

Sample syllabus: Contemporary Metaphysics
upper-level undergraduate

Instructor: Dr. Colin Smith (he/him)

Course description: In this course on contemporary metaphysics, we will investigate the ultimate natures of reality, existence, and ourselves. Questions to consider will include: what makes a person self-identical throughout a lifetime? Are our own thoughts and minds inherently private and inaccessible to others, or do we somehow share in knowing and thinking? What is time, and must we only travel through time in one direction and at one speed? What is the existential nature of that which *is not* but *could be*? What happens when we cease worrying about theories of *existence* and investigate the cosmos with respect to the nature of ultimate *grounding*? What are the metaphysical realities of race and gender, and how do these questions help us to distinguish "natural reality" from social construction?

No background knowledge in metaphysical philosophy will be presupposed, but this course will require an honest investment from the student in asking and attempting to answer these difficult and occasionally frustrating questions.

Learning Objectives:

- To develop critical reading and thinking skills.
- To develop academic and professional writing skills.
- To become critically conversant in some of the most important metaphysical controversies, including the nature of personal identity, time, the distinction between possibility and necessity, grounding metaphysics, and the metaphysics of gender and race
- To address and criticize our shared implicit assumptions about the natures of reality, the cosmos, and what we have called "existence"

Textbook: No texts or other items are required for purchase in this course. All readings have been made available through the course Canvas page. Most of these files were taken from the university library's electronic database or are scans of books available in the university library.

Grading:

10% Participation
10% Discussion board participation
5% Group review presentation
20% Midterm exam
25% Final exam
25% Research paper
5% Annotated bibliography

10% Participation: Students will be expected to demonstrate genuine engagement with and investment in the course content, as well an understanding derived from the

readings. Students are required to prepare for each class session by completing the reading indicated on the course calendar below. Completing all readings is a necessary condition for success in this course. Attendance will be taken.

10% Discussion board participation: On most weeks, students will be responsible for (1) posting in response to instructor- and student-generated prompts in a post of about 300 words, and (2) posing a critical question. A grading rubric will be provided.

5% Group presentation: On most Tuesdays, a group of three students will be responsible for beginning class by briefly summarizing the important points from last week's meetings, raising two critical questions, and engaging in a discussion. A grading rubric will be provided. See the schedule of presentations here.

20% Midterm exam and 25% Final exam: Two exams will be given on the dates specified on the course calendar below. The final exam will be cumulative and given at the designated time during finals week.

25% Research paper: Students must submit a research paper of 2000 to 3000 words, drawing on at least five academic sources from outside course content. A grading rubric and explanation of standards for acceptable sources will be provided.

5% Research paper annotated bibliography: due three weeks before research paper.

---NOTE: Boilerplate syllabus information removed. Please see previous syllabus---

Reading schedule:

Unit 1: Metaphysics of individuality

Week 1: Introduction

Bertrand Russell, "The Value of Philosophy"

Week 2: Personhood and personal identity

Derek Parfit, "Personal Identity"

Monima Chadha, "Eliminating Selves and Persons"

Week 3: Subjectivity

Thomas Nagel, "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?"

Peter Hacker, "Is There Anything It Is Like to Be a Bat?"

Week 4: Mind

Colin McGinn, *The Character of Mind*, Chapter 1, "Mental Phenomena"

Andy Clark and David Chalmers, "The Extended Mind"

Unit 2: The nature of reality

Week 5: Time

George Schlesinger, *Aspects of Time*, Chap. 1, "Similarities Between Time and Space"
Frank Arntzenius, "Time Travel and Modern Physics"

Week 6: Potentiality

Anna Marmodoro, "Do Powers Need Powers to Make Them Powerful?"
Kristina Engelhard, "Categories and the Ontology of Powers"

Week 7: Modality and possible worlds

David Lewis, "Modal Realism"
David Lewis, "Trans-World Identity"

Week 8: Midterm exam

No reading -- catch up, midterm exam review
MIDTERM EXAM given in regular classroom during class hours

Week 9: Existence

W. V. O. Quine, "On What There Is"
Kit Fine, "The Question of Ontology"

Week 10: Metaphysics of grounding

Jonathan Schaffer, "On What Grounds What"

Unit 3: Metaphysics of gender and race

Week 11: Metaphysics of gender

Claire Ainsworth, "Sex Redefined"
Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, Introduction
Charlotte Witt, *The Metaphysics of Gender*, Chap. 1, "Two Notions of Essence"

Week 12: Queer, intersex, and trans metaphysics

Hil Malatino, *Queer Embodiment*, Chap. 1, "Queer Monsters," Chap. 2, "Impossible Existences," and Chap. 6, "Toward Coalition"

Week 13: Metaphysics of race

Charles Mills, "But What Are You *Really*?"
Quayshawn Spencer, "A Radical Solution to the Race Problem"

Week 14: Gender, race, and power

Sally Haslanger, "Gender & Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them to Be?"

Week 15: Course conclusion

No reading -- catch up and conclude course
FINAL EXAM given during finals week