

# PHL 461 Metaphysics

## University of South Alabama

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### MEETING INFORMATION

Time: MWF 10:10-11:00  
Place: HUMB 136

Instructor: Allison Krile Thornton  
Email: [akrilethornton@southalabama.edu](mailto:akrilethornton@southalabama.edu)  
Office: HUMB 132  
Office Hours: W 1:15-3:15; or by appointment

### TEXT

*Metaphysics: An Introduction* by Alyssa Ney  
ISBN: 978-0-415-64075-6

### DESCRIPTION

This is a reading-heavy, writing-heavy class in metaphysics.

Metaphysics is the study of being qua being—as opposed to being qua living thing (that's biology) or being qua physical thing (that's physics) or being qua political thing (that's politics), or being qua countable thing (that's math), and so on. In other words, metaphysics is about the features things have insofar as they exist: like existence, concreteness (maybe?), sameness, difference, etc.

Metaphysics raises many puzzling questions. For example:

What exists? Do fictional characters exist? Do numbers exist? Is a hammer one thing, or two things (a head and a handle), or septillions of things (atoms)? Are there holes? Like in a slice of Swiss cheese with four holes: are there five things there, the slice plus the four holes?

What happens if you replace a boat one piece at a time with new planks and nails? Do you wind up with a totally different boat, or is the same as the old? If the former: when does the change happen? If the latter: how can that be when none of the original parts are there? What if all the while you were throwing off the old boards I was rebuilding a boat out of them? *Then* what would you say?

What are you made out of? A soul? An animal? A brain? Could you exist as a brain in a vat? Could you exist without a brain as long as machines were keeping your body alive? Are we free? If not, are you morally responsible for anything? Was Hitler?

What's time? Is time travel possible?

In this course, we'll to get to the bottom of these and other questions.

### OBJECTIVES

1. Increase knowledge, understanding, and appreciation of metaphysical problems
2. Develop critical reading and writing skills
  - a. Present and analyze arguments in premise-conclusion form
  - b. Compile a well-researched and appropriately articulated bibliography
3. Practice technological skills helpful for engaging philosophical literature

## ASSESSMENT

### Participation, Preparedness, and Presence (15% of total grade)

- 5%: participating frequently, respectfully and productively.
- 10%: accessing, printing, and bringing the articles under discussion; these must be organized in a three ring binder or small accordion folder
- Articles marked with a "🔍" you must use the library's database to find.

### 5 Summaries (25% of total grade)

- Summaries are worth 5% each.
- One page in length; single-spaced. (You will need to use a small font size and decrease the margins to make this work.)
- Each summary MUST clearly state:
  - The summarized article's main *thesis*
  - The summarized article's main *argument*, stated clearly, validly, and with numbered premises
- You may occasionally quote the summarized article, but do not over-quote. The purpose of this assignment is to strengthen your ability to analyze insightfully and summarize concisely.
- An example summary will be provided on Sakai.
- Each summary must be submitted BOTH through Turnitin AND in person.

### 2 Exams (30% of total grade)

- Exams are worth 15% each.
- Exams consist in essay questions.

### 2 Essays (30% of total grade)

- Early-term (10%); Final (20%)
- Each essay will be 1500-2000 words long.
- Use normal font-size and margins for the essays.
- Further details for the specific requirements of each essay will be provided at least two weeks in advance of the essay's deadline.
- Within one week of my having returned your first (and only the first) paper to you – graded – you will have one week to rewrite it in order to increase your grade.
- Each essay must be submitted BOTH through Turnitin AND in person (printed, stapled) by the deadline.

## GRADING SCHEMA

<b>A</b>		<b>B</b>		<b>C</b>		<b>D</b>		<b>F</b>
90 - 100		80 - 89.9		70 - 79.9		60 - 69.9		0 - 59.9

## DEATHTRAPS

### Absences

- You have three “sick days.” Use them wisely.
- I do not need a doctors’ note/proof you were sick if you miss.
- **HOWEVER:** if you miss more than three classes, **your final grade will be adjusted down by 2% for every additional class you miss.**
- For example, if your final grade was 91% and you missed four class periods, your adjusted final grade would be 89%. If you missed five class periods, your adjusted final grade would be 87%.

### Plagiarizing

- You are responsible for knowing what plagiarism is.
- You are responsible for avoiding it.
- If you plagiarize on an assignment, you will get a zero on the assignment, even if you did not know you were plagiarizing or know what plagiarism is.
- If you plagiarize on an assignment, I will report the fact that you plagiarized to the appropriate authority.

### Cheating

- Don't cheat.
- If you cheat, you will get a zero on whatever you cheated on and no opportunity to make it up.
- If you cheat, I will report the fact that you cheated to the appropriate authority.

## POLICIES

**Honor code:** Each student is expected to read, understand, and abide by the university’s Code of Student Conduct (which can be found in the USA student handbook).

**Technology:** Cell phones, laptops, tablets, etc. must be kept out of sight and out of use during class. If you require accommodations that require such technology, please talk to me about it.

**Accommodations:** If you have a condition that interferes with your ability to participate in this course, you may be entitled to accommodations. Please contact the Office of Student Disability Services at (251) 460-7212 or [disabilityservices@southalabama.edu](mailto:disabilityservices@southalabama.edu).

## PRELIMINARIES

1/07 FAQ

### I. Logic for Metaphysics

1/09 Read: first half of "Preparatory Background: Logic for Metaphysics" in Ney, pp. 2-17

1/11 Read second half of "Preparatory Background: Logic for Metaphysics" in Ney, pp. 17-29

## FIRST PART

### 2. Ontology

1/14 Read: Chapter I "An Introduction to Ontology" in Ney, pp. 30-59

1/16 ✦ Read: Peter van Inwagen, "Fiction and Metaphysics." *Philosophy and Literature* 7.1 (1983): 67-77. **SUM #1 DUE**

Submit: Summary #1 on "Fiction and Metaphysics"

1/18 ---

1/21 **NO CLASS (MLK DAY)**

1/23 ✦ Read: Jonathan Schaffer, "Monism: The Priority of the Whole" *Philosophical review* 119.1 (2010): 31-76

1/25 ✦ Read: David Lewis and Stephanie Lewis, "Holes." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 48.2 (1970): 206-212.

### 3. Abstract Entities

1/28 Read: Chapter 2 "Abstract Entities" in Ney, pp. 60-87

1/30 ✦ Read: David Lewis, "New Work for a Theory of Universals" *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 61.4 (1983): 343-377. **SUM #2 DUE**

Submit: Summary #2 on "New Work for a Theory of Universals"

2/1 **NO CLASS (Dr. KT is out of town)**

#### 4. Material Objects

- 2/4 Read: Chapter 3 "Material Objects" in Ney, pp. 89-117
- 2/6 ---
- 2/8 ⚙ Read: Michael C. Rea, "The Problem of Material Constitution" *The Philosophical Review* 104.4 (1995): 525-552.
- 2/11 Read: Peter van Inwagen *Material Beings*, Chapters 2 and 9 (Sakai)
- 2/13 Submit: Essay #1 ESSAY #1 DUE
- 2/15 Read: Dan Korman, Section 3 ("Against Revisionary Ontologies") of "Ordinary Objects" in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (link in Sakai)

#### Exam Week

- 2/18 TBD/Catch up day
- 2/20 Review Day  
Study: Study Guide for Exam I
- 2/22 Exam EXAM #1

### SECOND PART

#### 5. Human Persons

- 2/25 Read: Start reading the Locke reading below so as to have it finished by class on Wednesday.
- 2/27 Read: John Locke *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book II, Chapter XXVII ("Identity and Diversity") (link in Sakai; read pgs. 112-122)
- 3/01 ---
- 3/04 ---
- 3/06 Read: Eric Olson, "Personal Identity" in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (link in Sakai)
- 3/08 Read: Eric Olson, "An Argument for Animalism" in In: Martin, R. and Barresi, J., (eds.) *Personal identity*. Blackwell readings in philosophy. Blackwell, Oxford, pp. 318-334. (Link in Sakai) SUM #3 DUE
- Submit: Summary #3 on Eric Olson, "An Argument for Animalism"

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## 6. Modality

- 3/11 Read: "Modality" in Ney, pp. 190-216
- 3/13 ---
- 3/15 ---

3/18 NO CLASS (Spring break)

3/20 NO CLASS (Spring break)

3/22 NO CLASS (Spring break)

## 7. Free Will

3/25 ---

3/27 Read Ney, Chapter 9: Free Will

3/29 ✦ Read: Harry Frankfurt, "Alternative Possibilities and Moral Responsibility" *Journal of Philosophy*, 66 (1969): 829–39.

Submit: Summary #4 on Harry Frankfurt, "Alternative Possibilities and Moral Responsibility"

SUM #4 DUE

4/1 ✦ Read: Strawson, P. F., 1962. "Freedom and Resentment," *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 48: 187–211.

4/3 ✦ Mele, Alfred (2013) "Free Will and Neuroscience," *Philosophic Exchange*: Vol. 43 : No. 1 , Article 3.

4/5 ---

## Exam Week

4/8 TBD/Catch up day

4/10 Review Day  
Study: Study Guide for Exam 2

4/12 EXAM

Exam #2

THIRD PART

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8. Time

4/15

4/17

4/19

Submit: Summary #5

SUM #5 DUE

4/22

4/24

4/26

4/29 Final Exam Time: 10:30-12:30

Submit your final essay to me in person in that time frame.

ESSAY #2 DUE

\*Note that the syllabus is subject to change and likely will be changed. You will always be given advance notice if readings will be added or subtracted or if there will be any alteration in due dates or assignments.\*