

**PHIL 361 (501): Metaphysics**  
Spring 2023

Instructor: Byron Simmons

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Class: MWF 1:50-2:40PM in YMCA 115

Office hours: MW 12:30-1:30PM 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, necessity, and possibility. We will here sketch two quite different metaphysical pictures of the world: according to the first, the world is a thing—the biggest thing—which contains all other things as parts; according to the second, the world is all that is the case, it is a totality of facts or states of affairs, not of things. These preliminary discussions will provide us with the background necessary to enter into contemporary debates in analytic metaphysics.

In the second part of the course, we will turn to some fairly traditional questions about the world 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 time passes. That, I take it, is also quite obvious: it is immediately presented to us in experience. But what exactly does this amount to? Is there something special or privileged about the present? Do past and future entities exist? How, moreover, do things change over time?

In the third part of the course, we will focus on some more radical questions about the world 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, attempt to explore the nature and existence of certain peculiarly social artifacts such as games, money, tools, and works of art. And, time permitting, we will briefly explore the social significance of who we are and the nature of social construction.

**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 following skills:

- The ability to identify the structure of arguments—identifying their premises, conclusion, and logical form—and to present them in premise-conclusion form.

- The ability to 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.
- The ability to 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.
- The ability to 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 supplemental text:

Alyssa Ney, *Metaphysics: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2014). ISBN: 978-0-415-64075-6

I think this is a great book. But it’s also about to head into an expanded second edition, which might well be even better than the first. So rather than requiring you to purchase the first edition, I will make some of the relevant sections available electronically and encourage you to get the second edition when it comes out in April.

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 February 17<sup>th</sup> and March 31<sup>st</sup>) each worth 150 points and a **final exam** worth 150 points. The exams will all be closed-book, closed-notes. 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 - 465 points (100 - 93%)	C+:	399 - 385 points (79 - 77%)
A-:	464 - 450 points (92 - 90%)	C:	384 - 365 points (76 - 73%)
B+:	449 - 435 points (89 - 87%)	C-:	364 - 350 points (72 - 70%)
B:	434 - 415 points (86 - 83%)	D:	349 - 300 points (69 - 60%)
B-:	414 - 400 points (82 - 80%)	F:	below 300 points (below 60%)

**LATE WORK POLICY:** If 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).

**COURSE SCHEDULE:** 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**

- Wed, 1/18      Course Introduction
- Fri, 1/20      Truth and Falsity  
Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy*, ch. 12, "Truth and Falsehood"  
\*Ney, *Metaphysics*, "Logic for Metaphysics"
- Mon, 1/23      Being and Ontology  
W.V.O. Quine, "On What There Is", pp. 21-22  
\*Ney, *Metaphysics*, ch. 1, pp. 30-36
- Wed, 1/25      Being and Ontology (continued)  
W.V.O. Quine, "On What There Is", pp. 22-25
- Fri, 1/27      Being and Ontology (continued)  
Quine, "On What There Is", pp. 25-29, 34-38  
\*Ney, *Metaphysics*, ch. 1, pp. 37-53
- Mon, 1/30      Being and Ontology (continued)  
Quine, "On What There Is", pp. 34-38
- Wed, 2/1      [No Class: Ice Storm]

## **II. Traditional Metaphysics**

### **a) Possibility and Necessity**

- Fri, 2/3      Introduction: Truthmaking and Modality
- Mon, 2/6      Epistemological Approaches to Modality: The Unrevisability Account  
Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity*, ch. 1, "Preliminary Distinctions and Remarks", pp. 1-4  
\*Ney, *Metaphysics*, ch. 7, pp. 190-196
- Wed, 2/8      Epistemological Approaches to Modality: The Unrevisability Account (continued)
- Fri, 2/10      Epistemological Approaches to Modality: The Self-Evidentiality Account  
Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity*, ch. 1, pp. 4-6  
\*Richard Courant and Herbert Robbins, *What is Mathematics?* pp. 77-79  
\*David Lewis, *Parts of Classes*, ch. 2, pp. 29-35
- Mon, 2/13      Epistemological Approaches to Modality: The Self-Evidentiality Account (continued)  
A.W. Moore, *The Infinite*, ch. 8, pp. 116-121  
\*Courant and Robbins, *What is Mathematics?* pp. 79-83
- Wed, 2/15      Review for Exam

- Fri, 2/17      **First Exam**
- Mon, 2/20      Epistemological Approaches to Modality: The Self-Evidentiality Account (continued)
- Wed, 2/22      Epistemological Approaches to Modality: The Knowability Account
- Fri, 2/24      Epistemological Approaches to Modality: The Knowability Account (continued)  
Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, pp. 34-38
- Mon, 2/27      Epistemological Approaches to Modality: The Knowability Account (continued)  
Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, pp. 128-134  
\*Ney, *Metaphysics*, ch. 7, pp. 207-211
- Wed, 3/1      Epistemological Approaches to Modality: The Knowability Account (continued)  
Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, pp. 54-57  
Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity*, ch. 1, pp. 6-9
- Fri, 3/3      Metaphysical Approaches to Modality: The Possible Worlds Analysis of Modality  
\*Ney, *Metaphysics*, ch. 7, pp. 193-196
- Mon, 3/6      Metaphysical Approaches to Modality: Combinatorialism  
David M. Armstrong, "The Nature of Possibility", pp. 575-576
- Wed, 3/8      Metaphysical Approaches to Modality: Combinatorialism (continued)  
Armstrong, "The Nature of Possibility", pp. 576-578
- Fri, 3/10      Metaphysical Approaches to Modality: Combinatorialism (continued)
- [Mon, 3/13 & Wed, 3/15 & Fri, 3/17 – No Class – Spring Break]
- Mon, 3/20      Metaphysical Approaches to Modality: Combinatorialism (continued)  
Armstrong, "The Nature of Possibility", pp. 578-580
- Wed, 3/22      Metaphysical Approaches to Modality: Modal Realism  
Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds*, pp. 1-8  
\*Ney, *Metaphysics*, ch. 7, pp. 196-207
- Fri, 3/24      Metaphysical Approaches to Modality: Modal Realism (continued)  
Phillip Bricker, "Concrete Possible Worlds", pp. 88-91
- Mon, 3/27      Metaphysical Approaches to Modality: Modal Realism (continued)  
Armstrong, "The Nature of Possibility", pp. 580-586
- Wed, 3/29      Review for Exam
- Fri, 3/31      **Second Exam**
- Mon, 4/3      [No Class: Covid Day]
- Wed, 4/5      Zoom Day

Fri, 4/7 [No Class: Reading Day]

## **b) Similarity and Difference**

- Mon, 4/10 Universals: The One Over Many Argument  
Armstrong, *Universals and Scientific Realism*, vol. I, pp. xiii-xv, 11-17  
Armstrong, "Against 'Ostrich' Nominalism", pp. 440-443  
\*Ney, *Metaphysics*, ch. 2, pp. 60-69
- Wed, 4/12 Universals: Transcendent vs. Immanent Theories of Universals  
Armstrong, *Universals*, ch. 5, "Universals as Attributes", pp. 75-82
- Fri, 4/14 Universals: Sparse vs Abundant Theories of Universals  
Armstrong, *Universals*, ch. 5, "Universals as Attributes", pp. 82-88  
\*Lewis, "New Work for a Theory of Universals", pp. 344-347  
\*Ney, *Metaphysics*, ch. 2, pp. 70-71
- Mon, 4/17 Universals: Sparse vs Abundant Theories of Universals (continued)
- Wed, 4/19 Universals: Two Methods in Metaphysics  
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

## **III. Social Metaphysics**

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

- Fri, 4/21 Introduction: Presence-at-Hand and Readiness-to-Hand  
Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, Division I, Chapter 3, §15, pp. 95-102  
\*William Blattner, *Heidegger's Being and Time: A Reader's Guide*, pp. 48-56
- Mon, 4/24 The Pre-Philosophical and Phenomenological Conceptions of World  
Heidegger, *Being and Time*, Division I, Chapter 3, §14, pp. 92-95
- Wed, 4/26 The Proper Functions of Equipment  
Lynne Rudder Baker, *The Metaphysics of Everyday Life*, ch. 3, "Artifacts", pp. 49-53
- Fri, 4/28 The Proper Functions of Equipment (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  
Baker, *The Metaphysics of Everyday Life*, ch. 3, "Artifacts", pp. 55-59
- Mon, 5/1 Identity and Difference
- Tues, 5/2 Last Day of Class/Review for the Final Exam
- Mon, 5/8 **Final Exam at 3:30-5:30PM**