

Student Letters of Support

Letter #1

My name is Louise Morel, I am a French student who came to the University of Miami for a year. When I enrolled in the course of M. Watts: Social and Political Philosophy in FALL 2022, I was afraid I would have difficulty expressing myself and understanding the specific vocabulary used by the philosophers. I was delighted to find that my fears were unfounded, and I spent an enriching semester in both human and academic terms. This experience changed me deeply as a student of philosophy but also as an individual and a citizen. It is the reason why I warmly recommend M. Watts.

The subjects covered in class were rooted in contemporary social and societal issues. All sessions were supplemented by relevant and reasonably-sized articles, with optional, additional readings. I enjoyed re-reading the classics and discovering new authors and theories. Before taking this class, I thought that the teaching of philosophy was somewhat “dry” as in the French system, one has first to learn about the theories and then look for concrete examples. The course Social and Political Philosophy showed me that a different approach was possible! We covered many different philosophers and philosophies, we analyzed and compared different systems of thought and were able to emulate a real reflection on the various subjects we worked on.

As part of the classwork, we had to get involved in charities for 15 hours minimum to confront theory with reality. This particularity of the course certainly was one of the most innovative. The professor helped us along the way: he provided us with a list of charities he had previously exchanged with, and he made sure everything was safe. I went to Lotus House, a shelter for women and children, with other students and we met amazing people, worked in a team and really got involved while having a solid philosophical background to comprehend the situation we were in. Everything went smoothly and we were all satisfied with this experience.

My fellow students and I were also happy to use Virtual Reality in M. Watts’ Philosophy class. It gave us the opportunity to grasp more clearly the reality of homelessness and incarceration. The VR simulations we experienced were well chosen and appropriate for the course. I would really like to highlight how mind-blowing this experience was in terms of being close to the subject. My favorite session was when we were put in the place of a homeless woman and we shared her tent, her experience, and her feelings. We analyzed these experiences afterwards and it was a great way to fuel debate. M. Watts also organized debate sessions in small groups of 4. This time we were put in the place of philosophers whose aim was to organize a “perfect society”. This exercise allowed us students to exchange with each other and share our views.

On a more personal level, M. Watts was not only concerned about our philosophical and academic progress. He was attentive, passionate, and benevolent, being mindful to create an environment that allowed us to share and learn from each other in an atmosphere of mutual respect.

We were marked on many different exercises, and that gave us plenty of opportunity to express ourselves and use the material to our advantage. There were more formal exercises, such as a paper to submit, that we had to work on. There was also a group presentation and a more “peer to peer approach” exercise in which we had to create an original medium to explain to the class something we found difficult to understand. The professor allowed us to make mistakes and “get messy” (his words)! For every exercise, he made himself available for questions and he helped me review the outline of my paper.

With hindsight, I now realize that M. Watts’ teaching has empowered me not only by giving me the intellectual tools to be a better philosopher/thinker but also a better citizen, bridging the gap between abstract thought and theory and the realities of life and my capacity to get involved.

Should you wish to contact me, please do not hesitate

My email address is: louisemorel59@orange.fr

Letter #2

My name is Alexander Winegardner, recent graduate from the University of Miami with a Bachelor of Science degree in Applied Physics, and I am writing to give my recommendation of Professor Watts as an outstanding teacher for the course PHI 359. I took the course in my last semester to complete my minor in philosophy, but I am sure I would have taken it anyways even without needing to complete the minor just because of how interesting it was and how pertinent it is to our times and future as human beings. The class itself dealt with the concept and emerging technology of virtual reality (VR) and how it relates to various philosophical topics – ranging from classics such as the trolley problem to new ones such as debating whether virtual lives should matter or not. The use of tech (Meta Quest 2 headsets) and recent literature on the topic (Reality+ by David Chalmers) felt like a breath of fresh air when studying a topic such as philosophy where much of the work one generally studies is centuries or millennia old. I really enjoyed the classroom format where we would alternate between using the VR headsets together as a class and then discussing the readings for the week. It felt much more collaborative than the usual lecture format of college courses, and Professor Watts did an excellent job of guiding the discussion and asking interesting questions for the class to consider. Overall, taking PHI 359 gave me the opportunity for not only a deep dive into the current technological capabilities of VR, but also provided a way of thinking and talking about the philosophical issues surrounding its use that will undoubtedly serve me for the rest of my life.

Sincerely,
Alexander Winegardner
Email: a.winegardner@umiami.edu

Letter #3

I'm Dustin Goodwin, a University of Miami BBA '23 in Business Technology and Entrepreneurship. Currently, I work at Google and have previously interned at XR startups. While at the University of Miami, I held multiple leadership positions in the business school, the business technology department, the office of admissions, and the XR lab on campus. During my senior year, I had the pleasure of taking Professor Matthew Watts' Philosophy 359 *Immersive Experience and Virtual Reality* course. I was not expecting the last course I took at Miami to be the best course I ever took and wish I could've had more time with Professor Watts.

Professor Watts led a successful *Immersive Experience and Virtual Reality* course by balancing students' learning experiences through interactive activities using mixed reality devices (Meta Oculus headset and Magic Leap Lenses) and discussing philosophical takeaways. With a focus on virtual reality, Professor Watts' took a deep dive with us on the impact on the brain, society, and what the future holds. The format of the course was two classes per week with one day focusing on an open philosophical discussion that enabled students to debate sociological implications of technology and the other day carrying out virtual reality experiments that related to the philosophical elements we discussed earlier in the week. Part of the structure of the course was philosophical experiences that we had to leave the classroom to do. This was the only course that had outside-of-classroom experiences and students greatly benefited from writing about unique experiences.

This was by far the most interesting course I took in college. This course is something that you would see at Stanford or MIT, not at the University of Miami. With limited resources, Professor Watts was able to engage 2nd-semester seniors and maintain strong attendance throughout the year, which is an impressive feat for any Professor across the country teaching seniors. Professor Watts encouraged students to think outside of the box of traditional University courses and sparked great interest in students to inquire more about mixed reality. Coming from a background in mixed reality I already was interested in the course before taking it, but the consensus of the class was that Philosophy 359 was the best course they'd taken at the University of Miami.

The best experience I had in the course was writing a paper about an immersive experience I had outside of the class. In line with topics of immersion, Professor Watts set us out in the field to find immersive experiences throughout the city of Miami and write about the experience. One of the focuses of the class was the development of the hydrofloat tank. He challenged us to use a hydrofloat tank and write a report about the experience. I took the chance and had a life-changing experience in my

hydrofloat session. This experience helped me connect the lessons from this course to my aspirations in life. Most importantly, I was able to connect the philosophical discussions we had in this course and implement them in my personal life and career.

Any university would be lucky to have Professor Matthew Watts as an instructor. He was able to invoke philosophical discussion regarding the implications of technological advancements and challenge students from traditional backgrounds to think outside the box. Matthew Watts' is one of the most unique, intelligent, and forward-thinking people on campus. This course inspired me to pursue my dreams of working in the mixed reality field and I'd be more than happy to recommend him for any upcoming teaching positions.

Below is my contact information:

Dustin Goodwin at dustingoodwin01@gmail.com

Letter #3

October 2023

Dear Reader,

My name is David Ibrahim and as of writing this letter, am an undergraduate senior at the University of Miami. I have had the pleasure of taking classes with Matthew Watts for my study in Philosophy at the university and would like to write of my great experiences involved with the classes.

Matthew Watts was first and foremost one of the most effective educators I had experience with in the Philosophy program at my university. He always presented material in an interesting and fulfilling way, and I found myself having no problems with inattentiveness whenever I was in class. While lecturing is always important for explaining major concepts, Matthew had also structured the courses to enable and encourage class discussion over the respective topics and readings over the week. Additionally course materials were varied in scope in that readings ranged from older to more contemporary and differed in subject matter. Through the diversity of course material, Matthew Watts was able to illustrate the development of the field to the modern day as well as show how the subject of the field today has direct connections to us as students and residents in our respective communities. Outside of the classroom, education still continued with unique and interesting project assignments. For my Environmental Ethics course, there was a photo journal assignment which tasked students to interact with the world around them and tie in the philosophical concepts we had been learning from our experiences. While I was unable to attend due to family complications, there was a service learning component in my Social and Political Philosophy class which has students once again

interacting with the real world to see how the concepts we were learning in the classroom existed in the day to day life of others. These opportunities are extremely valuable for the typical student as the majority of coursework that one undergoes nowadays feels like an extension of high school. These unique approaches to examining how philosophy interacts with real life were great in driving home the point that philosophy as a subject is a helpful and important aspect of everyone's lives whether they are aware of its impacts or not. Outside of course specific material, Matthew Watts was simply a great resource to have as a teacher. He was very flexible with the class and accommodating for personal circumstances that one may have faced during their time taking the class. He was always friendly and willing to talk more after class, even after long commutes early in the morning to make it to class! It was a great pleasure to study under him and as such I highly recommend Matthew Watts as an educator and as a person.

For any additional inquiry, feel free to reach out to me through my contact information listed at the bottom. I sincerely hope that you consider Matthew for the position he is applying for, as he will surely bring great benefit to the field with which he involves himself with. Thank you, and take care,

-David Ibrahim

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Letter #4

To whom it may concern,

Professor Matthew Watts is an exemplary instructor. He embodies everything a student wishes to find in their professor- a passion for their area of study, an ability to discern what material will be most impactful for their class, and the ingenuity required to balance both real world and intellectual spaces the material taught can influence.

I have had the pleasure of being in Professor Watts' PHI336 course - the Philosophy of Politics and Social Sciences - and have had a very positive experience. Professor Watts had been able to create a balance between real-world experience and theoretical teachings that I have never seen presented in the classroom. He had allowed his students to derive from the lectures about homelessness life lessons that have altered my perception of the world.

This 15 hour service learning requirement has opened my eyes to the complexities of the world, and with the knowledge gained from Professor Watts' lectures, I am able to formulate my

own opinions and take action against the injustice found within the homeless community.

In addition to the service learning hours, Professor Watts made his lectures equally as engaging. He was able to blend 21st century technology such as Virtual Reality to offer an opportunity to engage all of our senses, and really challenge what we think we know. The content of the lecture themselves was also fabulously delivered, ensuring that the students really absorbed the information provided through periodic breaks in between the lecture, allowing for students to converse and question the philosophical premises provided.

Overall, I have had a wonderful time learning from Professor Watts this past semester, and hope to take more courses with him in the future.

Warm Regards,

1/23/2023

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