



photo credit: Jezael Megoza

Metaphysics of the Social World

MW 12:30 - 1:45, Malloy 215

Professor: Sara Bernstein

This class will use metaphysics to examine the natures of a wide range of social entities and phenomena. Topics discussed will include the metaphysics of social kinds, including gender, race, and disability; the metaphysics of social groups, like baseball teams, the Beatles, and the Supreme Court; the metaphysics of social entities, like restaurants and countries; the metaphysics of social relationships and activities, like love and video games; the metaphysics of virtual reality, social media, and cryptocurrency; and the metaphysics of food. We will end by discussing the metaphysics of collective responsibility.

All readings will be posted on Canvas. Starred readings are required. Others are recommended.

Assessment:

- 30% in-class participation* (see below)
- 10% in-class presentation on a reading or a topic related to the course
- 20% short paper (due October 7 at 11:59pm)
- 40% final paper (due December 14 at 11:59pm)

Extra credit opportunities will be available.

Schedule

Introduction

Wednesday, August 28: Introduction to Metaphysics of the Social World

Recommended: "Social Ontology," Rebecca Mason and Kate Ritchie

sign up for presentation dates by September 9

Metaphysics of Social Groups and Socially Significant Entities

Monday, September 2: Social Groups (I)

* "The Metaphysics of Social Groups," Kate Ritchie

Recommended: "Social Structures and the Ontology of Social Groups," Kate Ritchie

Wednesday, September 4: Social Groups (II)

* "Is a Band Without Its Original Members Still the Same Band?," Geoffrey Himes (Smithsonian Magazine article)

* "Sporting Teams, Space-Time Worms, and Israeli Football," David Papineau

* "The Ship of Theseus," Jenn Wang (Wireless Philosophy video)

Recommended: "The Metaphysics of Groups," Nikk Effingham;

"The Supreme Court and the Supreme Court Justices: A Metaphysical Puzzle," Gabriel Uzquiano

Monday, September 9: Social Establishments and Territories ****Deadline for signing up for presentation dates and topics****

* "People and Places," John Horden & Dan López de Sa

* "The Metaphysics of Establishments," Daniel Korman

Metaphysics of Gender, Sexual Orientation, and Race

Wednesday, September 11: Ameliorative Accounts of Gender

* "Gender and Race: What are they? What do we want them to be?," Sally Haslanger

Recommended: "Metaphysics and Social Justice," Aaron Griffith

Monday, September 16: Metaphysics of Gender

* "The Conferralist Framework," Ásta

Recommended: "Science Fiction Double Feature: Trans Liberation on Twin Earth," B.R. George and R.A. Briggs

Wednesday, September 18: Metaphysics of Sexual Orientation (I)

* "What is Sexual Orientation?," Robin Dembroff

Monday, September 23: Metaphysics of Sexual Orientation (II)

* "Sexual Orientation and Intrinsic Masking," Peter Finochiarro

Wednesday, September 25: Metaphysics of Race (I)

* "'But What are you Really?': The Metaphysics of Race," Charles Mills

Monday, September 30: Metaphysics of Race (II)

* "Making Sense of Racial Membership," Alejandro Naranjo Sandoval

Wednesday, October 2: Astrology as Aspirational Social Metaphysics

* "The Political Social Ontology of Astrology," Matthew Cull

Monday, October 7: ****First paper due****; Catch-up and Review.

Wednesday, October 9: Metaphysics of Intersectionality

* "The Metaphysics of Intersectionality," Sara Bernstein

Metaphysics of Disability

Monday, October 14: Disability

* "Disability, Minority, and Difference," Elizabeth Barnes

Recommended viewing: "Deaf U"

Wednesday, October 16: Non-canonical Disabilities

* "Lookism," Francesca Minerva

* "The Invisible Discrimination Before our Eyes," Francesca Minerva

Recommended reading: Ted Chiang, "Liking What You See: a Documentary"

Metaphysics of Games

Monday, October 28: The Metaphysics of Games I

* "Introduction" and "The Possibility of Striving Play" from *Games: Agency as Art*, C. Thi Nguyen

Recommended: "How Twitter Gamifies Communication," C. Thi Nguyen

Wednesday, October 30: The Metaphysics of Games II

* "Games as Social Transformation" from *Games: Agency as Art*, C. Thi Nguyen

Metaphysics of Food and Love

Monday, November 4: The Metaphysics of Food

* "The Metaphysics of Food," Alexandra Plakias

* "Metaphysics of Natural Food," Andrea Borghini

Wednesday, November 6: The Metaphysics of Culinary Art

* "Can Unmodified Food be Culinary Art?," Sara Bernstein

* "Can Food be Art in Virtue of its Savour Alone?," Mohan Matthen

Monday, November 11: The Metaphysics of Love

* "What is Love?: an Incomplete Map of the Metaphysics," Carrie Jenkins

* "A Dispositional Theory of Love," Hichem Nar

Metaphysics of Virtual Reality and Social Media

Wednesday, November 13: The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality

- * "The Virtual and the Real," David Chalmers
- * "The Puzzle of Virtual Theft," Neil McDonnell & Nathan Wildman

Monday, November 18: The Metaphysics of Social Media

- * "Moral Outrage Porn," C. Thi Nguyen and Bekka Williams
- * "The Anonymity of a Murmur: Internet (and Other) Memes," Simon Evnine

Recommended reading: "Retweeting: its linguistic and epistemic value," Neri Marsili
Recommended viewing: *Black Mirror*, "Nosedive"

Metaphysics of Money

Wednesday, November 20: The Metaphysics of Cryptocurrency (I)

- * "Is Bitcoin Money?," Asya Passinsky
- * "Cryptocurrency: Philosophy, Politics, and Economics" (pp. 1-11), Andrew Bailey, Brad Rettler, and Craig Warmke

Monday, November 25: No class (out of town for a workshop)

Monday, December 2: The Metaphysics of Cryptocurrency (II)

- * "On Bitcoin: A Study in Applied Metaphysics," Martin Lipman

Collective Responsibility

Wednesday, December 4: Collective Responsibility by Random Groups

- * "Collective Responsibility," Marion Smiley
- * "Can a Random Collection of Individuals be Morally Responsible?," Virginia Held

Monday, December 9: Causation and Moral Responsibility

- * "Causal Proportions and Moral Responsibility," Sara Bernstein

Wednesday, December 11: Final Review

A few notes concerning...

*Class Participation

Philosophical skill is best acquired by *doing philosophy* rather than passively learning about it. Active participation in class, which includes asking questions, coming up with cool and/ or silly examples, asking for clarification on confusing concepts, and/ or presenting an informed opinion about the reading, is central to learning to do philosophy. Talking once per class will be enough to do well in class participation.

Course Content

Some of the texts in this class contain content that people might find uncomfortable, offensive, or triggering. These issues also come up topically in some of the philosophical discussions. If you have concerns about this that you would like to discuss with me, please feel free to do so.

Philosophical “Bedside Manner”

Academic philosophy has a reputation as a blood sport. It need not be so. We’re all in the Truth Trenches together. Philosophical interaction can be friendly and collaborative while still being constructive and rigorous. Please contribute to class in ways that aim at discovering the truth rather than establishing intellectual dominance.

Syllabus Changes

It is possible that topics will be added, removed, or changed on the syllabus. If this happens, it will be announced in class and over email.

Extensions

Everyone is permitted one 24-hour extension on a paper. You don’t need to apologize or explain why you need one; just ask at least 48 hours in advance.

Academic Honesty

Using ChatGPT and other generative AI is not permitted in the course. Plagiarism is representing another person’s work as one’s own. Outside works must be clearly cited or placed in quotes. Any cheating will be handled according to the university’s policy on academic dishonesty. Please see the Honor Code for more information.

Ways to Reach Sara

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Office Hours: by appointment.