

# Metaphysics: An Introduction

A sample syllabus by Tiina C Rosenqvist

[This syllabus outlines an introductory course in metaphysics.]

## 1. Course Description

This course offers an introduction to metaphysics, the branch of philosophy that investigates the fundamental nature and structure of reality. Together, we will examine key metaphysical topics such as the nature of objects, kinds, minds, colors, and genders, as well as explore issues surrounding personal identity, free will, and time. Along the way, we will grapple with complex questions like: Are abstract objects, such as numbers, real? What distinguishes a natural kind from other categories? Is time travel logically possible? Do colors exist independently of perceivers? And can free will exist in a deterministic universe?

No prior experience in philosophy is required. This course is ideal for anyone curious about big questions and the conceptual tools we use to explore them.

“The distinctive goal of the metaphysician is to understand the structure of reality: what kinds of entities exist and what are their most fundamental and general features and relations. Unlike the natural and social sciences that seek to describe some special class of entities and what they are like—the physical things or the living things, particularly civilizations or cultures—metaphysicians ask the most general questions about how things are, what our universe is like.”

Alyssa Ney, *Metaphysics: An Introduction*

## 2. Course Objectives

Through active participation in this course, you will develop a deeper understanding of key questions in metaphysics, hone your ability to critically analyze philosophical arguments, and enhance your skills in reading, writing, and engaging in thoughtful discussions.

## 3. Course Structure

*In-person sessions:*

The standard format for the in-person sessions is lecture and discussion. There will also be occasional group work. You are expected to do the assigned readings before class, and participate actively in discussions and other in-class activities.

*Out-of-class activities:*

You need to complete all the *required* readings before the classes for which they are assigned.

You are also encouraged (though *not* required) to use the Canvas discussion board to share your thoughts on course content, to ask questions, to share links to relevant articles, etc. Both your in-class participation and discussion board participation count towards your participation grade.

You are required to write two papers, take a preliminaries quiz and a final exam (multiple-choice), and create one poster that takes a stand on a class topic.

#### 4. Assignments & Assessment

- Attendance & Participation (incl. Canvas posts) —15%
- Preliminaries Quiz —5%
- Paper 1 (800-1,000 words) and self-assessment —20%
- Paper 2 (1,200-1,600 words) and self-assessment —35%
- Poster—10%
- Final Exam—15%

#### 5. Course Policies

Omitted from this sample.

#### 6. Resources

Omitted from this sample.

#### 7. Class & Readings Schedule

Note on terminology:

- “**Required**” readings are the ones you are expected to read and engage with *before* the relevant in-class session, and the *only* ones you will be quizzed on. Normally you’re required to read one paper or book chapter or a collection of shorter excerpts per session.
- “**Optional**” readings / podcasts / videos are extra materials for when you are particularly interested in a topic.

## Module 1: Getting started

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- (1) Introduction, Syllabus
- (2) Preliminaries: Arguments
  - **Required:** Ney (2023): *Metaphysics*, “Logic for Metaphysics”
  - **Optional:** Papineau (2012): *Philosophical Devices*, “Syntax and Semantics,” 10.1-10-3
- (3) Preliminaries: Necessity and possibility; *Philskills: how to read philosophy*
  - **Required:** Ney (2023): *Metaphysics*, “Modality”
  - **Optional:** Papineau (2012): *Philosophical Devices*, “Possible Worlds”, 5.1-5.10
- (4) Preliminaries: Doing metaphysics, *Philskills: how to talk philosophy*
  - **Required:** Ney (2023), *Metaphysics*, “An Introduction to Ontology”

*Preliminaries Quiz (untimed, open-book)*

## Module 2: Objects and kinds

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- (5) Abstract objects
  - **Required:** Ney (2023): *Metaphysics*, “Abstract Entities”
  - **Optional:** Lowe (1995): “The Metaphysics of Abstract Objects”
- (6) Material objects
  - **Required:** Ney (2023): *Metaphysics*, “Material Objects”
  - **Optional:** Skrzypek (2023): “Form and Matter: Hylomorphism”
  - **Optional:** Paul (2010), “The Puzzles of Material Constitution”
- (7) Natural kinds
  - **Required:** Ney (2023): *Metaphysics*, “Natural Kinds”
  - **Optional:** Quine (1969): “Natural Kinds”
- (8) Social kinds
  - **Required:** Ney (2023): *Metaphysics*, “Social Kinds”
  - **Optional:** Mason (2016): “The metaphysics of social kinds”
- (9) *Philskills: How to write a philosophy paper*
- (10) Catch-up / Review

*Paper 1 Due*

### Module 3: Minds, Colors, and Genders

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- (11) The mind-body problem: substance dualism; *Philskills: how to read philosophy*
- **Required:** Descartes: *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Sixth Meditation
  - **Optional:** Nagel (1998): "Conceiving the impossible and the Mind-Body problem"
- (12) The mind-body problem: Identity theory
- **Required:** Smart (1959): "Sensations and brain processes" (in Chalmers 2021)
  - **Optional:** Ney (2023): *Metaphysics*, "Grounding and Fundamentality," 7.1-7.4
- (13) The mind-body problem: Functionalism
- **Required:** Putnam (1975): "The Nature of Mental States" (in Chalmers 2021)
  - **Optional:** Dasgupta (2014): "The Possibility of Physicalism," 557-564, 571-575
  - **Optional:** Ney (2023): *Metaphysics*, "Grounding and Fundamentality"
- (14) Color: eliminativism
- **Required:** Hardin (1991): "Color for Philosophers: A Précis"
  - **Optional:** Logue (2016): "Metaphysics of Color 2: Non-physicalist theories of color"
  - **Optional:** Rosenqvist (2023), "Philosophy of Color"
- (15) Color: reductive physicalism
- **Required:** Tye (2000): *Consciousness, Color, and Content*, Ch. 7 "On some alleged problems on objectivism about color"
  - **Optional:** Byrne and Hilbert (2003): "Color realism and color science"
  - **Optional:** Logue (2016): "Metaphysics of Color 1: Physicalist theories of color"
- (16) Color: relationalism
- **Required:** Cohen (2012): "Précis of The Red and the Real: An Essay on Color Ontology"
  - **Optional:** "Metaphysics of Color 2: Non-physicalist theories of color"
- (17) Gender: biological realism, social constructionism
- **Required:** Ney (2023): *Metaphysics*, "Race and Gender" 6.5-6.8
  - **Optional:** Haslanger (2005): "Gender and social constructions: Who? What? When? Where? How?"
- (18) Gender: conferralism
- **Required:** Ásta (2018): *Categories We Live By: The Construction of Sex, Gender, Race, and Other Social Categories*, "Ch. 4: Conferralism about Sex and Gender"
  - **Optional:** Ney (2023): *Metaphysics*, "Race and Gender" 6.9-6.10
- (19) Catch-up/review

## Module 4: Puzzles

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(20) Persistence and personal identity

- **Required:** Ney (2023): *Metaphysics*, “Persistence” 9.1-9.6
- **Required:** Locke (1690), “The Prince and the Cobbler”
- **Optional:** Reid (1785), “Of Mr. Locke’s Account of Our personal identity”

(21) Persistence and personal identity

- **Required:** Parfit (1987), “Divided minds and the nature of persons”

(22) Free will: libertarianism, determinism

- **Required:** Ney (2023): *Metaphysics*, “Free Will”
- **Optional:** Huemer (2016), “Free will and determinism in the world of *Minority Report*”
- **Optional:** Ekstrom (2011): “Free will is not a mystery”

(23) Free will: compatibilism, skepticism

- **Required:** Hogson (2011): “Quantum physics, consciousness, and free will”
- **Optional:** CrashCourse Philosophy: Determinism and Free Will; Compatibilism
- **Optional:** Pereboom (2011): “Free-will skepticism and meaning of life”

(24) Time and Time Travel

- **Required:** Lowe (2002): *A Survey of Metaphysics*, “Tense and the reality of time”
- **Required:** Lewis (1976): “Paradoxes of time travel”
- **Optional:** Ney (2023): *Metaphysics*, “Time”

(25) Catch-up / review

## Module 5: Wrapping Up

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(26) Easy ontology — the end of metaphysics?

- **Required:** Thomasson (2019): “*Précis of Ontology Made Easy*”

*Poster due*

(27) Poster session in class

(28) Final Review

*Final Exam*