

PHILOSOPHY 6210.01

METAPHYSICS

Winter 2011

Course Outline

Wednesdays 2:30-5:30

MacKinnon 346 (Philosophy Department seminar room)

Instructor: **Peter Loptson**

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Office hours: Mondays and Thursdays 2:00-3:00, or other times by appointment

Texts: (1) Caspar Hare, *On Myself, and Other, Less Important Subjects* (Princeton University Press, 2009)

(2) Mark Johnston, *Surviving Death* (Princeton University Press, 2010)

(3) Peter Loptson, *Reality: Fundamental Topics in Metaphysics*. Second Edition (University of Ottawa Press, 2010)

Additional readings for the course:

(i) John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, Book II, Chapter XXVII (“Of Identity and Diversity”)

(ii) David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book 1, Part 4, Section 6 (“Of personal identity”) and Book 2, Part 1, Section 2 (“Of pride and humility; their objects and causes”)

Recommended further reading:

(i) Mark Johnston, *Saving God: Religion after Idolatry* (Princeton University Press, 2009)

(ii) Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, I, Pt. II. Div. I. Bk. I. Ch. II. B, 16 (“On the original-synthetic unity of apperception”), 17 (“The principle of the synthetic unity of apperception is the supreme principle of all use of the understanding”), and 18 (“What objective unity of self-consciousness is”)

(ii) Bertrand Russell, *Human Knowledge: Its Scope and Limits* (Simon and Schuster, 1948), Part Three, Chapter II (“Solipsism”) and Part Six, Chapter VIII (“Analogy”)

Assignments for the course: (1) presentation, about twenty minutes in length, on important aspects of one of the readings (10%); (2) six very short essays (not more than 3 pages in length; 2 will be fine), due 19 Jan, 2 and 16 Feb, 2, 16, and 30 Mar (30%), each one on one important idea or argument in a reading for the due date; (3) two short essays, 5-8 pages, typed double-spaced, due 9 Feb and 9 Mar (20%); (4) one term paper, at least 15 pages in length, due 6 April

(40%) [note: there will be a late penalty deduction of 1% per day for all written assignments submitted after the due date]

The central text for the course is Mark Johnston's *Surviving Death*. Most of the other reading we will do is intended to fill in context for—in some cases, enlarge upon alternatives to—ideas and arguments which appear in Johnston's book, or to extend some of those ideas and arguments in interesting ways. (This is true, for example, of Caspar Hare's short book. Hare was a student of Johnston's, and some of the latter's ideas lie behind the—somewhat surprising—view which Hare defends.)

Mark Johnston is the Walter Cerf Professor of Philosophy at Princeton University. Johnston is a contemporary philosopher who advocates a number of views which are to some extent novel. Part of what is unusual in his work is his bringing together perspectives, and positions, which aren't commonly combined. For example, he has very positive views about religion; he is "religion-friendly", in fact, specifically friendly to Christianity (though to other religions as well). At the same time, he accepts a completely naturalistic view of the world, and of our place within it. Yet, Johnston is also a moral realist, holding that there are objective rights and wrongs, values and disvalues, some of which are as he sees it uncontroversially knowable. But, along with the preceding, Johnston, like Hume, rejects the idea that a person is an enduring or continuing substance, much less a substance which stands over against or transcends "nature". Some would see some of these leanings, or positions, and others which we will find in *Surviving Death*, as difficult or impossible coherently to combine. Others would conclude that, at the end of the day, many of the results which Johnston reaches don't amount to genuine or very convincing versions of the theses they purport to affirm. Part of our aim will be to come to our own conclusions about Johnston's views, and, as well, to some of the issues he addresses. Johnston draws on or engages with a wide range of philosophers, from diverse traditions, historical and contemporary. Thus, for example, the thinkers he cites and brings into his work include (among others): Thomas Aquinas, Aristotle, C. D. Broad, Descartes, Jonathan Edwards, Hume, Kant, Kripke, David Lewis, Locke, Mill, Nietzsche, Parfit, Perry, Plato, Ayn Rand, Schopenhauer, Sider, Socrates, Spinoza, van Inwagen, Wagner, Wiggins, Wittgenstein.

The central metaphysical topics of the readings we will do are *personal identity* and *what it is to be a person*, and whether and if so in what sense a person could manage to survive death. We will also explore intersections between being a person and *what has ethical value*. Importantly related to these issues is the question of the metaphysical status of subjective, or phenomenological experience—how things seem to an individual subject, or person, as they live in the world. If it seems persuasive that *the subjective feel of things* is an objective part of reality, this will help give rise to the central issue of the Caspar Hare book. To a number of philosophers—Schopenhauer, for example, and Wittgenstein, in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (probably partly influenced by Schopenhauer)—it has seemed plausible that, at least in a certain sense, the whole of *my* world is the whole of *the* world. Formally, this sounds like what is commonly called *solipsism*. Even if no one (even Hare, appearances to the contrary) will really adopt or advocate solipsism, something seems right in this conception. That is part of what Hare aims to formulate. Among our other targets and aims, we will try to see what may be meant by this elusive idea.