

# PH9GV-30 Time, Process and Experience

**23/24**

**Department**

Philosophy

**Level**

Taught Postgraduate Level

**Module leader**

Thomas Crowther

**Credit value**

30

**Module duration**

10 weeks

**Assessment**

100% coursework

**Study location**

University of Warwick main campus, Coventry

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## Description

### Introductory description

Most of the discussion in the philosophy of time in the 20th and 21st centuries has focussed on the category of tense (broadly, the distinction between past, present and future) and its philosophical implications. But tense is not the only way of representing temporal properties linguistically.

Linguists distinguish tense from 'aspect'. The aspect of a verb (or of a whole verb predication) can signify the temporal shape of a temporal situation; that is, whether it is an 'activity' or process, such as running or walking, an end-directed 'accomplishment' such as running to the shops, a 'state' such as solidity or fragility, or an instantaneous 'achievement' such as crossing the finish line. It can also provide information about whether the temporal situation is 'complete' as opposed to 'incomplete' ('Tom read a book' vs 'Tom is reading a book').

This module focuses on a range of philosophical questions that arise from reflection on verb aspect. Representative questions include:

- (i) How should we understand the Vendler distinctions of verb category (activities, states, accomplishments and achievements) and are they adequate to the varieties of temporal representation?
- (ii) How should we understand the notion of an 'aspectual viewpoint' that is standardly invoked in

explanation of the phenomenon of ‘grammatical aspect’ (that notion of aspect that distinguishes between situations as complete and incomplete)?

(iii) Some verb types are ‘telic’, in that they appear to signify progress towards an end-point or terminus at which the associated activity ceases (walking to the shops, reading a chapter) while some are atelic, in apparently lacking such a telic point (walking, reading, moving). How should we understand the distinction between telicity and atelicity?

Philosophers have often thought that while reality is not really tensed, our experience of it suggests it is. This prompts corresponding questions about verb aspect.

(iv) What is the relation between aspect and experience? Is experience ‘aspectual’? If so, how? If not, why not?

(v) Independently of (iv), even if it is granted that aspect is a feature of our temporal representations (whether in thought or talk), is reality itself, considered independent of such temporal representations, aspectual? Are there distinctions within representation-independent reality between telicity and atelicity, or between situations as complete and incomplete?

## **Module aims**

This module will offer students critical engagement with selected central topics in the philosophy of verb aspect through the careful study and discussion of seminal works in the area. Students will be expected to engage critically with the main arguments of the selected texts, and the philosophical positions presented in them. They will be expected to articulate their own views of the relative strengths and weaknesses of these arguments and positions.

## **Outline syllabus**

This is an indicative module outline only to give an indication of the sort of topics that may be covered. Actual sessions held may differ.

The module begins with three weeks that introduce important ideas and arguments in philosophical discussion of verb aspect, and also introduces central problems faced by philosophers working on these issues. I also introduce the idea that the distinction between process and events is a metaphysical distinction (a distinction within temporal reality), to be understood in terms of the distinction between ‘mass’ or ‘stuff’ (e.g. wine, gold, water) and ‘countables’ or ‘things’ (a glass of wine, a gold ring, a glass of water).

We then turn to the debate about ‘aspectual viewpoint’ and the suggestion made by Bernard Comrie (1976) that the distinction between processes and events is not a metaphysical distinction but a distinction between ‘ways of viewing’ temporal situations. We look at various kinds of proposals about what an aspectual viewpoint or an ‘aspectually-inflected’ temporal perspective might be, and examine some proposals in the philosophy of mind about what it is for a subject to occupy a temporal perspective.

Then we turn to a central debate about aspectual language: the so-called ‘imperfective paradox’. Is it possible for it to be true that someone is crossing the road even if they never get there? If so, why? If not, why not? We look in some detail at two important contributions to the literature (Fred Landman’s seminal 1990 paper “The Progressive” and Zoltan Szabo’s interesting 2004 critique of

Landman) that embody two quite different approaches to these questions.

In the final two weeks, we turn to a general question about the relation between aspect and temporal reality that has been in the background during the module: how should we understand the relation between temporal talk and temporal representation in thought, on the one hand, and temporal reality, on the other? We look at a discussion specific to the debate about verb aspect and at some literature that addresses the question more broadly. A question that I will be interested in pursuing in the seminars on this final topic is what place there is for reflection on the temporal structure of lived experience in 'descriptive metaphysics' (Strawson), 'natural language metaphysics' (Moltmann) or 'naïve metaphysics' (Fine).

Syllabus:

1. Introduction: Zeno Vendler (1957/1967) and the four-way verb typology
2. Verb aspect and temporal ontology: Mourelatos (1978) on Vendler.
3. Processes, events and the mass-count distinction: Crowther (2011) and Stout (2007), (2016).
4. Comrie, (1976), Klein (1994): grammatical aspect and some questions about 'aspectual viewpoint.'
5. Aspectual viewpoint and the temporal perspective from the 'lived present'. Crowther (draft work in progress to be circulated).

6. Reading Week

1. The imperfective paradox and the truth conditions of the progressive: Landman (1990).
2. The primacy of the progressive over the perfective: Szabo (2004) on Landman.
3. Aspect and temporal reality: Gill, Mourelatos and the question about telicity.
4. Aspect and temporal reality 2: Descriptive metaphysics, natural language metaphysics and the view from a temporal perspective.

## Learning outcomes

By the end of the module, students should be able to:

- By the end of the module the student should be able to have a systematic and advanced understanding and knowledge of the texts covered in the module, the main arguments of the texts, and critical responses to those arguments.
- By the end of the module the student should be able to communicate at an advanced level clearly and substantively in writing on the questions addressed in the module. They should be able to provide critical analysis of the relevant texts.
- By the end of the module the student should be able to work autonomously to articulate their own view of the relative merits of arguments, methodologies and positions in the literature, and engage critically with other points of view.
- Students should be able to demonstrate the skills involved in philosophical discussion, they

will have improved abilities to analyse and critically assess complex concepts and arguments. They will be able to communicate at an advanced level clearly and substantively in speech, as well as in writing, the philosophical arguments and concepts covered in the texts. They will be able to demonstrate sound judgement and initiative in selecting appropriate texts and methods for their investigation of a specifically circumscribed problem and should have acquired an advanced ability to pursue and organize philosophical research, documenting research carefully, and showing the ability to engage independently in philosophical debate.

## **Indicative reading list**

### General Reading

Comrie, B. 1976. *Aspect*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Kearns, K. 2011. *Semantics*. New York, Palgrave Macmillan. An introductory text that will be helpful in connection with discussion of perfective and imperfective meaning.

Klein, W. 1994. *Time in Language*. London, Routledge.

O'Shaughnessy, B. 2000. *Consciousness and the World*. London, Routledge.

Portner, P. 2005. *What is Meaning? Fundamentals of Formal Semantics*. Oxford, Blackwell. Another text that is helpful for some of the discussion of the truth conditions of aspectual sentences.

Power, S. E. 2021. *The Philosophy of Time: A Contemporary Introduction*. London, Routledge. This will be helpful as an introduction to some more general issues in the philosophy of time. See also Sam Baron and Kristie Miller, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Time*. Cambridge, Polity. 2019.

Rothstein, S. 2004. *Structuring Events*. Oxford, Blackwell.

Valberg, J. J. 2007. *Dream, Death and Self*. Princeton, Princeton University Press. Important source for some ideas about what a temporal perspective might be.

## **Research element**

The module will be assessed by a long capstone essay, which must be the product of the student's own research, and should not simply re-hash the delivered content. Students are encouraged to use the provided reading list as a jumping-off point for this research.

## **Subject specific skills**

- (i) The capacity to read key texts in philosophy of verb aspect and temporal ontology.
- (ii) The capacity to explain key arguments and positions found in the module reading material.
- (iii) To develop an appreciation of the strengths and weaknesses of the positions and arguments found in the texts covered by the module, and to be able to analyse and assess these positions and arguments in written and oral work.
- (iv) To work effectively with peers in group-oriented work, and to communicate and think about time, process and experience in a seminar environment.

## **Transferable skills**

- (i) To acquire the capacity to read demanding material effectively and critically.
  - (ii) To develop the capacity to explain demanding ideas and arguments clearly, briefly and accurately.
  - (iii) To think creatively about problems by deploying the capacity for clear thinking and reasoning
  - (iv) To work collaboratively and sensitively with others in a group environment, and to develop the self-confidence to communicate effectively in a group environment.
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## Study

### Study time

Type	Required
Seminars	9 sessions of 2 hours (6%)
Private study	282 hours (94%)
Total	300 hours

### Private study description

No private study requirements defined for this module.

## Costs

No further costs have been identified for this module.

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## Assessment

You must pass all assessment components to pass the module.

### Assessment group A

	Weighting	Study time
5000 word essay	100%	

### Feedback on assessment

Feedback on essays will be provided on the coversheet for the essay, addressing standard areas of evaluation and individual content.

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## Availability

## **Courses**

This module is Option list A for:

- Year 1 of TPHA-V7PM Postgraduate Taught Philosophy
- TPHA-V7PN Postgraduate Taught Philosophy and the Arts
  - Year 1 of V7PN Philosophy and the Arts
  - Year 2 of V7PN Philosophy and the Arts

This module is Option list E for:

- Year 1 of TPHA-V7PM Postgraduate Taught Philosophy