Ontology and Metaontology

Tentative Syllabus

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A. Statement of Purpose and Brief Overview

This will be a philosophy course on the topic of ontology and metaontology. Ontology is a branch of philosophy (in particular, of metaphysics) concerned with questions of existence. Important ontological questions include the following: Are there any such things as abstract objects (i.e., non-physical, non-mental, non-spatiotemporal objects)? Are there any such things as past and future objects, or are all objects presently existing objects? Are there any such things as 4-dimensional objects, i.e., objects with temporal as well as spatial extension? Are there any such things as 3-dimensional coincident objects? i.e., are there any pairs of 3-dimensional objects that are located in the exact same place and composed of the exact same parts (or made of the exact same physical stuff)? Are there any such things as composite objects, i.e., objects with proper parts? Are there any such things as merely possible objects, or are all objects actually existing objects? Are there any such things as Gods or non-physical souls?

Ontology is currently booming in philosophy. After going through a period of neglect during the middle of the 20th Century (largely because of the anti-metaphysical attacks of the logical positivists), ontology is currently going through a period of extreme resurgence. It would not be an exaggeration to say that we are currently in the Golden Age (or at least a golden age) of ontology.

There has also been a lot of recent interest in metaontology. Metaontology is a branch of philosophy that raises questions about ontological questions. For example, if OQ is some specific ontological question--e.g., the question of whether there are any such things as abstract objects, or whatever--then metaontological questions about OQ will include the following: Is OQ trivial or substantive? Is OQ a genuinely factual question with a uniquely correct answer? Could humans ever know the answer to OQ? --i.e., could they know whether objects of the given kind exist? --and if so, how? What is the best semantic theory of ordinary and/or philosophical discourse about objects of the kind that OQ asks about?

There is a lot of cutting-edge research going on today in both ontology and metaontology, and our course will introduce students to these areas of philosophy and delve deeply into numerous questions and issues surrounding these areas. There will be six faculty members, and each faculty member will give two lectures. Thus, students will study and be exposed to a large number of different issues and questions in ontology and metaontology.
The six faculty members for the course are all actively engaged in research in ontology and metaontology, and they all have international reputations. Thus, the course will be extremely useful for any student interested in pursuing studies in the now-flourishing fields of ontology and metaontology.

B. Course Schedule and Associated Bibliography

The course will offer 6.5 teaching days, from Friday to the Friday of the following week. It will mainly consist of 12 different lectures. Each faculty member will give one 1.5-hour lecture and one 2-hour lecture. Descriptions of the 12 sessions, and associated bibliographies, are as follows:

1. Mark Balaguer

   This Module will be about the philosophy of time and, in particular, the problem of temporal ontology.

   a. Anti-metaphysicalism about temporal ontology: In this session, I argue for a certain kind of anti-metaphysicalism about the temporal ontology debate, i.e., the debate between presentists and eternalists over the existence of past and future objects. I will define three different kinds of anti-metaphysicalism are defined--namely, non-factualism, physical-empiricism, and trivialism. I will argue that trivialism is false, and that that either non-factualism or physical-empiricism is true. I will also give some initial reasons for favoring non-factualism. (A corollary of the argument is that necessitarianism about the temporal ontology debate is false.)

   Optional Reading: Mark Balaguer, “Anti-Metaphysicalism, Necessity, and Temporal Ontology.”

   b. Special Relativity and Presentism: In this session, I will lay out the argument for the claim that presentism (the view that all that exists are present objects, i.e., that there are no past or future objects) is incompatible with the special theory of relativity. I will explain why this argument is mistaken by formulating a novel version of presentism that (a) preserves the core “metaphysical stance” of classical presentism, and (b) is fully compatible with special relativity.

   Optional Reading: Mark Balaguer, “How to Make Presentism Consistent with Special Relativity.”

2. Ferenc Huoranszki

   a. Contingency: I shall distinguish two distinct questions about the ontology of possibilities. One concerns their nature: whether or not we should understand them as ‘worlds’, whether or not they are concrete or abstract etc. The other concerns the grounds on the basis of which something is possible. According to the standard Humean accounts the ground of possibilities is the re-combinability of certain properties. I shall argue that dispositions, or rather powers, can provide a better ground for the contingency of events.

b. Non-persisting concrete particulars: How can we understand the nature of particulars that do not persist? Do they have to be changes? I shall argue that non-persisting particulars are indispensable from ontology because properties need to be manifested and their manifestations are events. This, however does not mean that events are fundamental entities, since what events are depends on what properties the can manifest.


3. Ned Markosian

This module will focus on an unduly neglected question in metaphysics: Should our ontology of the physical universe contain things, stuff, or both things and stuff? We will first clarify the distinction between things and stuff, will next formulate the different positions available, and will then examine some reasons for and against each of the three different options. I will ultimately defend a dualist ontology of both things and stuff.

a. Introduction to things and stuff; the case for stuff.
b. The case for things; a defense of a dualist ontology.


4. Michaela McSweeney

Both sessions in this module will be about the same topic: Is metaphysically neutral logic possible?
Many philosophers think of logic as a neutral, unbiased background that we can build philosophical arguments from. Historically, there has been a lot of hand-wringing about whether logic is, or whether we can make it, ontologically neutral (this is one reason Aristotelian logic was abandoned, and also part of the motivation for the free logic program). I want to discuss the question whether logic is, or can be, metaphysically neutral, which I take to be a much broader question than the question of ontological neutrality. I won't assume any background in anything more than basic classical logic. The focus will be on metaphysical issues.


5. Kate Ritchie

Social ontology has been gaining prominence in contemporary metaphysics. This module will focus on realism/anti-realism in social ontology, the metaphysics of social groups, and the nature of social structures.

a. Realism about Social Groups and the Nature(s) of Social Groups: Are social groups real? I will make the case that they are. Next, we will consider views of the natures of social groups like teams, committees, racial groups, and gender groups. I argue that the natures of social groups like teams and committees are distinct from those of groups like races and genders.


b. A Unified Social Ontology? In this lecture we will consider whether there is a way to develop a unified account of social groups. I argue that social structures give us the resources for a unified picture of social ontology (particularly, of social groups) that maintains distinctions argued for in the first lecture.

Recommended Reading: Katherine Ritchie (draft) Varieties of Social Structures; Brian Epstein (forthcoming) What are Social Groups? There Metaphysics and How to Classify Them. Synthese; Amie Thomasson (forthcoming) The Ontology of Social Groups. Synthese
6. Raul Saucedo

This Module will be about Collectivism.

a. Individualism versus Collectivism: A New Debate in Foundational Ontology: I have three main goals in this session. First, to introduce a hitherto much neglected debate in foundational ontology -- the debate over the relative priority of individuality and collectivity -- and articulate the opposition between two main views in the debate, which I call individualism and collectivism. Second, to defend the interest and significance of the debate: the issue over the relative priority of individuality and collectivity has a significant bearing on a variety of central debates in metaphysics, where individualism has been merely taken for granted and collectivist alternatives have been entirely overlooked. Third, to defend the intelligibility of the debate from a family of forceful objections, which threaten the coherence of not only this or that position but the very question over the relative priority between individuality and collectivity.

Optional reading: Schaffer, "On What Grounds What"; Saucedo, "Ontological Collectivism"

b. The Significance of Collectivism: Fundamental Mereology and Fundamental Relations: Building on the previous session, in this session I'll articulate and defend neglected collectivist alternatives in two central debates in metaphysics: the debate over the relative fundamentality of parts and wholes and the debate over fundamental relations. First, I sketch a novel, collectivist alternative to both pluralism and monism, which I call collective allism. On this view, fundamental facts concern neither some ultimate parts nor some ultimate whole, but all parts and wholes taken together--i.e. fundamental facts concern all entities taken collectively. I argue that this view is superior to both pluralism and monism: only it is compatible with a variety of scenarios we have good reason to take seriously. Second, I sketch a novel, collectivist version of an old, broadly reductionist view about relations, according to which all relational facts are grounded in non-relational facts about the relata. On this version of the view, the non-relational facts grounding relational facts concern the relata taken collectively rather than individually. I argue that this version of the view is superior to the default, individualist version of the view: only it is immune to the objections that discredited the broadly reductionist view.