

PHIL 130: METAPHYSICS
Fall 2023



Olga Spiegel, Untitled, 1965

Instructor: Dr. Kerry McKenzie
Class: Tu Th 11-12.20, WLH 2208
Office hours: Th 1-2pm (tbc), Arts and Humanities Building 0499

Objectives. In this course, we will think about the transformational metaphysical visions experienced by subjects undergoing psychedelic therapy. We will consider which of the accompanying visions ought to be classed as metaphysical hallucinations, and which have any rational or scientific basis. We will think about why, were we to believe in these visions, we might experience this as deeply therapeutic, and about some of the ethical dilemmas that surround any act of recommending that people undergo this therapy given the major personal transformations it induces. This course will therefore be relevant not only to those (like me) that are drawn to metaphysical speculation, but also to those interested in psychedelic experience

and the cultural logic surrounding it. It will also be of relevance to people planning careers in psychiatry or counseling, as psychedelic treatment is already legal in many states and California is likely to join them.

Focus. Our focus will be on the following questions:

1. Are there any reasons to endorse panpsychism – the theory that everything is conscious?
2. Should we believe that we exist ‘not only in the familiar world of space and time, but also in a realm having a timeless, eternal quality’?
3. Is the existence of the self an illusion?
4. Is there a ‘fundamental unity’ to the world?

Assessment. This course is – like psychedelic therapy itself – somewhat experimental. The material we will be reading is often difficult, and in other ways non-ideal. Thus your assessment in this course is rather non-standard. More than anything, I want you to **read** the material, **think** about it, and be prepared to discuss it with the class. This is much more important to me than you being able, in the end, to form a very coherent position on any of these topics. As such, you will be **assessed primarily on your participation in this course**, where ‘participation’ is defined as (i) showing up, (ii) contributing intelligently and reflectively to the discussion board, and (iii) contributing to discussion in class. Your assessment is therefore by its nature subjective, but I will be awarding all demonstrated effort to get to grips with the difficult questions we are looking at, and to help others to do so too. I recommend that you mark up all your reading with annotations, as if I deem your participation to have been low you can argue that at least you were trying to understand the material by reading it closely and with commitment.

Schedule of Assessment:

- In-class midterm on panpsychism on Tues Oct 31st: 20 %.
- Final assignment (online via Turnitin): Wednesday Dec 13th, 2.30pm: 25 %.
- Reading responses (on Canvas), **by 8pm on day before** assigned class: 22.5 %.
- Participation in class: 22.5%.
- Attendance: 10% (1 point per class attended).
- There is no sit-down final, but please keep the time on reserve for consultations with me if required. (You are also welcome to use that time to produce your final assignment.)

Final assignment. The format of your final assignment is open-ended and negotiable, and what you will submit will be determined in consultation with me. Some options are (a) to write a regular, argumentative philosophy essay; (b) to develop some discussion board posts into a lengthier reflection; (c) to take on the role of a psychiatrist or councilor writing a letter of recommendation concerning the choice to undergo psychedelic therapy, focusing on the possibility of metaphysical transformation; (d) to make a poster illustrating some of the (difficult) science surrounding the notion of ‘selfhood’; (e) something else entirely. **Please keep the scheduled exam period (11-2.30pm Weds Dec 13th) in reserve**, as I may be asking you to discuss the content of your final assignment with me.

Prerequisites. There are no prerequisites for this course. This has certain implications – the most important of which is that you all feel free, at all times, to ask clarificatory questions (as I will inadvertently slide into unfamiliar philosophical jargon).

Readings. There is no textbook and all readings will be uploaded onto Canvas. It is **imperative** that you read through the required readings before class, and keep ploughing through even if you do not

understand much of them at first. The hope is that the readings for each segment will become comprehensible as the segment is completed. This holistic structure means you will likely have to go back and read the papers again before completing your assignments.

Ethos. Everything we are going to be looking at is weird and counter-intuitive. The relevant science is in flux; there is no settled view on any of the questions we look at; few particularly appropriate readings exist, and most importantly I don't know what the answers to any of the questions I give you are. Therefore do not be afraid to say something even if you think it is 'stupid', and please do not judge your peers for doing so either. Please consider the class a 'safe space' for saying things that sound bananas.

Academic integrity. All of your work must be your own. **Do not use AI to generate any of your answers, at any stage of production.** (Is this unfair towards those who may have, for whatever reasons, difficulty in producing polished prose? No, because I don't care about the quality of your writing, beyond that it communicates your ideas.) Be aware that an academic integrity violation could seriously harm your long-term prospects ('once a cheat, always a cheat'). For the full policy, and guidelines on how to excel with integrity, see <https://students.ucsd.edu/academics/academic-integrity/policy.html>.

SYLLABUS

- WEEK 0 INTRODUCTION

Thurs Sept 28th Meet and Greet

- ☞ Reading: 'Why Universities Should be More Like Monasteries', Molly Worthen, *New York Times*, May 25th, 2023. s

- WEEK 1 SOME BACKGROUND

Tues Oct 3rd Metaphysical Transformations

- ☞ Reading: 'Psychedelic Therapy Alters Metaphysical Beliefs', Timmerman et al, *Scientific Reports* (2019)

Thurs Oct 5th Introducing Physicalism

- ☞ Reading: 'The Rise of Physicalism', David Papineau, 2009.

- WEEK 2 THE PUZZLE OF PHYSICALISM

Tues Oct 10th Structuralism about Physics

- 'Is consciousness part of the fabric of the universe?', *Scientific American* Sept 25, 2023.

- ☞ Reading: Excerpts of Russell, *Analysis of Matter* (1929) and *Problems of Philosophy* (1910); excerpts from the work of Galileo.

Thurs Oct 12th Problems with Physicalism

- ☞ Reading: 'The knowledge argument against physicalism', *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Torin Alter, up to Section 5.

- WEEK 3 PANPSYCHISM I

Tues Oct 17th The Argument for Panpsychism

- ☞ *Galileo's Error*, Phillip Goff, Chapter 4 (2019)
- ☞ Recommended: 'Panpsychism: Ubiquitous Science' by Peter Sjosted-Hughes

Thurs Oct 19th The Scientific Status of Panpsychism I

☞ Sean Carroll, 'Consciousness and the Laws of Physics', *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 2021.

• WEEK 4 PANPSYCHISM II

Tues Oct 24th Review / Preview

☞ Sarah Lane Ritchie, 'Panpsychism and Spiritual Flourishing: Constructive Engagement with the New Science of Psychedelics', *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 2021.

☞ (Optional) Ursula Goodenough, 'Vertical and Horizontal Transcendence', in *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science*, 2001.

Thurs Oct 26th

☞ No reading.

• WEEK 5 MIDTERM AND INTRODUCING ETERNALISM

Tues Oct 31st

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Thurs Nov 2nd Introducing Relativity

☞ Reading: Alyssa Ney, 'Time' (Chapter 5 of *Metaphysics: An Introduction*) excerpt.

• WEEK 6 THE ARGUMENT FOR ETERNALISM

Tues Nov 7th

☞ Reading: 'Time and Physical Geometry', Putnam (1967)

Thurs Nov 9th

☞ Justin Smith, 'This is a Philosopher on Drugs', *Slate*, May 7th 2023.

☞ Optional: 'Presentism and Relativity: No Conflict', E.J. Lowe (2013)

• WEEK 7 THEORIES OF SELF I

Tues Nov 14th The ambiguities of 'the self'

☞ Sean Gallagher, 'Philosophical conceptions of the self: themes from cognitive science', *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 2000.

Thurs Nov 16th The illusion of Self

☞ Thomas Metzinger, *The Ego Tunnel: The Science of the Mind and the Myth of the Self*, 2009: Chapter 3.

– OR:

☞ Chris Letheby, 'Unbinding the Self', Chapter 7 of *Philosophy of Psychedelics*, 2021.

• WEEK 8 THEORIES OF THE SELF II

Tues 21st Nov The self and time

☞ Craig Callender, 'Time Lost, Time Regained', 2016.

Thurs 23rd Nov Thanksgiving: no class

☞ No reading.

• WEEK 9 THE POLITICS OF SELF-TRANSFORMATION

Tues 28th Nov Spiritualism as selflessness

☞ Chris Letheby, 'Naturalizing Psychedelic Spirituality', *Zygon* 2017.

Thurs 30th Nov Psychedelic therapy or playing with fire?

☞ Timmerman et al, 'Towards psychedelic apprenticeship: Developing a gentle touch for the mediation and validation of psychedelic-induced insights and revelations', *Transcultural Psychiatry* 2021.

• WEEK 10 THE POLITICS OF SELF-TRANSFORMATION II

Tues Dec 5th Capitalism, alienation, and the self

☞ 'Marxism and Buddhism: Not Such Strange Bedfellows', Graham Priest, *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 2018.

Tues Dec 7th Final reflections.