

Introduction to Metaphysics (Phil 259)

Instructor: Morgan Thompson (she/her)

Course description:

Metaphysics concerns the structure of reality. It asks questions like: Do entities like electrons and minds exist in the same way as a tree or a water bottle? What distinguishes kinds like H₂O and lions from kinds like ‘animals at the Lincoln Park Zoo’? Are race and gender real and in what way? Are groups like the Supreme Court more than a collection of their members? How should we understand claims about possibilities, such as ‘If kangaroos did not have tails, they would fall over’? And how do social structures (that is, social practices, social roles, institutions) cause social outcomes?

In this course, we will cover philosophical views on ontology (what exists), fundamental levels of reality, the composition of social groups, natural and social kinds, the nature of race and gender, possibility and necessity, and social structural causation. There will be particular emphasis on social aspects of reality.

Course Objectives:

- Clarity in thought and language, especially through writing of complex and abstract subject matters.
- Ability to assess arguments for validity and to employ basic logical notation.
- be able to recognize and understand prescriptive issues, questions and claims, and to distinguish them from descriptive issues, questions, and claims involved in discussing natural and social kinds, including gender and race;
- Capacity to articulate your own position in debates about levels of reality, composition of social groups, natural and social kinds, the nature of gender and race, possibility and necessity, and social structural causation.
- Provide reasons for one’s own view, anticipate objections, and respond to them.
- Nuanced and charitable interpretation of texts and views.
- Open-minded and respectful engagement during class discussion and activities, especially in response to peers’ views.

Assessment:

1st paper: 4 pages, worth 20% of the final grade

2nd paper: 4 pages, worth 30% of the final grade

Participation Self-evaluations, together worth 25% of the final grade

Final exam: worth 25% of the final grade

Schedule:

Week 1 – Sep 24	Ney: Preparatory Background (if needed)	
Sep 26	Ney: Ch 1 An Introduction to Ontology, 1.1-1.3, 1.5 (13 pages)	
Week 2 – Oct 1	Ney: Ch 7 Grounding and Fundamentality, 7.1-7.4 (12 pages)	
Oct 3	Ney, Ch 7, 7.5-7.8 (15 pages)	
Week 3 – Oct 8	Katherine Ritchie, “What Are Groups?”, sections 1 and 2 (6 pages)	
Oct 10	Ney: Ch 5 Natural and Social Kinds, 5.1-5.4 (10 pages)	Paper 1
Week 4 – Oct 15	Katikireddi and Valles, “Coupled ethical–epistemic analysis of public health research and practice: Categorizing variables to improve population health and equity” (7 pages)	
Oct 17	Ney, Ch 5, 5.5-5.7 (10 pages)	
Week 5 – Oct 22	Ney: Ch 6 Metaphysics of Race and Gender, 6.6-6.10 (11 pages)	
Oct 24	Barnes, Metaphysics of Gender (8 pages)	Participation Self-Eval 1
Week 6 – Oct 29	Ney: Ch 6 Metaphysics of Race and Gender, 6.1-6.5 (11 pages)	
Oct 31	Spencer, A Radical Solution to the Race Problem (14 pages)	
Week 7 – Nov 5	Spencer cont.	Paper 2
Nov 7	Lauer and Khalifa, “Should Ordinary Race Talk be Privileged?”, Sections 1-4 (13 pages)	

Week 8 – Nov 12	Ney: Ch 10 Modality, 10.1-10.3 (10 pages)	
Nov 14	NO CLASS	
Week 9 – Nov 19	Ney: Ch 11 Causation, 11.1-11.3 (15 pages)	
Nov 21	Haslanger, Social Structures, Section 3 -7 (11 pages)	
Week 10 – Nov 26	Ross, Social structural explanation, Sections 1- 3.3 (13 pages)	Participation Self-Eval 2
Nov 28	THANKSGIVING	
Week 11 – Dec 3	Reading Period	
Dec 5	Reading Period	Optional Study Session
Thursday, 12/12/2024: 12PM-2PM		Final Exam