Course content

We frame our class with a single question: Why does it mean to be? Put differently: What does it mean to say something exists? More simply: What is being? There is a slight variation of this: Why is there something rather than nothing? Or: Why is there anything at all, rather than nothing at all? Clearly this is no ordinary line of questioning. For Martin Heidegger, the great 20th-century German philosophy, all of these can be gathered together into a single interrogative force, which is, for him, the most fundamental question. While human beings have asked many questions before they reach this fundamental question, many people never encounter it; some never gain the opportunity to recognize the claim such questions place upon us, they never feel it deeply and sharply, they never sense the necessity of responding to what may be the most originary question of human existence. And yet, once we catch just a glimpse of its hidden power, the world is transformed. Once raised, the question looms ever-over us, unsettling the meaning of the world with the extreme breadth and weight of the question. It is the most fundamental question; it is the first question. It is not first in the sense of time; it is not the first question that we ask as children. It is first because it is the widest and deepest question.

It is the widest question because it addresses everything. In speaking of being, it speaks of everything that is, was, or will be. The range of this question finds its limit only in nothing; nothingness forms its border infinite border. The question reaches so far that we are not able to reach further than everything and anything that is. It is the deepest question because it is not simply concerned with particular things, with this chair here or that table there; it is concerned instead with things in general. As such, it is concerned with the essence of things, the thingness of things. It aims at the ground of what is insofar as it is; and this ground itself is not a particular thing but the general condition for the existence of all particular things. This ground is what accounts for the Being of all particular beings. We see here the depth: to seek the ground of things is to try to get to the bottom of it all. Whatever the ground turns out to be, it must account for the being of beings as such. The “why” in “Why is there something rather than nothing?” thus penetrates the underlying realm of existence and proceeds to the limits of it all. In fact, this question does not even stop with nothing; rather, it leads up to the cliff of nothingness and forces us
to peer over the edge and feel the sucking hollowness of the abyss. We see here a related question to that fundamental question: What is nothingness? Does nothingness have a kind of being? Can nothingness be at all?

It seems that this kind of inquiry, which we might call a *metaphysical investigation*, forces us to keep our distance from any particular being; for we consider the whole of being, being itself, without any special preference for this or that being. And yet, in asking this question, there is one special kind of being that inevitably stands out: we stand out, the ones asking this question, *us*. Raising the question of Being leads to a questioning of ourselves and our worlds. If we are talking about the whole of being, the Being of every being, then this necessarily includes ourselves; we, as beings, take this same ground as the ground of our being. Asking this question does not free us from being, but instead brings the question of our existence, why we exist, to the front and center. In posing the question "What does it mean to be or to exist?", we cannot help but consider many other questions: "Why am I here? What kind of being am I? What does it mean to be me? What is the purpose of existence? etc." This fundamental question "is the question of all questions." To me, these are fundamental questions because they are fundamental to being human. Asking this question thus does something to us when we take it seriously. To be sure, other beings are not affected by this question. An oak tree or a cardinal is not affected in the least by this question. Whether we ask it or not, the sun continues to rise and fall, and the trees continue to grow. The ability to pose and feel the weight of this question is then a sort of reflexive privilege.

In essence, if this is the most fundamental question, then it must affect us in the most fundamental way. Think of it like this. In asking this question, privilege that it is, we force ourselves to step out of our normal, unreflective way of being in the world such that we are forced to push away all other previously held beliefs, truths, securities, etc. This privilege is thus a great risk, as it makes us doubt even the most obvious things, question the most deeply held assumptions, render unfamiliar the most familiar things. This question contains the power to transform our world into an alien place; it renders us homeless in our own homes, all in a single blow. The fabric of the world is ripped apart even though it looks exactly the same. In order for this class to work, then, we will need each other to take this question absolutely seriously, to truly risk the meaning of the existence of the world. I now ask of you: be willing to examine and test your currently held answers to fundamental questions. One goal of the class is for each of you to improve your metaphysical thinking, and this goal will only be achieved if you dig deeper, beneath the assumed veracity of your current understanding of what it means to be. After all, the fundamentality of the question puts everything *is*, everything that *exists*, at stake. Since this question reaches the deepest and widest, only nothing is left untouched. Metaphysical inquiry is not merely a theoretical tool that leaves the world unchanged. Instead, it puts the world at stake. The meaning of life itself is up for grabs in this class. More precisely, the metaphysical question is asked only by taking a leap. Even better: *the question is this leap*, To raise the question is to put the world at stake. To raise this question is thus to initiate a transformation of the world without moving. The whole world will shift, though you will not have moved an inch. The practice of metaphysics forces us to travel to the ends of existence, only to show us that we are lead back to whence we came. We, the askers of this question, lead ourselves back to the ground of ourselves.

This is where I want us to reach, deep down into the ground of our own existences. To do this, we travel back to Ancient Athens, where we find what is perhaps the most focused, sustained, and elaborate (according to surviving texts) metaphysical investigation in Western Civilization. In order to reach down, we reach back, to the source to those who sowed the seeds of what will soon be called *metaphysics*. One of our main tasks this semester is to understand what is at stake in the ancient formulation of metaphysics. However, you will not just study what other people have said about metaphysics. Instead, you will actually *do metaphysics*. In my eyes, metaphysics is something you do. It is an activity, a practice. Your other main task this semester is to formulate *your own metaphysics*. The first two writing assignments this semester will ask you to: first, construct what you understand the meaning of being to be, and second, critique this understanding.
But there is more, as the point of developing metaphysics is more than mere theory-making. It must also make us engage the world differently. We might call this a “making metaphysics for life,” or a “lived metaphysics.” By this I mean to say that metaphysics is not just an abstract, purely speculative discipline that has no relevance to our lives but can instead become a tool for constructing or revealing a different way of being in the world, a new way of being a being in Being. If we say that everything is really a modification of fire, as the ancient Turkish philosopher Heraclitus argued, what kind of world follows from this worldview? Or if you argue that we live in a providentially organized world, perhaps according to a divine plan, what would this say about our daily lives? Or if we say that everything is essentially water, as the first western philosopher Thales argued, how does this change how we engage the world? My hope is that we do not just read about metaphysics but instead do metaphysics in order to provoke us into living differently. To do this, you will have to convince us that your metaphysics is actually the best metaphysics, in thought and act. My hope is that this will create a bit of a competitive community of diverse metaphysical account with the aim of creating better, more meaningful, more beautiful ways of living.

Texts

Please buy (be sure to get the translations and editions I specify)


On moodle

- Parmenides
- Heraclitus

Assessment

The 5 Projects

You will be graded on 3 types of assignments:

1. **Metaphysics for Life.** There is at least one overarching goal for our class: *to make us see, if not live in, the world differently using something you learned from or found in these ancient texts on metaphysics.*
practical way to do this is to actually develop your metaphysics. There are three steps to doing this, which will correspond to the three main projects you will carry out this semester.

a. **Your Metaphysics.** One of the constant themes of our class is this: *metaphysics is not a rarified, merely theoretical discipline, but is instead an activity, a practice.* Metaphysics is something you really do. In this spirit, you will not only study and discuss metaphysics this semester, but will actually *construct your metaphysics.* In the first significant writing assignment this semester, you will do lay out your own metaphysical treatise (in a 5-page paper (minimum), 12 pt. font, Times New Roman, double-spaced, 1-inch margins) that articulates what you take to be the meaning of being or existence. (200 points or 20% of the grade)

b. **Critique of Your Classmate's Metaphysics.** In the next significant writing assignment you will critique the metaphysics developed by two of your classmates. The goal is to charitably and respectfully challenge the metaphysical treatises of two of your classmates. This is a difficult task, but one that is essential to sophisticated philosophical practice. To be a good, respectful critique does not mean being nice and uncritical; rather, it means taking seriously another’s ideas, arguments, and positions, and this seriousness means offering critical analysis of others’ work. You need to strike the balance between thoughtfully poking holes in others’ metaphysical thinking and yet being supportive and encouraging. Try to both find the weak spots and look for concrete ways to improve. Look for the argumentative problems (i.e., when a conclusion does not follow from previous statements, when a claim is not convincingly supported, etc.) and potential avenues for development. Be a harsh but objective critique. I will provide prompts, questions, and ways to help you offer a very helpful and respectful critique. Concretely, you will write two 3-page papers that thoroughly critique what others have said was the meaning of being.

Finally, you must take a 30 min walk with the people who wrote the two metaphysical treatises that you critiqued. On these walks you will discuss your critiques and the meaning of being. (200 points or 20% of the grade)

c. **From Your Metaphysics to Your Life.** The last part of this ongoing metaphysics construction is to rewrite your metaphysics in response to the specific challenges expressed in the critiques. The critiques will point you to your weak points, those places at which you need to improve your thinking and writing, strengthen your argument. Taking these indications seriously will improve your account of metaphysics. You will thus not be writing from a blank slate, but will instead be refining a line of thinking that you have already been following for most of the semester.

But this is not all. Not only will you refine your metaphysics treatise, you will also indicate specific ways in which this might affect how you live. The idea is this: what you think the world is made of affects how you live in the world. Put differently, your account of what it means to be changes your being in the world. To do this, you will rewrite your metaphysics with a new aim in mind: everyday life. In addition to responding to the critiques you were offered, you will also write a new introduction and conclusion to your metaphysical treatise that explains how your metaphysics might affect your life. The final version of your metaphysics treatise must be at least 8 pages long.

Finally, there will be a TBD public component in which each of you will present your metaphysics to the Elon beyond your classroom. We will together formulate the details of this final component. (250 points or 25% of the grade)

2. **Journal of Metaphysics**

Before every class period, you should write a journal entry that corresponds to the reading for the upcoming class meeting. These journals will be graded three times this semester. Please include the following for each entry: date of completion and author, title, and page numbers or section headings of reading. Also, I always
encourage students to include drawings, diagrams, philographics, photographs, etc., though these always require sufficient explanations.

Each journal entry should include three components:

a. **Summary**: Summaries should be around 104 words long. The point is to try to articulate, very concisely, what is *philosophically at stake* in a reading selection. You should home in on the main questions, claims, and arguments contained in a text. It may take some time to develop the aptitude to do this well, which is why we will do this all semester long. By the end, you should be pretty damn good at it.

b. **Critical question**: For each class period you should formulate (at least) one penetrating philosophical question that arises directly out of the text. Try to make your questions *philosophically critical*. One question could have more parts, though it need not. Either way, it must relate directly to the text. To ensure this, you must include a citation of the exact page(s) or line(s) from which your question emerges or at which your question is directed. These questions are important for our in-class discussions, as they will help guide us through the texts.

c. **Exegesis**: This is where you will explain a single very short passage of the text in great detail. These are to be tight exegeses — I am not looking for your opinion or your feelings, or summaries. They must be between 203 and 307 words each. Citations must be included, though they do not count towards this word count. Each reading response must unpack the meaning of one quotation from the text we will be discussing, and the section of the text with which you work should be very focused. I’m serious, if you can write a good exegesis on three words, do that. Also, do not repeat what has already been said in class, as this needs to be an original reading of the text.

3. **Philosophical Ekphrases**:

   a. **Metaphysical music**

      One day I was driving home after a class when an amazing *song* played. It was one of a series of *Consolations* by the great Hungarian pianist Franz Lizst. This made me think about the possibilities for connecting a song to a philosophical text or idea, and Lizst’s *Consolations* seemed to capture something important about the medieval philosopher Boethius’ *Consolation of Philosophy*. Both the song and the music seemed to share something special. Then I thought about whether or not it were possible to find the perfect song for other philosophers, works philosophy, philosophy, or philosophical texts. What, for example, would be the musical interpretation of Plato’s *Republic* or Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*? This then made me think that about the possibility of selecting several other interpretations of philosophical texts, etc. What would be the architectural equivalent of Boethius? Which film or painting does this too? Which novel? Which everything!

      This is a sort of exercise in philosophical *ekphrasis*. Ekphrasis is a technique of art practice in which there is an attempt to translate the *essence or form* of one work of art to an artwork in a different medium. Examples include trying to write a poem based on a painting or even as simply as trying to make a movie out of a book. In each act of ekphrasis there is a translation going on from one medium to another. Since this is a translation, something is lost and something is gained. Think about how if a filmmaker tries to make a film that completely emulates a book, the film ends up being quite bad. But if she realizes that the possibilities for film are different than the possibilities for literature, then she embraces the differences and takes advantages of all the new things that a film can say about the story in the book but that the book cannot say about itself. My thought is that this could happen with philosophy texts and tunes.

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1 When I say ‘philosophically critical’ I mean it in the philosophical sense of trying to view it from many angles at once, of trying to test out the strength and validity of something. To critique a claim or argument philosophically means showing great respect and value to that claim. It is not a personal attack but a charitable and objective (as much as possible) way to understand the assumptions undergirding a claim and the consequences following from it. A critique is sharp but fair, challenging but considerate.
One day this semester we will have a session in which we bring in a song or other work of art that captures an idea in one of the texts we read this semester or the whole text itself. To do this, you will bring in your ekphrastic song and play it (either you or through an artificial player) for the class. You will then argue as to why this song captures this idea, text, etc., in person and in writing. The rest of the class will then evaluate your selection and either support or challenge it as a successful ekphrastic act. You should write a one-page (minimum) paper articulating your argument as to why this song captures this idea, etc. (50 points or 5% of the grade)

b. **Metaphysical object**

This is second kind of philosophical ekphrasis. Later in the semester we will have a session in which each person will bring in a single object that captures an idea in one of the texts we read this semester or the whole text itself. To do this, you will bring in your ekphrastic object and present it for the class. You will then argue as to why this object captures this idea, text, etc., in person and in writing. The rest of the class will then evaluate your selection and either support or challenge it as a successful ekphrastic act. You should write a one-page (minimum) paper articulating your argument as to why this object captures this idea, etc. (50 points or 5% of the grade)

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**Class Schedule**

**Introduction to Class:** *What is ancient philosophy and why is it so concerned with metaphysics?*

- **Aug. 30**  Parmenides
- **Sept. 1**  Heraclitus

**Plato’s *Parmenides***

- **Sept. 6**  126a-132a
- **Sept. 8**  132a-137c
- **Sept. 13**  137c-155e
- **Sept. 15**  155e-160b
- **Sept. 20**  160b-end
Plato’s *Timaeus*
- Sept. 22: 17a-29d
- Sept. 27: 29d-37a
- Sept. 29: 37a-47e
- Oct. 4: 47e-57d
- Oct. 6: 57d-69a
- Oct. 11: 69a-end

Oct. 13: *Metaphysical Music*

Oct. 14-18: No class (Fall break)
Oct. 20: NO CLASS

Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*
- Oct. 25: Book I (Alpha)
- Oct. 27: Book II (little alpha)
- Nov. 1: Book III (Beta)
- Nov. 3: Book IV (Gamma)
- Nov. 8: Book V (Delta)

Nov. 10: No class

- Nov. 15: Book VI (Epsilon)
- Nov. 17: *Metaphysical object*

Nov. 24-27: No class (Thanksgiving)

- Nov. 29: Book VII (Zeta) & Book VIII (Eta)
- Dec. 1: Book IX (Theta) & Book X (Iota)
- Dec. 6: Book XI (Kappa) & Book XII (Lambda)
- Dec. 8: The end of metaphysics

Final: Elon Metaphysics: The Living Rivalry