year in the graduate program. Satisfactory performance requires both active participation in class discussions and satisfactory completion of all assigned work — including short papers, handouts, presentations, and more substantial papers. These assignments are not given letter grades but are returned to you with comments. If your work is poor enough to make failing the course something you should worry about, I will alert you of the need to do more and we will meet to discuss how you might improve.

These grade policies are consistent with official UF grading policy which can be found at <https://catalog.ufl.edu/UGRD/academic-regulations/grades-grading-policies/>.

Feedback on your written work. Essays and papers are returned to you via Canvas. When they are returned, you should be able to see both an overall comment and marginal (that is, in-text) comments. For directions on how exactly to see the in-text feedback, see the Canvas instructions here: <https://community.canvaslms.com/t5/Student-Guide/How-do-I-view-annotation-feedback-comments-from-my-instructor/ta-p/523>. If you have any problems with this, let me know ASAP.

5. Policies

5.1 Attendance

Unexcused absences for a graduate course are quite unacceptable. If you miss a class, excused or not, you need to take responsibility for finding out what you have missed. If you do have a good excuse for an absence or a missed assignment, you need to get in contact with me in a reasonable amount of time and make any relevant arrangements. Of course, if you are seriously ill, do not worry about that and seek medical attention immediately, letting me know later when it is feasible to do so.

If illness or other disruptions render it unreasonable to expect you to turn in your assignments by the due date, I will offer either an extension or a make-up opportunity.

5.2 Academic honesty

As stated in the UF Student Honor Code [<https://sccr.dso.ufl.edu/policies/student-honor-code-student-conduct-code/>], all UF students are bound by the following "Honor Pledge"

The Honor Pledge: We, the members of the University of Florida community, pledge to hold ourselves and our peers to the highest standards of honesty and integrity by abiding by the Student Honor Code. On all work submitted for credit by Students at the University of Florida, the following pledge is either required or implied: "On my honor, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid in doing this assignment."

The honor code specifies a number of activities that constitute academic dishonesty as well as the sanctions (that is, penalties) that may result, including suspension and expulsion. The policy in my classes for academic dishonesty is simple: Any academic dishonesty means an automatic failing grade for the course. Of course, at the graduate level, any academic dishonesty is also prima facie grounds for immediate dismissal from the graduate program.

Collaboration. With one exception, the assignments in this class do not allow you to collaborate with other students. The exception is the assignment of working with another student to identify some readings relevant to your particular interests. This prohibition on collaboration does not mean that you cannot make use of ideas from others that arise during the class, so long as you give credit in an appropriate way (which might just be "as suggested by X in class discussion"). You are in fact encouraged to learn from each other in this way.

5.3 Disability accommodations

Students with disabilities who experience learning barriers and would like to request academic accommodations should connect with the Disability Resource Center [<https://disability.ufl.edu/students/get-started/>]. It is important for you to share your accommodation letter with your instructor so we can discuss any special access needed as early as possible in the semester.

5.4 Course evaluations

Students are expected to provide professional and respectful [<https://gatorevals.aa.ufl.edu/students/>] feedback on the quality of instruction in this course by completing course evaluations online via GatorEvals. Please note that these evaluations are anonymous and only made available to the instructor after the final grades for the course have been submitted. I always read through all of these evaluations so as to find ways to improve the course and I encourage you to complete one at the assigned time.

You will be notified when the evaluation period opens, and you can complete evaluations through the email you receive from GatorEvals, in their Canvas course menu under GatorEvals, or via <https://ufl.bluera.com/ufl/>.

Public data providing summaries of course evaluation results are available online at <https://gatorevals.aa.ufl.edu/public-results/>.

6. Resources

6.1 Technical support

If you have questions regarding Canvas or related technology used in connection with this course, you should contact the UF Computing Help Desk through one of the following:

- Email: helpdesk@ufl.edu
- Web: <https://helpdesk.ufl.edu/>
- Phone: (352) 392-HELP (4357)

6.2 Other support services

Faculty mentors: As a graduate student in the philosophy program at the University of Florida, you have been assigned an official faculty mentor. Information on mentors is distributed when you arrive. Please remember that you can consult with your mentor for help and advice as needed, especially if you find it difficult or uncomfortable to ask other faculty (e.g., the graduate coordinator).

U Matter, We Care: If you or someone you know is in distress, please contact umatter@ufl.edu, 352-392-1575, or visit the U Matter, We Care website [<https://umatter.ufl.edu/>] to refer or report a concern and a team member will reach out to the student in distress.

Counseling and Wellness Center: Visit the Counseling and Wellness Center website [<https://counseling.ufl.edu>] or call 352-392-1575 for information on crisis services as well as non-crisis services.

Student Health Care Center: Call 352-392-1161 for 24/7 information to help you find the care you need, or visit the Student Health Care Center website [<https://shcc.ufl.edu/>].

University Police Department: Visit the UF Police Department website [<https://police.ufl.edu/>] or call 352-392-1111 (or 9-1-1 for emergencies).

UF Health Shands Emergency Room / Trauma Center: For immediate medical care call 352-733-0111 or go to the emergency room at 1515 SW Archer Road, Gainesville, FL 32608. Visit the UF Health Emergency Room and Trauma Center website [<https://ufhealth.org/emergency-room-trauma-center>].

Library Support [<https://cms.uflib.ufl.edu/ask>] provides various ways to receive assistance with respect to using the libraries or finding resources.