

## PHIL 6330 – Metaphysics

1028 Brown Hall

Tues., 4:00-6:30

[james.v.martin@wmich.edu](mailto:james.v.martin@wmich.edu) (3011 Moore Hall, by appointment)

**Required Texts:** *Norms and Necessity* (Thomasson)

All other readings will be online

**Course Description:** This course will provide an introduction to historical and contemporary approaches to modality in metaphysics. We'll aim to be historically careful during that portion of the course, but the primary goal is to make sense of where particular contemporary problems come from and to recognize the strengths and weaknesses of previous attempts to handle them. The (roughly) second half of the course will involve us in working through Amie Thomasson's 2020 book *Norms and Necessity*. As Thomasson's account is a descendant of so-called linguistic accounts, we'll inevitably be crossing into the territory of philosophy of language quite often.

### Schedule and Readings:

Week 1 Jan. 12 We'll begin with an overview of some of the key questions and topics to be discussed in the course, along with a review of several important distinctions. We'll then start our more detailed investigation of these themes with Aristotle.

- [1] Aristotle, *Prior Analytics* I.1-3
- [2] Aristotle, *Prior Analytics* I.5-6
- [3] Aristotle, *Prior Analytics* I.8-12
- [4] Aristotle, *Prior Analytics* I.13-22
- [5] Aristotle, *Metaphysics* Θ.3-4
- [6] Aristotle, *De Interpretatione* 13

[1] lays out the basic definitions employed in Aristotle's syllogistic and offers an initial characterization of modal propositions. [2] presents the non-modal portion of the syllogistic, while [3] and [4] present the "apodectic" and "problematic" syllogistic respectively. (There's still no consensus about how exactly to understand [3] and [4]. The logician Jan Łukasiewicz, e.g., suggested that they were "almost incomprehensible." Just dip into them and try to see what Aristotle is up to there.) [5] addresses an argument that only the actual is possible. [6], among other things, explains two senses of 'possible' in Aristotle. (Most commentators don't pay special attention to Aristotle's remarks on the 'admissible' here since he appears to treat it as being equivalent with the 'possible'.)

Week 2 Jan. 19 The next important stop on our historical survey is the approaches Hume and Kant take in order to deal with questions related to modal epistemology.

- [1] Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* 1.3.14
- [2] Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* 1.2.2
- [3] Kant, Letter to Herz
- [4] Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* B1-B30

[5] Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* A218-226/B265-274

In [1], Hume draws his famous conclusion that we can't come to know about "necessary connexions" (if any exist). [2] relates conceivability and possibility in a now-familiar way. [3] is an important letter from Kant's correspondence that discusses how we might know that our concepts can really be instantiated at all. [4] is the introduction to the second edition of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. It contains his influential characterization of the analytic/synthetic and a *priori*/*posteriori* distinctions. In [5], Kant considers the relation between the possible, the actual, and the necessary as modes of judgment.

Week 3 Jan. 26

In the work of Carnap and C.I. Lewis, the founder of modern modal logic, the necessary, the *a priori*, and the analytic are all identified. (Rejecting Kant's synthetic *a priori* knowledge was important for Carnap and other members of the positivist movement.) This week, we'll look at how this identification is motivated and argued for, while tracking the development of the notion of "analyticity" from Kant through Carnap. Since Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*-era views play a major role in inspiring the thought of Carnap, we'll spend a bit of time discussing them as they relate to necessity and logical truth as well.

[1] Carnap, *Meaning and Necessity* §2

[2] Carnap, *Meaning and Necessity* §39

[3] C.I. Lewis, A Pragmatic Conception of the *A Priori*

[4] Carnap, Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology

[5] Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* §§1-3

[6] (optional) Friedman, Logical Truth and Analyticity in Carnap's "Logical Syntax of Language"

In [1], Carnap defines the concept of "*L*-truth," which he intends to capture what we ordinarily refer to as "logical or necessary or analytic truth" (note that he's identifying the necessary and the analytic here explicitly). [2] presents Carnap's understanding of various modalities, as well as an argument that whatever is necessary is necessarily necessary. In [3], C.I. Lewis outlines a theory of the *a priori* similar to Carnap's that also makes the analytic, the *a priori*, and the necessary turn out to be coextensive. [4] is probably Carnap's most widely read and discussed paper. Pay special attention to the section on "Linguistic Frameworks" and the role they play in answering questions in metaphysics. [5] gives us enough of Wittgenstein's views about the world and our ways of representing it to enable us to understand his "picture theory of meaning" and the influence it had on Carnap's thinking. [6] discusses many of the issues we'll be focusing on in class as they relate to Carnap's difficult work *The Logical Syntax of Language*. It's optional, but it may be helpful background to our meeting.

Week 4 Feb. 2

In a series of papers and book chapters, Quine offers a number of influential criticisms of the work of Carnap and the very idea of *de re* modality. Our aim this week will be to understand and evaluate these criticisms as well as to appreciate their continued relevance.

[1] Quine, Two Dogmas of Empiricism §§I-IV

[2] Quine, Three Grades of Modal Involvement

[3] Quine, *From a Logical Point of View*, chapter VIII

The first four sections of [1] contain Quine's influential critique of the analytic/synthetic distinction, which plays a central role in Carnap-style accounts of necessity as based on analyticity. [2] and [3], among other things, question the intelligibility of *de re* modality. These are difficult papers, but do your best to at least get a sense of the main points Quine is trying to make in them. To that end, I encourage you to not get too caught up in the more formal aspects of these pieces. Here are a few notes about Quine's symbolism that might help make the going a little less tough though. Quine uses the symbol ' $\supset$ ' for material implication, which is often written as ' $\rightarrow$ ' in more modern texts. ' $(x)$ ' and ' $(\exists x)$ ' are the quantifiers "for all  $x$ " and "for some  $x$ " respectively. You'll see Quine using so-called dot notation now and then. You can think of a dot as something like a single parenthesis used to group together symbols. E.g.,  $p \supset p \vee q$  suggests  $p \supset (p \vee q)$ , which we'd write more fully as  $p \supset (p \vee q)$ , *not*  $(p \supset p) \vee q$ , which would be written instead as  $p \supset p \cdot \vee q$ . (Unfortunately, Quine uses just a dot for conjunction as well, but context makes it clear which is intended.) ' $\hat{x}(\varphi(x))$ ' means the class of all things  $\varphi$  is true of. ' $(\iota x) \varphi(x)$ ' is read as "the  $x$  such that  $\varphi(x)$ ."

Week 5 Feb. 9 Many philosophers attribute the rebirth of metaphysics in contemporary analytic philosophy to the work of Kripke. This week, we'll focus on excerpts from the *Naming and Necessity* lectures, as well as an interesting addendum to these talks, in order to make sense of what many take to be the definitive conceptualization of the major distinctions we've been discussing continually thus far.

- [1] (*optional*) Kripke, Quantified Modality and Essentialism
- [2] Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, Lecture I (excerpt)
- [3] Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, Lecture II (excerpt)
- [4] Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, Lecture III (excerpt)
- [5] Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, Addendum (b)

[1] is a direct response to some of Quine's criticisms of *de re* modality discussed last week. (Kripke actually wrote this paper in the early 60s while he was a student in one of Quine's classes at Harvard.) [2] gives Kripke's characterization of the analytic/synthetic, necessary/contingent, and *a priori/a posteriori* distinctions. It also further addresses Quinian worries about *de re* modality; David Lewis's theory of possible worlds; and the contingent *a priori*. [3] contains some remarks on the so-called necessity of identity. [4] offers discussion and examples of the necessary *a posteriori*. In [5], Kripke suggests a "clue" for the understanding of the necessary *a posteriori* in general.

Week 6 Feb. 16 Having completed a quick "greatest hits" tour of the general subject of modality, we'll compile a list of some modal puzzles and their solutions to check the work of Thomasson against as we move on to her book going forward.

- [1] Fine, Essence and Modality (excerpt)
- [2] Fine, Necessity and Non-Existence (excerpt)
- [3] Salmon, The Logic of What Might Have Been (excerpt)
- [4] Williamson, *Modal Logic as Metaphysics*, Chapter 1

Kit Fine's [1] has been hugely influential in motivating attempts to disentangle claims about essences from modal properties. In this excerpt, he gives an argument that seems to show that we shouldn't understand essential properties simply as those an entity possesses of necessity. [2] presents Fine's "puzzle of possible non-existence." In a series of articles of which [3] is a part, Nathan Salmon argues against the **4** axiom that states what is necessary is necessarily necessary. The excerpt from [3] presents the main form of this argument. In [4], Timothy Williamson makes a case for the surprising conclusion that every possible thing is a necessary thing.

Week 7 Feb. 23 This week we'll finally begin our engagement with Thomasson's book. We'll discuss the supposed advantages of the normativist understanding of modal claims; review some of the pre-history of normativism; and aim to evaluate how well some common objections to variants of conventionalism have been overcome.

[1] (*optional*) *Norms and Necessity*, Introduction

[2] *Norms and Necessity*, Chapter 1

[3] Quine, *Truth by Convention*

[4] Sider, *Reductive Theories of Modality* (excerpt)

The introduction to *Norms and Necessity*—the optional [1]—lays out some of the work modality is supposed to do in contemporary metaphysics and characterizes the two main schools of understanding modal claims we'll be focusing on: the descriptivist and the normativist accounts. [2] provides a brief history of non-descriptive approaches to modality and diagnoses why these views have largely (and unjustifiably) been abandoned. [3] and [4] present what are often thought to be the most devastating objections to conventionalism-like theories of modality. In [3], Quine suggests that there's a regress problem for conventionalism about logic; in [4], Sider argues that conventionalism fails to make, e.g., " $2 + 2 = 4$ " necessarily necessary. If the Thomasson account is to get anywhere, it'll have to have convincing replies to these points in hand.

Week 8 Mar. 2 Having fended off some prominent objections to linguistic approaches to modality, Thomasson goes on this week to further flesh out her modal normativism by considering the function and use of modal language.

[1] *Norms and Necessity*, Chapter 2

[2] Austin, *How to Do Things With Words*, Lectures I-II

[3] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* §§185-242

[4] (*optional*) Thomasson, *Ontology Made Easy*, Chapter 2

In [1], Thomasson starts making the case for why modal claims might be useful and for an understanding of the role they might play in stating and negotiating the semantic rules governing the usage of other of our terms. Thomasson is here continuing her case against the idea that modal claims aim to describe features of the world. In the first lecture of [2], Austin introduces the notion of a "performative utterance" as part of his project of disabusing philosophers of their belief that saying something is primarily aimed at stating something. This is another version of the so-called "descriptive fallacy" that Thomasson is battling. The second lecture of

[2] discusses dimensions along which performative utterances can be evaluated and criticized. [3] contains Wittgenstein's main reflections on rule-following. Given that Thomasson's treatment of modal claims essentially connects them with semantic rules, we ought to have some conception of rules and the potential difficulties they raise if we want to have a clear picture of the account's foundations. [4] is a long chapter from an earlier work by Thomasson that presents her conception of the kinds of rules that we negotiate and state using modal language.

Week 9 Mar. 9 This week we'll see Thomasson's response to the so-called Frege-Geach problem that's been promised since the first chapter of the book.

[1] Geach, Assertion  
[2] *Norms and Necessity*, Chapter 3  
[3] Prior, The Runabout Inference Ticket

In [1], Geach raises a problem that he believes is encountered any account of language—modal or otherwise—that only tells us what the function/use of that language is. If we only understand modal terms when, for example, they're being used to get us to pay attention to some semantic rule or another, how are we supposed to make sense of the same terms when they're not doing this kind of advocating or attention-directing (e.g., when they occur in the antecedent of a conditional)? [2] provides Thomasson's answer to this question. She aims to discharge the duty Geach demands of giving meanings to modal terms in all contexts via an appeal to an inferential role semantics for 'necessary' and 'possibly.' [3] is a short note that raises some questions about how inferential role can be co-opted to give meaning to a term.

Week 10 Mar. 16 In this week's main reading, Thomasson continues to respond to objections to her modal normativist position. We'll be discussing how the view makes sense of the *de re* and *a posteriori* necessities that any theory of modality must account for at this point.

[1] *Norms and Necessity*, Chapter 4  
[2] (optional) Jackson, *Language, Names, and Information*, Chapter 1  
[3] Jackson, *From Metaphysics to Ethics*, Chapter 3

[1] presents Thomasson's take on the Kripke/Putnam examples of apparently *de re* and *a posteriori* necessities. Her approach generally appeals to semantic rules for the use of names, so she's forced to argue against several theories of naming that claim Kripke's picture as an ancestor. The optional [2] is a useful overview of contemporary descriptivist views of naming that reject the kind of response to Kripke most troublesome for Thomasson. [3] presents some of the basic ideas of the 2-dimensionalist response to Kripke's examples, which Thomasson suggests is often parallel to her own view. This line of thought will serve as a useful object of comparison. (Since much of our discussion will presuppose the material from 5.[4], you might want to review this excerpt from Lecture III of *Naming and Necessity* as well.)

Week 11 Mar. 23 We'll hear Thomasson's final replies to objections this week before moving on to consider some of the purported ontological advantages of the view.

- [1] *Norms and Necessity*, Chapter 5
- [2] (optional) Ludwig, *De Re Necessities*
- [3] Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds*, Chapter 1.1-3
- [4] *Norms and Necessity*, Chapter 6

In [1], Thomasson considers and responds to the objections that (i) there are object-language semantic rules that aren't necessary; (ii) there are necessities that aren't object-language semantic rules; and (iii) rules themselves can only be understood in modal terms and so the account is circular. The optional [2] is an unpublished piece that Thomasson refers to off-and-on throughout her book. It's worth our having at least a brief look at his take on these issues. Discussions of "ontological advantages" in modal metaphysics often presuppose the basics of David Lewis's *On the Plurality of Worlds*. In [3], Lewis gives an overview of his modal realism and presents its application to modality and counterfactual thinking. [4] gives Thomasson's account of why her view is preferable to one that posits robust modal features in the world or one that commits to a plurality of real, but inaccessible, alternate worlds.

Week 12 Apr. 6 One of the main payoffs a linguistically-based account of modal claims promises is a relatively straightforward account of how we know facts about the modal landscape. We'll see Thomasson's version of modal epistemology this week.

- [1] *Norms and Necessity*, Chapter 7
- [2] Yablo, *Is Conceivability a Guide to Possibility?*
- [3] van Inwagen, *Modal Epistemology*

In [1], Thomasson compares her account of how we know modal claims to some other recent accounts. In particular, she examines Barbara Vetter's disposition-based view, and Timothy Williamson's counterfactual-based approach. She finds both to be problematic, and then goes on to explain how her own account does a better job of meeting the "integration" and "reliability" challenges. [2] is an early important contemporary discussion of a conceivability-based account of modal epistemology, which Thomasson dismisses without much discussion despite there seeming to be clear connections with this kind of view and her own. Yablo's paper deals with the apparent difficulty for this kind of view posed by Kripke's *a posteriori* necessities, which appear to be conceivable other than they are. [3] presents an argument that suggests belief in modal claims is often unjustified. It's an important work in the area of "modal skepticism," and responds directly to Yablo.

Week 13 Apr. 13 Thomasson suggests that the primary motivator of all her metaphysical work is a desire to explain how it's possible to do metaphysics without relying on any bizarre faculties or special "metaphysical" insights. We'll hear about how her modal normativism justifies the traditional methodological approach within this corner of analytic metaphysics this week.

- [1] (optional) Nolan, *Method in Analytic Metaphysics*
- [2] Tahko, *An Introduction to Metametaphysics*, Chapter 8
- [3] *Norms and Necessity*, Chapter 8
- [4] (optional) Price, *Metaphysics After Carnap: The Ghost Who Walks?*

In [1], Daniel Nolan gives an overview of a variety of important methodological assumptions in contemporary metaphysics. He also outlines some general constraints on metaphysical theorizing. [2] contains a general discussion of the role of intuitions and thought experiments within analytic metaphysics. [3] presents Thomason's account of how her view makes sense of and answers metaphysical questions from internal as well as external perspectives. She argues that it's a major benefit of her view that the traditional method of relying on intuitions and thought experiments (as discussed in the Tahko reading) finds a natural justification in her understanding of modality. [4] contains some reflections on the state of metaphysics after the Carnap/Quine dispute we discussed early in the semester and suggests that Carnap's critique of robust metaphysics remains unanswered.

Week 14 Apr. 20 Student presentations

We'll begin wrapping up by spending some time with our closing thoughts about *Norms and Necessity*. Then, each of you will have the chance to give a roughly 5 minute presentation on the basic idea of your final papers. The plan is just for you to get some feedback from your peers and figure out places where you might need to focus more of your attention and so on as you finish up your paper for the course.

**Assignments:**

Paper Prep.	10%	Paper-topic proposal and bibliography	Due: Apr. 16
Précis	10%	Précis of a recent article dealing with one of our topics	Due: Apr. 16
Participation	10%	Regular attendance and participation is expected	
Final Paper	70%	Roughly 15-20 page seminar paper	Due: Apr. 23

**Accommodations:** Any student with a documented disability who needs to arrange reasonable accommodations must contact me and the appropriate Disability Services office at the beginning of the semester. The two disability service offices on campus are: Disabled Student Resources and Services (269) 387-2116 and the Office of Services for Students with Learning Disabilities (269) 387-4411.

**Academic Honesty:** You are responsible for making yourself aware of and understanding the university's [policies and procedures](#) that pertain to Academic Honesty. If there is reason to believe you have been involved in academic dishonesty, you will be referred to the Office of Student Conduct. You will be given the opportunity to review the charge(s). If you believe you are not responsible, you will have the opportunity for a hearing. You should consult with me if you are uncertain about an issue of academic honesty prior to the submission of an assignment.

**Grading:** The grading for this course will be based on the following scale.

A	[92.5, 100]
BA	[87.5, 92.5)
B	[82.5, 87.5)
CB	[77.5, 82.5)
C	[72.5, 77.5)
DC	[67.5, 72.5)
D	[60, 67.5)
E	[0, 60)