

PHIL10155 - METAPHYSICS

Course Guide

Instructor: Josh Pearson

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Overview

In this course, we'll be thinking, reading, talking and writing about the following six, central and interrelated topics in Metaphysics:

- (1) Do we have free will? Are free actions possible in a deterministic world?
- (2) What is causation? Can the *absence* of some event be a cause? And is it possible to give a theory of causation using only more basic notions—such as counterfactuals?
- (3) When are counterfactuals—claims like, 'If I were to take Metaphysics, I would have a great time'—true, if ever? (Well, obviously *that* counterfactual is true—but what about other, less obvious ones?)
- (4) What does it take for something to be metaphysically possible? What is a 'possible world'—surely not something that, like the actual world, concretely exists...*right*?
- (5) What kind of thing are you? A person, presumably. But what is *that*? And can it survive teletransportation, fusing with another, and being divided in two?
- (6) When, if ever, does a collection of objects combine to constitute a further object? Never? Sometimes? Always? *Just how many objects are there?*

We'll also consider when answers to these questions have implications in ethics. Some of these connections may be familiar, such as between free will and moral responsibility. Others less so. Parfit argued that the correct answers to (5) should make us less selfish and less afraid of death; Hare argues that the correct answers to (3) means we should be grateful that any old-enough historical event happened (including the extremely bad ones); Johnston argues that popular answers to (6) entail it is almost never permissible to undergo short-term costs at the promise of long-term benefits.

We can respond to these ethical consequences by either denying the metaphysical thesis that entails it ("denial"), insisting the metaphysical thesis does not have that ethical consequence after all ("accommodation"), or, more radically, accepting the ethical consequences and changing the way you live your life ("reform"). We will treat neither denial, accommodation nor reform as off the table. You'll learn how to arrive at your own, carefully considered and defensible views on these matters.

Learning Outcomes

On completion of this course, you will be able to:

- Demonstrate core skills in philosophy, including the ability to interpret and engage with philosophical texts, to evaluate arguments, and to develop one's own critical ideas in response.
- Acquire an understanding of some of the central problems in metaphysics and of leading approaches to resolving them.
- Analyse these problems and the strengths and weakness of various approaches made to resolving them.

Seminars

Each week, you will take part in a two-hour seminar. Your seminar will either be at:

- 9am on Mondays, at 1.17 Dugald Stewart Building; or
- 4.10pm on Thursdays, at G.01, Classroom 1, High School Yards Teaching Centre

These are the times the seminars *start*—I recommend arriving a few minutes before if possible. Attendance at these seminars is required and will be monitored. Please email me if you foresee any issues with this.

Importantly, these seminars are not merely lectures. Rather, you should expect to actively participate in them, such as through discussions or in other forms (like small group tasks, minute-papers and polls).

I know first-hand that participating in class can be daunting. This can be for various reasons, one being just that philosophy is often abstract and difficult. I encourage you to stretch and challenge yourself. Do note that what are sometimes glossed as “mere requests for clarification”—like *I just don't understand what this philosopher means by the word “___”*—are in fact significant and important contributions to a discussion. Being able to articulate what is confusing, or what you don't understand, about some idea or argument is a crucial step to engaging with it philosophically. I am happy to chat if you are struggling with this aspect of the class.

Readings

Each week there will be required reading to do before the seminar. These are listed below in the Course Schedule. Please note:

- To help you actively engage with the readings, **each reading will be accompanied with a set of reading instructions, available on Learn the week before.** These will involve:
 1. Some *pre-reading* questions. These help draw out your own, perhaps implicit, philosophical opinions on the relevant topic before finding out what others have thought.
 2. Some questions to answer *while* reading. Use these to help identify parts of the reading to pay special attention to.
 3. Some questions for *after* you've finished reading. Often, they will ask you to consider how the arguments you've read do or don't cohere with your own position.
- Answering these questions will help you actively engage with the readings, prepare you for class discussion, and provide a starting point for thinking about your chosen assessment question. **There will be reading instructions for week 1!**
- For some readings, we will only be required to read excerpts from the relevant paper/chapter. The reading instructions will tell you exactly which portion of the reading is required.

The Course Schedule also lists recommended reading for each week. These provide either helpful background, alternative explanations for the key ideas in the required readings, further discussion, or tips for writing and thinking about philosophy (such as Alan Hájek's work on philosophical heuristics). I can also recommend more reading to you—just email me! This might be helpful for when you work on your...

Assessments

There are two assessments for this course:

- Mid-term essay (1,500 words, 40%), due October 22nd at 12pm.
- Final essay (2,500 words, 60%), due December 12th at 12pm.

For each assignment, you will be able to choose among multiple essay questions that I will upload to Learn **four weeks before the deadline.**

For the **final essay**, there is also the option of answering an essay question about the course that you have constructed yourself. **However this is only a possible option if you have in writing from me (via email) agreement on your own essay question two weeks before the deadline.** That's November 26th at 12pm. If you'd like to take this option, you should probably start asking me about it a few days before November 26th, if not earlier.

I will be following these marking guidelines. I will offer writing advice and point to resources during seminars throughout the semester, including during the **paper workshop** in

week 11. You will also get written feedback on both your midterm and final essay. Finally, I am happy to chat and offer additional advice about writing during my office hours or by appointment (email).

If you foresee any issues with completing these assignments, please let me know as soon as possible. Though, please note that **it is not in my power to grant extensions. You can apply for extensions at the University Student Administration.**

Finally, information about lateness penalties, word count, academic misconduct, etc, can all be found here.

AI Policy

This course will follow the default department policy on use of AI; in short, **zero AI permitted for assessments.** At length:

Philosophy courses aim to foster careful original thought, improve persuasive academic writing skills, and enhance students' abilities to understand complex topics. Using generative AI tools to produce assessed work is almost always detrimental to this aim, which is why the use of AI is prohibited in writing, revising, and editing of academic work that is submitted for assessment in Philosophy. This includes undergraduate and postgraduate essays, undergraduate and postgraduate dissertations, take-home exams, or any other form of assessment.

Violations of the policy may be referred to the School Academic Misconduct Office (SAMO) for investigation.

The full policy is here. In solidarity, I vow not to use AI to help me in any way when producing materials for this course, nor for any of my current research projects.

Course Schedule

Please note: this is the schedule as-of August 17th, 2026. It is subject to (minor) changes. In particular, I will fill out more recommended readings where I have left a '...'. All readings will be made available on Learn. You can also ask me (via email or in person) for additional recommended readings.

Week 1 (Sep 21st/24th) – Free Will is Incompatible with Determinism

Required Reading:

- *This course outline!* (So, if you're reading this, well done!)

- Van Inwagen, Peter (1975). “The Incompatibility of Free Will and Determinism”. *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition*, 27(3), 185–199.
- Hare, Caspar (2026). “Introduction”. *Living in a Strange World*. Chapter 1. OUP. (Excerpts).

Recommended Reading:

- Hájek, Alan (Manuscript). *Philosophical Heuristics and Philosophical Creativity*. (Available on Learn).
- Beebe, Helen (2013). “Free Will: The Basics”. *Free Will: An Introduction*. Chapter 1. Basingstoke: Palgrave-Macmillan. (If you’re interested, see also chapters 2, 3 and 5 for more on compatibilist and incompatibilist theories of free will.)
- Van Inwagen, Peter (2000). “Free will remains a mystery”. *Philosophical Perspectives* 14:1-20. (Especially the second half, which discusses the prospects of free will under indeterminism.)
- Whittle, Ann. (2023). “A New Solution to the Problem of Luck”. *Philosophical Issues*, 33, 314–327.

Week 2 (Sep 28th/Oct 1st) – Causation and Counterfactuals

Required Reading:

- Collins, John ; Hall, Ned & Paul, L. A. (2004). “Counterfactuals and Causation: History, Problems, and Prospects”. In John Collins, Ned Hall & Laurie Paul, *Causation and Counterfactuals*. MIT Press. (Excerpts)
- Edgington, Dorothy (2003). “Counterfactuals and The Benefit of Hindsight”. In Phil Dowe & Paul Noordhof, *Cause and Chance: Causation in an Indeterministic World*.

Recommended Reading:

- Ney, Alyssa (2023). “Causation”. *Metaphysics: An introduction*. Second Edition. Chapter 11. Routledge.
- Lewis, David (1987) “Causation”. *Philosophical Papers Volume II*. Chapter 21. New York: OUP. (This version includes various postscripts to his original, influential article)
- Collins, Hall and Paul’s *Causation and Counterfactuals*, of which we will read the introduction, contains many excellent articles on this subject.

- Hájek, Alan (Manuscript). *Philosophical Heuristics and Philosophical Methodology*. (Available on Learn).

Week 3 (Oct 5th/8th) – Free Will is Compatible with Determinism

Required Reading:

- Frankfurt, Harry (1969). “Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility”. *The Journal of Philosophy*, 66(23), 829–839.
- Lewis, David (1982). “Are We Free to Break the Laws?” In Gary Watson, *Free will*. New York: OUP.

Recommended Reading:

- Beebee, Helen (2013). “Frankfurt’s Nefarious Neurosurgeon”. *Free Will: An Introduction*. Chapter 6. Basingstoke: Palgrave-Macmillan. (Further good readings on Frankfurt can be found here!)
- Beebee, Helen. (2003). “Local Miracle Compatibilism”. *Noûs*, 37(2), 258–277.
- Dorr, Cian (2016). “Against Counterfactual Miracles”. *The Philosophical Review*, 125(2), 241–286.
- More of Hájek’s Heuristics, to be made available on Learn.

Week 4 (Oct 12th/15th) – Causation, Omissions, and Responsibility

Required Reading:

- Beebee, Helen. (2004). “Causing and Nothingness”. In E. J. Hall, L. A. Paul, & J. Collins (Eds.), *Causation and Counterfactuals* (pp. 291-308). MIT Press.
- Sartorio, Carolina (2007). “Causation and Responsibility”. *Philosophy Compass*, 2: 749-765.

Recommended Reading:

- Hájek, Alan (Manuscript). *Writing Heuristics*. (Excerpts, available on Learn).
- Bernstein, Sara (2017). “Causal Proportions and Moral Responsibility”, in David Shoemaker (ed.), *Oxford Studies in Agency and Responsibility Volume 4*. OUP.
- Sartorio, Carolina (2009). “Causation and Ethics”, in Helen Beebee, Christopher Hitchcock, and Peter Menzies (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Causation*. OUP.

- Byrne, Thomas (2025). “Saving and Letting Live.” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 111 (3):753-772.

MIDTERM ESSAY IS DUE OCTOBER 22nd BY 12PM

Week 5 (Oct 19th/22nd) – Possibility, Necessity, and Possible Worlds

Required Reading:

- Sider, Theodore (2003). “Reductive theories of modality.” In Michael J. Loux & Dean W. Zimmerman, *The Oxford Handbook of Metaphysics*. New York: Oxford University Press. pp. 180-208.
- Hare, Caspar (2026). “Introduction”. *Living in a Strange World*. Chapter 1. OUP. (The rest of).

Recommended Reading:

- Ney, Alyssa (2023). “Modality”. *Metaphysics: An introduction*. Second Edition. Chapter 10. Routledge. (And further references there in. The Sider reading also contains plenty of good references for further reading.)
- Fischer, Bob (2017). “The Moral Objection to Modal Realism”. *Erkenntnis* 82, 1015–1030.
- Stalnaker, Robert (1976). “Possible worlds”. *Noûs* 10 (1):65-75.

Week 6 (Oct 26th/29th) – Counterfactuals, Consequentialism and Chaos

Required Reading:

- Hájek, Alan (Manuscript). *Consequentialism, Cluelessness, Clumsiness, and Counterfactuals*. (Available on Learn)
- Hare, Caspar, (2026). “Hindsight and the Great Yes.” *Living in a Strange World*. Chapter 5. OUP.

Recommended Reading:

- More of Hare’s *Living in a Strange World*; in particular:
 - Chapter 2 for relevant background;
 - Chapter 6 for objections to his “Hindsight and the Great Yes”;
 - Chapter 3 for a discussion of problems related to the Hájek reading; and

- Chapter 4 for Hare’s solution to those problems—though note that this chapter is especially difficult.
- ...

Week 7 (Nov 2nd/Nov 5th) – *The Psychological versus Bodily Criterion for Personhood*

Required Reading:

- Locke, J., & Fraser, A. C. (1894). “Of Identity and Diversity”. *An essay concerning human understanding : collated and annotated, with prolegomena, biographical, critical and historical, by Alexander Campbell Fraser* Chapter XXVII. Vol. 1. Clarendon Press.
 - If you are finding Locke’s original text hard to parse, I highly recommend instead reading Jonathan Bennett’s rewording of it, which I’ll upload to Learn. (*But try reading the original first!*)

Recommended Reading:

- Olson, Eric (2024). ”Personal Identity”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Winter 2024 Edition, Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.).
- Williams, Bernard. (1970). “The Self and the Future”. *The Philosophical Review*, 79(2), 161–180.
- ...

Week 8 (Nov 9th/12th) – *Just How Many Objects Are There?*

Required Reading:

- Ney, Alyssa (2023). “Material Objects”. *Metaphysics: An introduction*. Second Edition. Chapter 3. Routledge. (Excerpts)
- Ney, Alyssa (2023). “Persistence”. *Metaphysics: An introduction*. Second Edition. Chapter 9. Routledge. (Excerpts)
- Hare, Caspar, (2026). “Three Population Explosions.” *Living in a Strange World*. Chapter 5. OUP.

Recommended Reading:

- Thomson, J. J. (1998). “The Statue and the Clay”. *Noûs*, 32(2), 149–173.
- ...

Week 9 (16th/19th) – How to Survive Being Split in Two

Required Reading:

- Parfit, Derek (1971). “Personal Identity”. *The Philosophical Review*, 80(1), 3–27.
- Lewis, David (1983). “Survival and Identity”. *Philosophical Papers Volume I* New York: OUP. (Only this version contains the important postscripts!)

Recommended Reading:

- Parfit, Derek (1976). “Lewis, Perry, and what matters”. In Amélie Oksenberg Rorty, *The Identities of Persons*. University of California Press. pp. 91-108. (Parfit’s critique of Lewis’s view)
- Wolf, S. (1986). Self-Interest and Interest in Selves. *Ethics*, 96(4), 704–720. (For more on whether Parfit’s view has important ethical upshots.)
- ...

Week 10 (Nov 23rd/26th) – The Person-ite Problem

Required Reading:

- Hare, Caspar (2026). “The Crowds Riot”. *Living in a Strange World*. Chapter 8. OUP.
- Hare, Caspar (2026). “Botched Crowd Control”. *Living in a Strange World*. Chapter 9. OUP.
- Hare, Caspar (2026). “Successful Crowd Control”. *Living in a Strange World*. Chapter 10. OUP.

Recommended Reading:

- Hare, Caspar, (2026). “Frequently Asked Questions.” *Living in a Strange World*. Chapter 11. OUP.
- Johnston, Mark (2016). “The Personite Problem: Should Practical Reason Be Tabled?” *Noûs*. 51 (3):617-644.
- ...

Week 11 (Nov 30th/Dec 3rd) – Paper Workshop

No required readings this week — but **you are required to bring in a paper plan** (I’ll explain what this is in week 10). Recommended readings are just the readings above related to your planned paper!

*****FINAL ESSAY IS DUE DECEMBER 10th BY 12PM*****