

Revisionary Ontology

Philosophy 535: Topics in Metaphysics

Friday 12:00 - 2:30pm

Room 1164 AH (Seminar Room)

Maegan Fairchild

Room 2220

Office Hours TBA

"The revisionary literature often gives the impression that revisionists are people who have heard rumors about the existence of tables at family affairs, and apart from a natural reluctance to offend their non-philosophical relatives, they themselves have no initial intuitive feelings one way or another about whether tables might exist."

Against Revisionary Ontology, Eli Hirsch

Metaphysicians often favor extraordinary answers to questions that otherwise seem pretty ordinary: for example, *radical permissivists* insist that there are far more material objects than we usually think there are, while *radical eliminativists* deny that many (most, or all) familiar material objects exist. *Necessitists* say that not only does my possible twin brother exist, but that he *would* have existed no matter how the world turned out. *Qualitativists* deny that there are any individuals at all, while *monists* say that there *is* an individual — but *only* one! *Eliminativists* about race and gender hold that there *aren't* any races or genders. *Wave function realists* argue that fundamental physical space is dramatically unlike the three dimensional world of concrete objects we appear to occupy. And this is — remarkably! — only a very small sampling.

In this seminar, we'll survey a selection of contemporary debates about ontology by examining the weird, radical, or revisionary theories they sometimes give rise to. Along the way, we'll be guided by broader questions: what can we learn from thinking about weird and revisionary theories? What is the status of "common sense" in metaphysical theory choice? Is that special to metaphysics, or more general? (How do we think about revisionary theories in other fields?) What *should* guide theory choice in metaphysics? Might that differ when it comes to thinking about the material, the modal, the fundamental, and the social?

Although we will explore these topics in depth, this is intended to be an accessible survey course, and won't presuppose any background in metaphysics.

Objectives.

This course has three aims:

- (i) to provide students with a foundation for / fluency in contemporary metaphysics,
- (ii) to equip students to pursue independent research on the topics we cover, and to identify connections with other areas of research interest, and
- (iii) to examine, develop, and practice professional skills relevant for further study in academic philosophy.

Course assignments will therefore include not only the opportunity to complete a traditional full-length research paper, but also the option to engage with the course material in a wide variety of other formats.

I'll also be sharing with you answers to the following questions from the authors of many of the papers we're reading:

What was the most enjoyable part of working on this paper, or this project? What was the trickiest?

I really encourage you to read these answers with an eye both to the content-level questions (Why and how should we think about weird views? What challenges do we face when defending them?) as well as the professional and personal ones (What makes philosophers excited about the work they do? What snags do they overcome in the process? How do they think about their work in retrospect?).

Requirements.

Everybody.

- For each session I'd like you to submit two '**discussion questions**': one critical engagement question, one clarificatory question. These are due to me by email each week (beginning January 25th) by 3pm Thursday. You may skip one set for any reason.
- All students must submit a **Paper Proposal** by the end of the term. (Even if you aren't writing a term paper; see below.)

Custom Tracks.

Beyond that, students can complete this course either by completing (A) one short assignment and a full length term paper, (B) two short assignments and a short (eg. conference-length) paper, or (C) five short assignments.

	Track A	Track B	Track C	Due
	Paper Proposal (15%)	Paper Proposal (15%)	Paper Proposal (15%)	<i>by Apr 19 (*)</i>
			Short Assignment (15%)	<i>by Feb 22</i>
	Short Assignment (15%)	Short Assignment (15%)	Short Assignment (15%)	<i>by Mar 1</i>
			Short Assignment (15%)	<i>by Mar 29</i>
		Short Assignment (15%)	Short Assignment (15%)	<i>by Apr 5</i>
	Term Paper (60%)	Short Paper (45%)	Short Assignment (15%)	<i>by May 20 (*)</i>
	Discussion (10%)	Discussion (10%)	Discussion (10%)	Weekly

Guidelines for meeting these requirements, details about the paper proposals, and options for mini-assignments can be found on Canvas (under “Phil 535 Short Assignment Options”). I’ll introduce some of the mini-assignments and host an open discussion of related skills in a combined session with RCRS.

In the interest of making sure that everyone is getting what they’d hoped from the seminar, I’m requesting that **all students meet with me at least twice**: once before January 25th and again before March 1st.

Accommodations and Support.

Students who require academic accommodations can work with the office for [Services for Students with Disabilities](#) to arrange for (among other things) assistive technology, academic coaching, and other accommodations. **Please notice that many students don’t receive adequate diagnoses or discover that they have access to academic accommodations until late in their academic careers, and identifying appropriate accommodations in graduate school can be very difficult.** If you find yourself struggling in your courses, check out the [documentation and registration pages](#) at SSD to see if you might qualify. (Helpful pages include those on [registering temporary disabilities](#), [Learning Disability Criteria](#), [ADHD Criteria](#), and some discussion of [Mental Health Conditions](#) covered through SSD.)

Whether or not you are able to secure accommodations through SSD, I am happy to work with you to find a way to ensure you can get the most out of the course, and complete all of the required coursework during the term. The three-track system is designed to offer some flexibility here, but if you’d like to talk about which track best suits your needs (on the understanding that those might change over the course of the term), let me know.

I’ve also compiled an annotated list of additional university resources on my [website](#), including mental health resources, crisis response and sexual assault contacts, and campus affordability resources.

Schedule of Readings

This schedule is subject to change; check email and/or Canvas site for updates. All non-optional readings are required. The optional readings are here to provide some subset of {context, background, counterpoints, expansion, interesting asides} for each week's readings. I'll try to give you some advance guidance about what is going on in each, so you can make informed choices.

January 11	Organizational & Overview Meeting
January 18	Engaging Others (RCRS Combined Session)
January 25	<p>Material Ontology I: What composite material objects are there? Van Cleve (2008), <i>The Moon and Sixpence</i> Markosian (2008), <i>Restricted Composition</i> Sider (2013), <i>Against Parthood</i> Optional: Markosian (1998), <i>Brutal Composition</i></p>
February 1	<i>No Class (away)</i>
February 8	<p>Material Ontology II: What coincident material objects are there? Bennett (2004), <i>Spatiotemporal Coincidence and the Grounding Problem</i> Sosa (1987), excerpts from <i>Subjects Among Other Things</i> Hawthorne (2006), excerpts from <i>Metaphysical Essays</i> Optional: Yablo (1987), <i>Identity, Essence, and Indiscernibility</i> Optional: Fairchild (forthcoming), <i>The Barest Flutter of the Smallest Leaf</i></p>
February 15	<p>Counterpoints I: Arbitrariness and Moderate Metaphysics Korman (2015), <i>Objects</i>, Ch 8: <i>Arbitrariness</i> Fairchild and Hawthorne (2018), <i>Against Conservatism in Metaphysics</i> Optional: Fairchild (ms), <i>Arbitrariness and the Long Road to Permissivism</i></p>
February 22	<p>Counterpoints II: Common Sense, Evidence, and Counterexamples Kelly (2008), <i>Common Sense as Evidence: Against Revisionary Ontology and Skepticism</i> Weatherson (2003), <i>What Good Are Counterexamples?</i> Optional: Korman and Carmichael (2017), <i>What do the folk think about composition, and does it matter?</i> Optional: Rose (forthcoming), <i>Cognitive Science for the Revisionary Metaphysician</i></p>
March 1	<p>Modal Ontology I: Necessitism and Modal Logic Williamson (2013), <i>Modal Logic as Metaphysics</i> Ch 1, Ch 2 (part) Optional: Chapter 6, Sections 6.1, 6.2</p>
March 8	<i>No Class (Spring Break)</i>
March 15	<p>Modal Ontology II: Simplicity, Generality, and Intuitions Revisited Sullivan (2014), <i>Modal Logic as Methodology</i></p>

	<p>Sider (2016), On Williamson and Simplicity in Modal Logic Optional: <i>TBA</i></p>
March 22	<p>Fundamental Ontology I: Are there any individuals? (ft. Parsimony and Redundancy) Paul (2016), A One Category Ontology Dasgupta (2009), Individuals: An Essay in Revisionary Metaphysics Optional: <i>TBA</i></p>
March 29	<p>Fundamental Ontology II: Are there many individuals? (ft. Ockham’s Razor/Laser) Schaffer (2010), Monism: The Priority of the Whole Optional: Schaffer (2015), What Not To Multiply Without Necessity Optional: Baron and Tallant (2018), Do Not Revise Ockham’s Razor Without Necessity</p>
April 5	<p>Fundamental Physical Ontology and the “Minimal Divergence Norm” Emery (2017), Against Radical Quantum Ontologies Optional: Emery (ms), Mooreanism in Metaphysics from Mooreanism in Physics Optional: Ney (2015), Fundamental physical ontologies and the constraint of empirical coherence: a defense of wave function realism</p>
April 12	<p>Social Ontology I: Gender, Realism, and Ontological Oppression Barnes (2017), Realism and Social Structure Dembroff (forthcoming), Real Talk on the Metaphysics of Gender Optional: Hawley (2018), Social Science as a Guide to Social Metaphysics?</p>
April 19	<p>Social Ontology II: Political Constructivism and Cultural Constructivism Haslanger (2000), Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them To Be? Jeffers (2013), The Cultural Theory of Race Background: Jeffers (2017), Du Bois, Appiah, and Outlaw on Racial Identity Additional Discussion: PEA Soup Ethics Discussion of Jeffers Optional: Mills (2000), “But What Are You Really?”</p> <p>Wrap-Up / Proposals Due</p>