

Fundamental reality – syllabus

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Professor: Neil Mehta

Seminars: Tue/Fri, 10:30-11:50 AM, classroom 18, Cendana (RC3) level 1

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“The aim of philosophy ... is to understand how things in the broadest sense of that term hang together in the broadest sense of that term” – Wilfrid Sellars.¹

Overview. This course centers on the following question: *What is the structure of reality?* Of all the questions that we can ask, this is one of the most profound, and also one of the most profoundly difficult! We will consider how to frame the question, how to answer it, and how to understand its significance. Along the way, we will ask smaller questions, such as:

- Is there a relation of grounding that connects what is more fundamental to what is less fundamental?
- Are there really ordinary objects like tables and chairs, or is it just a convenient fiction for us to talk as if there were such objects?
- What is most fundamental – the smallest particles, the universe as a whole, or something else?
- What is the metaphysical status of social constructs such as gender?

Goals. This seminar has many intertwined goals. To begin with, you will learn a great deal about contemporary metaphysics. For example, you will learn to:

- Understand various theoretical frameworks for thinking about fundamentality, grounding, essence, existence, etc.
- Use tools that are formal – i.e., broadly mathematical – to understand these frameworks.

In tandem with this, you will also develop many skills and virtues – in particular:

Argumentative skills:

- Using interpersonal evidence.
- Using good conditional arguments.
- Using inference to the best explanation.
- Developing objections and replies.

Writing skills:

- Structuring your writing.

¹ 1963, p. 1, *Science, Perception and Reality*, The Humanities Press: New York.

- Being precise.
- Using signposts.

Conversational skills:

- Listening attentively to others.
- Making contributions that are focused, well-structured, and evidentially supported.

Intellectual virtues:

- Taking the initiative.
- Extending your learning.
- Being fair-minded.
- Embracing uncertainty.

All of these skills and virtues have very wide applications. Indeed, you can use them not only in your other classes, but also in your ordinary, non-academic life.

Thus, the aim of this course is not just to help you become a better philosopher. It is also to help you become a better human being.

Accommodations; mood; attendance. I will always do whatever I can to help you to learn. If you require any special accommodations, then please have CTL let me know.

Moreover, you are a mature adult, and I will treat you as such. As long as you are respectful towards others, you may behave in seminar as you wish. For example, you may stretch, leave to use the restroom without asking permission, and (quietly!) eat snacks. Similarly, the only penalty for missing seminar will be the learning opportunities that you forego. You will have *absolute freedom* – but also *absolute responsibility*.²

Spirit of the course. The material in this course will be challenging, especially when it comes to the broadly mathematical tools that we will be using. But a mathematical background, though it would be helpful, is not required. Everything that you need will be taught in seminar.

What *is* required is that you be fearless when you encounter technical material, and also that you be patient in working out what all of the fancy symbols mean. If you are fearless and patient in these ways, then you will develop a real understanding in this seminar.

Pedagogy. Our seminars will be run on the model of the *dance class*.

Assessment. As a default, please submit all assignments as Word documents on Canvas. So that I may grade your work anonymously, do not include your name.

- Homework (warm-ups, cool-downs, and peer reviews): 30%.
 - You will have a homework assignment due at 11:59 PM before each seminar. The purpose of these assignments is for you to practice new skills, to fail, and to learn from your failures. For this reason, you will receive *100% credit* simply for completing all of the exercises carefully.

² And here I tip my hat to Spider-Man.

- First paper, draft: 5%. First paper: 20%. First paper, revision: 10%.
- Second paper, draft: 5%. Second paper: 30%.

Screens; texts. We will want to stay engaged with the philosophical ideas and with each other. Thus, please do not use any personal screens (cell phones, laptops, tablets) in seminar. But do bring a printed copy of the relevant text(s) to each seminar. If you forget, then I will ask you to leave seminar to get the text. This is not a punishment! It is rather a way to give you the best possible learning opportunities.

Merriment. I will host a start-of-semester party on Fri, 31 Jan and an end-of-semester party on Sat, 18 Apr. These have no particular academic value, and you are not required to attend. However, there will be food, games, and glee!

Miscellaneous. Here are some further policies that you may review on your own.

Academic integrity. Academic honesty is required, as detailed in the College's policies (<https://studentlife.yale-nus.edu.sg/policies/academic-integrity/>). At the appropriate time in the course, I will give you detailed instruction about the nature of plagiarism and the consequences of committing it. So please submit nothing but your best attempt to think through the material on your own. In particular, you must cite not only all direct quotations from any source, but additionally *all ideas paraphrased from any source*. Also be sure to include an acknowledgments section citing all intellectual influences, including myself and your classmates. *Any plagiarized work will automatically be brought to the attention of a college-wide disciplinary committee.*

End-of-semester date. The last activity for this seminar is the final paper, due on Sat, 2 May at 11:59 PM.

Grading. Your final grade for the semester will be determined on a curve. Likewise for grades on all assignments, except for the homework.

In particular, I will sort student scores from highest to lowest, and then map grades according to *roughly* the following distribution: 1/2 A- or higher, 1/3 B+ or B, and 1/6 B- or lower. I will make adjustments to this distribution as I deem appropriate.

Late work. All late work will be marked down by 1/3 of a letter grade (e.g., A- to B+) per day late. In addition, warm-up and cool-down assignments are intended to prepare you for seminar. Thus, these will be accepted only until 8 AM on the day of seminar.

Prerequisite. You must have completed one philosophy elective prior to this one.

Philosophy major. This course satisfies the following requirements for the philosophy major:

- Skills dimensions: formal analysis, problem solving.
- Historical: new.

Schedule

Read each assigned text very carefully, perhaps several times. Really dig in: take notes, highlight, make outlines. But do not expect to understand precisely what is going on before seminar – our discussions will clear up a lot of your confusions! If you still feel confused after our seminar discussions, then I encourage you to come to office hours.

The bonus readings are optional. You may read them to learn more about particular topics.

Part 1: Key metaphysical concepts

Week 1, starting 13 Jan: Existence.

Mon: No reading.

Thu: Read W. V. O. Quine, “On what there is.” Read handout on representing arguments and conditionals; submit cool-down 1.

Bonus reading: Peter van Inwagen, “Meta-ontology.”

Week 2, starting 20 Jan: Possible worlds.

Mon: Read handout on precision and inference to the best explanation; submit warm-up 2.

Thu: Read David Lewis, “Counterpart theory and quantified modal logic,” §1 only. This reading is very hard, but very short – just 4 pages! So read it at least three times, very carefully. Then submit cool-down 2.

Fri: (24 Jan.) No seminar – Chinese New Year.

Week 3, starting 27 Jan: Possible worlds, cont.

Mon: Read David Lewis, “Counterparts of persons and their bodies.” Submit warm-up 3. Since this is a public holiday, I will accept warm-ups until 9 AM Tue morning without penalty (but warm-ups submitted later will not be accepted). Note also that you will find this reading especially confusing. Not to worry! Things will be made clear in seminar.

Thu: Read handout on evaluating arguments; submit cool-down 3.

Fri: (31 Jan.) Start-of-semester party, 7:30 PM-midnight.

Week 4, starting 3 Feb: Essence.

Mon: Read Kit Fine, “Essence and modality.” Submit warm-up 4.

Thu: Read handout on argument by elimination; submit cool-down 4.

Bonus reading: Gideon Rosen, “Metaphysical dependence: Grounding and reduction.”

Week 5, starting 10 Feb: Grounding.

Mon: Read Jonathan Schaffer, “On what grounds what.” Submit warm-up 5.

Thu: Read handout on explaining an idea; submit cool-down 5.

Bonus readings: Jonathan Schaffer, “Grounding in the image of causation”; Selim Berker, “The unity of grounding.”

Week 6, starting 17 Feb: Against grounding.

- Mon: Read Jessica Wilson, “No work for a theory of grounding.” Focus on sections III, IV, and V. Submit warm-up 6.
- Thu: Read handout on structuring your ideas; submit cool-down 6.
 Bonus reading: Neil Mehta, “Can grounding characterize fundamentality?”

Recess week: Sat, 22 Feb to Sun, 1 Mar.

Part 2: The structure of reality

Week 7, starting 2 Mar: Nihilism and permissivism.

- Mon: Read Daniel Korman, “Debunking perceptual beliefs about ordinary objects.” You may skip §2.2, §4, and §6. Submit warm-up 7.
- Thu: Read handout on signposts; submit cool-down 7.
- Sat: Submit paper 1 draft.

Week 8, starting 9 Mar: Monism.

- Mon: Read Jonathan Schaffer, “Monism: The priority of the whole.” Skip the appendix. Submit warm-up 8.
- Wed: Submit peer review, paper 1.
- Thu: Submit cool-down 8.
 Bonus readings: Jonathan Schaffer, “Is there a fundamental level?”; Jonathan Schaffer, “From nihilism to monism.”
- Sat: Submit paper 1.

Week 9, starting 16 Mar: Monism, cont.

- Mon: Read Ted Sider, “Against monism.” Submit warm-up 9.
- Thu: Read David Cornell, “Monism and statespace: A reply to Sider.” Read handout on taking the initiative; submit cool-down 9.

Week 10, starting 23 Mar: Emptiness.

- Mon: Read Graham Priest, “The structure of emptiness.” Submit warm-up 10.
- Thu: Read handout on extending learning; submit cool-down 10.

Week 11, starting 30 Mar: True contradictions; emptiness, cont.

- Mon: Read Jay Garfield and Graham Priest, “Nagarjuna and the limits of thought.” Submit warm-up 11.
- Thu: Read handout on fair-mindedness; submit cool-down 11.

Part 3: Metaphysics and society

Week 12, starting 6 Apr: Socially constructed categories.

- Mon: Read Sally Haslanger, “Gender and race: (What) are they? (What) do we want them to be?” Submit warm-up 12.
 Bonus reading: Robin Dembroff, “What is sexual orientation?” Note: Robin Dembroff is gender non-binary and prefers to be referred to by the pronoun “they.”
- Thu: Read handout on uncertainty; submit cool-down 12.
- Fri: (10 Apr.) No seminar – public holiday.

Week 13, starting 13 Apr: Social constructed categories, cont.

Mon: Read Elizabeth Barnes, "Going beyond the fundamental: Feminism in contemporary metaphysics." Submit warm-up 13.

Thu: Read review handout; submit cool-down 13.

Bonus readings: Jonathan Schaffer, "Social construction as grounding"; Mari Mikkola, "On the apparent antagonism between feminist and mainstream metaphysics."

Fri: Submit draft of final paper.

Sat: (18 Apr.) End-of-semester party, 7:30 PM-midnight.

Reading week: Sat, 18 Apr to Fri, 24 Apr.

Sat, 25 Apr: Submit peer review for final paper.
Sat, 2 May: Submit final paper.