

Metaphysics of Modality

Lecturer: Maja Malec

Email: MalecM@ceu.edu

Department of Philosophy, CEU

Course Level: MA and PhD Philosophy

2 US credits/4 ECTS credits

Winter 2023–2024

Tuesdays, 8:50–10:30

Room: D-105

Introduction

The course offers an overview of this interesting but complex topic. We will first familiarize ourselves with different types of modalities (alethic, epistemic, and deontic) and then limit our attention to alethic modalities (metaphysical, natural, conceptual, logical, and so forth). How are they connected, and can they be unified? Finally, we will focus on metaphysical modality and its source. We will critically discuss several interpretations representative of various approaches (reductive and non-reductive, realist and anti-realist, and so forth). Interpretations from the second half of the previous century are usually set within the framework of possible worlds, so the fundamental question becomes the nature of possible worlds. Recent interpretations tend to tackle the issue of the source of metaphysical modality directly, and of special importance here is the relationship between metaphysical necessity and essence. Is essence reducible to necessity or is necessity grounded in essence?

Learning outcomes

By the end of this course students will be able to recognize different types of modalities and their connections. They will have a good grasp of the issues concerning metaphysical modality and of the main interpretations of its source. They will be able to clearly state the advantages and disadvantages of each and argue for their preferred interpretation.

Content and format of classes

The required readings listed below, which are not available online, will be posted on Moodle. There students will also find a list of background and further readings for each topic as well as a short introductory comment with some discussion questions to help students prepare for the class. The classes will involve mostly discussions and some lecturing.

For understanding the topic some knowledge of modal logic is required. I will prepare a quick overview for those who need it in the introductory class. For those who would like to learn more, a list of textbooks will be posted on Moodle.

Week Schedule

Week 1 Introduction

Overview of the course, its content, and requirements; the basics of modal logic.

Garson, James (2023). "Modal Logic", Sections 1–9, 16. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2023 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2023/entries/logic-modal/>

Nelson, Michael (2023). "The De Re/De Dicto Distinction", Supplement to "Propositional Attitude Reports." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2023 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2023/entries/propositional-attitude-reports/>

Part 1 Various types of modality

In this part of the course, we will get acquainted with various modal concepts and ascertain their interconnections, with a focus on metaphysical modality.

Week 2 Modal jungle

Short passages from various authors, defining or explaining various kinds of modalities (on Moodle).

Week 3 Unification of alethic modalities

Fine, Kit (2005). "The Varieties of Necessity," in *Modality and Tense: Philosophical Papers*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, pp. 235–260.

Week 4 Metaphysical modality – challenge

Priest, Graham (2021). "Metaphysical Necessity: A Skeptical Perspective," *Synthese*, 198 (Suppl. 8), pp. 1873–1885. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-018-1885-6>

Part 2 Metaphysical modality and possible worlds

In this part of the course, we will shortly discuss (1) the interpretation of metaphysical modality in terms of possible worlds and (2) the ontological status of possible worlds.

Week 5

Divers, John (2002). *Possible Worlds*, Part I "Introduction." London and New York: Routledge, pp. 1–40.

Week 6

Lewis, David (1973). *Counterfactuals*, 4.2 "Possible Worlds". Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, pp. 84–91.

Stalnaker, Robert (1984). *Inquiry*, Ch 3 "Possible Worlds." Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, pp. 43–58. Reprinted in *Ways a World Might Be: Metaphysical and Anti-Metaphysical Essays* (2003), Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 25–39.

Lewis, David (1986). *On the Plurality of Worlds*, "The Thesis of Plurality of Worlds" (pp. 1–5), "Isolation" (pp. 69–81); "Plenitude" and "Actuality" (pp. 86–96). Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Part 3 The Relationship between metaphysical necessity and essence

In this part of the course, we will discuss the connection between essence and modality. Should essence be explained in modal terms or is it rather the opposite – metaphysical necessity depends on essence.

Week 7 Critique of the modal account of essence and proposal of the definitional account of essence

Fine, Kit (1994). "Essence and Modality: The Second Philosophical Perspectives Lecture." *Philosophical Perspectives*, 8, Logic and Language, pp. 1–16.

Week 8 Improved modal account

Zalta, Edward N. (2006). "Essence and Modality." *Mind*, 115 (459), pp. 659–693.

Part 4 Modal anti-realism

What if modality is not real or objective? In this part we will consider two proposals in this vein.

Week 9 Humean account of modality

Sider, Theodore (2011). *Writing the Book of the World*, Ch 12 “Modality.” Oxford: Clarendon Press, pp. 266–291.

Week 10 Normative account of necessity

Thomasson, Amie L. (2020). *Norms and Necessity*, Ch 2 “The Function of Modal Discourse.” New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 52–76.

Part 5 Discussion of chosen topics

In the last part of the course, we will discuss two topics chosen together (in Week 7). It could be something we discussed and would like to elaborate further, some of the new theories that were proposed lately, e.g., Barbara Vetter’s potentiality, or some account from the history of philosophy, e.g., Aristotle’s, Descartes’s, Leibniz’s, or even Quine’s criticism of modality. One possibility is also the relevance of epistemology in evaluating modal theories.

Week 11

TBA

Week 12

TBA and short concluding remarks

Requirements

For audit and grade

Students are expected to attend classes, read the required reading for each week, and participate in discussions (a good starting point would be to prepare answers to discussion questions posted beforehand on Moodle).

Background readings are optional, but they are supposed to help students better understand the required reading.

For grade

Students will once during the term prepare a presentation on one of the required readings and a handout. The specifics will be explained at the introductory class and posted on Moodle.

Students will write a final essay of approx. 2,000 words due on April 15; until March 10 they will submit a short description of the paper (max. 500 words). The specifics will be explained in the introductory class and posted on Moodle.

Should the final essay receive a borderline mark, the student’s overall mark will be adjusted according to the student’s in-class performance and participation.

Assessment

In-class presentation with handout: 20%

Final essay: 80%