

## **Metaphysics of Possibility**

Sara Bernstein (sara.bernstein@duke.edu)

Mondays 3:05-5:35pm West Duke 204

What does it mean to say that something is possible? Strictly speaking, is anything possible? What is the relationship between conceivability and possibility? What are the differences between logical, physical, and metaphysical possibility? What are “possible worlds”? What are *impossible* worlds? In virtue of what are other possible worlds similar to our own? In virtue of what is the actual world actual? Do we have epistemic access to what is possible? This seminar will be a David Lewis-heavy introduction to these and other questions about the metaphysics of possibility, as well as its relation to philosophy of mind, causation, logic, and philosophy of language.

### **Course Requirements:**

For undergraduate students:

weekly well-formed questions by email (30%)  
one 8-10 page term paper (40%)  
class participation (30%)

For graduate students:

weekly well-formed questions by email (30%)  
one in-class presentation on a course reading (10%)  
one presentation on your own term paper and term paper (40%)  
class participation (20%)

### **Required Texts:**

David Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds*

...and numerous others, available on the secret course website.

### **Schedule**

Monday, August 27: Introduction to Metaphysics of Possibility

- David Lewis, *Plurality of Worlds*, “A Philosopher’s Paradise”  
(sections 1.1-1.3)

September 3: What are Possible Worlds?

David Lewis, *Plurality of Worlds*, "Paradise on the Cheap" (section 3.1)  
Peter van Inwagen, "Two Concepts of Possible Worlds"

September 10: What makes the actual world actual?

David Lewis, *Plurality of Worlds*, "Actuality" (1.9)  
Olla Solomyak, "Actuality and the Amodal Perspective"

Optional: Jessica Wilson and Adam Murray, "Relativized Metaphysical Modality"

September 17: Actualism

Karen Bennett, "Two Axes of Actualism"  
Iris Einheuser, "Inner and Outer Truth"

September 24: Counterpart Theory

David Lewis, *Plurality of Worlds* "Counterparts or Double Lives?" (4.1-4.3)  
Ted Sider, "Beyond the Humphrey Objection"

October 1: Counterpart Theory versus Transworld Identity

Alvin Plantinga, "Transworld Identity or Worldbound Individuals?"  
Saul Kripke, Lecture II from *Naming and Necessity*

October 8: Essentialism

Kit Fine, "Essence and Modality"  
LA Paul, "The Context of Essence"

October 15: **No class.** (Fall Break)

October 22: Modal Recombination

David Armstrong, *A Combinatorial Theory of Possibility* (excerpt)  
David Lewis, *Plurality of Worlds*, "Plentitude" (1.8)

October 29: Conceivability and Possibility

David Chalmers, "Does Conceivability Entail Possibility?"  
Stephen Yablo, "Coulda, Woulda, Shoulda"

November 5: **No class.** Makeup day: Monday, December 3.

November 12: Conceivability and Possibility in Metaphysics of Mind:

David Chalmers, "Can Consciousness be Reductively Explained?" (excerpt from *The Conscious Mind*)

Optional: Shaun Nichols, "Imaginative Blocks and Impossibility"

November 19: Impossible Worlds and Counterpossibles

Daniel Nolan, "Impossible Worlds: a Modest Approach"

Berit Brogaard and Joe Salerno, "Why Counterpossibles are Non-Trivial"

November 26: Similarity Metrics Across Worlds

David Lewis, "Counterfactual Dependence and Time's Arrow"

Jonathan Bennett, "Counterfactuals and Temporal Direction"

December 3: Paper Presentations and Review.

A few notes concerning...

#### Plagiarism

Don't do it. It's wrong, it's lazy, and it's antithetical to everything a college education is about. Also, it hurts my feelings.

#### Extensions

Ask.

#### Syllabus Changes

It is possible that topics will be added, removed, or changed on the syllabus. If this happens, it will be announced in class and over email.

#### Ways to Reach Sara, or her Indistinguishable Robot Clone

Email: [sara.bernstein@duke.edu](mailto:sara.bernstein@duke.edu)

Office Hours: 201G West Duke, Monday 2-3pm, or by appointment.

Transworld communication with an on-call counterpart: always.