

Metaphysics

Fall 2013

Main Classes on Tuesdays and Thursdays, 4:55 PM - 6:10 PM

Peter Unger, Professor peter.unger@nyu.edu

Discussion Sections: Friday 11:00 AM - 12:15 PM and Friday 12:30 PM – 1:45 PM

Eli Alshanetsky, TA alshanetsky@nyu.edu

Metaphysics is extremely comprehensive. Accordingly, in this class we'll confront only a small sample of what metaphysicians try to achieve.

Whether you know it or not, each of you has some deep metaphysical beliefs. And, knowingly or not, you've each wondered about some large metaphysical questions. Through exchanges with the professor for the course, and with the TA, you should become increasingly aware of your main metaphysical commitments, and some possible answers to your large metaphysical questions.

For quite a few enrolled, the class is dauntingly large. But, students should participate, anyway: Ask for clarification; voice an idea opposing what's on offer; do whatever it takes to get yourself involved – short of behaving chaotically, or otherwise inappropriately. Without much student discussion, we all might just as well, or almost as well, view, and hear, a videotape of a professor – or an actor who's memorized a shtick. So, I'll try to have many students participate. This will be important not only for your learning experience, but also for your course grade. Most of your course grade will be based on your written work – but class contribution will also count, as will questions asked, and comments made, during office hours.

Reading will be from four sources, two to be purchased, one distributed for free:

1. A textbook, *Metaphysics* by Peter van Inwagen
2. An anthology, *Metaphysics: The Big Questions*, edited by van Inwagen and Dean Zimmerman. In the course plan, I'll refer to this as MBQ.
3. A Coursepack, to be distributed freely in the class to all enrolled.
4. Material on Professor Unger's NYU Webpage, available in PDF form.

Here's the course plan, to be followed flexibly, not rigidly.

Week 1: This week I'll try to sketch the metaphysical outlook with which we've been inculcated, by our culture and our early education. For some material relating to the sketch, but mostly for other reasons, in van Inwagen's *Metaphysics*, read chapter 1.

Among other things, this chapter will provide a helpful background for what's upcoming in the course, and for an appropriate attitude toward metaphysics, and toward philosophy, in general.

Week 2: This week our topic will be The Puzzle of Concrete Reality. For a discussion of this topic, we shall read, in *Metaphysics: The Big Questions* (henceforth MBQ) Selection 52 (Lewis) pages 499-502 and 508-510, Selection 60 (Parfit) and Selection 61 (Swinburne).

Week 3: This week will be primarily devoted to the Problem of Free Will. For discussion, in *Metaphysics*, read chapter 12. And, in MBQ, read Selections 44 (Hobart) and 46 (Chisholm).

Week 4: This week will also be primarily devoted to Free Will. In MBQ, read Selection 48 (van Inwagen) and Selection 49 (O'Connor).

Our discussion will aim to help you write a short paper, 3 pages typed double-space, along one of these two opposite lines:

1. An essay arguing for the idea that it is possible for you really to choose
2. An essay arguing for the idea that it isn't possible for you really to choose

Week 5: On Tuesday of this week, you will submit your essays.

This will be the first week primarily devoted to what philosophers call The Mind-Body Problem: What are the main difficulties for the idea that each of us mental beings is a physical entity? In light of these difficulties, is it reasonable to think that we mental beings *aren't* physical? Or, is it possible to disarm the difficulties, and to think we mental beings *are* physical?

For this week's discussion, in *Metaphysics*, read chapter 10. Also, read Unger, "Two Cartesian Arguments for Some Spacelike Substantial Dualism, distributed in class sessions.

Week 6: This week will also be devoted to the Mind-Body Problem. For discussion, in MBQ, read Selection 41 (Chalmers), 42 (Russell), 54 (Kripke) but only from bottom of page 535 to its end on page 539. Also, read Selection 35 (Chisholm).

Week 7: While we will continue to discuss The Mind-Body Problem, we shall also become involved in a closely related issue, The Problem of Personal Identity. That Problem comprises such questions as:

Is it possible for you to survive the destruction of your body?

Is it possible for several people simultaneously to have, or to share, a single body?

For discussion, read chapter 11 of *Metaphysics* and, in MBQ, read 35 (Chisholm) - a repeat - and 36 (Shoemaker), and (37) Olson.

Week 8: There'll be more discussion of The Problem of Personal Identity and The Mind-Body Problem.

In MBQ, read Selection 38 (Parfit). In our Coursepack read Chisholm, "Questions about the Unity of Consciousness", Zuboff "The Story of a Brain" and three pieces by Unger: "I Do Not Exist," (Some pages from) "Why There Are No People" and (Some Pages from) "The Problem of the Many".

Our discussion will aim to help you write a short paper, 3 pages typed double-space, on either of two opposite propositions:

1. "I am an immaterial mental being, in no way physical, who will long survive the destruction of my physical body."
2. "I am a material being, in no way immaterial, who won't long survive the destruction of my physical body."

Week 9: In Tuesday's class, you will submit your papers.

This week, we'll continue our discussion from the previous few weeks and greatly expand it, to include our encounter with Berkeleyan idealism. Read Chapter 3 of *Metaphysics*.

Week 10: This week, we'll discuss the metaphysical status of (what we take to be) material objects:

Are there many material objects; or, is there just a single heterogeneous physical field?

If there are many material things, do some compose others, more complex than them; or, are there really just the many simple material objects, maybe just quarks and electrons?

For discussion, first read these items, largely repeats: In *Metaphysics*, read Chapter 2. In the Coursepack, read the few selected pages from Peter van Inwagen's *Material Beings*, "Contact". Then, provided online, read chapter 6 of Unger's forthcoming *Empty Ideas*, "Empty Debates about Material Matters".

Week 11: This we'll begin to discuss The Philosophy of Time.

For discussion, first, in *Metaphysics*, read Chapter 4, but only up through page 81.

Next, in MBQ read Selections 12 (Prior), (14) Broad and 16 (Prior). Next, in the Coursepack, read the selection by J. J. C. Smart, "The Space-Time World".

Finally, in MBQ, read Selections 27 (Lewis), 28 (Lewis) and 29 (Zimmerman).

Week 12: We shall discuss some further questions concerning Time. For this discussion, first, provided online, read those sections of chapter 7 of Unger's *Empty Ideas* read sections 2 and 3. Then, in the Coursepack, read the presented selection from Derek Parfit's *Reasons and Persons*, "Different Attitudes to Time".

Week 13: On Tuesday of this week, you'll submit, in class, a 3-page paper written along one of these two opposite lines:

1. Time and space are so very different that they can't possibly be anything like two species of the same genus; so, there's something very wrong with the idea that concrete reality has four *dimensions*, three *of them* spatial and one *of them* temporal.
2. Time and space are only superficially different; so, it's a metaphysically important truth that concrete reality has four *dimensions*, three *of them* spatial and one *of them* temporal.

This week and the will be devoted to some very general questions about what individuals there are and, in the terms I prefer, how an individual might be propertied and related (to other individuals.)

For this discussion, first read, in *Metaphysics*, chapter 2. Next, in MBQ, read Selection (4) Russell, (5) Armstrong, 6 (Price) and Selection 7 (Williams). Finally, and provided online, in chapter 7 of *Empty Ideas*, read sections 1, 4 and 5. *As you'll be submitting your papers this Tuesday, it's a good idea to start on this week's reading over the Thanksgiving break, and continue on with it gradually.*

Week 14: There may be only one class session this week. On that day, we will continue our discussion from week 13, and we will conclude our discussion of metaphysics. Toward concluding in an aptly modest way, read a mini-chapter in *Metaphysics*, chapter 13 "Concluding Meditation".