

*Louis deRosset – Spring 2023*

## **Introduction to Metaphysics**

MWF 1:10-2:00 LAFAYE L100

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### **Description**

This course provides an introduction to the methods and many of the issues of contemporary metaphysics. No effort will be made to survey either the details of any particular school of thought, or the complete contemporary philosophical scene. Instead, you will read, think, and write about a series of issues of central importance in contemporary metaphysics, including the natures of existence, necessity, persons, time and change, and material things. You should leave the course knowing more about what metaphysics is and how it's done. You should also have continued your development of some of the critical skills philosophers (and investigators more generally) use to address some of the most interesting and important questions people have ever asked. These skills include lifting arguments from texts, critically assessing them, and communicating the results clearly and cogently.

### **Requirements**

You are expected to attend all lectures and to participate in classroom discussions. There will be a midterm, a final exam, and a paper. From time to time there will be short homework assignments. Course grades will be determined by summing using the following weights:

homework, attendance, and participation	15%
paper	30%
midterm	25%
final	30%

This is not a contract; I reserve the right to change relative weights and course requirements to suit your educational needs.

### **Office Hours**

You are strongly encouraged to come by my office hours, Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays from 8:30-9:30 AM, for help or discussion. Office hours are offered either via teleconference or in person at 70 South Williams Street. You should book an appointment online at <https://louis-uvm.youcanbook.me>. Shortly before the time of your appointment, I will send you a link for a teleconference meeting (MSTeams, Zoom, or similar). Of course, if you make an appointment, you may also stop by my office at 70 South Williams Street, #107 to talk in person.

### **Readings**

Readings are available on the course blackboard site; you may login at <https://bb.uvm.edu>.

They can be read with Adobe Acrobat Reader DC, which you can download and install free of charge. Please contact me immediately if, for any reason, you are unable to access any of the readings.

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**Protocol for making up absences**

If you miss a class, you can make it up by completing the following steps:

- Read the notes for the class meeting you missed on BlackBoard (<https://bb.uvm.edu>) under **Course Materials/Notes/**;
- compile a list of questions about the material;
- make an office hours appointment at <https://louis-uvm.YouCanBook.me> and show up;
- tell me the date of the class you missed;
- discuss the material with me.

## Policies

**Student Learning Accommodations:** In keeping with University policy, any student with a documented disability interested in utilizing ADA accommodations should contact Student Accessibility Services (SAS), the office of Disability Services on campus for students. SAS works with students and faculty in an interactive process to explore reasonable and appropriate accommodations, which are communicated to faculty in an accommodation letter. All students are strongly recommended to discuss with their faculty the accommodations they plan to use in each course. Faculty who receive Letters of Accommodation with Disability Related Flexible accommodations will need to fill out the Disability Related Flexibility Agreement. Any questions from faculty or students on the agreement should be directed to the SAS specialist who is indicated on the letter.

Contact SAS:

A170 Living/Learning Center

802-656-7753

[access@uvm.edu](mailto:access@uvm.edu)

<https://www.uvm.edu/access>

**Religious Holidays:** Students have the right to practice the religion of their choice. If you need to miss class to observe a religious holiday, please submit the dates of your absence to me in writing by the end of the second full week of classes. You will be permitted to make up work within a mutually agreed-upon time.

**Electronic devices:** No electronic devices may be used for any reason other than as an accommodation for a documented condition. If you are using an electronic device in violation of this policy, I will ask you to leave the class meeting.

**General statement regarding potential changes during the semester:** <http://catalogue.uvm.edu/> The University of Vermont reserves the right to make changes in the course offerings, mode of delivery, degree requirements, charges, regulations, and procedures contained herein as educational, financial, and health, safety, and welfare considerations require, or as necessary to be compliant with governmental, accreditation, or public health directives.

**Lived Name and Pronoun Information:** The UVM Directory includes fields for indicating your lived name and your pronouns. Lived names (preferred names, names in use) are names that an individual wants to be known by in the University community. Entering your pronouns is strongly encouraged to help create a more inclusive and respectful campus community. To update your information, login to the UVM Directory. A preview box will allow you to see how this information will appear in other systems used on campus such as Microsoft Teams and Blackboard. More information about how to make changes to your lived name and pronouns is available in the [Knowledge Base](#).

**Intellectual Property Statement/Prohibition on Sharing Academic Materials:** Students are prohibited from publicly sharing or selling academic materials that they did not author (for example: class syllabus, outlines or class presentations authored by the professor, practice questions, text from the textbook or other copyrighted class materials, etc.); and students are prohibited from sharing assessments (for example homework or a take-home examination). Violations will be handled under UVM's Intellectual Property policy and Code of Academic Integrity.

**Academic Integrity:** The [Academic Integrity policy](#) addresses plagiarism, fabrication, collusion, and cheating.

**Code of Student Conduct:** UVM's [Code of Student Conduct](#) outlines conduct expectations as well as students' rights and responsibilities.

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**FERPA Rights Disclosure:** The purpose of UVM's [FERPA Rights Disclosure](#) is to communicate the rights of students regarding access to, and privacy of their student educational records as provided for in the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) of 1974.

**Final Exam Policy:** The University [final exam policy](#) outlines expectations during final exams and explains timing and process of examination period.

**Grade Appeals:** If you would like to contest a grade, please follow the procedures outlined in [this policy](#).

**Grading:** [This link](#) offers information on grading and GPA calculation.

**Promoting Health & Safety:** The University of Vermont's number one priority is to support a healthy and safe community:

[Center for Health and Wellbeing](#)

[Counseling & Psychiatry Services \(CAPS\)](#) Direct Phone Line: (802) 656-3340

C.A.R.E. If you are concerned about a UVM community member or are concerned about a specific event, we encourage you to contact the Dean of Students Office (802-656-3380). If you would like to remain anonymous, you can report your concerns online by visiting the [C.A.R.E. Team website](#).

## 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.

<b>Metaphysics</b>	the natures of things
<b>Epistemology</b>	how we know about things

For example:

<b>Metaphysics</b>	“What is the nature of temperature?”	[Something about mean molecular kinetic energy]
<b>Epistemology</b>	“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. Biden, for instance, won the 2020 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 Joe Biden. But what does it mean to deny existence of Santa Claus, but affirm it of Joe Biden? What kind of difference between them do we thereby indicate?