

Introduction to Metaphysics

I. **What Metaphysics Is:** Metaphysics is the study of **what there is** and **what it's like**.

(a) **What there is:** This is sometimes called *ontology*. Examples of ontological claims include:

- (1) There is no God.
- (2) There is something that all green things have in common: their *color*.
- (3) There are no immaterial objects.
- (4) There are infinitely many prime numbers.
- (5) There are four fundamental forces: gravity, electromagnetism, the strong nuclear force, and the weak nuclear force.

(b) **What it is like:** The study of the natures of things. Examples of such claims include:

- (6) God is outside of space and time.
- (7) The color green cannot exist independently of particular things that have that color.
- (8) Being a material object requires taking up space.
- (9) No number is a material object.
- (10) Gravity is a lot weaker than the other fundamental forces.

II. **Almost every area of human inquiry is metaphysics.** That includes all of mathematics, and most of natural and social science. They all tell us a little part of the story about what there is and what it's like.

III. **What's proper to philosophy?** Don't worry: we aren't going to try to study almost every area of human inquiry. Instead, we're going to look at questions that are of interest to contemporary philosophers. Whenever human beings get clear enough on methods and fundamental assumptions to be able to do proofs, design experiments, program computer models, *etc.*, they spin off a new science. (In the last century, this happened in a number of areas, including psychology and linguistics.) What's left is studied by philosophers.

IV. **Metaphysics vs. Epistemology:** For some reason, we human beings have a tendency to confuse an inquiry into the natures of things with an inquiry into how we know about them.

Metaphysics	the natures of things
Epistemology	how we know about things

For example:

Metaphysics	“What is the nature of temperature?”	[Something about mean molecular kinetic energy]
Epistemology	“How do we know what temperature it is?”	[Something about thermometers]

You shouldn't let difficulties saying how we know something blind you to the facts.

Consider the claim: “You are sitting in a class on metaphysics”.

How do you know that this claim is true? No one knows, exactly.

But it really is true. It's a fact.

V. Some warnings:

- (a) There's an awful lot of **philosophy of language** in contemporary metaphysics.
- (b) A little bit of background in **symbolic logic** may help. But it won't be presupposed. Don't be intimidated by some of the symbol-mongering in the readings.
- (c) Much of the subject matter of this course is **very abstract**. It is extremely important to try to keep your feet on the ground. Toolkit: (i) always go back to **simple examples**; and (ii) Don't be intimidated by general pronouncements (*e.g.* “Everything that exists is made of matter”); and (iii) remember the obvious facts.
- (d) I will be giving **no definitive answers** to the fundamental questions which we will be studying. My job is to introduce you to the issues, not indoctrinate you.
- (e) Despite the abstractness of the subject matter, you are obligated to **be sensible**. If your head stays in the clouds you will not do very well.
- (f) This course is designed to be **very dry**, so as not to induce a buzz with deep-sounding bullshit. The lesson of the course is that there are things we encounter every day that we don't really understand. We aren't going to be studying anything supernatural. Our puzzles center on the most familiar and ordinary things.
- (g) The reading will be **more difficult** than you realize. You will have to read over and over again.

VI. Topics covered will include:

- (a) **Possibilities**: In addition to how things actually are, there are various possibilities for how they could have been. Obama, for instance, won the 2008 election. But he might have lost it. His loss, though it did not in fact occur, is possible. But what are these supposed possibilities? Is there any reason to think there are such things? If so, then what is their nature?

- (b) **Personal Identity:** You are very different now from the way you were fifteen years ago. Despite these differences you are one and the same person as that toddler. What makes you one and the same person as the little toddler you were? And what sort of thing is a person that it can maintain its identity through such radical changes?
- (c) **Time and Change:** Route 7 gets narrower as it goes from South Burlington to Shelburne. Route 7 in South Burlington got wider between 2004 and 2006. The latter phenomenon is an example of change over time. The former is an example of what we might call “change over space”. Is there a big difference between these two kinds of change? Or are they both instances of the same phenomenon? More generally, what is the nature of temporal change?
- (d) **Material Objects:** Consider a particular material object (*i.e.* something that’s made of matter), like this shirt. Consider the swatch of fabric of which this shirt is made. What is the relation between the shirt and the swatch? Are they one and the same thing? or are they distinct? The swatch of fabric is also a material object. Just how many material objects am I wearing on my upper torso?
- (e) **Existence:** There is no such thing as Santa Claus. But there is such a thing as Barack Obama. But what does it mean to deny existence of Santa Claus, but affirm it of Barack Obama? What kind of difference between them do we thereby indicate?