

# Taking Metaphysics to the Next Level

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Tu 2:40–4:35 PM (online)

PHIL 4640/6640

## *Description*

This seminar takes metaphysics to the next level in three ways: going meta, going fundamental, and going higher-order. Metametaphysics concerns philosophical issues about metaphysics as a discipline: What is metaphysics about? What’s the point of doing metaphysics? Is there a right metaphysics? How can we know what the right metaphysics is? Fundamental metaphysics concerns issues surrounding fundamentality: What is it for something to be fundamental? Are there different notions of fundamentality? How can we tell what’s fundamental? Does it matter what’s fundamental? Higher-order metaphysics concerns issues surrounding “higher-order” languages, i.e., languages with quantifiers over something other than objects (e.g., sets, properties, propositions, pluralities, etc.): Are higher-order quantifiers legitimate? How should we interpret them? What are we even quantifying over? How do they interact with other things, like modality?

## Instructor

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Instructor: Arc Kocurek  
Email: [awk78@cornell.edu](mailto:awk78@cornell.edu)  
Office Hours: by appointment

## Readings

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All readings will be made available on Canvas. Some additional resources:

### *Introductions to Metaphysics*

- **Alyssa Ney, *Metaphysics: An Introduction*.** This is the book I would assign for an introductory course in metaphysics.
- **Earl Conee & Theodore Sider, *Riddles of Existence*.** This is a smaller book, covering fewer topics, but the chapters are crystal clear and excellent. Plus, they have a chapter on metametaphysics!
- **Theodore Sider, John Hawthorne, and Dean W. Zimmerman (eds.), *Contemporary Debates in Metaphysics*.** This is a collection of survey articles. For each topic, two philosophers write a chapter defending opposite views. This also has some chapters on metametaphysics.

### *Texts on Metametaphysics and Grounding*

- **David J. Chalmers, David Manley, and Ryan Wasserman (eds.), *Metametaphysics: New Essays on the Foundations of Ontology*.** Several of the readings for the course will be drawn from this collection, but there are also a lot of great articles we won’t have time to cover.
- **Tuomas E. Tahko, *An Introduction to Metametaphysics*.** A well-written and accessible text for giving one an overview of the main topics in metametaphysics.
- **Fabrice Correia and Benjamin Schnieder (eds.), *Metaphysical Grounding: Understanding the Structure of Reality*.** Contains a number of great articles on grounding and fundamentality.

## Assignments

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### *Reading Responses (20%)*

You need to submit a short response to one of the main readings each week. The response will consist of two paragraphs: one that summarizes the reading and one that discusses whatever thoughts you had about it (e.g., a question, an objection, a request for further clarification about something, or a connection to other issues/topics). These are graded for completion. Responses are due **by the end of the day on Monday each week**. You can skip two weeks without penalty. (There are 12 weeks in total where you can potentially submit a response.)

### *Paper Assignments (25%, 35%)*

There are two paper assignments. The first will be a shorter paper where you will introduce a topic with some preliminary discussion. The second will be an expansion of your first paper where you will dive deeper into that topic. Undergraduates have the option to write their second paper on a different topic. (Graduate students who want to switch topics will need to consult with me first.)

Undergraduate option 1	Paper 1 (≈6–8 pages)	approved topic	Due April 30
	Paper 2 (≈6–8 pages)	another approved topic	Due May 21
Undergraduate option 2	Paper 1 (≈6–8 pages)	approved topic	Due April 30
	Paper 2 (≈12–15 pages)	expansion of paper 1	Due May 21
Graduate student	Paper 1 (≈8–10 pages)	approved topic	Due April 30
	Paper 2 (≈15–20 pages)	expansion of paper 1	Due May 21

Critically engaging with any of the readings listed on the syllabus that are not marked with a “☆” counts as an approved topic. If you wish to write about a paper/topic not on the syllabus, you must get prior approval from me first.

### *Peer Review (20%)*

After the first paper, you will be assigned two other students' papers. Your task is to read these papers and give constructive feedback on them. Each review must be at least 500 words in length, including a brief summary of the paper at the beginning of at most 200 words (the review can be longer, and can include specific in-line feedback). Reviews will be graded for completion. You must return your comments **by the end of the day on May 12**.

## Schedule (tentative)

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Unindented readings are required.  
Indented readings are optional.

☆ = a background/survey article

### Week 1

02/09

#### Introduction

*Background:*

- ☆ Ney (2014), "Preparatory Background: Logic for Metaphysics"
- ☆ Conee (2014), "What is Metaphysics?"
- ☆ Sider (2014), "Metametaphysics"

### Week 2

02/16

#### Some Classic Metaphysical Disputes

☆ Lewis & Lewis (1970), "Holes"

*Pick one more:*

- ☆ Friend (2007), "Fictional Characters"
- ☆ Ney (2014), "Abstract Entities"
- ☆ Sider (2014), "Constitution"
- ☆ Conee (2014), "Universals"

### Week 3

02/23

#### The Quine-Carnap Debate

Quine (1948), "On What There Is"

Carnap (1950), "Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology"

*Quine:*

- Melia (1995), "On What There's Not"
- Yablo (1998), "Does Ontology Rest on a Mistake?"
- ☆ van Inwagen (1998), "Meta-Ontology"
- ☆ von Solodkoff (2014), "Paraphrase Strategies in Metaphysics"

*Carnap:*

- Eklund (2009), "Carnap and Ontological Pluralism"
- Flocke (2020), "Carnap's Noncognitivism about Ontology"

### Week 4

03/02

#### Quantifier Variance (Or: The Sider-Hirsch Debate)

Sider (2009), "Ontological Realism"

Hirsch (2009), "Ontology and Alternative Languages"

*Realism:*

- Dorr (2005), "What We Disagree About When We Disagree About Ontology"
- Bennett (2009), "Composition, Colocation, and Metaontology"
- Fine (2009), "The Question of Ontology"
- ☆ Jenkins (2010), "What is Ontological Realism?"

*Anti-Realism:*

- Chalmers (2009), "Ontological Anti-Realism"
- Hofweber (2009), "Ambitious, Yet Modest, Metaphysics"

### Week 5

03/09

———— Well-Being Day (no meeting) ————

**Week 6**  
03/16

**The Revenge of Carnap?**

*Guest Speaker: Amie Thomasson*

Plunkett (2015), "Which Concepts Should We Use?: Metalinguistic Negotiations and The Methodology of Philosophy" (part II optional)

Thomasson (2017), "Metaphysical Disputes and Metalinguistic Negotiation"

*Neo-Carnapianism:*

Price (2009), "Metaphysics After Carnap: The Ghost Who Walks?"

Thomasson (2009), "Answerable and Unanswerable Questions"

*Metalinguistic Negotiation:*

Plunkett & Sundell (2013), "Disagreement and the Semantics of Normative and Evaluative Terms"

Flocke (forthcoming), "Ontological Expressivism"

Belleri (2017), "Verbalism and Metalinguistic Negotiation in Ontological Disputes"

☆ Belleri (2020), "Ontological Disputes and the Phenomenon of Metalinguistic Negotiation: Charting the Territory"

Kocurek, Jerzak, & Rudolph (2020), "Against Conventional Wisdom"

**Week 7**  
03/23

**Grounding & Fundamentality**

Schaffer (2009), "On What Grounds What"

Rosen (2010), "Metaphysical Dependence: Grounding and Reduction"

*Elaboration on Grounding:*

Fine (2001), "The Question of Realism"

Fine (2012), "Guide to Ground"

☆ Raven (2015), "Ground"

Schaffer (2016), "Grounding in the Image of Causation"

*Other Theories of Grounding:*

Bennett (2011), "Construction Area (No Hard Hat Required)"

Audi (2012), "Grounding: Toward a Theory of the *In-Virtue-Of* Relation"

**Week 8**  
03/30

**Criticism of Grounding**

Wilson (2014), "No Work for a Theory of Grounding"

Barnes (2014), "Going Beyond the Fundamental: Feminism in Contemporary Metaphysics"

*Grounding Skepticism:*

Daly (2012), "Scepticism About Grounding"

Koslicki (2015), "The coarse-grainedness of grounding"

Cameron (2016), "Do We Need Grounding?"

*Whether Feminist Metaphysics is Compatible with Mainstream Metaphysics:*

Mikkola (2015), "Doing Ontology and Doing Justice: What Feminist Philosophy Can Teach Us About Meta-Metaphysics"

Schaffer (2017), "Social construction as grounding; or: fundamentality for feminists, a reply to Barnes and Mikkola"

Sider (2017), "Substantivity in feminist metaphysics"

**Week 9**  
04/06

**Beyond the Fundamental: Social Ontology**

*Guest Speaker: Kate Ritchie*

- ☆ Ritchie (2015), "The Metaphysics of Social Groups"
- Ritchie (2020), "Social Structures and the Ontology of Social Groups"

*Group Metaphysics*

- Effingham (2010), "The Metaphysics of Groups"
- Ritchie (2013), "What Are Groups?"
- Papineau (2017), "Sporting Teams, Space-Time Worms and Israeli Football"
- Faller (2019), "How Groups Persist"
- Korman (2020), "The Metaphysics of Establishments"

*Feminist Metaphysics:*

- Haslanger (2000), "Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them To Be?"
- Ásta (2011), "The Metaphysics of Sex and Gender"
- Dembroff (2016), "What Is Sexual Orientation?"
- Díaz-León (2018), "On Haslanger's Meta-Metaphysics: Social Structures and Metaphysical Deflationism"
- Bernstein (2020), "The Metaphysics of Intersectionality"

**Week 10–11**  
04/13

**Second-Order Logic & Plurals**

- ☆ Sider (2020), "Crash Course on Higher-Order Logic" (sections 1–3)
- ☆ Rayo (2007), "Plurals"

*Optional:*

- Boolos (1975), "On Second-Order Logic"
- Boolos (1984), "To Be is to be a Value of a Variable (or to be Some Values of Some Variables)"
- Hazen (1993), "Against Pluralism"
- Oliver & Smiley (2001), "Strategies for a Logic of Plurals"
- ☆ Turner (2018), "What's So Bad About Second-Order Logic?"

**Week 12**  
04/27

**Absolute Generality**

*Guest Speaker: James Walsh*

- ☆ Rayo & Uzquiano (2006), "Introduction to *Absolute Generality*"
- Walsh, "Articulating Absolute Generality"

*Optional:*

- Cartwright (1994), "Speaking of Everything"
- McGee (2000), "Everything"
- Rayo (2003), "When does 'everything' mean everything?"
- Williamson (2003), "Everything"
- Glanzberg (2004), "Quantification and Realism"
- Flocke (2020), "The Metasemantics of Indefinite Extensibility"

**Week 13**  
05/04

**Metaphysical Rationalism**

- ☆ Amijee (2020), "Principle of Sufficient Reason"
- Dasgupta (2016), "Metaphysical Rationalism"

**Week 14**  
05/11

**Is Realism Valuable?**

Dasgupta (2018), "Realism and the Absence of Value"

*Optional:*

Sider (forthcoming), "Dasgupta's Detonation"