Metaphysics I: The Nature of Being

J. Chandler BA Cantab, MA, PhD

Overview:

As the Mind/Body/Spirit sections of our bookshops testify, the term ‘metaphysics’ has, in recent popular culture, come to be associated with various mystical or occultist schools of thought such as the New Age and New Thought movements. There is now a common conception of metaphysics as the study of a number of parapsychological phenomena, ranging from psychokinesis and telepathy to faith healing, astrology and clairvoyance.

This, however, is not the ‘metaphysics’ that is the topic of this course. Metaphysics, in the academic sense, is a branch of philosophy that investigates the nature of the most fundamental and abstract features of reality. Metaphysicians are typically concerned with issues such as such as the nature of:

- everyday objects,
- properties,
- numbers and sets,
- necessity and possibility,
- time and space,
- laws of nature,
- identity,
- change,
- causation.

These are topics of great interest in their own right. However, it is also worth noting that these are concepts that pervade just about every single area of philosophy, be it philosophy of mind, philosophy of science, ethics or even aesthetics.

This course will present a selection of some of the main areas of metaphysical inquiry, with an eye to introducing the students to those debates that are most pertinent to other philosophical subdisciplines. It will appeal both to those who are puzzled by various fundamental philosophical issues and to those who want an essential foundation for further study in more ‘applied’ sectors of philosophy.
**Entrance requirements:**

There are no specific requirements. Students taking this module should however be capable of writing to a good standard of academic English. Guidance will be provided with respect to various key study skills such as critical reasoning and essay-writing. The course can also be taken as part of the Certificate in Humanities.

**Aims:**

The module aims to:

- provide students with a general understanding and appreciation of some key philosophical issues discussed in contemporary metaphysics,
- provide a general theoretical background for some of the particular issues discussed in various other courses (e.g. Metaphysics III: Philosophy of Mind).
- incite and teach students to read critically and rigorously,
- assist students in becoming confident and articulate communicators.

**Learning outcomes:**

By the end of the module students should have:

- gained a deeper insight into the nature of the world,
- come to grips with the kinds of methods involved in philosophical enquiry,
- developed a number of key transferable analytical and critical skills.

**Teaching methods:**

The module will consist in a series of lectures followed by class discussions. Students should allow time for private reading and study.

**Method of assessment:**

The course work will consist of two essays of 2,000-4,000 words each. Students should have attended at least 50% of the meetings in order to qualify for assessment.
Coursework Titles for the Session 2005-2006

To be announced

Submission Dates for Coursework

• Essay 1: lecture of week 7 (15th of November).
• Essay 2: lecture of week 12 (13th of December).

Schedule and Reading:

Compulsory reading is marked with two stars (**). Optional reading is marked by one (*). Reading available for download on WebCT is marked with a diamond (◊).

Week 1: Admin, Methodology & overview

• J. Lau 'Miniguide to Critical Thinking' ** ◊
• J. Pryor 'Guidelines on Writing a Philosophy Paper' ** ◊
• J. Pryor 'Guidelines on Reading Philosophy' ** ◊

Week 2: Properties I - Realism


**Week 3: Properties II – Nominalism & Reductive Realism**


**Week 4: Objects**


**Week 5: Facts and Events.**


- **Chisholm, R.** (1976) *Person and Object*. La Salle IL: Open Court. Ch 4 [for the Chisholmian view of events] *


- **Schneider, S.** (2006) ‘Events’, in *The Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*. Available at http://www.iep.utm.edu/e/events.htm [okay open-access overview, but I think Bennett is far better] * ◊


**Week 6: Modality: Necessity and Possibility.**


• Stalnaker, R. (1976) ‘Possible Worlds’, Nous 10(1): 65–75 [a clear overview of the work on possible worlds with a presentation of Stalnaker’s own views] ◊


**Week 7: Reduction and Supervenience.**


- Fodor, J.A. (1974) 'Special Sciences - or the Disunity of Science as a Working Hypothesis', *Synthèse* 28: 97-115. [for the 'multiple realisability' argument against the reduction of special science properties] *

- Fodor, J. (1997) 'Special Sciences: Still Autonomous after all These Years'. *Philosophical Perspectives* 11:149-163. [replies to Kim (1992)] *


- Van Gulick, R. 2001). 'Reduction, Emergence and Other Recent Options on the Mind/Body Problem: A Philosophic Overview’, *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 8(9-10):1-34. [another general survey article, with emphasis on the Philosophy of Mind] *

**Week 8: Counterfactual Conditionals.**


Chs 10-19 cover the Lewis-Stalnaker accounts, Ch 20 covers Goodman-style accounts and Ch 21 Compares the two


- Lowe, E. J. (2002) *A Survey of Metaphysics*. Oxford: OUP. Ch 8 'Counterfactual conditionals' [a slightly more advanced overview than the set reading; doesn't cover Goodman-style accounts] *◇


---

**Week 9: Laws of Nature.**


** Week 10 & 11: Causation 1 & 2. **


** Week 12: Dispositions. **


• Bird, A. (1998), 'Dispositions and Antidotes', The Philosophical Quarterly 48: 227–234. [presents a counterexample to the conditional analysis] *


