

COURSE PHIL 2480: METAONTOLOGY

INSTRUCTOR J. Dmitri Gallow (✉: jdmitrigallow@pitt.edu)

SEMINAR TIMES Tuesdays, 16:30–19:00
Room 1008B, Cathedral of Learning

OFFICE HOURS Mondays and Wednesdays, 15:00–16:00
Room 1029D, Cathedral of Learning

DESCRIPTION Does my hand exist? Do numbers exist? Does the past exist? Does God exist? Is there a thing, the statue, which is distinct from the clay which composes it? These are ontological questions. Ontological questions are questions about which (kinds of) things exist. Meta-ontological questions are questions about ontological questions. Carnap and his intellectual descendants defend the meta-ontological position that many ontological questions are, in some sense, empty, trivial, or merely verbal. For Carnap, the merely verbal questions were the ‘external’ questions about which language to adopt, contrasted with ‘internal’ questions which are answerable in the terms of the adopted language. There are several neo-Carnapian positions defended nowadays. For instance, quantifier variantists like Hilary Putnam think that we could very well speak a language which is precisely like ordinary English, except that quantified claims take on a slightly different meaning, in that the quantifiers ‘range over’ only mereological simples (things which have no proper parts). Then, sentences like ‘My hand exists’ would be false, since my hand is not a mereological simple. Similarly, we could speak a language very much like English, except that quantifiers ‘range over’ all possible mereological fusions of simples. Then, sentences like ‘My hand exists’ would be true, as would sentences like ‘The fusion of my left ear and the Eiffel tower exists’, and ‘The fusion of all the cats exists’. Though we may make a linguistic choice to speak about the fusion of all cats, there’s no fact of the matter about whether the fusion of all cats is there to be spoken about prior to our linguistic choice.

In this research seminar, we will study these neo-Carnapian anti-realist positions, as well as some realist alternatives. To lay my cards on the table: I’m very unsympathetic to this brand of anti-realism, and my sincere hope is to attract people to this seminar who will argue me out of my dogmatic slumber. One question I will want to keep before our minds throughout the seminar is: how far should an anti-realist position extend? Are debates about whether the past exists trivial or merely verbal? What about debates over God’s existence? In Carnapian terms: what distinguishes the ‘external’ questions of whether there are numbers from the ‘internal’ question of whether there are odd perfect numbers? And on which side do debates about the past/God/material constitution fall?

EVALUATION Final grades will be determined by 3 components:

Paper(s)	60%
Presentation	20%
Participation	20%

PRESENTATION: After the first seminar meeting, you will sign up to present material from one of the readings and help lead a subsequent discussion on the topic.

EVALUATION
(CON'T)

PAPERS: You may either submit one long research paper (about 6,000 words) or three short response papers (about 2,000 words). If you choose to submit three short response papers, these papers should be handed in within one week of the seminar in which we discuss the readings you are responding to. If you choose to submit one long research paper, then you should meet with me to discuss your ideas before 12/3, and your paper is due before the start of the spring semester.

PARTICIPATION: It is important that you come to seminar prepared to actively (and respectfully) participate in the discussion. This means 1) that you should have done all the required readings; 2) that you should contribute to, without dominating, the discussion; and 3) that you should be respectful of your fellow classmates. You should take a look at [Chalmer's guidelines](#) for respectful, constructive, and inclusive philosophical discussion to get a more concrete idea of what I mean by treating your classmates respectfully.

The seminar is intended to be an *active* learning environment. I (normatively) expect students to arrive with questions and concerns, and to be actively engaged throughout the seminar.

SCHEDULE

August 27th: Course Intro

Syllabus

Carnap, *Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology*

* Willoughby, *Stoppism: Retrospects and Prospects* (optional, but recommended)

September 3rd: Internal and External Questions

Warren, *Internal and External Questions Revisited*

Eklund, *Carnap and Ontological Pluralism*

September 10th: Quine on Ontological Disputes

Quine, *Existence and Quantification* or *On What There Is* (pick one to read)

van Inwagen, *Being, Existence, and Ontological Commitment*

Melia, *On what there's not*

* Soames, *Ontology, Analyticity, and Meaning: the Quine-Carnap Dispute* (optional)

September 17th: Mereology

van Inwagen, *The Doctrine of Arbitrary Undetached Parts*

Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds*, pp. 211–213

Sider, *van Inwagen and the Possibility of Gunk*

September 24th: Quantifier Variantism

* Putnam, *The Many Faces of Realism, Lecture 1: Is there still anything to say about realism and truth?* (optional)

Hirsch, *Quantifier Variantism and Realism*

Hirsch, *Ontology and Alternative Languages*

October 1st: Quantifier Variantism, day 2

Hawthorne, *Superficialism in Ontology*

Eklund, *The Picture of Reality as an Amorphous Lump*

* Sider, *Hirsch's Attack on Ontologese* (optional)

SCHEDULE
(CON'T)

October 8th: Verbal Disputes

Lewis, *Noneism or Allism?*

Manley, *Introduction: A Guided Tour of Metametaphysics*, §3

Chalmers, *Verbal Disputes*

October 15th: Metasemantics

Burgess and Sherman, *Introduction: A Plea for the Metaphysics of Meaning*

Lewis, *Languages and Language*

Lewis, *Radical Interpretationism*

Putnam, *A problem about reference*, chapter 2 of Reason, Truth, and History

October 22nd: Metasemantics, day 2

Lewis, *Putnam's Paradox*

Lewis, *New Work for a Theory of Universals* (selections)

Schwartz, *Against Magnetism*

October 29th: Fictionalism

Kalderon, *Introduction* (to Fictionalism in Metaphysics)

Yablo, *The Myth of the Seven*

Dorr, *What we Disagree about when we Disagree about Ontology*

November 5th: Ground

Schaffer, *On What Grounds What*

Fine, *The Question of Realism*

November 12th: Structure

Sider, Writing the Book of the World, ch. 1, ch. 4 (§§4.1–4.4), ch. 5, and ch. 6 (§§6.1 and 6.3)

November 19th: Structure, day 2

Sider, Writing the Book of the World, ch. 9 and ch. 11

November 26th: no class, Thanksgiving break

December 3rd: Easy Ontology

* Thomasson, *Answerable and Unanswerable Questions* (optional)

Thomasson, Ontology Made Easy, chapter 2, §§3.1 and 3.4

ACADEMIC
INTEGRITY

Students in this course will be expected to comply with the University of Pittsburgh's Policy on Academic Integrity.

DISABILITY
SERVICES

If you have a disability for which you are or may be requesting an accommodation, be sure to contact me within the first two weeks of the semester, as well as Disability Resources and Services (DRS), 140 William Pitt Union, (412) 648-7890, drsrecep@pitt.edu, (412) 228-5347 for P3 ASL users. DRS will verify your disability and determine reasonable accommodations for this course.

LAPTOP
POLICY

As a general rule, laptops and smart phones are not permitted during class. If you have some good reason for requiring a laptop or a cell phone during class, come speak to me about it in office hours.

RECORDING
POLICY

To ensure the free and open discussion of ideas, students may not record classroom lectures, discussion and/or activities without the advance written permission of the instructor, and any such recording properly approved in advance can be used solely for the student's own private use.

SCHEDULE
REVISION

As the course progresses, the course schedule may be revised. If it is, I will notify all enrolled students via email and post an updated syllabus to Courseweb.