

PHIL 4640/6640: Metaphysics of Modality

Monday 10:10am–12:05pm · Uris Hall G28

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Office Hours: Wednesday 3–4pm (or by appointment)

Description

This course will cover four big questions concerning the nature of metaphysical modality:

1. **Analysis:** What is it for something to be possible?
2. **Source:** What makes something possible?
3. **Epistemology:** How can we know whether something is possible?
4. **Purpose:** What good is it to know whether something is possible?

Each week, we will cover a different answer to some or all of these questions. In the first part of the course, we will primarily focus on the questions of the analysis and source of modality, shifting attention to the epistemological and purpose questions in the second part (though there will be substantial overlap between the two parts). Topics covered include modal realism, essence, dispositions, counterfactuals, conceivability, and the objectivity of modality.

Requirements

Students auditing this course must do the reading prior to the seminar.

Students taking this course for credit must satisfy three main requirements:

1. Write a seminar paper (15–20 pages, double-spaced) on some topic closely related to the seminar by **December 12**. Send me a paragraph tentatively summarizing your proposal by **November 14**. You may want to schedule a meeting with me prior to these date to go over your plan.
2. Lead half the discussion on one reading. Email me with three dates, ranked in order of preference, by **September 17**. Prior to the seminar, you should meet with me to go over your plan.
3. Each week, email me a short response (\approx 100 words) to the reading by **the Sunday before seminar by 11:59pm**. Your response can be pretty much anything so long as it demonstrates that you did the reading. For instance, it can be a question, an objection, a strengthening of an argument, or a historical connection.

Schedule (subject to revision)

Aug. 27 | **Introduction**

Sep. 3 | **Labor Day** (no class; reading recommended)
Theodore Sider, "Reductive Theories of Modality"

Sep. 10, 17 | **Realism**
David K. Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds*, sections 1.1–1.2, 2.1, 2.4, 2.8

Sep. 24 | **Necessary vs. A Priori**
Saul Kripke, "Identity and Necessity"
David K. Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds*, sections 4.1, 4.5

Oct. 1 | **Essence and Dispositions**
Kit Fine, "Essence and Modality"
Barbara Vetter, "Recent Work: Modality without Possible Worlds"

Oct. 8 | **Fall Break** (no class; background reading optional)
David K. Lewis, "Counterfactuals and Comparative Possibility"

Oct. 15 | **Counterfactuals**
Timothy Williamson, *The Philosophy of Philosophy*, chapter 5

Oct. 22 | **Dispositions**
Barbara Vetter, "Williamsonian Modal Epistemology, Possibility-Based"
Timothy Williamson, "Reply to Vetter"

Oct. 29 | **Rationalism**
David J. Chalmers, "Does Conceivability Entail Possibility?"

Nov. 5 | **Imagination**
Peter Kung, "Imagination as a Guide to Possibility"

Nov. 12 | **Normativism**
Amie L. Thomasson, "Norms and Necessity"

Nov. 19 | **Deflationism**
Justin Clarke-Doane, "Modal Objectivity"

Nov. 26 | **Why Modalize?**
John Divers, "Modal Commitments"
Daniel Nolan, "Response to John Divers"

Dec. 3 | **Seminar Paper Workshop**