

PHL 406: Seminar in Modal Metaphysics

Fall 2017

Instructor: Adam Murray
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Meetings: Tuesdays 2–5 p.m., UC 51.

1 Course Description

Welcome to the seminar.

Our central topics this term are **existence and modality**. Specifically, we will consider the question of whether existence is a *necessary*, or *contingent*, matter, and how these contrasting theoretical options in modal ontology are best understood. These questions lie at the core of a contemporary and ongoing debate in modal metaphysics. The *ontic contingentist* maintains that there might have been more, or less, than there actually is; the *ontic necessitist*, by contrast, denies these seemingly obvious claims about possible existence and possible non-existence. For example, according to the necessitist, **you** are a necessary being. Although that thesis is surprising, it is maintained by the necessitist for reasons having to do with deep and fundamental issues in modal logic and modal semantics, as we will see.

The overall aim of the seminar is for you to gain an understanding of the broad contours of the contingentist-necessitist dispute, together with cognate issues arising in the metaphysics, semantics, and logic of modality. The seminar will be challenging; you should come to each meeting prepared to discuss all assigned materials.

2 Course Readings

There are no required texts for the course. Readings will be posted in advance to the course Blackboard page. Ensure early in the term that you are able to regularly access this site and the course materials therein.

3 Course Evaluation

Your grade in the course will be based upon the following weighted criteria:

- Attendance and participation (15%).
- 5 short reading responses (10%).
- An in-class presentation (20%).

- A midterm paper on an assigned topic (20%).
- A final term paper on a topic of your choosing (35%).

3.1 Detailed Breakdown of Evaluation

Here is a more detailed breakdown of the work you will be required to complete as a student in this course:

1. Attendance and Participation.

- Your attendance at all seminar meetings is a course requirement, so please plan on attending regularly.
- You are also expected as a student in the seminar to contribute to class discussions, and to come to our weekly meetings having read all of the relevant material.

2. Reading Responses.

- Over the course of the term, you will prepare and submit (by email) 5 short reading responses on an article or book chapter from the syllabus.
- These are intended to be very short, and should involve not only a brief synopsis of the article in question, but also some constructive engagement with the topic (i.e., the raising of a question or objection). Each short reading response should be in the neighborhood of 300 words (certainly no more than 500).
- We will discuss further particulars at our first meeting of the term.

3. Seminar Presentation.

- At some point in the term, you will give a presentation on one or more articles or book chapters being studied for the course. The presentation will count towards 20% of your final grade.
- In general, we will set aside approximately 30–40 minutes for each presentation. You should plan to present for 15 minutes or so, and to lead the seminar in discussion for the remainder of the period.
- Your presentation should be both *expository*—it should clearly explain the central theses being defended in the article (chapter) you have selected—and also *exploratory*: you should aim to raise questions or critical points of your own concerning the material you have summarized.

4. Midterm Paper.

- The midterm essay assignment will require you to identify, extract, and represent an argument developed by a given philosopher in one of the assigned course readings, and to raise one or two critical points of your own in connection with that author's thesis.
- This will be a relatively short piece of writing: expect to compose something in the neighborhood of 6–700 words (certainly no more than 900).
- Your grade on the mid-term paper will count towards **20%** of your grade in the course.
- A selection of topics will be made available to you by the end of October, together with more detailed instructions.

5. Final Research Paper.

- The aim of the final term paper is to give you an opportunity to explore a theme from the course in greater depth. You must consult with me in advance on your topic. Expect to write a paper in the neighborhood of 1500–2000 words.
- The term paper must be submitted to me electronically during the December exam period. This means that **December 20th is a hard deadline for paper submission.**

4 Schedule of Topics and Readings

Here is a detailed schedule of the topics and readings we will be discussing over the course of the term. Unless otherwise noted, all readings are required reading.

Sept. 12: **Introduction.**

The Modal Problem of Non-being.

Overview of the seminar's structure; scheduling of presentations and other logistics for the term.

Sept. 19: **Williamson's Framework.**

Reading: Williamson, 'Necessary Existents'; 'The Necessary Framework of Objects'.

Recommended: Williamson, *Modal Logic as Metaphysics* (Chapter 1).

Sept. 26: **Modality and Ontology.**

Reading: Fine, 'Necessity and Nonexistence'; Plantinga, 'Actualism and Possible Worlds'; Lewis, 'Possible Worlds'.

Recommended: Menzel, [Actualism](#); McMichael, 'A Problem for Actualism about Possible Worlds'.

Oct. 3: **Representing Existence Across Possible Worlds.**

Reading: Lewis, 'Counterpart Theory and Quantified Modal Logic'; Plantinga, 'Transworld Identity or Worldbound Individuals?'; Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (selections).

Recommended: Mackie, [Transworld Identity](#).

Oct. 10: **Technical Foundations.**

Reading: Kripke, 'Semantical Considerations on Modal Logic'; Williamson, 'Bare Possibilia'.

Recommended: Ballarín, [The Modern Origins of Modal Logic](#); Copeland, 'The Genesis of Possible Worlds Semantics'.

Oct. 17: **The Being Constraint.**

Reading: Plantinga, 'On Existentialism'; Salmon, 'Existence'.

Recommended: Bergmann, 'A New Argument from Actualism to Serious Actualism'; Hudson, 'On a New Argument from Actualism to Serious Actualism'; Bacon, 'The Logic of Empty Names'.

Oct. 24: **Propositional Object-Dependence.**

Reading: Plantinga, 'On Existentialism', 'The Boethian Compromise'; Fine, 'Plantinga on the Reduction of Possibilist Discourse'.

Recommended: Spencer, 'Contingent Existents'.

Nov. 1: **Higher-order Contingency and Ontology.**

Reading: Stalnaker, 'Merely Possible Propositions'; Stalnaker, 'Models and Reality'.

Recommended: Hoffman, 'Response to Stalnaker'.

No meeting Nov. 7: Fall "Reading Break".

Nov. 14: **Inner and Outer Truth.**

Reading: Adams, 'Actualism and Thisness'; Stalnaker, *Mere Possibilities* (selections).

Recommended: Einheuser, 'Inner and Outer Truth'.

Nov. 21: **Alternative Foundations.**

Reading: Kaplan, 'The Logic of Demonstratives'; 'Afterthoughts'; Davies and Humberstone, 'Two Notions of Necessity'.

Recommended: Chalmers, 'The Foundations of Two-Dimensional Semantics'.

Nov. 28: **Ontology Relative to a Context.**

Reading: Murray and Wilson, 'Relativized Metaphysical Modality'; Murray, 'Contingency in the Necessary Framework of Objects'.

Recommended: Hellie, Murray, and Wilson, 'Entry on Relativized Metaphysical Modality'.

Dec. 5: **TBD.**

Reading:

Recommended:

5 Additional Course Information

1. Course Contact.

- In addition to our regular meetings, I will hold a set of weekly office hours on Tuesdays from 5:15–6:15 p.m., in JHB 503.
- Please feel free to attend these office hours should you need to speak with me on matters pertaining to the course, or to ask any questions. Outside of class and office hours, the absolute best way to reach me is by email.

- Please note that email is an inappropriate format for asking substantive philosophical questions about the course material. Those sorts of questions are encouraged, but you should bring them to our seminar in order that we may discuss the issues properly.

2. **Style and Formatting.**

- Your submitted work should conform to a standard formatting and citation style, such as MLA, APA, or Chicago.
- **Please note:** Any written work submitted to me electronically must be in .pdf format. .doc, .docx, etc., are not cross-platform stable formats and I will have difficulty reading any file you send me with such an extension.

3. **Late Work.** Your assigned work for this course must be submitted on time. Late penalties on assigned work are set at 1/3 of a letter grade per day, to a maximum of five days (this includes weekends/holidays), unless accompanied by a documented medical explanation or due to a family emergency. Any work outstanding beyond this point will receive a grade of 0.

4. **Academic Honesty.**

- As you are undoubtedly aware, using someone else’s ideas without explicit acknowledgement is stealing, and constitutes plagiarism. It is your responsibility to understand the nature of plagiarism, and what to do to avoid it in your writing.
- For more information on academic infractions, and how to avoid them, see [here](#).
- Note that the common penalty in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences for plagiarism in a written assignment, test, or examination is **F** on the piece of work. For the most serious acts of plagiarism, such as the purchase of an assignment or cheating on a test or examination, the penalty can also include suspension for a period of up to five years from registration in courses taught in a particular department or from all courses taught in this Faculty.

5. **Disability accommodation.** Should you require any accommodations in this course due to a disability, please do not hesitate to communicate this fact to me either in person or in writing.

6 **Important Dates**

Classes begin	Sept. 7.
Fall Reading Break (no classes)	Nov. 6–10.
Last day to withdraw without academic penalty	Nov. 6.
Final Class	Dec. 5.
Classes End	Dec. 7.
Final term paper due	Dec. 20.