

Introduction to Metaphysics

Summer 2011 (7/11 – 8/17)

Instructor : Kurt L. Sylvan

Meets : Monday/Wednesday

from 6:00 PM to 9:40 PM

in Frelinghuysen Hall, Room A4

Course Description

Metaphysics is a branch of philosophy that aspires to characterize the basic ingredients of reality at a very high level of generality. Many questions in metaphysics are about *whether* and *how* we can explain a familiar kind of phenomenon that our commonsense thinking accepts in *more fundamental* and often *more naturalistically acceptable* terms. Examples of apparently existing commonsense phenomena we'll discuss which raise difficult metaphysical puzzles are:

- (i) free will;
- (ii) persons and their psychological states;
- (iii) the (seeming) fact that objects can gain and lose properties over time without ceasing to exist;
- (iv) the (seeming) fact that the world has a past, present and future, and the other (seeming) fact that we only have direct access to the present;
- (v) the (seeming) fact that the objects we observe share *genuine respects of similarity*;
- (vi) the (seeming) fact that there are truths about such *abstract entities as numbers*;
- (vii) the (seeming) fact that causal relations glue together some events in time;

and

- (viii) the (seeming) fact that there are laws of nature that explain the patterns of events we observe in the world.

Typically, metaphysical questions about apparent phenomena like (i-viii) get answered by three different parties. *Reductionists* claim that we can indeed reduce the apparent commonsense phenomenon to something more fundamental. *Nonreductionists* claim that we cannot reduce the phenomenon but can acceptably view it as part of basic reality. *Eliminativists* claim that we cannot reduce the phenomenon, cannot acceptably view it as part of basic reality, and therefore must simply forget about believing in it. All of the debates on which we'll focus in this class will fall into this pattern. We will be examining reductionist, nonreductionist, and eliminativist views about each of the apparent phenomena (i-viii).

Readings

Most of our readings on the metaphysical puzzles surrounding (i-viii) will come from [Contemporary Debates in Metaphysics](#) (abbreviated "[CDM](#)" below), a recent collection edited by John Hawthorne, Ted Sider and Dean Zimmerman. This book has been ordered for the class. Some other readings will be posted on a Sakai site that I'll create for the class. A few remaining readings will be taken from the excellent and free online [Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#). Here is the order in which we will cover the topics, and what we will probably read (broken down into *required* readings and *optional but (very) useful* readings):

Optional preliminary reading for Monday July 11: Ted Sider's Introduction in CDM.

I. *Freedom and Determinism*

Required (to be discussed on Wednesday July 13 and Monday July 18)

Kane, Robert. "Incompatibilism" in CDM

Frankfurt, Harry. "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person" on Sakai

McKenna, Michael. "Compatibilism" on <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/compatibilism/>

Optional but Useful:

Frankfurt, Harry. "Alternative Possibilities and Moral Responsibility" on Sakai

_____. "The Importance of What We Care About" on Sakai

Vihvelin, Kadri. "Compatibilism, Incompatibilism and Impossibilism" in CDM

II. *Persons and their Identity Conditions*

Required (to be discussed on Monday July 18 and Wednesday July 20)

Thomson, Judy. "People and their Bodies" in CDM

Parfit, Derek. "Persons, Bodies, and Human Beings" in CDM

Optional but Useful:

McMahan, Jeff. Passages on his Embodied Mind View from the Ethics of Killing on Sakai

Olson, Erik. "Personal Identity" on <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/identity-personal/>

Parfit, Derek. "We Are Not Human Beings" on Sakai

III. *Persistence and Change*

Required (to be discussed Monday July 25 and Wednesday July 27)

Sider, Ted. "Temporal Parts" in CDM

Hawthorne, John. "Three-Dimensionalism vs. Four-Dimensionalism" in CDM

Optional but Useful:

Gallois, Andre. "Identity over Time" on <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/identity-time/>

IV. *Time*

Required (to be discussed Monday August 1 and Wednesday August 3)

Zimmerman, Dean. "The Privileged Present: Defending the 'A-Theory' of Time" in CDM

Smart, J. J. C. "The Tenseless Theory of Time" in CDM

Optional but Useful:

Markosian, Ned. "Time" on <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/time/>

V. *Abstract Objects*

Required: (to be discussed Monday August 8)

Swayer, Chris. "Abstract Entities" in CDM

Dorr, Cian. "There Are No Abstract Objects" in CDM

Optional but Useful:

Rosen, Gideon. "Abstract Objects" on <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/abstract-objects/>

VI. *Properties: Nominalism vs. Realism about Universals*

Required: (to be discussed Wednesday August 10 and Monday August 15)

Armstrong, David. "Properties I, II" in A World of States of Affairs on Sakai

Lewis, David. "New Work for a Theory of Universals" on Sakai

Shoemaker, Sydney. "Causality and Properties" on Sakai

Optional but Useful:

Swyer, Chris. "Properties" on <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/properties/>

Rodriguez-Pereyra, Gonzalo. "Nominalism in Metaphysics" on

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/nominalism-metaphysics/>

VII. *Causation and Laws*

Required: (to be discussed Monday August 15 and Wednesday August 18)

Carroll, John. "Nailed to Hume's Cross?" in CDM

Schaffer, Jonathan. "Causation and Laws of Nature: Reductionism" in CDM

Optional but Useful:

Armstrong, David. Selections from What is a Law of Nature? on Sakai

Carroll, John. "Laws of Nature" on <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/laws-of-nature/>

Schaffer, Jonathan. "The Metaphysics of Causation" on

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/causation-metaphysics/>

Assignments, Grading and Policies

Your grade will be based on:

A. *Discussion Board Comments/Questions.* To facilitate discussion, I'd like to have everybody to post either (I) some questions about the reading, or (II) some critical comments or objections to the arguments in the reading on the Discussion Board on Sakai on several occasions. These can be anywhere from a few sentences to several pages: what matters is that they help you grasp the material or help me to see what people are finding most baffling or problematic, and prime us for discussion. You should post these at latest at 9:00 on the night before the reading. Each of you should do this for 5 meetings. The first time I'd expect this would be for the readings for Monday July 18 (you'd post on Sunday night), and you are welcome to comment on the readings for the previous week on this particular occasion. You can pick which meetings to do these for, though I do want there to be discussion for every topic. So I might make a sign-up sheet. This is for 25% of the grade.

B. *Exam.* There will be a take-home midterm exam. I'll hand out questions on July 27, and you will have a week to write out answers to them, and hand them into me in printed form in class on August 3. This is for 30% of the grade.

C. *Attendance and Participation.* You will definitely have to attend the class regularly to do well and to avoid getting lost. I will allow only three unexcused absences, and you will be penalized for every subsequent unexcused absence. You are also encouraged to participate by talking as much as possible. This will be for 15% of the grade.

D. *Final Paper*. You should hand in a paper of 6-10 pages on August 17 *via* the Sakai Drop Box. I'll post some paper topics on July 20. You can also design your own topic, though you'd have to pass it by me first. This will be 30% of the grade.

Of course, don't plagiarize on your papers. This is penalized by the University, and it isn't good for your own intellectual flourishing, which you should certainly value!

Contact Information and Office Hours

To contact me, please send email to ksylvan@philosophy.rutgers.edu. I will be holding office hours in 3 Seminary Place, Room 207. They will be held on Mondays and Wednesdays from 3:00 to 5:00.