

Philosophy 341: Introduction to Metaphysics

Syllabus

Instructor

Tim Juvshik
tjuvshik@umass.edu

Room: TBD
Office Hours: TBD

Course Description

Metaphysics is usually regarded as one of the three main branches of philosophy, along with epistemology and axiology. However, metaphysics is notoriously difficult to define. It's often thought to be the study of what there is or what exists. Thus, metaphysics pursues the questions of what exists, what kinds of things there are, what ways things could be, how things actually are, what categories things fall into, where things are, and what relations exist between all the things that exist. In this course, we'll pursue these questions in various guises and about a variety of different things and kinds of things. Specifically, we will consider the following: (a) the methods, aims, and scope of metaphysics, (b) whether there are abstract objects, in addition to concrete ones, (c) the nature of material objects and how they're composed, including persons, (d) the nature of time and the possibility of time travel, (e) what it is to be a cause or effect and whether we have free will in a deterministic universe, and (f) the existence and nature of various social entities, including artifacts, groups, and institutions. The aim of this course is to give students a general introduction to metaphysics via readings on core topics, as well as familiarize students to its methods and scope, while going slightly into depth about these issues. Students will come out of the course with a solid understanding of this branch of philosophy and how metaphysics relates to other branches of the discipline.

Course Goals and Learning Outcomes

In this course, we will explore one of the foundations of philosophy through an investigation of the central topics of analytic metaphysics. By the end of the course, you will be able to:

- Characterize many of the central issues in contemporary analytic metaphysics.
- Discuss and evaluate the main theses and arguments about those issues in a reasoned and neutral way.
- Articulate and defend your own views on those issues.
- Make connections between metaphysics and other areas of philosophy.
- Write a research paper in a philosophically rigorous, analytic, and concise manner.
- Think at a very high level of abstraction – a skill that is very valuable in many different fields but which takes a great deal of practice, which you will get in this course.

Course Readings

There are no required textbooks for this course. Course readings will be from a variety of sources, including articles, discussion notes, and book chapters. All reading materials will be made available on the course website or on reserve from the library.

Grading

Letter grades (corresponding to a 4-point scale: A=4, A-=3.7, B+=3.3, etc.) will be assigned based on the following:

SNTs	20%
Unit Summaries	20%
Mid-term Paper	20%
Final Paper	25%
Participation	15%

Assignments

Socratic Note Taking (SNT)

The purpose of these assignments is to help you read articles more effectively, and to provide accountability for completing the readings. “Socratic Note Taking” is named after Socrates, who famously taught by asking questions. In these notes, you will write questions as you read. Think of it as a reading quiz that you create yourself, along with an answer key. A set of notes is due for each reading. Students will be required to produce three questions and answers per reading, roughly equidistant throughout each reading. Collectively, these are worth 20% of your grade. Complete and submit your questions/answers on the course website prior to the start of the class for which they’re due.

Unit Summaries

The class is divided into six units, each of which explores some central topic in metaphysics. At the end of each unit, students will write up a summary of the main views and positions on each topic (where a unit has two main, related topics, students will pick one). Summaries should be approximately 1000 words (~2-3 pages) and are an exercise in concise summarizing of the ‘lay of the land’ of each topic. Summarizing well and concisely is a valuable skill but one which takes practice. Summaries are due one week after the end of each unit.

Mid-term Paper

The first paper, due around mid-semester, will be 1500-2000 words (~5-6 pages) and will summarize, evaluate, and take a position on, some debate or argument for one of the views we discussed in the first half of the course. Prompts are available on the course website, though if students wish they can come up with their own, however, they must run them by me first.

Final Paper

The final paper should be 2500-3000 words (~8-10 pages) and will be your own contribution to one of the debates we look at during the course. Students will develop an argument for some position that we discussed and consider and respond to potential objections. Students will turn in an outline, which I will return with comments, and then submit the final paper at the end of the semester, during finals.

Participation

There is a participation grade worth 15% of your final grade, awarded on the basis of participating in class discussions. Coming to office hours to discuss the course material can count towards the participation grade.

Class Expectations

- **Course Readings:** Students should do all the assigned readings before the class in which they're discussed as this is necessary to complete the SNTs, but also because class discussion will be much more fruitful if we're all on the same page. All readings are available on the course webpage.
- **Attendance:** As this is an upper division course, I expect you to attend (though I understand that things come up). I will keep track of attendance and you should notify me of any absences.
- **Electronics Policy:** Laptops, tablets, and phones are not permitted during class unless needed for in-class work. Using electronics is distracting to both yourself and others, and studies have shown that it lowers grades of the user and those around them. If you require a special accommodation regarding electronics please come see me to request an exemption.
- **Communication:** You can contact me via e-mail. I will endeavour to respond within 24 hours, but usually don't respond after 5pm on weekdays nor on weekends. My principal method of communicating with you will be via your UMass e-mail, so be sure to check this daily.
- **Late Work Policy:** Late assignments without an extension will be downgraded by 1/3 of a letter grade per day after the due date (e.g. A to A-), up to a penalty of 2 full letter grades (after which they won't be accepted). Consult with me to request an extension. Extensions will not be granted for the SNTs; late SNTs will be graded as 0.
- **Grade Disagreement:** I am happy to discuss your graded assignments with you. I ask that you first read through my comments on your assignment, write down any questions you have, and then schedule an appointment with me. Note that I require a 24-hour "cooling off" period before discussing grades. If you think a grade you have received is unfair, please write a paragraph explaining why and send it to me via email. Note that this can result in your initial grade being *either raised or lowered*.
- **Extra Credit:** As a matter of general policy, no extra credit will be offered in this course unless *extremely* unusual circumstances arise which necessitate it.
- **Classroom Etiquette:** Students are expected to respect each other, allow others the chance to speak, and be open-minded to views different from their own. We're here to learn and that's best done through community building, a prerequisite of which is respect and toleration.
- **Syllabus:** Readings and schedule are subject to change. Any changes will be announced in class and on the course webpage.

Provisional Course Schedule

Unit 1: Ontology

Week 1: Ontological Commitment

“Holes”, Lewis and Lewis (1970)

“On What There Is”, Quine (1948)

“Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology”, Carnap (1956)

Week 2: Grounding and Easy Ontology

“Existence Questions”, Thomasson (2016)

“On What Grounds What”, Schaffer (2009; selections)

Unit 2: Abstract Objects

Week 3: Platonism and Nominalism

Universals: An Opinionated Introduction, Armstrong (1989; selections)

On the Plurality of Worlds, Lewis (1986; 81-86)

Platonism and Anti-Platonism in Mathematics, Balaguer (1998; selections)

Unit 1 Summary Due

Week 4: Abstracta in Other Domains

Fiction and Metaphysics, Thomasson (1999; selections)

Works of Music, Dodd (2007; selections)

“An Ontology of Words”, Irmak (2019)

“The Anonymity of a Murmur: Internet Memes”, Eynine (2018)

Unit 3: Material Objects

Week 5: Mereology

“What are Physical Objects?”, Markosian (2000)

“Why Constitution Is Not Identity”, Baker (1997)

“Parts and Wholes”, McDaniel (2010)

Unit 2 Summary Due

Week 6: Personal Identity

“The Unimportance of Identity”, Parfit (1995)

“Survival and Identity”, Lewis (1976)

The Human Animal, Olson (1997; selections)

Unit 4: Time

Week 6: The A-theory and the B-Theory

“A Defense of Presentism”, Markosian (2004)

Time, Language, and Ontology, Mozerky (2015; selections)

Objective Becoming, Skow (2015; selections)

Unit 3 Summary Due

Week 7: Time Travel

“The Paradoxes of Time Travel”, Lewis (1976)

“Time Travel: Double Your Fun”, Arntzenius (2006)

Mid-term Papers Due

Unit 5: Causation and Free Will

Week 8: Causation

“Causation”, Loux (2002)

“Causing and Nothingness”, Beebe (2004)

Unit 4 Summary Due

Week 9: Free Will

“The Incompatibility of Free Will and Determinism”, van Inwagen (1975)

“Agent Causation as the Solution to All the Compatibilist’s Problems”, Markosian (2012)

Unit 6: Social Ontology

Week 10: Artifacts

“Artifacts and Human Concepts”, Thomasson (2007)

“On the Place of Artifacts in Ontology”, Elder (2007)

“How Real Are Artefacts and Artefact Kinds?”, Lowe (2014)

Unit 5 Summary Due

Week 11: Groups and Institutions

“Social Creationism and Social Groups”, Ritchie (2018)

“Social Mereology”, Hawley (1017)

“Social Ontology and The Philosophy of Society”, Searle (2007)

Week 12: Race and Gender

“Gender and Race: (What) are they? (What) do we want them to be?”, Haslanger (2000)

“Passing, Traveling and Reality: Social Constructionism and the Metaphysics of Race”, Mallon (2004)

Week 13: Wrap-Up

Discussion and Wrap-Up (no readings)

Unit 6 Summary Due

Final Paper Outlines Due

Final Papers Due During Exam Period