

Seminar in Metaphysics

Instructor: Antonio Freiles

Place & Time: TBD

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Office Hours: TBD

Course Description: This class aims to showcase the richness of the kind of work metaphysicians have been focusing on, using two notions as case studies: grounding and essence. Grounding and essence have been central to metaphysical discussions since the turn of the century, and this course, although not comprehensive of all the literature, aims to survey the initial motivations of these two notions, their formal features, the skepticism surrounding them, and some of their fruitful applications in social ontology.

In the context of grounding, we will start by reading the papers that have motivated its importance in contemporary metaphysical debates. We will then focus on different forms of skepticism: whether the notion of grounding can be unified, whether grounding facts are themselves grounded, and whether, when regimented in a formal setting, grounding is inconsistent. We will also see how the relation of grounding interacts with the notions of existence and identity, and conclude with the application of grounding to the debates over social construction and anchoring.

In the context of essence, we will see how the reductionist project of reducing metaphysical necessity to essence was introduced, and discuss two forms of skepticism: one about whether the counterexamples to the initial definition of essence in terms of metaphysical necessity are correct, and the second about whether this project is compatible with the intuitive view that something could have failed to exist. We will then connect essence to the notions of knowledge and explanation. Finally, we will conclude by investigating the role of essence in social ontology.

Learning Objectives: By the end of the course, students should be able to:

- (1) command the central concepts and arguments introduced during the course;
- (2) critically evaluate primary texts in contemporary metaphysics relevant to the understanding of grounding and essence;
- (3) gain the familiarity and curiosity needed to present and assess the formal tools, such as the logics of ground and essence, relevant to the philosophical discussion;
- (4) develop an original line of argument on a topic of their choice and defend it in writing at the level of a high-quality, polished draft;
- (5) draw on a broad base of sources to support future research projects in contemporary metaphysics.

Assessment: Your grade comes from four components.

1. *Reading Responses*: 20 points of your course grade. Over the course of the semester, you will write seven reading responses. The idea is to focus closely on a narrow question the paper raises (a premise in the larger argument, a distinction it draws, a reconstruction it offers, or an ambiguity in the text) and respond to it. Your response can go either way: you might push back against the author, or you might build on a point and strengthen it. Each response is capped at 250 words, which is meant less as a constraint than as an invitation to say what you think as concisely as you can. You are welcome to reuse this material in your final paper, and you will receive feedback on every response.

2. *Outline*: 20 points of your course grade. By the end of Week 8, you will submit an outline of your final paper; however, you are encouraged to submit it as soon as you have a clear idea. It should lay out the paper's main argument together with a sketch of two objections you anticipate. The word limit is 1000 words.

3. *Final Paper*: 30 points of your course grade. The final paper should show familiarity with the relevant literature while also striving to make an original point. The word count should be between 6000 and 8000 words. The submission date is TBD.

4. *Oral Exam(s)*: 30 points of your course grade. There are two oral exams, each lasting at most thirty minutes. The first takes place during the discussion of your outline; the second follows the submission of your final paper. Questions come in two kinds. Most will concern your outline and final paper. The remaining questions will draw on your reading responses, and may extend to the main definitions or the central argument of the texts you responded to.

Schedule: below, you can find the plan for the semester. I marked optional readings with '*'.

Week 1, Introduction

Kit Fine, *The Question of Realism*.

Kit Fine, Sections 1-5 and Section 11 of *Guide to Ground*.

Week 2, Ground: Its Impact

Jonathan Schaffer, *On What Grounds What*.

Gideon Rosen, *Metaphysical Dependence: Grounding and Reduction*.

Week 3, Ground: Skepticism

Jessica Wilson, *No Work for a Theory of Grounding*.

Ted Sider, Sections 8-8.3 of *Writing the Book of the World*.

Week 4, Ground: Logical Puzzles

Stephan Krämer, *A Simpler Puzzle of Ground*.

Boris Kment, *Russell-Myhill and Grounding*.

Peter Fritz, *Ground and Grain*.

Week 5, Ground: Numerical Identity

Erica Shumener, *Explaining Identity and Distinctness*.

Ezra Rubinstein, *Grounding Identity in Existence*.

Week 6, Ground: Going Meta

Karen Bennett, *By Our Bootstraps*.

Louis deRosset, *Grounding Explanations*.

Week 7, Ground: Social Construction

Aaron Griffith, *Social Construction: Big-G Grounding, Small-g Realization*.

Asya Passinsky, *Social Construction and Meta-ground*.

Week 8, Ground: Anchoring

Brian Epstein, Chapter 6 of *The Ant Trap: Rebuilding the Foundations of the Social Sciences*.

Jonathan Schaffer, *Anchoring as Grounding: On Epstein's The Ant Trap*.

Mari Mikkola, *Grounding and Anchoring: On the Structure of Epstein's Social Ontology*.

Week 9, Essence: Modality

Kit Fine, *Essence and Modality*.

Andreas Ditter, *Essence and Necessity*.

* Kit Fine, *The Logic of Essence*.

Week 10, Essence: Skepticism

Nathan Wildman, *Against the Reduction of Modality to Essence*.

Timothy Williamson, *Essences, Heuristics, and Metaphysical Illusions*.

Week 11, Essence: Contingentism

Trevor Teitel, *Contingent Existence and the Reduction of Modality to Essence*.

Qichen Yan, *Grounding, Contingentism, and the Reduction of Metaphysical Necessity to Essence*.

Week 12, Essence: Knowledge

Mark Jago, *Knowing What It Is*.

Boris Kment, *Essence and Modal Knowledge*.

Week 13, Essence: Explanation

Shamik Dasgupta, *Metaphysical Rationalism*.

Martin Glazier, *Essentialist Explanation*.

Jon Erling Litland & Taylor-Grey Miller, *Towards an Inferentialist Account of Essentialist Explanation*.

Week 14, Essence: Social Properties

Rebecca Mason, *Social Kinds Are Essentially Mind-Dependent*.

Dee Payton, *Searching for Social Properties*.

Week 15, Essence: Uniessentiality

Charlotte Witt, Chapter 3 of *The Metaphysics of Gender*.

John Horden and Dan López de Sa, *Gender Essentialisms*.