

Phil 411: Metaphysics

Location and Time: [Zoom](#) (Password: Quine), T and Th: 2:10 PM - 4:00 PM

Professor Robert Wallace, rhwallac@calpoly.edu.

Office Hours: Fridays 2-5PM or by appointment.

The information contained in this course syllabus, other than the grade and absence policies, may be subject to change with advance notice, as deemed appropriate by the instructor.

Course Description:

Metaphysics is the branch of philosophy that seeks to understand the structure of reality in both the most general and the most fundamental terms. Metaphysicians ask some hard questions: what exists? Are numbers real, or are they fictions? Do chairs really exist, or are there really only particles? What does it mean for something to be possible? How do causes cause their effects? How do you stay *you* over time? Is time travel possible? How do things persist through time? Do you have free will?

Maybe it is apparent from the breadth of these questions, metaphysics has been defined differently across the history of philosophy. Philosophers have wondered at times if metaphysics is justified. Unsurprisingly, metametaphysics, a subfield of philosophy that asks, “how should we do metaphysics?” has recently seen tremendous growth!

The course will offer an advanced introduction to contemporary analytic metaphysics by way a couple of these important questions. (Contemporary, insofar as we will look at texts and ideas from about the 1950s to today; analytic, insofar as we will engage with these questions with a focus on argumentative precision and clarity). We will discuss questions about ontology, abstract objects, modality, causation, and free will.

Course goals:

You might have thought that the goal of this course was for me to offer definitive answers to these metaphysical questions. But it isn't. Instead, the goal of the course is to provide you with the tools to think critically, for yourself about these questions, and for you to develop good answers to them. This course will help you develop your own thoughts on these matters. I'm looking forward to hearing what you think!

Learning Outcomes:

By the end of this course, students will be able to:

- State and explain some leading metaphysical theories and arguments.
- Illustrate the assets and liabilities of some leading metaphysical theories and arguments.
- Evaluate the plausibility of some leading metaphysical theories and arguments.
- Write a thoughtful, concise term paper that exhibits the rhetorical and explanatory standards of contemporary analytic philosophy.

Format:

Due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, class will be held synchronously over Zoom. The course will be entirely online, with our class sessions held synchronously over Zoom on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 2:10PM - 4:00PM. All classes will be in the same Zoom room: [Classroom](#), Password: Quine. You'll be able to find this link on our Canvas site, as well as recordings of lectures and our discussions.

Class begins on Sept. 15th. This is a 4-Unit lecture-discussion course, and you should expect to commit 12 hours per week on this course. A typical class will begin with a lecture-ish overview of the material in question and then transition to a seminar-style format. We will take a break halfway into class to cut down on Zoom fatigue.

I can't make you do this, but I would strongly recommend having a class group chat (like Slack or WhatsApp or something) so that you can remind each other about assignments, talk philosophy, share memes, and be friends.

Required Text:

Alyssa Ney, *Metaphysics: An Introduction*.

All other assigned readings will be posted on Canvas.

Grading and Assignments:

Grade Breakdown:

Attendance Course Participation: 10%

Weekly Responses: 15%

Exam 1: 20%

Exam 2: 20%

Term Paper: 35%

Due dates for assignments can be found in the "course outline" section of the syllabus.

Attendance and Course Participation: Attending class is an essential part of succeeding in this course. You will not do well in this course if you don't show up. The default for attending class is keeping your camera on. You will lose two points for each unexcused absence. Obviously, life happens. Please get in touch with me as soon as you are able if something comes up. Please be aware that religious holidays are "excused absences" for students according to [Cal Poly's Class Attendance Policy](#).

As part of your participation grade, I'm going to ask you to sign up to be a *point person* for two class sessions. (Sign-ups are on Canvas). When you are the point person, I will invite you to discuss your weekly response and get discussion going. I might ask you to follow up on what another student has said. This will be worth 4 points.

The other 6 points of course participation can take many forms. You get .5 points for (1) substantively contributing to class, (2) commenting on other students' weekly responses, (3) posting to the Q & A forum, up to 6 points total.

Weekly Responses: Each week (excluding week 1), you'll be asked to write up a short response (250-500 words) to one of that week's reading assignment. I will use them to structure our discussions. You can write about any of the assigned readings. You will post them to the discussion board for the week's responses, and they will be due the evening before the class we will discuss that reading, at 11PT.

You should think about these responses as a way to practice for the term paper by critically engaging with the text. For example, you might challenge an argument, raise a difficult question, or compare the ideas in this reading to something we have already talked about in class. I encourage you to thoughtfully reflect and reply to your fellow student's responses.

For our last week of class, instead of a short response, you will post a question for exam review.

Exams: We will have two exams, both of which will be available for you to take on Canvas. Exams will consist of multiple choice and short answer sections. They will be open book. (Consider this to be the digital equivalent of a take home exam). You can take these exams anytime during the week they are assigned. Once you start the exam you will have 2 hours to complete it.

Term Paper: You will write a 10-to-15-page double-spaced term paper on a topic of your choosing. I will provide you with suggested topics. Another way to write the term paper is to take one of your weekly responses and expand into a full paper. (Philosophy majors: you should think about the term paper as preparation for writing the senior project paper; the skills for writing this term paper will carry over). My job is to help you write these term papers. I am more than happy to read drafts and outlines, or simply talk through the ideas with you.

The instructions for the papers and the outline are our Canvas website. We will discuss in class. I will also post a writing guide.

Late Work: Work that is handed in after the day after the deadline has passed will be marked down one full letter grade, and so on. For instance, an A paper that is received within 24 hours of the deadline will receive a B, 48 hours late will receive a C, and so on. The following *do not count* as legitimate excuses: failure to read the syllabus, sleeping in, or forgetfulness. If you require an extension, please contact me as soon as possible.

Rounding and Curving: I will round final course grades up by .5, so that a 79.5 will earn a B- while a 69.5 will earn a C-, and so on. I will do no other rounding. 79.4s will not be rounded up. Standing policy is that no grades will be curved in the course, but I reserve the right to curve when needed. Please do not rely on this possibility!

Syllabus Acceptance: Before I record any grades for a student in this course, they must complete the “syllabus acceptance” assignment on Canvas.

Academic Integrity:

Students are encouraged to share intellectual views and discuss freely the principles and applications of course materials. However, graded work/exercises must be the product of independent effort unless otherwise instructed. Ignorance of the academic integrity policies is not a viable excuse. Please thoroughly familiarize yourself with the [Office of Students’ Rights and Responsibilities page on Academic Integrity](#), as well as the information found on [Academic Programs and Planning website regarding cheating and plagiarism](#).

Bottom line: do your own work!

If you have any questions about academic integrity, please do not hesitate to ask me!

Inclusion and Classroom Behavior:

This class will be fully online, but usual classroom etiquette norms apply. As in any course, you must be respectful to myself and the other students during this class. Beyond this, as philosophers in training, you have special reason to treat each other’s thoughts and ideas charitably. Each of you (and myself) will be coming at these fundamental questions with different backgrounds, belief systems, intellectual strengths, and interests. Our class is a place where thoughts can be expressed without fear of bullying or discrimination. Aristotle thought that the best kind of friendship was one where friends make each other more virtuous people; in this class, we should strive to be friends-in-thinking, helping each other to think more clearly about the problems at hand.

Please be aware that you can update your pronouns on Canvas in the user settings. If you would like more information on pronouns, visit Cal Poly’s [Pronouns Matter](#). If your preferred name or pronouns change during the quarter, please let me know. Mistakes in addressing one another may happen. If you make a mistake or are corrected, please briefly apologize and correct yourself. (I will do the same if I make a mistake!)

Accessibility and Accommodations:

We can’t be friends-in-thinking unless the learning experience is as accessible as possible for everyone. If you anticipate or experience physical, technical, or academic barriers to your learning experience, please let me know immediately so that we can discuss options. You can always contact the [Disability Resource Center](#). They are located in Building 124, Room 119. I’d be happy to help you with this. I have also set up a page in our Canvas site that has a comprehensive list of student resources with links. You can find it here: [Student Resources Page](#). If your documentation status presents obstacles to engaging in this class, you may request confidential accommodations. You may consult with [RISE](#) or the [Dream Center](#) for examples of possible accommodations. Such arrangements will not jeopardize your student status, your financial aid, or any other part of your residence.

Student Care Resources

If you face challenges securing food, housing or other basic needs, please be aware that many resources are available to support you through [Cal Poly's Basic Needs](#) initiative or by contacting the [dean of students](#). An extensive list of critical care resources is also listed and updated on the Cal Poly Coronavirus information pages [Student Care Resources](#) page.

Mental health is an important part of your overall well-being. Students experiencing personal problems or situational crises during the quarter are encouraged to contact Counseling Services (805-756-2511) for assistance, support and advocacy. This service is free and confidential. Check out the [Campus Health and Wellbeing](#) website for more information.

If you have specific questions about the Covid-19 pandemic, please visit the [Cal Poly Coronavirus website](#). For specific information on frequently asked questions about Cal Poly classes and programs, visit the [Classes and Programs](#) section of this website. If you have concerns about accessing the tools that you need to continue with your studies, including technology, please contact [retention](#).

If I can help you in any way to access the resources above, or if you have any questions about student care resources, please contact me so that I can assist you. I am committed to ensuring that all students have the resources they need to be able to participate in this course.

Course Materials and Intellectual Property

Please note that all course materials, provided by the instructor and/or other sources, are covered by copyright protections. Students are not authorized to record, share, repost, and/or redistribute these materials in any form(s) (such as, but not limited to, hard copy and electronic forms) in any venue(s) (such as, but not limited to, social media platforms and online study material sites). In some cases, sharing, re-posting, recording, and/or redistributing course materials constitutes a violation of Cal Poly academic integrity policies, while in other cases such actions constitute a violation of copyright protections.

Outline of the Course:

Below please find an outline of the course, subject to change. Required readings are just that: required. You have to read these for the class session. Further readings are additional readings to help develop your views on a particular topic. They won't show up on the exams but may be useful in preparing for the term paper.

Week 1: Ontology

9/15

No Reading.

9/17

Required Reading: Ney, *Metaphysics: an Introduction*, chap 1

Further Reading: van Inwagen, "Being, Existence, and Ontological Commitment"

Week 2: Abstract Entities

9/22

Required: Ney, chap 2

9/24

Required: Szabo, "Nominalism"

Further Reading: Armstrong, excerpts from *Universals: An Opinionated Introduction*

Week 3: New Directions on Abstract Entities

9/29

Required Reading: Thommasson, "Fictionalism versus Deflationism"

Further Reading: SEP, Fictionalism

10/1

Tugby, "Platonic Dispositionalism"

Further Reading: SEP, Dispositions

Week 4: Critiques of Quinean Ontology

10/6

Ney, Chapter 4

Further Reading: TBD

10/8

Required Reading: Schaffer, "On What Grounds What"

Further Reading: Bennett, "There Is No Special Problem of Metaphysics" *

Week 5: Modality

10/13

Required Reading: Ney, Chapter 7; Lewis, Excerpts from *On the Plurality of Worlds*

10/15

Required Reading: Plantinga, "Actualism and Possible Worlds"
Further Reading: Lewis, "Is There Life on Possible Worlds?"

Assignment: Complete Exam 1 by Sunday, 10/18, 11PM PT

Week 6: Modality Without Possible Worlds

10/20

Required Reading: Sider, "Reductive Theories of Modality"

10/22

Required Reading: Barbara Vetter, "'Can' without Possible Worlds"

Week 7: Free Will: Incompatibilism

10/28

Required Reading: Ney, Chapter 9: Free Will

Further Reading: McKenna and Pereboom, excerpts *Free Will: A Contemporary Introduction*

10/30

Required reading: Van Inwagen, "The Power of Rational Beings"; Pereboom, "Defending Hard Incompatibilism."

Further reading: Ekstrom, "Free Will, Chance, and Mystery"; Chisholm "Free Will and the Self"

Week 8: Free Will: Compatibilism

11/3

Required Reading: Frankfurt, "Alternative Possibilities and Moral Responsibility"

Further Reading: P.F. Strawson, "Freedom and Resentment"

11/5

Required Reading: Sartorio, excerpts from *Causation and Free Will*

Further Reading: Fischer and Ravizza, excerpts from *Responsibility and Control*

Week 9: Causation

11/10

Required Reading: Ney, Chapter 8

11/12

Lewis, "Causation as Influence"

Week 10: Causation

11/17

Sartorio, "Causation as Difference-Making"

11/19

Paul and Hall, excerpt from *Causation: A User's Guide*

Assignment: Term Papers Due by 11/22, 11PM PT

Week 11: Exam Review

11/24:

Exam Review

Exam Week

Assignment: Exam 2 due by 12/3, 11PM PT