

# METAPHYSICS SEMINAR (B-KUL-W0EC5B)

SPRING 2022

**Instructor:** Dr. Zita Toth ([zita.toth@kuleuven.be](mailto:zita.toth@kuleuven.be))

**Time and place:** Thursdays, 14:00–16:00, HIW Seminar Room N

**Office hours:** Thursdays, 16:00–17:00, & *by appt.*

## COURSE DESCRIPTION

“Metaphysics, at the bottom, is about the fundamental structure of reality,” notes a contemporary metaphysician at the very beginning of his book (Sider 2011, p. 1). While not everyone would agree with this characterization, we can at least say that metaphysics is about something *fundamental*, be it structure, being, or universals; that it is about the most basic features of the world. What *are* the most fundamental things in the world? Are they universals or particulars? What do particulars consist of, and how can they endure through time? What *is* time, anyway, and what does it mean to say that they ‘can’, or that something is ‘possible’? These are just a few of the questions metaphysicians have examined, starting at least from the Presocratic period. In this class, we are going to look at how they were tackled by some 20th-century philosophers, mostly belonging to the analytical tradition. Along the way, we will also glance at parts of the long history of the discipline.

## REQUIRED TEXTS

Readings will be made available on Toledo. Please make sure you have the required reading with you in each class.

## REQUIREMENTS AND GRADING

**Attendance and in-class participation, 10%.** Students must read the assigned texts in advance and be prepared to contribute to class discussion of the readings. Conversation is essential to Philosophy. Everyone, even if they are bored or shy or anxious is expected to participate in class. Participation will be assessed by the quality of the students’ contributions to discussions.

**To prepare for class participation:** please come to every class with a written note of 2 or 3 questions about the reading for the class.

**Presentation, 20% + 10% written component.** Every week one or two students, depending on the number enrolled, will have to deliver a presentation. The presentation must be accompanied by a brief handout of approximately one page. The purpose of the presentation is to encourage and focus class discussion; as such, students should summarize the main arguments of the text and provide at least one question for discussion.

**Every presentation will be accompanied by a written component:** In this written argument rehearsal exercise, the student should pick a single argument from the reading, and reconstruct and defend it premise by premise. Detailed instructions of how to do this will be given at the beginning of the semester. The written component can be re-done once.

**Final paper, 60%.** The final paper should be approximately 3500 words. It should be on a topic of the student's own choice, based on the material covered in the course. All paper titles must be approved by me. All students must submit an abstract (ca. 300-words summary) of their papers, as well as prepare it for discussion in the final class.

**The deadline for submitting the final papers is XXXX:** [TODO: where do I find out this deadline?] I am happy to read and provide feedback on preliminary drafts as long as they are sent to me at least a week in advance of the final deadline.

## COURSE POLICIES

**Second examination.** The second examination attempt is limited to (re)submitting the course work. Participation and/or presentation cannot be retaken. The student who in the course of the academic year did not attend class as required or who did not give a presentation will again receive the NA result.

**Plagiarism.** Plagiarism is easily detected, and the penalties will be severe. If you are unsure about what constitutes plagiarism, consult the guidelines on the philosophy department's website, contact me, or contact the writing tutors of the HIW Study Lab.

**E-mail.** There may be some official communication via e-mail, and everyone is expected to check their e-mail accounts regularly and read their e-mails carefully. You can expect me to read and answer my e-mails within 24 hours.

**Writing support.** Students are encouraged to contact the writing tutors of the HIW Study Lab for help with writing their papers (please note, though, that it is not an editing service).

[TODO: anything standard about various accommodations, etc.? Electronic devices policy? Figure out policy/custom about reader.]

## TENTATIVE SCHEDULE

The schedule is tentative, which means it might change at any point during the semester. I will post any changes and will call your attention to it in advance.

**Introduction.** What is Metaphysics all about?

- **Feb. 17:** Peter van Inwagen and Meghan Sullivan, “Metaphysics” (SEP, sel.)

**Particulars: The Ontology of the Everyday World.** In everyday language, we often speak of individual objects being in this or that way, or having such and such properties. But what are, precisely, the bearer of these properties? Is there a bare object, when we peel off *all* the properties, or is it just properties, all the way down?

- **Feb. 24:** Max Black, “The Identity of Indiscernibles”
- **Mar. 3:** Edwin B. Allaire, “Bare Particulars”

**Modality and Possible Worlds.** The concepts of ‘necessity’, ‘contingency’, or ‘possibility’ and ‘impossibility’ are called modal concepts. When I say that ‘Hillary Clinton could have been elected US president in 2016,’ I mean that things *could have gone* in such a way in 2016 that she was elected US president. But what grounds such a claim? And what are the principled ways of talking about the *ways things could have gone*?

- **Mar. 10:** David Lewis, “Possible Worlds”
- **Mar. 17:** Alvin Plantinga, “Actualism and Possible Worlds”

**Time and Persistence.** What is time? As Augustine notes already in the 4th century, “If no one asks me, I know; if I want to explain it to a questioner, I do not know” (*Confessions*, XI). Philosophers has always found time puzzling. Does it exist? If so, what properties does it have? Can it have contradictory properties? And what about objects that persist in time? What *does it mean* to say that object persists in time?

- **Mar. 24:** J.M.E. McTaggart, “Time”
- **Mar. 31:** C.D. Broad, “Ostensible Temporality”
- **Apr. 21:** David Lewis, “Counterparts or Double Lives?”
- **Apr. 28:** Trenton Merricks, “Endurance and Indiscernibility”

**Causation.** What does it mean to say that one thing (or event) causes another? Does that involve some kind of necessary relation between the cause and effect? How do we perceive this relation, if we perceive it at all?

- **May 5:** David Lewis, “Causation”
- **May 12:** Elizabeth Anscombe, “Causality and Determination”

**Conclusion.**

- **May 19:** paper writing workshop