

Introduction to Metaphysics

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Course Description

Metaphysical questions ask about what exists, what the things that exist are like, and how they relate. They tend to focus on what things are like in themselves, as opposed to how we know about or represent them. In this course, we will cover a core set of these questions from a contemporary perspective. We will first ask about how humans fit into the world: Do we have free will? How do we persist through time? We will then zoom out a little, and ask: How should we explain facts about the existence of the social world? Does time really “flow”? To answer these questions, we will read classic and recent texts and work through the arguments of some of the major positions in these debates. Through this process, we will develop a variety of philosophical tools that can be applied to new topics.

Learning Outcomes

1. Produce philosophical writing that meets the field of philosophy’s expectations regarding structure, argumentation, and evidence.
2. Understand the major positions in several theoretical and applied areas of metaphysics.
3. Handle sources appropriately, properly citing.

Technology in the Classroom

Please minimize your technology use in the classroom. Students should take notes using a notebook and either bring the textbook to class or consult their notes. If you choose to use a laptop, please disable your wifi during class. **Please refrain from looking at your phone during class.** If you need an exception to this policy for person reasons, please let me know before class by email or in person.

If you are a student with a disability that has a technology accommodation, please let me know as soon as possible.

Accessibility

Bryn Mawr College is committed to providing equal access to students with a documented disability. Students needing academic accommodations for a disability must first register with Access Services. Students can call 610-526-7516 to make an appointment with the Director of Access Services, Deb Alder, or email her at dalder@brynmawr.edu to begin this confidential process. Once registered, students should schedule an appointment with the professor as early in the semester as possible to share the verification form and make appropriate arrangements. Please note that accommodations are not retroactive and require

advance notice to implement. More information can be obtained at the Access Services website. (<http://www.brynmawr.edu/access-services/>)

Any student who has a disability-related need to record this class first must speak with the Director of Access Services and to me, the instructor. Class members need to be aware that this class may be recorded.

Title IX

Bryn Mawr/Haverford College is committed to fostering a safe and inclusive living and learning environment where all can feel secure and free from harassment. All forms of sexual misconduct, including sexual assault, sexual harassment, stalking, domestic violence, and dating violence are violations of Bryn Mawr/Haverford's policies, whether they occur on or off campus. Bryn Mawr/Haverford faculty are committed to helping to create a safe learning environment for all students and for the College community as a whole. If you have experienced any form of gender or sex-based discrimination, harassment, or violence, know that help and support are available. Staff members are trained to support students in navigating campus life, accessing health and counseling services, providing academic and housing accommodations, and more.

The College strongly encourages all students to report any incidents of sexual misconduct. Please be aware that all Bryn Mawr/Haverford employees (other than those designated as confidential resources such as counselors, clergy, and healthcare providers) are required to report information about such discrimination and harassment to the Bi-College Title IX Coordinator.

Information about the College's Sexual Misconduct policy, reporting options, and a list of campus and local resources can be found on the College's website:

<https://www.brynmawr.edu/inside/policies-guidelines-handbooks/title-ix>

Notes on Academic Integrity

I regard plagiarism as a very serious matter. In this class, plagiarism consists of work taken partially or entirely from an uncited source (online content, a peer, a published article, etc.) and assumed as your own. Any use of AI to write for you is also considered plagiarism and is easily detectable. If I have reasons to suspect plagiarizing, I will ask that you report yourself to the Bryn Mawr Honor Board. See the Bryn Mawr Honor Code and Honor Board Hearing Process in the Student Handbook for more information.

Evaluation

- Weekly reflections: Each week you will write a short reflection on the reading, worth 30% of your grade. These will be graded as *full credit*, *half credit*, or *no credit*.
- Exams: There will be two exams, worth 25% of your grade each. The exams will not be cumulative.
- Final paper: A final paper that builds on your weekly reflections (5 pages), **due during finals week** and worth 20% of your grade.

Weekly reflections:

By **noon each Thursday** you will submit a 200–300 word reflection through Moodle on that

week's readings. Your reflection should either identify something you found **interesting** in the reading (and explain why you found it interesting, perhaps connecting it to your own life or other courses you've taken) or something you found **confusing** (and explain why you found it confusing, with an attempt to make sense of what the author might mean).

Grading Policies

1. Attendance is expected.
2. The grading standard for this course is that a "B" reflects a minimal but satisfactory engagement with the material of the course. Anything above a "B" will reflect the quality of work submitted by the student.
3. Extensions can be granted on assignments, but you should ask at least a day in advance. If you do not make arrangements beforehand, late papers will be downgraded by 1/3 letter grade per day.

Grade breakdown:

Grade	Grade Points	Percentage Range	Meaning
A	4.0	94–100%	Excellent
A-	3.7	90–93%	Excellent-
B+	3.3	87–89%	Very Good
B	3.0	83–86%	Good
B-	2.7	80–82%	Good-
C+	2.3	77–79%	Satisfactory+
C	2.0	73–76%	Satisfactory
C-	1.7	70–72%	
D	1.0	60–69%	
F	0	0–59%	

Course Materials

Required: *Metaphysics: The Big Questions* (2nd ed), van Inwagen and Zimmerman.

Other readings will be posted on the course site.

Tentative Schedule of Readings

Topic 1: The Problem of Free Will

Week 1

Jan 23: Introductory class

What is metaphysics? How do we do it?

Optional reading: Van Inwagen and Sullivan, "Metaphysics" (course site)

Jan 25: The problem of free will

Optional reading: Vihvelin, "Arguments for Incompatibilism", (course site)

Week 2

Jan 30: Libertarianism

Chisholm, "Human Freedom and the Self"

Feb 1: Discussion

Week 3

Feb 6: Compatibilism

Wolf, "Sanity and the Metaphysics of Responsibility" (course site)

Feb 8: Discussion

Week 4

Feb 13: Incompatibilism

Van Inwagen, "The Consequence Argument"

Feb 15: Discussion

Topic 2: Persistence

Week 5

Feb 20: Introduction to personal identity

Sider, "Personal Identity", pp. 7–11 (course site)

Shoemaker, "Personal Identity: A Materialist Account", sections 1–2

Feb 22: Discussion

Week 6

Feb 27: Body theory vs. memory theory

Swinburne, "Personal Identity: the Dualist Theory", sections 1 and 2; Shoemaker, "Personal Identity: A Materialist Account", sections 3–5

Feb 29: Discussion

Week 7

Mar 5: REVIEW

Mar 7: Exam 1

Week 8

SPRING BREAK

Week 9

Mar 19: Temporal parts and change

Hawley, "Temporal parts", sections 1–4 (course site)

Mar 21: Discussion

Topic 3: From People to Groups of People

Week 10

Mar 26: The Supreme Court

Uzquiano, "The Supreme Court and Its Members" (course site)

Mar 28: Discussion

Week 11

Apr 2: The Mereological Account of Groups

Hawley, "Social Mereology" (course site)

Apr 4: Discussion

Topic 4: Time

Week 12

Apr 9: Time is unreal

McTaggart, "Time"

Broad, "McTaggart's Arguments against the Reality of Time"

Apr 11: Discussion

Extra reading: Sider, "Time" (course site)

Week 13

Apr 16: The B-theory of time

Smart, "The Space-time World"

Apr 18: Discussion

Week 14

Apr 23: Time travel

Lewis, "The paradoxes of Time Travel"

Apr 25: Discussion

Week 15

Apr 30: REVIEW

May 2: Exam 2

Final paper due during finals week