

Metaphysics – syllabus

Philosophy 4445/5545, Spring 2007

Tuesdays 5.00-7.30, Lucas 209

Instructor: Robert Northcott

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Office hour: after class, or by appointment

Course introduction

What is there really in the world? Nowadays we often look to science for the answers, and for that reason we have become rather skeptical of, for instance, tree spirits and *élan vital*. But science itself takes for granted basic notions such as *causes* and *laws of nature*. Yet what are these things in turn? Not easy... We shall examine leading current views.

An underlying theme will turn out to be the viability or otherwise of so-called *Humean* answers to these questions. That is, are the powers attributed to causes and laws irreducibly basic? Or are they, as some Humeans maintain, illusory vestiges of outdated mysticism, no more worthy of ontological respect than those tree spirits and *élan vital*?

Course outline

Jan 16 1) Introduction

Humean Supervenience

Jan 23 2) Hume's critique

Jan 30 3) Against Hume: causal perception

Feb 6 4) For Hume: rotating discs

Causation

Feb 13 5) The counterfactual theory

Feb 20 6) A survey of theories and problems

Feb 27 7) The manipulability theory

Counterfactuals

Mar 6 8) Evaluating counterfactuals

Mar 13 9) Counterfactuals and cognition

Mar 20 **Midterm exam**

(Mar 27 – Spring Break)

Laws of Nature

Apr 3 10) The necessitarian view

Apr 10 11) The best-system view

Apr 17 12) Causes versus laws

Meta-metaphysics

Apr 24 13) Do causation and laws reduce? – one further look

May 1 14) Composition and colocation

May 8 **Final exam**

Grading

There will be set readings for each week, as listed below. You are required to read these... At the end of each class I will hand out the following week's reading, plus a few multiple-choice quiz questions on them. You will be required to email me answers to these questions by 3pm the day of class the following week. The questions will be easy enough – but only if you have actually done the reading. Basically, the quizzes are thus intended to force you to do just that. By doing so, you will get much more out of the course. Generally, class will be more interesting for all of us if everyone has some familiarity in advance with what we are talking about. Overall, class participation will account for 30% of the total grade. Note in particular: performance on the weekly quizzes will form a large part of the class participation score.

There will be a mid-term exam, as per the schedule. This will count for a further 30% of the total grade. I anticipate that the mid-term will consist of essay questions on material covered up to that point, maybe requiring three essays in 2½ hours. I will let you know the exact details, regarding both format and material covered, nearer the time.

For the final 40% of the total grade, I am planning to give you a *choice*:

-- *First option*: sit a final exam, similar in format to the midterm.

-- *Second option*: write a course paper. This should be of a length in the range of 3000 to 3500 words (i.e. roughly 12 pages double-spaced). The deadline will be around the time of the final exam, I'll tell you the exact date nearer the time. The paper must be on material from the course. *Anyone choosing to write a paper must consult with me beforehand to check that their topic is suitable.* (For general guidance on writing philosophy papers, I recommend adapting the advice from: <http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html>)

Generally, you'll need to give me a pretty good reason to miss any exam, or to miss the deadline for the final paper, or to miss the deadline for any of the weekly reading quizzes. However, of course unfortunate circumstances do arise occasionally. The golden rule in those cases is, if possible, to contact me about it in advance. It's much easier sorting things out ahead of time.

I will be using incremental (plus/minus) grading.

Schedule of readings for each week

N.B. All details are subject to change.

Jan 16) Introduction

Jan 23) Hume's critique

-- David Hume (1748), *Enquiry concerning human understanding*, sections IV and VII, i.e. pp25-39 and 60-79

Jan 30) Against Hume: causal perception

-- Peter Menzies (1998), 'How justified are the Humean doubts about intrinsic causal links?', *Communication and Cognition* 31.4, pp339-56 (the rest optional)

Feb 6) For Hume: rotating discs

-- David Lewis (1986), *Philosophical Papers* Vol II, Oxford, pp ix-xi
-- Craig Callender (2000), 'Humean Supervenience and Rotating Homogeneous Matter', *Mind* 110, pp25-30 and 35-40 (the rest optional)

Feb 13) The counterfactual theory of causation

-- David Lewis (1973), 'Causation', *Journal of Philosophy* 70, pp556-567

Feb 20) A survey of causation theories and problems

-- Jonathan Schaffer (2003), 'The Metaphysics of Causation', *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/causation-metaphysics/> (extracts)

Feb 27) The manipulability theory of causation

-- Judea Pearl (2000), 'The art and science of cause and effect', *Causality*, Cambridge, Epilogue

Mar 6) Evaluating counterfactuals

-- John Collins, Ned Hall and L.A. Paul, eds (2004), *Causation and Counterfactuals*, MIT, pp2-7, 9, 19-21 (pp7-9, 9-12, 21-2 optional)
-- James Woodward (2003), *Making Things Happen*, Oxford, pp133-4, 137-45 (pp134-7 optional)

Mar 13) Counterfactuals and cognition

-- James Woodward (2003), *Making Things Happen*, Oxford, pp118-123
-- Daniel Gilbert (2006), *Stumbling on Happiness*, Harper Collins, pp3-16
-- Daniel Povinelli (2004), 'Of apes and men', *Daedalus* winter 2004, pp29-41

Mar 20) Midterm exam

(Mar 27 – Spring Break)

Apr 3) Laws of nature: the necessitarian view

-- Fred Dretske (1977), *Philosophy of Science* 44, pp 248-268

Apr 10) Laws of nature: the best-system view

-- John Earman (1986), *A Primer on Determinism*, Dordrecht, 81-90

-- David Lewis (1973), *Counterfactuals*, Oxford, pp72-75

Apr 17) Laws of nature: causes versus laws

-- Nancy Cartwright (1994), 'Fundamentalism versus the patchwork of laws', chp 1 (pp pp23-34) of *The Dappled World* (1999)

Apr 24) Do causation and laws reduce? – one further look

-- Jonathan Schaffer (forthcoming), 'Causation and Laws of Nature: Reductionism', in *Contemporary Debates in Metaphysics*, J. Hawthorne, T. Sider, and D. Zimmerman, (eds.), Oxford. Section 3 (the rest is optional)

May 1) Meta-metaphysics

-- Karen Bennett (forthcoming), 'Composition, colocation, and metaontology', from D.Chalmers, D.Manley and R.Wasserman (eds), *Metametaphysics*, Oxford, (draft version, extracts)

May 8) Final exam