

# Metaphysics

PHIL 201, Spring 2025

## Basic course information

*Instructor:* Justin Mooney

*Email:* jmooney@holycross.edu

*Office:* Smith 517

*Office hours:* 1pm - 2pm, MWF

*Course dates:* Jan 22nd - May 5th

*Days:* Mondays, Wednesdays, & Fridays

*Time:* 11:00am - 11:50am

*Room:* Stein 307 (in-person)

The best way to communicate with me outside of class is via the email address listed above. I will do my best to answer emails within 48 hours at most, and usually sooner.

## Course description and objectives

If you like deep questions, metaphysics is for you. Metaphysicians are curious about questions like: do we have free will? What does it take to be the same person over time? What is time, anyway? Is time travel possible? Why is there something rather than nothing? And so on. These are some of the deepest questions in philosophy. For the most part, metaphysicians don't worry about whether these questions are "practical." Maybe our lives would go on more or less the same way regardless of how we answer them. But sometimes there is value in just knowing. I want to know. Do you?

As we think through these questions, we will be working to develop and hone philosophical skills such as analyzing concepts, constructing and critiquing arguments, and evaluating philosophical theories.

The objectives for this course are the following:

1. Learn about some of the most influential theories in metaphysics, concerning topics such as free will, personal identity, time and time travel, fictional characters, and why anything exists at all.
2. Begin (or continue) to develop philosophical skills, such as the ability to properly evaluate an argument.
3. Begin (or continue) to develop philosophical virtues, such as open-mindedness.
4. Learn to express philosophical ideas clearly in written work.

To meet these objectives, you will be asked to read and engage with recent work by professional philosophers on a number of different topics in metaphysics.

## **Assignments**

*Exams:* There will be two exams in this class: a midterm (to be administered in class on Mar 14th) and a non-cumulative final (to be administered in class on the date set by the university). Each exam is worth 25% of your final grade. More details about the exams will be provided in class.

*Review essay:* You will be asked to write a review of a work of time travel fiction. It can be any medium (movie, TV show, novel, etc.) as long as it is a narrative that prominently features some form of time travel. Your job will be to summarize the narrative and then evaluate it in light of what we learn about time travel in class. It is due on April 16th, and it is worth 25% of your final grade. I will not read drafts of this essay, but if you would like to discuss your essay with me while it is in progress, you may do so during my office hours.

*Participation:* this is a discussion-based class, and participation will be important to your learning experience. It will also count for 25% of your final grade. In this class, participation includes the following components.

1. Attending class regularly. Unexcused absences may negatively impact your grade. Persistent tardiness may also negatively impact your grade.
2. Completing the assigned readings on time. In the course schedule below, each reading is listed next to the date that we will discuss it in class, and should be completed by the start of class on that date.
3. Speaking up regularly during small group discussions and class discussions. Most class sessions will include both a small group discussion time and a full class discussion time. To ensure that you get full points for participation, you should always contribute to small-group discussions, and you should aim to say something during full-class discussions about once a week or more.
4. Completing in-class assignments. Throughout the course, there will occasionally be small assignments to be completed during class time. Failure to complete these assignments due to absence or for other reasons can negatively impact your grade.

You are not required to visit me during my office hours, but doing so a few times throughout the semester, for the purpose of discussing anything related to the class, *may* boost your participation grade.

## **Readings**

There are no textbooks in this class. All required readings for this course will be available in digital form on the course's Canvas page. You are expected to complete each reading assignment before class on the day that we are scheduled to discuss it. (In the course schedule below, each reading is listed next to the date that we will discuss it in class.) Some of the assigned readings will be challenging. Please know that you are not expected to understand everything you read. I will explain the main ideas in class, and you will have opportunities to ask questions.

Sometimes I may ask the class for feedback about a particular reading assignment, especially how easy or challenging it was, and I will take this feedback into account for planning and instructional purposes.

## Grades

Your final grade in this class breaks down as follows. The midterm exam is worth 25% of your final grade; the final exam is worth 25%; the autobiographical essay is worth 25%; and participation is worth 25%. This class will use a standard grading scale:

A	93-100%	C	73-76%
A-	90-92%	C-	70-72%
B+	87-89%	D+	67-69%
B	83-86%	D	65-66%
B-	80-82%	F	0-65%
C+	77-79%		

## Policies<sup>1</sup>

*Attendance:* Students are expected to attend class regularly and to fulfill all obligations of the course as outlined on this syllabus and discussed during class. If you need to miss a class session, you should communicate with me about this in advance. Whether an absence is excused is at the discretion of the instructor. Poor attendance counts against your participation grade. Students should also read and abide by [the College's class attendance policy](#).

*Extensions:* Extensions on homework assignments may be granted in special circumstances such as family and medical emergencies. Whether the relevant circumstances qualify the student for an extension is at the instructor's discretion. Whenever possible, students who need an extension on an assignment should communicate with the instructor about their situation prior to the official deadline. In cases where an extension is NOT granted, assignments will be deducted by 1/3 letter grade for each day they are late (e.g. a B+ paper drops to a B paper if it is one day late; it drops to a B- if it is two days late; etc.). Assignments more than one week late will not be accepted.

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<sup>1</sup> Many of the following policy statements are taken or adapted from the Curriculum Committee Course Guide.

*Make-up exams:* Students who miss an exam due to special circumstances such as a family or medical emergency may be permitted to make up that exam at a later date. Whether the relevant circumstances qualify the student for the opportunity to take a make-up exam is at the instructor's discretion. Whenever possible, students who need to miss an exam for any reason should communicate with me about this ahead of time. Students who miss an exam and do not qualify to take a make-up exam will receive a failing grade on that exam.

*Technology:* use of electronic devices such as laptops and cell phones is not permitted in class. There are two exceptions to this rule. First, some students have accommodations through Accessibility Services which permit them to use a laptop or similar device in class. Second, I will sometimes permit the use of laptops or similar devices to complete in-class group assignments.

*Recording:* PLEASE NOTE that, consistent with applicable federal and state law, this course may be video/audio recorded as an accommodation only with permission from the Office of Accessibility Services. Students are not permitted to record the contents of this class under any other circumstances.

*Class Discussion:* There will be many opportunities for in-class discussion during this course, including both small-group and whole-class discussion. Students are expected to be respectful of others at all times.

*Academic Integrity:* All education is a cooperative enterprise between faculty and students. This cooperation requires trust and mutual respect, which are only possible in an environment governed by the principles of academic integrity. As an institution devoted to teaching, learning, and intellectual inquiry, Holy Cross expects all members of the College community to abide by the highest standards of academic integrity. Any violation of academic integrity undermines the student-faculty relationship, thereby wounding the whole community. Students in this class are required to read the full text of [the College's Academic Integrity Policy](#) and to abide by its standards.

*Artificial Intelligence:* artificial intelligence may be used for the purposes of minor editing, such as correcting spelling and grammar, but not to compose sentences and paragraphs from scratch. If you do choose to use artificial intelligence to edit your work, you must indicate in a footnote or at the end of your document which AI tools you have used, and how you have used them. Failure to comply with this policy may result in a failing grade on the relevant assignment.

*Accessibility:* The College of the Holy Cross is committed "[to providing students with disabilities equal access to the educational opportunities and programs available at Holy Cross in accordance with the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 as amended, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and Massachusetts laws.](#)" Any student who feels the need for accommodation based on the impact of a disability should contact the [Office of Accessibility Services](#) to discuss support services available. Once the office receives documentation supporting the request for accommodation, the student would meet privately with Accessibility Services to discuss reasonable and appropriate accommodations. The office can be reached by calling 508-793-3693. If you are

already registered with Accessibility Services, please be sure to get your accommodation letters and deliver them to your instructors in a timely fashion. Instructors need at least 4-5 days advance notice to be able to facilitate the process of receiving testing accommodations.

## Schedule

\*This schedule is subject to change.

Jan 22	Intro: what is metaphysics?
Jan 24	Intro: course overview
<b>Unit 1</b>	<b>Free Will</b>
Jan 27	Griffiths, "Introduction" (from <i>Free Will: The Basics</i> )
Jan 29	van Inwagen, "The Incompatibility of Free Will and Determinism"
Jan 31	Lewis, "Are We Free to Break the Laws?"
Feb 3	Frankfurt, "Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility"
Feb 5	Swenson, "A Challenge for Frankfurt-Style Compatibilists"
Feb 7	Wolf, "Asymmetrical Freedom"
<b>Unit 2</b>	<b>Personal Identity</b>
Feb 10	Noonan, "An Initial Survey" (from <i>Personal Identity</i> )
Feb 12	Thomson, "People and Their Bodies"
Feb 14	Parfit, "Personal Identity"
Feb 17	Olson, "Was I Ever a Fetus?"

Feb 19	Carter, “Will I Be a Dead Person?”
Feb 21	Carpenter, “Practice and Theory of No-Self” (from <i>Indian Buddhist Philosophy</i> )

**Unit 3                    Time and Change**

Feb 24	Rea, “Time” (from <i>Metaphysics: The Basics</i> )
Feb 26	Taylor, “Spatial and Temporal Analogies”
Feb 28	Markosian, “Sideways Music”

Spring break!

Mar 10	Hawley, “Sameness and Difference” (ch. 1 in <i>How Things Persist</i> )
Mar 12	Review day
Mar 14	<b>Midterm Exam</b>

**Unit 4                    Time Travel**

Mar 17	Chiang, “The Merchant and the Alchemist’s Gate”
Mar 19	Lewis, “The Paradoxes of Time Travel”
Mar 21	Lewis, “The Paradoxes of Time Travel” (continued)

**Unit 5                    Material Objects**

Mar 24	Smart, “How to Reidentify the Ship of Theseus”
Mar 26	Korman, “Constitution” (from <i>Objects: Nothing Out of the Ordinary</i> )
Mar 28	Lewis, “Many, but Almost One”

Mar 31	Markosian, "Restricted Composition" (sections 1-4)
Apr 2	Markosian, "Restricted Composition" (sections 5-12)
Apr 4	Merricks, "Epiphenomenalism and Eliminativism" (ch. 3 from <i>Objects and Persons</i> )

**Unit 6                      Fictional Characters**

Apr 7	Thomasson, "If We Postulated Fictional Objects, What Would They Be?"
Apr 9	Lewis, "Truth in Fiction"
Apr 11	Lewis, "Truth in Fiction" (continued)

Apr 14	Xhignesse, "The Paradox of Fiction"
Apr 16	Spillover day <b>Review Essay due</b>
Apr 18	Easter Break!

**Unit 7                      Ultimate Reality**

Apr 21	Easter break!
Apr 23	No classes
Apr 25	Leslie, "A Proof of God's Reality"

Apr 28	Rasmussen & Weaver, "Why Is There Anything?"
Apr 30	Rasmussen & Weaver, "Why Is There Anything?" (continued)
May 2	van Inwagen, "Why is there Anything at All?"



May 5

Review Day

TBD

**Final Exam**