

Virginia Tech's MA Proseminar

Fall 2025

Instructor: Mercedes Corredor, mcorredor@vt.edu

Class Dates: Tuesday/Thursday 3:30-4:45pm

Location: War Memorial 501

Office Hours: Thursday 12pm or by appointment

Zoom: <https://viriniatech.zoom.us/my/mcorredor>

Course Description

This proseminar is designed around the following four aims.

(1) To improve your philosophical writing. This is a writing-intensive course and, as such, you will produce writing regularly and you will receive detailed and frequent feedback on your work. My primary goal is for you to make significant strides as a writer of philosophy over the course of the semester and I believe that the best way to do that is to get comfortable writing often.

(2) To expose you to a fantastic hodge-podge of philosophical texts: some seminal, some cutting edge, some memorably clear, some strikingly creative, some highlight visiting faculty members' research interests, some written by future Department Colloquium speakers, and some that just spark-joy. The range of questions to which one can direct philosophical attention, and the methods one can deploy to do so, are incredibly vast; the texts we'll cover, though illustrative of this, barely scratch the surface.

(3) To provide you with ample opportunity to talk and do philosophy with one another. Active participation is expected in the course and you will be given the opportunity to work together on small-group presentations. It is important that you all work towards cultivating a healthy philosophical rapport with one another – your cohort-mates are some of the people you will learn the most from during the MA (and, with some luck, even beyond). We will practice how to do this well.

(4) To expose you to some of the other faculty members in the department: their interests, teaching styles, quirks, etc. My hope is that this will help you orient yourselves as you progress through the program.

Coursework

PAPERS. You will be expected to write five short papers (1250-1500 words) and one longer rewrite (2250-2750 words). You will submit work roughly every other week on the following dates (with the exception of one of these dates, which you may skip):

- September 7
- September 21
- October 5

- October 19
- November 2
- November 16
- December 7

This course is structured around seven “mini-units.” As such, you will write on five of these topics – five short papers on five distinct topics. You will also extend and rewrite one of these five shorter papers (for a grand total of six paper submissions on six of the above dates). For the most part, you can choose which topics you want to write about and which you would like to skip. *There is just one constraint: you must write a paper on either Consciousness or Personal Identity (i.e. you may not skip both of these topics).*

PRESENTATIONS. In addition everyone will have to do at least TWO group presentations. I have chosen groups of two (more or less at random) and the idea is that the group will be asked to present some key arguments/ideas from the readings and lead a discussion of about half an hour or so on the topic. The groups will be reshuffled each time, so you will each have the opportunity to work with different members of the cohort.

Assessments

Your grade for the proseminar will be based on your participation in class and the progress you make on your writing over the course of the semester. I care a lot less about where you start off than where you end up (and how you get there).

I will not assign particular grades on particular assignments. I recognize that this can sometimes feel uncomfortable and frustrating but I have chosen to do things this way because I think it is a mistake to be overly grade-focused in proseminar: the primary aim of the class ought to be simply *getting better at philosophy*, not getting an “A.” As such, I am much more interested in providing you with timely, regular, and individualized feedback on the content of your written work with the expectation that you use this feedback to hone your skills, than I am with assigning you grades.

At the same time, it can be useful to have a sense of how things are going throughout the semester. As such, I will assign “fake grades” which you can understand as follows:

Baseline: This paper is competent but it is not exceptional. If you receive a “Baseline” (or two or three) there is absolutely no reason to worry – one can receive a “Baseline” and still be *very much* on track to get an “A” in the course, provided you show improvement over the semester. At the same time, if you are *consistently* receiving “Baselines” (three times or more), that means you should be especially thoughtful and intentional about making improvements to your writing. If you are consistently producing “Baseline-level” papers, I encourage you to meet with me to discuss further, tailored strategies for improvement.

Needs Improvement: This paper contains significant errors. If you are consistently receiving feedback in this range, you are not currently on track for success in the course and there is cause for being extremely proactive and strategic about getting your writing on track. That said, you are at the very start of the MA program and we have seen many students who, with hard work, started off producing work at this level and were able to turn the ship around. We're here to help – writing well is a skill that one can practice and acquire – let's chat!

Proficient: This paper hints at distinction but it contains some clear weaknesses as well. You are on track for success in the course. That said, I advise you to remain consistent and thoughtful with respect to honing your writing skills. More specifically, I advise you to give yourself more time on your next short paper so that you have more time to develop and refine (or even trash and restart) it.

Excellent: Really excellent work. This is the sort of work I would expect of a first-year student at a competitive PhD program.

Schedule of Readings and Assignments

Week 1 Love

August 26 - Loving Philosophy (Nguyen); "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action" (Lorde); Writing Guidelines (Pryor)

August 28 - "Love as a Moral Emotion" (Velleman)

Week 2 Love

September 2 - "Love: Gloriously Amoral and Arational" (Zangwill)

September 4 - "Grace and Alienation" (Yao)

September 7 - Submission Opportunity #1

Week 3 Openmindedness

September 9 - "Integrity, Truth, and Value" (Svavarsdóttir)

September 11 - "Deliberation and Emancipation: Some Critical Remarks" (Yaure)

Week 4 Openmindedness

September 16 - "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" (Douglass)

- Visit from Prof. Phil Yaure

September 18 - "Abortion, Ultrasound, and Moral Persuasion" (Rini)

September 21 - Submission Opportunity #2

September 22 - Coffee and Chat

- Writing and Rewriting Workshop

Week 5 Consciousness

- September 23 - "What is it like to be a Bat?" (Nagel)
September 25 - "Materialism and Qualia: The Explanatory Gap" (Levine)
- Visit from Prof. Kelly Trogdon

Week 6 Consciousness

- September 30 - "Epiphenomenal Qualia" (Jackson)
October 2 - "What Experience Teaches" (Lewis)

October 5 - Submission Opportunity #3

Week 7 Moral Realism

- October 7 - "Non-Naturalistic Realism in Metaethics" (Enoch)
October 9 - "A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value" (Street) (NB: this reading is 50 pgs. long!)
- Visit from Prof. Justin Horn

Week 8 Moral Realism

- October 14 - "A Liberal Realist Answer to Debunking Skepticism" (Huemer)
October 16 - "Gastronomic Realism: A Cautionary Tale" (Loeb)

October 19 - Submission Opportunity #4

October 20 Coffee and Chat

- Visit from Prof. Fabian Wendt

Week 9 Speech Acts

- October 21- *How to Do things with Words*, excerpts (Austin)
October 23 - "Speech Acts and Unspeakable Acts" (Langton)

Week 10 Speech Acts

- October 28 - "Pornography, Speech Acts, and Context" (Saul)
October 30 - Pornutopia (Bauer), How to Do Things with Philosophy (Srinivasan)

November 2 -Submission Opportunity #5

Week 11 Personal Identity

- November 4 - "A Dialogue on Personal Identity and Immortality" (Perry)
November 6 - *Reasons and Persons* Chpt. 10 (excerpts) (Parfit)

Week 12 Personal Identity

- November 11 "Was I Ever a Fetus?" (Olson)
November 13 - No Class!

November 16 - Submission Opportunity #6

November 17 - Coffee and Chat

- Visit from Prof. Lydia Patton

Week 13 Truth Seeking in Philosophy

November 18 "Skepticism about Philosophy" (Brennan) and "The Value of Philosophy" (Russell)

November 20 "Philosophy Without Belief" (Barnett)

Thanksgiving Break

Week 14 Truth Seeking in Philosophy

December 2 "Challenging the Pursuit of Novelty" (Davis)

December 4 "Humility is Not a Virtue" (Bloomfield) and *Thinking in Good Company* (Korsgaard)

December 7 - Submission Opportunity #7

December 8 - Coffee and Chat