

Topics in Metaphysics and Epistemology
Professor Peter Unger

Fall Semester 2015
Tuesdays and Thursdays, 2:00 PM to 3:15 PM

The first 70% to 75% of the course will be organized around Professor Unger's new book, *Empty Ideas*, published in July of 2014. Reflecting the central themes of that book, this main part of the course will concern metaphysics itself, both the status of the enterprise in general, and quite a few of the metaphysical topics that, especially in the last fifty years, have been much discussed by leading academic philosophers. Through the NYU Libraries, students can use Oxford Scholarship Online, to get pdf versions of all the book's chapters, all eventually to be assigned. Though that is free of charge, it is a pretty difficult and unpleasant way to read so much material. Accordingly, students may buy a copy of the book at less than half the standard price, as an OUP author can get his or her own books inexpensively, and pass the savings on to students. Readings will be from these following sources: 1. That book. 2. An Anthology, *Metaphysics: The Big Questions*, Eds, Peter van Inwagen and Dean Zimmerman, available at the NYU Book Center, 3. Photocopies distributed in class, or scanned and sent by email, and 4. The Internet.

The rest of the course will deal with our values and attitudes toward central metaphysical possibilities for us human beings. The reading for this will be distributed by the professor.

Students will write a paper for the course, to be submitted at the beginning of week 9. In some cases, where the paper is judged of high quality, that will suffice. In other cases, the students will write a second paper, to be submitted within a week of the last class meeting for the course. Details of these papers will be discussed well before the papers are due.

Here is the plan that, flexibly enough, we will follow. As early experience in the course indicates, later parts of the plan may be subject to change.

First class is on Thursday, September 3rd. For discussion in this class, if you can get your hands on the material, read chapter 1 of *Empty Ideas*, henceforth, EI. The first full Week of the class will begin with the session held on Tuesday, September 8th. It is this week that, below, is listed as Week 1.

Week 1 For discussion in class, first read some photocopied material distributed in the first class:

1. The Introduction to Peter van Inwagen's textbook, *Metaphysics*.
2. A selection from van Inwagen's *Material Beings*, to be distribute in class or by email.
3. A selection in *Metaphysics: The Big Questions*, henceforth, MBQ; Selection 52, David Lewis, "Modal Realism at Work: an Excerpt from On the Plurality of Worlds"

Then read, or re-reread, Chapter 1 of EI.

Week 2 There will be little new reading this week. Making sure that you've gotten a good grasp of EI's First Chapter, go on to read Chapter 2 of EI.

Week 3 For discussion in class, read:

1. Chapter 3 of EI.
2. Then, available from Oxford Scholarship Online, Donald Davidson, "Knowing One's Own Mind", as in his *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*, Oxford University Press, 2002. Using the pdf version of this chapter, *read just pages 4 – 6 of this pdf*.
3. Then, Selection from Hilary Putnam, "The Meaning of 'Meaning'", to be provided.
4. Then, Selection from Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History*, to be provided.
5. Then, again read Chapter 3 of EI, now in light of the material by Putnam and Davidson.

Week 4. For discussion in class read:

1. Chapter 4 of EI.
2. Then, Selection from Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, to be provided.
3. Then, Secondary literature on *Naming and Necessity*, to be provided: C. Hughes, KRIPKE: Names, Necessity and Identity, Oxford U. P., 2004, pages 108-118.
4. Then, again read Chapter 4, now in light of the material by Kripke and Hughes.

Week 5. For discussion in class read:

1. Chapter 5 of EI.
2. Kit Fine, "Coincidence and Form," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume*, Volume LXXXII, 2008, available through JSTOR. Read from the essay's first page, page 100, through the top few lines of page 111.

Week 6 For discussion in class read:

1. L. A. Paul, "The Puzzles of Material Constitution", *Philosophy Compass*, Volume 5, Number 7, pages 579-570. Available through NYU Libraries.
2. Amie L. Thomasson, "The Controversy Over the Existence of Ordinary Objects," *Philosophy Compass*, Volume 5, Number 7, pages 591-601. Use NYU Libraries.
3. Chapter 6 of EI, including the Appendix to that Chapter.

Week 7 For discussion in class:

First read Chapter 7 of EI, with special attention to pages 160-169 and 179-186.

Then, in MBQ read:

1. Selection 4, Bertrand Russell "Universals: an Excerpt from *The Problems of Philosophy*".
2. Selection 5, David M. Armstrong, "Universals as Attributes: An Excerpt from *Universals: An Opinionated Introduction*".
3. Selection 7, D. C. Williams, "The Elements of Being".

Week 8 For discussion in class, reread Chapter 7, this time with special attention to pages 170-179. Then, in MBQ read:

1. Selection 12, A. N. Prior, "The Notion of the Present".
2. (Not in current MBQ) J. J. C. Smart, "The Space-Time World", to be provided.
3. Selection 16, A. N. Prior, "Some Free Thinking about Time".
4. Selection 27, David Lewis "In Defense of Stages".
5. Selection 28, David Lewis "The Problem of Temporary Intrinsic".
6. Selection 29, Dean W. Zimmerman, "Temporary Intrinsic and Presentism".

Week 9 For discussion in class, first read Chapter 8 of EI.

Then, in MBQ read:

1. Selection 36, Sydney Shoemaker, "Personal Identity: A Materialist Account".
2. Selection 38, Derek Parfit, "Divided Minds and the Nature of Persons".
3. Selection 35, Roderick Chisholm, "Which Physical Thing Am I?"

Then Read:

4. Eli Hirsch, "Kripke's Argument Against Materialism," in Robert C. Koons and George Bealer, eds. *The Waning of Materialism*, Oxford University Press, 2010. Use the pdf from Oxford Scholarship Online, available from NYU Libraries.

Then, again read Chapter 8 of EI, now in light of the material from the listed selections.

Week 10. For discussion in class:

First, read Chapter 9, with special attention to pages 223-234.

Then, in MBQ read:

1. Selection 52, David Lewis, "Modal Realism at Work: an Excerpt from On the Plurality of Worlds". This was assigned for Week 1; at this point you should be able to get a fuller feel for the material.
2. Selection 60, Derek Parfit, "Why Anything? Why This?"
3. Selection 61, Richard Swinburne, and "Response to Derek Parfit".

Finally, for this week, reread Chapter 9 of *Empty Ideas*.

The remainder of the course will concern, primarily, our evaluative attitudes toward various metaphysical prospects or possibilities. Why do we dread the eventual end of our own experiencing, but we are completely blasé about the fact that, before just a very few decades ago, we did not exist, and no experiencing was our own experiencing? How much value do we place on the quality and duration of our own experiencing, and how much on what lies beyond the reach of anyone's mentality?

In any case, we will make sure to read and discuss, well before the end of the course, absolutely all of the body of *Empty Ideas*. And, if there is time to do so, we may read and discuss the very few reviews of the book that have so far appeared – or maybe not, depending largely on what the students are most interested in doing.