

PHIL 272: Metaphysics

Loyola University Chicago: Spring 2021

Meeting time varies by student: Find your group [on Sakai](#)



Instructor: Dr. Joshua Mendelsohn <jmendelsohn@luc.edu>.

Instructor's office hours: Tuesday and Thursday 4:15pm, or by appointment.

Teaching assistant: Kevin Mager <kmager@luc.edu>.

Teaching assistant's office hours: By appointment.

The goal of metaphysics is to answer fundamental questions about the nature of reality, such as: What, fundamentally, exists? What, for that matter, does it mean for something to exist? Does everything exist in space and time? (If so, where is the number three, and when does the color red exist?) Are some things “more real” than others? If so, what is most real and what makes it that way? What does it take for an object or a person to persist over time? Are there facts that could not be otherwise (for instance, the fact that $2+2=4$)? What causes a fact to be like that?

These, and questions like them, fall outside the scope of special sciences like physics, sociology, psychology and mathematics – although answers to these questions are often presupposed by these sciences. Philosophers from the ancient world until today have not only pursued the project of answering these questions, they have also persistently challenged the possibility of answering them. In this course, we will read and discuss both contributions to metaphysics and challenges to it. Readings will be drawn from contemporary and historical authors.

This course has a Mind and Science (M&S) designation for the purposes of major specialization.

Learning goals

Students who successfully complete this course will:

1. Become familiar with the some of the central topics, terminology and approaches to questions in contemporary and historical metaphysics
2. Learn to formulate and evaluate arguments for and against positions in metaphysics
3. Be able to critically reflect on the possibility of metaphysics

Format of the course

As a participant in this class, you will complete weekly reading assignments, watch pre-recorded lectures, and participate in a weekly discussion over Zoom. Although this course is listed as meeting twice a week, you will be required to meet synchronously only **once** each week over Zoom. See the table [on Sakai](#) or consult the email sent out to determine when you are required to be present for the Zoom session. **Before each meeting**, you should watch the assigned lecture, complete the assigned reading, and complete the quiz if there is one. The Zoom session will be devoted to discussion, answering questions and holding formal debates over the issues we have been considering.

Books

The only book required for this course is: Anna Marmodoro & Erasmus Mayr. *Metaphysics: An introduction to contemporary debates and their history*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. The book is available from the bookstore. An inexpensive Kindle version is also available on Amazon, which can be read using the Kindle app on many different devices. Either the print version or the Kindle version is sufficient for this course.

Assessment

1. *Quizzes* on reading and terminology (15%).
2. *Participation*, which can take a number of forms, including (i) emailing well thought-out questions to me, which we will then discuss in class, (ii) talking over what you have been thinking about in connection with the course during office hours, and (iii) verbal engagement during discussion classes (15%).
3. Taking part in one *collaborative debate* over the course of the semester (20%). In these debates, you will be assigned a role on a team defending one side of an issue in metaphysics. You will prepare your argument in collaboration with your teammates and the other side.
4. Two open-book exams worth 20% and 30% each (50%). You will be given 48–72 hours to complete each exam.

The following table is used to compute letter grades from percentages. The listed percentage grade or higher is required for the respective letter grade:

A+	97.5	C+	77.5
A	92.5	C	72.5
A-	90	C-	70
B+	87.5	D+	67.5
B	82.5	D	62.5
B-	80	D-	60

Academic honesty

All work you submit in this class is presumed to be your own. Cheating and plagiarism will incur very serious consequences. At a minimum, the student will fail the relevant assignment. More serious or repeat offenders may fail the course or face expulsion. Review the definition of plagiarism and the consequences at <https://www.luc.edu/cas/advising/academicintegritystatement/>.

Student accommodations

The university is committed to supporting students who require special accommodations to participate fully. In order to receive the accommodations you require, you should (i) register with the Student Accessibility Center (<http://www.luc.edu/sswd>), (ii) present your accommodation letter to the instructor during the first two weeks of class, and (iii) notify the SAC of any upcoming exams two weeks in advance (step (iii) only applies to students with accommodations related to testing). Accommodations cannot be provided without all steps being taken.

Course Schedule

The following schedule is provisional. Any changes will be announced in class or in recorded lectures. The syllabus will also be updated to reflect the latest changes, so it's best to check the latest version on Sakai. Please ensure that you have completed the assigned reading and watched the lecture *before* your discussion section that week.

Introduction

Week of **Metaphysics and other sciences** Marmodoro and Mayr, "Introduction" (pp. 1–9).
1/19

Individuals

Week of **Substances as primary beings** Marmodoro and Mayr, "Substance" §§1.1
1/26 (pp. 10–20).
Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 4.1–2, 7.1–3 with commentary by Vasilis Politis, plus a short passage from *Categories*.

Week of **What is an individual substance?** Marmodoro and Mayr, "Substance" §§1.2–1.3
2/2 (pp. 20–33).
– The bundle view Aristotle, *Physics* I.7.
– The bare particular view John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, book II, ch. 23, §§1–6.
OPTIONAL: Max Black, "The Identity of Indiscernibles".

Week of 2/9	What is an individual substance? – Hylomorphism	Marmodoro and Mayr, “Substance” §§1.4–1.6 (pp. 33–46). Aristotle, <i>Metaphysics</i> 7.10 1035b14–26, 7.17, 8.1–3 with commentary by Vasilis Politis; <i>De Anima</i> 2.1. OPTIONAL: Matthew McGrath, “Temporal parts”.
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Challenges to substance metaphysics

Week of 2/16	Nominalism	W.V.O. Quine, “On What There Is”. Marmodoro and Mayr, “Properties and Relations” §§2.1–2 (pp. 47–59). Selections from Boethius’s second commentary on Porphyry.
Week of 2/23	Monism	Peter van Inwagen, “Individuality”. Benedict de Spinoza, <i>Ethics</i> prop. 1–14. Selections from Gauḍapāda, <i>Kārikās on the Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad</i> . OPTIONAL: Jonathan Bennett, “A Study of Spinoza’s Ethics”, ch. 3.
Week of 3/2	Anti-essentialism	Mark Siderits, “Madhyamaka: The Doctrine of Emptiness”. W.V.O. Quine, “Speaking of Objects”. Marmodoro and Mayr, ch. 3, §§3.1–3.

Four case studies

Week of 3/9	Case studies 1 and 2: Numbers and Propositions	Gottlob Frege, <i>The Foundations of Arithmetic</i> , §§18–28. James Franklin, “Aristotelianism in the Philosophy of Mathematics”. Gottlob Frege, <i>Thought</i> . Short excerpts from Frege-Russell correspondence.
Week of 3/16	Case studies 3 and 4: God and Race	Alyssa Ney and Allan Hazlett, “The Metaphysics of Race”. Peter van Inwagen, “Necessary Being: The Ontological Argument”. Avicenna, <i>The Salvation</i> , “Metaphysics,” II.12–13. First exam due 3/12.

 Modal metaphysics

Week of 3/23	Is everything necessary?	Leibniz, <i>On Contingency</i> . Spinoza, <i>Ethics</i> prop. 15–29.
Week of 3/30	What makes something necessary? – Possible-world realism – Modal actualism	Marmodoro and Mayr, ch. 3, §§3.1–3.4. David Lewis, <i>On the Plurality of Worlds</i> , pp. vii–13. Robert Stalnaker, “Possible Worlds”. OPTIONAL: Sinhababu, “Possible girls”.
Week of 4/6	What makes something necessary? – Powers-based accounts	Marmodoro and Mayr, ch. 2, §§2.4–6; ch. 3, §§3.5. Barbara Vetter, “Recent Work: Modality without Possible Worlds”.

Can the goals of metaphysics be attained?

Week of 4/13	Are our metaphysical judgments just a reflection of our conceptual scheme?	Selections from Kant, <i>Prolegomena to any future metaphysics</i> . E.J. Lowe, “The possibility of Metaphysics”.
Week of 4/20	Are they just a reflection of our language?	Rudolf Carnap, “The Elimination of Metaphysics”. Selections from Wittgenstein, <i>Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus</i> . Final exam due 5/6.

University privacy statement

Assuring privacy among faculty and students engaged in online and face-to-face instructional activities helps promote open and robust conversations and mitigates concerns that comments made within the context of the class will be shared beyond the classroom. As such, recordings of instructional activities occurring in online or face-to-face classes may be used solely for internal class purposes by the faculty member and students registered for the course, and only during the period in which the course is offered. Students will be informed of such recordings by a statement in the syllabus for the course in which they will be recorded. Instructors who wish to make subsequent use of recordings that include student activity may do so only with informed written consent of the students involved or if all student activity is removed from the recording. Recordings including student activity that have been initiated by the instructor may be retained by the instructor only for individual use.

Intellectual property

This syllabus, as well as all course materials including lecture slides and exams, are intellectual property of the instructor, Dr. Joshua Mendelsohn. They may not be shared during or after the course without the written permission of the instructor.