

**PHIL 361 (500): Metaphysics**  
Fall 2023

Instructor: Byron Simmons  
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Class: MW 4:10 – 5:25 PM in YMCA 109  
Office hours: MW 12:30 – 1:30 PM in YMCA 301J and by appointment

**COURSE DESCRIPTION:** *Metaphysics* is the philosophical study of reality. It is primarily concerned with what there is (*ontology*) and what things are like (*metaphysics proper*).

In the **first part** of the course, we will explore the basic concepts of truth, being, and ontological commitment. We will take truth to be a kind of correspondence with reality. So, for example, it is true that there are eight planets in our solar system—and false that there are nine planets—because of what reality is like, namely, because reality contains some things, Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, etc., which are all planets and which are in all our solar system. This understanding of the nature of truth will have two primary consequences: first, our beliefs will only be true when they agree with an independent reality; and, second, whenever we have most reason to believe something to be true, we will be committed to the existence of whatever it would take to make that belief true. This will lead us to the problem of non-being: given that it is true that, say, Pegasus does not exist, doesn't that mean that reality will have to contain something, namely, Pegasus, that doesn't exist? But if that's right and Pegasus is part of reality, doesn't that mean that he must exist after all? So how could we ever truly say that something doesn't exist?

In the **second part** of the course, we will turn to three fairly traditional questions about reality as we find it. Consider, first, the seemingly mundane observation that the entities which we encounter in our experience of reality are similar to and different from each other in a variety of ways. That, I take it, is a piece of received wisdom, a quite obvious and almost self-evident truth. But what are some of the ways in which these entities are similar or different and what helps to explain these similarities and differences? Are some differences somehow different in kind from others or are they all on a par? Must we, in order to account for and explain these differences, countenance something beyond the entities themselves: namely, universals, haecceities, or modes of being?

Consider, next, the observation that while some things must be the way they are (it is, for example, necessarily the case that  $2 + 2 = 4$ ), other things needn't be the way they are (it is, it seems, only contingently the case that there are eight planets). What is it that explains why some facts are necessary, while others are merely contingent? It seems, moreover, that it is possible for there to be more or fewer planets than there are, and even for there to have been no planets at all. But if so, what is it that makes these things possible? If there are actually eight planets in reality, what is it that makes it possible for there to be more or fewer planets than that? How does the truth of such modal claims correspond to an independent reality? Are they somehow made true by what actually exists? Or do we need to countenance various merely possible entities as well?

Consider, finally, the observation that the world around us is in a constant state of flux: a tiny acorn grows into a mighty oak, a delicious apple rots away into a disgusting pile of mush, what is here today is gone tomorrow. But how is such change even possible? For, in general, when two things differ in what they are like, then they cannot be one and the same. And yet an acorn is not an oak, an

apple is not a pile of mush. These things are really quite different from each other—and in so many ways. So how can they be one and the same thing? And if they're not the same thing, then nothing is changing. But how could that be?

In the **third part** of the course, we will focus on some more radical questions about reality as we make it. For we would appear to play some kind of role in the construction of social reality. We will, to this end, explore the nature and existence of tools and other peculiarly social artifacts. Could there be any hammers without nails, boards, or people to use them? What does it take for a hammer, a doorknob, or a stop sign come into existence? And under what conditions do such entities continue to exist? What, moreover, is the relation between, say, a hammer and the wooden shank and metal mass that makes it up? Are they one and the same thing? Or are they distinct entities?

**COURSE PREREQUISITES:** Junior or senior classification or approval of instructor.

**SPECIAL COURSE DESIGNATION:** None.

**COURSE LEARNING OUTCOMES:** The primary goal of this course is to introduce you to some of the fundamental concepts and contemporary debates in analytic metaphysics. By the end of this course, you will have developed the ability to:

- Identify the structure of arguments—identifying their premises, conclusion, and logical form—and to present them in premise-conclusion form.
- Provide focused objections to arguments, which concentrate either on a particular premise or on a particular inference in the argument's structure and suggest reasons to doubt that premise or inference.
- Analyze the strength of different objections to an argument, thinking about how an objection works, how central to the argument the point being challenged by the objection is, and how easy it would be to modify the argument so as to avoid the objection.
- Rationally defend a philosophical position, by explaining and then presenting valid arguments in favor of each of its central tenets, and identifying and responding to potential objections to it.

**TEXTBOOK AND COURSE RESOURCE MATERIALS:** All required readings will be made available electronically. But I highly recommend purchasing a copy of the following supplementary text:

Alyssa Ney, *Metaphysics: An Introduction*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Routledge, 2023). ISBN: 978-0-8153-5049-1

I think this is a great book. There is, however, no need to buy it because I will make selections from the first edition available on Canvas.

Note that this course will be somewhat **reading-intensive**. The required texts might not be very long, but you will still need to spend a lot of time doing the reading assignments. If you want to do as well as possible, you will need to read each reading assignment carefully and critically, and more than once.

The reading assignments will form the basis for the class discussions but these discussions will often cover material that goes beyond the readings. If you don't work hard at the readings, you will

have a much harder time understanding the class lectures; and if you only do the readings and skip the lectures, you will also miss out on much of what the course will cover.

**GRADING POLICY:** There will be **two in-class exams** (on September 27<sup>th</sup> and October 25<sup>th</sup>) each worth 150 points and a **final exam** (on December 8<sup>th</sup>) worth 100 points: these exams will all be closed-book, closed-notes.

There will also be **several short homework assignments** worth a total of 50 points.

Your **class participation** will be worth an additional 50 points.

There are thus a total of 500 points available in this course. Your grade will be determined on the basis of this numerical grade and will break down as follows:

- A: 500 – 450 points (100% - 90%)
- B: 449 – 400 points (89% - 80%)
- C: 399 – 350 points (79% - 70%)
- D: 349 – 300 points (69% - 60%)
- F: below 300 points (below 60%)

**LATE WORK POLICY:** Each homework assignment is due at the start of class on the day that it is due. I will accept late work with no penalty, provided that you turn it in within a week of its due date.

If, for whatever reason, you are unable to take either of the in-class exams on the days that they are held, you will need to schedule a makeup exam. I would strongly prefer you to take the exams on time, but I will allow you to make them up without penalty, provided that you do so no later than a week after they are held.

Work submitted by a student as makeup work for an excused absence is not considered late work and is exempted from the late work policy ([Student Rule 7](#)).

**PARTICIPATION AND ATTENTANCE POLICY:** While in class, you should be actively engaged. An actively engaged student will raise questions, contribute points of view about the readings and what I say about them—which can include challenging my interpretation of the readings or the plausibility of my assessment of their arguments.

The university views class attendance and participation as an individual student responsibility. Students are expected to attend class and to complete all assignments.

Please refer to [Student Rule 7](#) in its entirety for information about excused absences, including definitions, and related documentation and timelines.

**MAKEUP WORK POLICY:** Students will be excused from attending class on the day of a graded activity or when attendance contributes to a student's grade, for the reasons stated in [Student Rule 7](#), or other reason deemed appropriate by the instructor.

Please refer to [Student Rule 7](#) in its entirety for information about makeup work, including definitions, and related documentation and timelines.

Absences related to Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 may necessitate a period of more than 30 days for make-up work, and the timeframe for make-up work should be agreed upon by the student and instructor” ([Student Rule 7, Section 7.4.1](#)).

“The instructor is under no obligation to provide an opportunity for the student to make up work missed because of an unexcused absence” ([Student Rule 7, Section 7.4.2](#)).

Students who request an excused absence are expected to uphold the Aggie Honor Code and Student Conduct Code. (See [Student Rule 24](#)).

**ACADEMIC INTEGRITY STATEMENT AND POLICY:** “An Aggie does not lie, cheat or steal, or tolerate those who do.”

“Texas A&M University students are responsible for authenticating all work submitted to an instructor. If asked, students must be able to produce proof that the item submitted is indeed the work of that student. Students must keep appropriate records at all times. The inability to authenticate one’s work, should the instructor request it, may be sufficient grounds to initiate an academic misconduct case” ([Section 20.1.2.3, Student Rule 20](#)).

You can learn more about the Aggie Honor System Office Rules and Procedures, academic integrity, and your rights and responsibilities at [aggiehonor.tamu.edu](http://aggiehonor.tamu.edu).

**AMERICANS WITH DISABILITIES ACT (ADA) POLICY:** Texas A&M University is committed to providing equitable access to learning opportunities for all students. If you experience barriers to your education due to a disability or think you may have a disability, please contact Disability Resources office on your campus (resources listed below). Disabilities may include, but are not limited to attentional, learning, mental health, sensory, physical, or chronic health conditions. All students are encouraged to discuss their disability related needs with Disability Resources and their instructors as soon as possible.

Disability Resources is located in the Student Services Building or at (979) 845-1637 or visit [disability.tamu.edu](http://disability.tamu.edu).

**TITLE IX AND STATEMENT ON LIMITS TO CONFIDENTIALITY:** Texas A&M University is committed to fostering a learning environment that is safe and productive for all. University policies and federal and state laws prohibit gender-based discrimination and sexual harassment, including sexual assault, sexual exploitation, domestic violence, dating violence, and stalking.

With the exception of some medical and mental health providers, all university employees (including full and part-time faculty, staff, paid graduate assistants, student workers, etc.) are Mandatory Reporters and must report to the Title IX Office if the employee experiences, observes, or becomes aware of an incident that meets the following conditions (see [University Rule 08.01.01.M1](#)):

- The incident is reasonably believed to be discrimination or harassment.

- The incident is alleged to have been committed by or against a person who, at the time of the incident, was (1) a student enrolled at the University or (2) an employee of the University.

Mandatory Reporters must file a report regardless of how the information comes to their attention – including but not limited to face-to-face conversations, a written class assignment or paper, class discussion, email, text, or social media post. Although Mandatory Reporters must file a report, in most instances, a person who is subjected to the alleged conduct will be able to control how the report is handled, including whether or not to pursue a formal investigation.

The University’s goal is to make sure you are aware of the range of options available to you and to ensure access to the resources you need.

Students wishing to discuss concerns in a confidential setting are encouraged to make an appointment with [Counseling and Psychological Services \(CAPS\)](#).

Students can learn more about filing a report, accessing supportive resources, and navigating the Title IX investigation and resolution process on the University’s [Title IX webpage](#).

**STATEMENT ON MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLNESS:** Texas A&M University recognizes that mental health and wellness are critical factors that influence a student’s academic success and overall wellbeing.

Students are encouraged to engage in healthy self-care by utilizing available resources and services on your campus.

Students who need someone to talk to can contact Counseling & Psychological Services (CAPS) or call the TAMU Helpline (979-845-2700) from 4:00 p.m. to 8:00 a.m. weekdays and 24 hours on weekends. 24-hour emergency help is also available through the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline (988) or at [988lifeline.org](http://988lifeline.org).

**TENTATIVE COURSE SCHEDULE (SUBJECT TO REVISION):** The required readings will all be made available online, and should be done before the class under which they are listed. (\* = optional, supplementary reading)

**I. Preliminaries**

Mon, 8/21	Course Introduction
Wed, 8/23	Truth and Falsity Bertrand Russell, <i>The Problems of Philosophy</i> , ch. 12, “Truth and Falsehood” *Ney, <i>Metaphysics</i> , 1 <sup>st</sup> ed., “Logic for Metaphysics”
Mon, 8/28	Being and Ontology Plato, <i>Sophist</i> 237a-239a W.V.O. Quine, “On What There Is”, pp. 21-25 *Ney, <i>Metaphysics</i> , ch. 1, pp. 30-36
Wed, 8/30	Being and Ontology (continued) Russell, “On Denoting”, pp. 479-484, 488, 491 Quine, “On What There Is”, pp. 25-29

\*Ney, *Metaphysics*, ch. 1, pp. 37-53

Mon, 9/4 [No Class – Labor Day]

Wed, 9/6 Being and Ontology (continued)  
Quine, “On What There Is”, pp. 34-38  
**Homework 1 due (10 points)**

## **II. Traditional Metaphysics**

### **a) Similarity and Difference**

Mon, 9/11 Universals: The One Over Many Argument & Transcendence vs. Immanence  
David M. Armstrong, *Universals and Scientific Realism*, vol. I, pp. xiii-xv, 11-17  
Armstrong, “Against ‘Ostrich’ Nominalism”, pp. 440-443  
Armstrong, *Universals*, ch. 5, “Universals as Attributes”, pp. 75-82  
\*Ney, *Metaphysics*, ch. 2, pp. 60-69

Wed, 9/13 Universals: Sparse vs Abundant Theories of Universals  
Armstrong, *Universals*, ch. 5, “Universals as Attributes”, pp. 82-88  
\*Ney, *Metaphysics*, ch. 2, pp. 70-71  
**Homework 2 due (10 points)**

Mon, 9/18 Universals: Two Methods in Ontology  
Quine, “On What There Is”, pp. 29-32  
Armstrong, *Universals*, ch. 5, “Universals as Attributes”, pp. 88-93  
\*Armstrong, “Against ‘Ostrich’ Nominalism”, pp. 443-448  
\*Ney, *Metaphysics*, ch. 2, pp. 71-74

Wed, 9/20 Haecceities: The Qualitative/Non-Qualitative Distinction  
Robert M. Adams, “Primitive Thisness and Primitive Identity”, pp. 5-13

Mon, 9/25 Haecceities: Arguments Against the Identity of Indiscernibles/Review for the Exam  
Adams, “Primitive Thisness and Primitive Identity”, pp. 13-19

Wed, 9/27 **First Exam (150 points)**

### **b) Possibility and Necessity**

Mon, 10/2 Introduction: Truthmaking and Modality  
Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity*, ch. 1  
\*Ney, *Metaphysics*, ch. 7, pp. 193-196

Wed, 10/4 Combinatorialism  
Armstrong, “The Nature of Possibility”, pp. 575-578

Mon, 10/9 [No Class – Fall Break]

Wed, 10/11 Combinatorialism (continued)  
Armstrong, “The Nature of Possibility”, pp. 578-580

- Mon, 10/16    Modal Realism  
                   Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds*, pp. 1-8, 69-71  
                   \*Ney, *Metaphysics*, ch. 7, pp. 196-207
- Wed, 10/18    Modal Realism (continued)  
                   Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds*, pp. 71-81  
                   \*Phillip Bricker, "Island Universes and the Analysis of Modality", pp. 107-114
- Mon, 10/23    Modal Realism (continued)/Review for the Exam  
                   Bricker, "Concrete Possible Worlds", pp. 79-82
- Wed, 10/25    **Second Exam (150 points)**
- Mon, 10/30    Modal Realism (continued)  
                   Bricker, "Concrete Possible Worlds", pp. 88-91  
                   Armstrong, "The Nature of Possibility", pp. 580-586  
                   **Homework 3 due (10 points)**

### **c) Time and Change**

- Wed, 11/1     Persistence and Parthood  
                   Judith Jarvis Thomson, "Parthood and Identity Across Time", pp. 201-205  
                   \*Ney, *Metaphysics*, ch. 6, pp. 170-178
- Mon, 11/6     Persistence and Parthood (continued)  
                   Thomson, "Parthood and Identity Across Time", pp. 206-210  
                   \*Mark Heller, *The Ontology of Physical Objects*, ch. 1, "Temporal Parts of Four-Dimensional Objects", pp. 1-4
- Wed, 11/8     Persistence and Parthood (continued)  
                   Thomson, "Parthood and Identity Across Time", pp. 210-220  
                   \*Ney, *Metaphysics*, ch. 6, pp. 178-188  
                   **Homework 4 due (10 points)**
- Mon, 11/13    Persistence and Temporary Intrinsic  
                   Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds*, pp. 202-204  
                   Lewis, "Rearrangement of Particles: Reply to Lowe", pp. 65-68  
                   \*Lewis, "Tensing the Copula", pp. 1-4
- Wed, 11/15    Persistence and Temporary Intrinsic (continued)  
                   Sally Haslanger, "Endurance and Temporary Intrinsic"

### **III. Social Metaphysics**

#### **a) Tools, Equipment, and Social Artifacts**

- Mon, 11/20    Introduction: Presence-at-Hand and Readiness-to-Hand  
                   Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, Division I, Chapter 3, §§14-15, pp. 92-102  
                   \*William Blattner, *Heidegger's Being and Time: A Reader's Guide*, pp. 48-56
- Wed, 11/22    [No Class – Reading Day/Thanksgiving Break]

- Mon, 11/27    The Proper Functions of Equipment  
                  Lynne Rudder Baker, *The Metaphysics of Everyday Life*, ch. 3, "Artifacts", pp. 49-53
- Wed, 11/29    Identity and Difference  
                  Baker, *The Metaphysics of Everyday Life*, ch. 2, "The Reality of Ordinary Things", pp. 32-39  
                  Baker, *The Metaphysics of Everyday Life*, ch. 3, "Artifacts", pp. 53-59
- Mon, 12/4     Last Day of Class/Identity and Difference (continued)  
                  Heidegger, *Being and Time*, Division I, Chapter 3, §16, pp. 102-107  
                  \*Blattner, *Heidegger's Being and Time: A Reader's Guide*, pp. 56-59  
                  **Homework 5 due (10 points)**
- Fri, 12/8     **Final Exam at 10:30 AM – 12:30 PM (100 points)**