

Metaphysics Syllabus

Fall 2015

Course and Contact Information

Instructor:	Dr. James Pearson
Instructor's email:	james.pearson@bridgew.edu
Office:	Tillinghast Hall 325
Course Number:	PHIL 405 - 001
Class:	MW 3:20pm-4:35pm, Maxwell Library 212
Office Hours:	M 11:00am-12:00noon, W 12:45-1:45pm, or by appointment. Please email me in advance to set up a specific time.

Course Description

Most of us agree that some things are real (e.g. chairs) and some things are not (e.g. unicorns). But what is it to *be* “real”? How do spatiotemporally located objects retain their identity over time, in space, while undergoing various changes? Does everything that exists exist in the same sort of way, or are there classes of objects—perhaps “persons” or “numbers”—that possess unique properties?

These questions all presuppose the existence of our world. But what do we mean by “world” in the first place? Might there be other worlds? Why does *this* one exist? And is the current philosophical fashion of talking about “possible worlds” a legitimate way to frame arguments concerning possibility, necessity, and other modalities?

In this course, you will examine various arguments that metaphysicians have deployed to shed light upon these abstract questions. By reflecting upon the relative appeal of their competing pictures of the fundamental nature of reality you will expose their—and your own—metaphysical commitments. This will position you to evaluate the contentious relationship between philosophy and science that has been at the heart of analytic metaphysics for the last century.

Course Objectives

This 400-level philosophy course will afford you with the opportunity to demonstrate your mastery of the core logical, written, oral, and informational literacy skills that you have developed in other philosophy classes. By the end of this course you will be able to:

1. *Identify* characteristic patterns of argument in 20th Century metaphysics
2. *Classify* philosophical theories according to which metaphysical principles they adopt
3. *Connect* particular readings to the overarching course framework
4. *Formulate* a philosophical research question
5. *Construct* a response to that research question
6. *Revise* your response to that research question
7. *Evaluate* the reasons and causes of the 20th Century revival of metaphysics
8. *Criticize* your sociocultural metaphysical presuppositions

Course Requirements

Your grade for this course will be calculated using a 100-point scale:

Response Papers – 15%

At regular intervals throughout the semester, you will write six 1-2 page response papers to prompts based on the assigned reading. The purpose of these short papers is to refine particular philosophical skills, such as careful précis, capturing contrasting viewpoints, and generating counterexamples (see objectives 1, 2, 3, 7, and 8). Their length will also allow you to practice concise analytic writing in preparation for your research paper. Please complete these short papers in 12 point Times New Roman font, double-spaced, with 1” margins. Each paper is worth three points, and your weakest paper will be dropped when your final grade is calculated.

Take-home Midterm – 15%

There will be a take-home midterm exam on October 7. This is an opportunity for you to pause and take stock of what you have learned about the historical context of 20th century metaphysics in preparation for the topic-driven units with which we shall close our class (see objectives 1, 2, and 7). I encourage you to discuss the questions on the exam with each other, but will expect you to carefully cite any ideas that such conversations generate. Please complete the midterm in 12 point Times New Roman font, double-spaced, with 1” margins.

Research Paper Draft – 10%

We will complete in-class activities to both generate and refine the topics for your individual research papers (see objectives 4 and 5). Your research paper should be 14-15 pages, and is an opportunity to explore in detail a problem from the course that has particularly interested you. The first draft of is due on November 23. You will bring two hard copies; one for me, and one for one of your classmates. Please complete your research paper in 12 point Times New Roman font, double-spaced, with 1” margins.

Peer Feedback Assignment – 5%

Over Thanksgiving break, you will read one of your classmates’ research paper drafts and complete a peer feedback assignment. In addition to developing your own writing and editing skills, this is a chance for you to help your classmates improve their work. You will bring two hard copies of this feedback to class on November 30; one for me, and one for your classmate. You will each use the feedback you receive to revise your research paper (see objective 6).

Presentation and Participation – 15%

To critically evaluate your metaphysical beliefs (see objective 7), you will need to communicate them to the rest of the class. To participate requires arriving at class punctually and regularly contributing to collegiate discussion. These experiences, in which you will have to clearly explain yourselves to each other, will be invaluable when you come to complete your written assignments. On December 9, each of you will briefly present a key problem you are facing in your research (see objective 6), and lead a 5-8 minute class discussion about it.

Revised Research Paper – 40%

Your revised research paper is due on December 15 (see objective 6). Please complete your research paper in 12 point Times New Roman font, double-spaced, with 1” margins.

Plagiarism and Academic Integrity

I expect you to adhere to the strictest standards of academic integrity. Any student who is academically dishonest (e.g., who cheats on an exam, or who turns in work that is not his or her own) will fail the course. If you are unsure about what constitutes cheating, see me before you turn in any work. You can find the Bridgewater State University policy on academic integrity here: <http://catalog.bridgew.edu/content.php?catoid=7&navoid=486>

Disability and Special Needs

If you require assistance due to disability or special needs, please contact the university's Disability Resources Staff. They are located in the Academic Achievement Center in Maxwell Library. The university's statement of policy can be found at <http://www2.bridgew.edu/disability-resources>. Please do not hesitate to talk to me about accommodating you in any way.

Cell Phone and Laptop Policy

Since we will spend much of our class time discussing ideas, I ask that you do not distract each other by using cell phones or laptops.

Attendance and Lateness

Attendance and punctuality are very important. I know that there will be times that due to unforeseen circumstances you cannot attend class (for medical, transportation, family or emergency reasons). Since I expect all of you, as adults, to take responsibility for your own class attendance, the precise reason for a particular absence does not concern me. You can miss two classes without it affecting your overall grade. Arriving late to class twice will count as one absence. Perfect attendance will earn you a 2 point bonus. It is your responsibility to find out whether any assignments were given in any class that you miss.

Late response papers and take-home midterms will be docked one third of a letter grade for each day they are late. Late research papers will not be accepted.

Class Reading Schedule

Readings will be made available online through Blackboard. Please print your own copy of each assigned paper and bring it with you to class.

1. Wednesday Sep 2 Course Introduction

Unit 1: Logical Positivism and The Death of Metaphysics

2. Monday Sep 7 LABOR DAY – NO CLASS

3. Wednesday Sep 9 READ: A. J. Ayer. “The Elimination of Metaphysics” from *Language, Truth, and Logic* (1936).
DUE: Response to Ayer

4. Thursday Sep 10 DISCUSS: The Verification Principle

5. Monday Sep 14 READ: David Stove. “What is Wrong With Our Thoughts? A Neo-Positivist Credo” from *The Plato Cult and Other Philosophical Follies* (1991).
DUE: Response to Stove

6. Wednesday Sep 16 DISCUSS: The Metaphysical Impulse

Unit 2: Metaphysics Fights Back – Assessing Metaphysical Principles

7. Monday Sep 21 READ: Max Black. “The Identity of Indiscernibles” (1952).

8. Wednesday Sep 23 READ: William Rowe. “The Cosmological Argument and the Principle of Sufficient Reason” (1968).

9. Monday Sep 28 READ: David Lewis. “Counterparts of Persons and Their Bodies” (1971) and “Modal Realism at work” from *On the Plurality of Worlds* (1986).
DUE: Dialogue Assignment

10. Wednesday Sep 30 READ: Hilary Putnam. “After Metaphysics, What?” (1988) and “Truth and Convention” (1987).

11. Monday Oct 5 READ: Brian Ellis and Caroline Lierse. “Dispositional Essentialism” (1994).

12. Wednesday Oct 7 DISCUSS: Which (if any) Metaphysical Principles are plausible?
CHOOSE: Research Paper Area
ASSIGNED: Take-home Exam

13. Monday Oct 12 COLUMBUS DAY – NO CLASS

Unit 3: Metaphysics Fights Back – Ontological Theory

14. Wednesday Oct 14 READ: A.N. Whitehead. “The Century of Genius” and “The Eighteenth Century” from *Science and the Modern World* (1925).
DUE: Take-home Midterm

15. Monday Oct 19 READ: W. V. Quine. “On What There Is” from *From a Logical Point of View* (1953).

16. Wednesday Oct 21 READ: W.V. Quine. “Speaking of Objects” from *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays* (1969).

17. Monday Oct 26 READ: Roderick Chisholm. “Beyond Being and Nonbeing” (1973).
DUE: Response to Chisholm

18. Wednesday Oct 28 READ: Chris Swoyer. “Abstract Entities” (2008).

19. Monday Nov 2 DISCUSS: Midterm Exams
DUE: Research Paper Outline and First Paragraph

Unit 4: What is Time?

20. Wednesday Nov 4 READ: Dean Zimmerman. “The Privileged Present: Defending an ‘A-Theory’ of Time” (2008).

21. Monday Nov 9 READ: J.J.C. Smart. “The Tenseless Theory of Time” (2008).
DUE: Response to Zimmerman or Smart

22. Wednesday Nov 11 VETERAN’S DAY – NO CLASS

Unit 5: What are People?

23. Monday Nov 16 READ: Judith Jarvis Thomson. “People and Their Bodies” (2011).
READ: Luciano Floridi. “The Informational Nature of Personal Identity” (2011).

24. Wednesday Nov 18 READ: Simone de Beauvoir. “Childhood” from *The Second Sex* (1949).
READ: Kwame Anthony Appiah. “Part One” from *Race, Culture, Identity: Misunderstood Connections* (1994).

25. Monday Nov 23 READ: Kristie Dotson. “How is this paper philosophy?” (2012).
DUE: TWO full drafts of term paper

26. Wednesday Nov 25 THANKSGIVING RECESS – NO CLASS

27. Monday Nov 30 DISCUSS: Research Paper Draft
DUE: TWO copies of Peer-editing Assignment
DUE: Persons Assignment

Unit 6: What is Change?

28. Wednesday Dec 2 READ: Sydney Shoemaker. “Time Without Change” (1969).

29. Monday Dec 7 READ: Eric T. Olson. “The Paradox of Increase” (2006).

30. Wednesday Dec 9 **PRESENT:** Research Paper Difficulties
DISCUSS: Is Metaphysics Moribund?

Tuesday Dec 15 **DUE:** Revised Research Paper