Alternative Theories of Modality
Spring 2014

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Time and Location: Mon, 12:30-3:15pm, Malloy 220

Course Description:
For the past sixty years, the most popular approach to understanding necessity and possibility has been in terms of possible worlds. While the possible worlds framework has been very fruitful for framing debates in metaphysics, epistemology and semantics, it has also faced some recalcitrant problems. Some of these problems are technical (i.e. coming up with a consistent, coherent modal logic). Others are ideological (i.e. developing a theory of what these worlds are such that they can perform their myriad roles in metaphysics, semantics, and epistemology).

The possible worlds framework was not always orthodoxy, and even today there are dissenters—lesser-known but nonetheless systematic and compelling approaches to modality that eschew or diminish possible worlds. Our course aims to introduce graduate students to these neglected but vibrant alternatives in both their historical and contemporary forms. Primary topics include: theistic theories of modality, conventionalism and neo-conventionalism, powers-based theories, necessitism, and primitivism.

Course Goals:

(1) To write clear, interesting, and accurate research papers that approach the standard of professional publications in philosophy.

(2) To learn to read, understand, and evaluate arguments expressed in modal logic.

(3) To become more familiar with historical traditions and better equipped to connect historical debates with their contemporary analogues.

(4) To develop a fluency with alternative theories of modality and to contribute interesting and original research to these ongoing debates.

Procedures and Standards for Evaluation:

Students taking the course for credit will be asked to produce a seminar-length research paper due at the final meeting of the class. Because this is an advanced seminar in metaphysics, we expect the final seminar papers to make an interesting and original contribution to these debates with an eye towards future conference presentation and/or publication. Everyone, including auditors, is expected to do the reading and contribute regularly to our seminar discussion.
Topics and Readings:

The citations are incomplete right now, but all of the readings will eventually be made available in the course’s Dropbox folder. The lineup is likely to change depending on class interests. Readings should be done prior to the seminar meeting; come prepared to discuss.

Background to Recent Trends in Modal Metaphysics


Weeks 1: A (Very!) Selective History

Aristotle, On Generation and Corruption II.11-12; On the Heavens I.11 [Optional: Metaphysics Theta 3-4; De Interpretatione 9]
Aquinas, ST I48q2 and I49q2
Hume - Treatise 1.3.14
Ayer – Chapter 4 from Language, Truth, and Logic.

Optional secondary:
Adams, Robert Merrihew. “Leibniz’s Theories of Contingency,” from Leibniz: Determinist, Theist, Idealist (OUP 1999)

Weeks 2-4: Quine and Neo-Conventionalism

Carnap, TBD
**Week 5: Anti-Essentialism**

Sullivan, Meghan “Anti-Essentialism.” DRAFT.

**Weeks 6-8: Modal Logic, Necessitism, and Primitivism**

   Chapters 1, 3, 4 and 8.
*PPR* Symposium Articles
Stalnaker TBD

**March 17: No class**; begin paper writing prep and discuss proposals with us

**Week 9-10: Essences, Powers and Modality**

Fine, Kit - “Essence and Modality”
Jacobs, Jonathan – “A powers theory of modality: or, how I learned to stop worrying and reject possible worlds” *Phil Studies*, 2010
Pawl, Timothy – “Nine problems (and even more solutions) for powers accounts of possibility,” forthcoming
Borghini, Andrea and Neil Williams. “A dispositional theory of possibility”

**April 7: No Class**...Class will be rescheduled and meet at one of our homes later in the week.

**Week 11-12: Theism and Modality**

Leftow, Brian- Excerpts from *God and Necessity*, chs. 9,10, 13.
Leftow, Brian- “Aquinas on God and Modal Truth”, The Modern Schoolman 82 (2005), 171-200
Descartes, excerpts
Leibniz, excerpts
Kant, excerpts

Optional secondary:
Newlands, “Leibniz and the Ground of Possibility”, *Phil Review* 2013
Andrew Chignell, “Kant, Real Possibility, and the Threat of Spinoza” *Mind* 2012