

Philosophy 741: Metaontology
Fall, 2016

Instructor: Phillip Bricker

Office: 370 Bartlett Hall

e-mail: bricker@philos.umass.edu

Course website: <http://blogs.umass.edu/bricker/teaching/philosophy-741-metaontology/>

Office hour: Wednesday 3-4, and by arrangement

Course Requirements: Two short expository papers (4-6 pages), a presentation (20-30 minutes), and a term paper (15-20 pages). Short papers each count 20% of the grade; the presentation counts 10%, and the term paper counts 50%. Constructive class participation can boost your grade in borderline cases.

Distribution Credit: Metaphysics.

Readings: All readings are either available on-line or will be made available on the course website, address above. (The readings are password protected; e-mail me if you have forgotten the password.) You may, however, want to purchase the anthology Some of the readings in the second half of the course will come from the anthology *Metametaphysics* (edited by Chalmers, Manley, and Wasserman); I recommend it if you like to purchase books.

Brief Course Description: For the first four weeks or so of the course, we will focus on the traditional problem of ontological commitment, focusing on Quine and approaches inspired by Quine. As we will see, there are three rather different ways of developing a “Quinean” criterion for ontological commitment that ties ontological commitment to the quantifier. And there is a generalization of the Quinean approach that I will call the “entailment approach.” We will also consider whether and how criteria for ontological commitment apply to ordinary language. For the next four weeks or so we will look at non-Quinean, but realist, approaches to ontology that invoke truthmakers or grounding. These approaches have in common that they accept a deep distinction between what is fundamental to reality, and what is derived; and they see the project of ontology as directed towards what is fundamental, and how what is fundamental “explains” everything else. Authors we will read include Fine, Schaffer, and Cameron. I will be especially interested in the question: do we need a primitive grounding (or in-virtue-of) relation. For the last four weeks or so, we will look at deflationary approaches to ontology, and to metaphysics more generally: (neo-)Carnapian approaches (Hirsch, Yablo); (neo-)Fregean approaches (Wright, Hale); easy ontology (Thomasson). We will end by looking at “maximalist” approaches (Belaguer, Eklund). I myself favor an approach of this sort that is in some respects deflationary, but in others robustly realist.

I have written a monograph on ontological commitment that is on my website (and is the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry for “Ontological Commitment”). I will make use of this where appropriate, primarily during the first four weeks of the course. But we will also cover a lot of