

PHILO 36000: METAPHYSICS

Hunter College | Spring 2020 | T+F 12:45–2PM | Daniel Harris (danielwharris@gmail.com)

Course website: danielwharris.com/teaching/360/

Username and password for readings: ‘hunter’ and ‘abstract’

About the Course

Metaphysics is the study of fundamental questions about the nature of reality that aren’t obviously settled by (current) science. We’ll survey a few topics in metaphysics. For example:

- Luke Skywalker is Princess Leia’s brother. This seems like a true statement. Does it follow that Luke and Leia really exist, in some sense? If so, in *what* sense? If not, what is this statement *about*?
- Concrete things like electrons, chairs, and people exist in particular places and times. Are there also abstract entities like numbers and properties? If numbers don’t *really* exist, then what are we learning about when we do mathematics?
- Physical things are made up of subatomic particles. In time, they lose some particles and gain others. What, if anything, makes them the same things from one time to another?
- When we think or talk about counterfactual possibilities—what might have been, or what could be—are we talking about something real? If not, what makes our counterfactual thoughts and statements true or false?
- Are scientific laws and causal relations objectively real aspects of the world, or are they just part of how we interpret the world?
- Modern physics seems to show that the passage of time is an illusion. How can we reconcile this with our ordinary experience of time passing?
- Are race and gender social constructs? What would that even mean, anyway?

We will try to achieve some balance between an overview of all of these topics and a zoomed-in look at a couple of them.

Office Hours

My office is 1446HW. My office hours are on Tuesdays, 2:15–3:30, or by appointment.

Grade Breakdown

10% In-Class Participation

40% Daily Writing Assignments (exercises, questions)

50% Term Paper, broken into several components:

- 10% Abstract Meeting
- 15% Penultimate Draft
- 10% Feedback for other students
- 15% Final Draft

Website and Readings

All of the required readings for this course will be posted on the course website:

<http://danielwharris.com/teaching/360>

Before you begin preparing for each class, go to the website and look at what’s required for that day. (It’s important to do this, as the reading schedule will change over the course of the semester.) To prepare for class, do the readings, take some notes on them, try to do the exercises (if there are any), and formulate some questions to raise in class. You should also do that day’s assignment (see below). You should bring your copy of the reading to class in either physical or electronic form, prepared to flip through the pages and discuss them.

There are two books that we’ll read large portions of, and you may want to buy a copy of those:

- Alyssa Ney (2014): *Metaphysics: An Introduction*. Routledge. ISBN-10: 041564075X
- Stewart Shapiro (2000): *Thinking about Mathematics*. Oxford University Press. ISBN-10: 0192893068

Participation and Daily Assignments

Although I will do some lecturing, this is primarily a discussion course, and so you are required to attend each meeting and participate in the discussion. You should raise questions as they occur to you, and you should try to answer other students’ questions before I do. The point isn’t to be right all of the time, but to try out ideas, and to get better at thinking through complex lines of thought as a group. It’s not possible to learn philosophical concepts without practice applying them yourself. Class is a chance to do that.

40% of your grade will come from daily short writing assignments that you will be asked to upload a copy of before class. Your assignment will be the same for each class: write a paragraph or two that responds to that day’s reading by explaining something that you found confusing, unconvincing, or otherwise intellectually unsatisfying about it. The purpose of this is to focus your (and my) attention on the aspects of the reading that we will need to focus on in class.

I will not give detailed written feedback on these assignments, and I will normally let you know how you’re doing on them in batches (or when you ask me). I will give each assignment a grade of either 0 (fail), 1 (pass) or 2 (nice work!) based on the following criteria:

- Does your assignment show me that you have made a serious attempt to read and understand the text, or does it suggest that you have not read the text carefully?
- Does your assignment show that you have worked to think the issue through on your own and articulate the source of your confusion, or is the question superficial or rushed?
- Is your assignment formulated in clear, grammatical English, and is it easy to read and understand, or is it unclear what you're trying to say?

Part of the point of these assignments is to prepare for in-class discussion, and I will expect every student to raise the issues from their assignments (as well as other questions) in at least most class sessions. Participation therefore counts for an additional 10% of your grade in the course.

Term Paper

Your term paper will be a chance to delve deeper into one of the topics that we explore in this course. Your job will be to clearly explain a debate in metaphysics and, if one position in that debate appeals to you, explain what you take to be the decisive argument for it. (If you think that the debate is unresolved, you should explain the best arguments on either side, and why they aren't decisive.) In order to do this, you will have to read more of the relevant literature than we can get to in class, and this will require independent research in order to find and read the major primary sources on your topic. The final draft of your term paper should be about 2500–3000 words (around 10–12 pages, double spaced), and will be worth 15% of your grade.

Abstract, Meeting, Draft, and Comments

You will be graded on your term paper in stages, each of which will be important to your grade.

- First you will create a 1-page **abstract** in which you'll explain your plan for writing the paper (thesis, argument outline, and sources). You'll bring this abstract to an **office-hours meeting**, and I will give you some feedback.
- Next you will hand in a **draft** of your paper. This should not be a rough and sloppy first draft. You should have already spent time editing and revising it by this stage. The draft should be about 2000–2500 words (about 8–10 pages), and is worth 15% of your final grade.
- Next you will read and provide **feedback** on the essays of two other randomly-assigned students. (I will also give feedback to everyone on their drafts.) The purpose of this is for you to help each other to see which parts of your papers are unclear or unconvincing, so that they can improve these points in the final drafts. Your feedback will be worth 10% of your final grade.

Late Assignments Policy

Daily assignments cannot be submitted late for credit, but I will ignore your lowest four assignment grades. Other assignments

will have 10% deducted per day late. If your penultimate draft is late, you forfeit your ability to participate in the feedback assignment (and so automatically lose 10% from your final grade).

Academic Dishonesty

Hunter College regards acts of academic dishonesty (e.g., plagiarism, cheating on examinations, obtaining unfair advantage, and falsification of records and official documents) as serious offenses against the values of intellectual honesty. The College is committed to enforcing the CUNY Policy on Academic Integrity and will pursue cases of academic dishonesty according to the Hunter College Academic Integrity Procedures.

ADA Statement

In compliance with the ADA and with Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, Hunter College is committed to ensuring educational access and accommodations for all its registered students. Hunter College's students with disabilities and medical conditions are encouraged to register with the Office of AccessABILITY for assistance and accommodation. For information and appointment contact the Office of AccessABILITY located in Room E1214 or call (212) 772-4857 /or VRS (646) 755-3129.

Hunter College Policy on Sexual Misconduct

In compliance with the CUNY Policy on Sexual Misconduct, Hunter College reaffirms the prohibition of any sexual misconduct, which includes sexual violence, sexual harassment, and gender-based harassment retaliation against students, employees, or visitors, as well as certain intimate relationships. Students who have experienced any form of sexual violence on or off campus (including CUNY-sponsored trips and events) are entitled to the rights outlined in the Bill of Rights for Hunter College.

a. Sexual Violence: Students are strongly encouraged to immediately report the incident by calling 911, contacting NYPD Special Victims Division Hotline (646-610-7272) or their local police precinct, or contacting the College's Public Safety Office (212-772-4444).

b. All Other Forms of Sexual Misconduct: Students are also encouraged to contact the College's Title IX Campus Coordinator, Dean John Rose (jtrose@hunter.cuny.edu or 212-650-3262) or Colleen Barry (colleen.barry@hunter.cuny.edu or 212-772-4534) and seek complimentary services through the Counseling and Wellness Services Office, Hunter East 1123.

CUNY Policy on Sexual Misconduct Link: <http://www.cuny.edu/about/administration/offices/la/Policy-on-Sexual-Misconduct-12-1-14-with-links.pdf>

Tentative Schedule of Readings

Warning: This really is tentative. It will change! Always consult the current schedule on the website before preparing for class.

	TUESDAYS	FRIDAYS
1	January 28 Introduction	January 31 Logic for Metaphysics (Ney, pp.1-29)
2	February 4 Ontology (Ney, ch.1)	February 7 Ontology (Ney, ch.1)
3	February 11 Abstract Entities (Ney, ch.2)	February 14 Philosophy of Mathematics (Shapiro, pp.16-20 + ch.2)
4	February 18 Plato and Aristotle on Mathematics (Shapiro, ch.3)	February 21 Kant and Mill on Mathematics (Shapiro, ch.4)
5	February 25 Logicism (Shapiro, ch.5)	February 28 No Class
6	March 3 Contemporary Mathematical Realism (Shapiro, ch.8)	March 6 No Class
7	March 10 Contemporary Mathematical Antirealism (Shapiro, ch.9)	March 13 Material Objects (Ney, ch.3)
8	March 17 No Class	March 20 Critiques of Metaphysics (ch.4)
9	March 24 Time (Ney, ch.5)	March 27 Persistence (Ney, ch.6)
10	March 31 Modality (ney, ch.7)	April 3 Causation (Ney, ch.8)
	April 7 No Class	April 10 Spring Recess
11	April 14 Spring Recess	April 17 The Metaphysics of Race (Ney, ch.10) American Anthropological Association's Statement on Race
12	April 21 Quayshawn Spencer: Racial Realism 1 and 2 Abstract of term paper due, Office-hours meetings this week	April 24 Barbara J. Fields: Ideology and Race in America
13	April 28 Marilynn Frye: Sexism Judith Butler: Gender Trouble (excerpt)	May 1 Sally Haslanger: Race and Gender: (What) Are they? (What) Do We Want Them To Be?
14	May 5 Katharine Jenkins: Amelioration and Inclusion: Gender Identity and the Concept of Woman Penultimate draft of term paper due	May 8 Alex Byrne: Are Women Adult Human Females?
15	May 12 Topic TBD Comments on other students' drafts due	
	May 17 (Sunday, midnight) Final draft of term paper due by email	