

**On What is Not  
Fall 2020**

**CUNY, GC: PHIL 76500  
Columbia University: PHIL GR9515**

**Place/Time:** Online. Tuesdays 2pm–4pm. First class, September 8; last class, December 8. Zoom links will be sent out at least half an hour before meetings.

**Extra Classes:** Because of the large number of students, we will be putting on two extra classes per week for enrolled students. (Times to be arranged.) We will teach one each. Students may go to one or other of these. These classes will be driven by questions from students.

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**Office Hours:** Students who wish to talk with us outside class should email to arrange a time for a Zoom chat.

**Description:** It seems clear that in some sense the world contains things that are: people and planets, societies and works of art, and maybe numbers and other abstract objects. Many philosophers have held that it contains, equally, things that are not. But if they are not, how can such things be in the world? Indeed, does the notion of something that is not even make sense? This seminar will investigate. Some of the topics and philosophers we may meet include: Plato on non-being; non-existent objects (Meinong); negative facts (Russell); omissions, absences, and our perception thereof (Sartre, Nyāyā philosophers); nothingness (Heidegger, Nishida); holes, silences, pauses; negative epistemic states; the empty world, the null mereological individual—and what-not.

**Learning Outcomes**

By the end of the course students should be able to think more critically about the issues the course covers, and explain and defend their views on these matters.

**Program:** The first class will be an introduction; the last class will be a wind-up. For the other classes, reading will be set. This will be **distributed the week before**. Reading will be of two kinds: required and optional. You are expected to do the required reading **before the class** and come along prepared to discuss it. Enrolled students are expected to email us a question on the texts they have been reading suitable to be discussed in class. We need to receive this *no later than* the Sunday before the class.

**Assessment:** The grade for the course will be determined by a term paper, due at the end of the semester, exact date to be determined.

### Provisional Schedule

(This may be adjusted as we go along.)

#### 1 September 8 — INTRODUCTORY SESSION. NO READING

#### 2 September 15 — THE SOPHIST ON NON-BEING

- Plato, *The Sophist*, translated by N. P. White, in *Plato. Complete Works*, ed. by J. M. Cooper, Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett, 1997, pp. 235–293; relevant material starts at 236e.

Optional reading:

- Gill, M. (2020), ‘Method and Metaphysics in Plato’s Sophist and Statesman’, in E. Zalta (ed.), *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/plato-sophstate>, esp. Sections 5 and 6.
- Owen, G. E. L. (1971), ‘Plato on Not-Being’, pp. 223–267 of G. Vlastos (ed.), *Plato 1: Metaphysics and Epistemology*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday.
- Varzi, A (ed.), A brief selection of relevant texts from Aristotle and some Medievals.

#### 3 September 22 — NON-EXISTENT OBJECTS

- Quine, W. V. (1948), ‘On What There Is’, *Review of Metaphysics* 48: 21–38; repr. as ch. 1 of *From a Logical Point of View*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Routley, R. (1982), ‘On What There Isn’t’, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 43: 151-178.
- Priest, G. (2008), ‘The Closing of the Mind: How the Particular Quantifier Became Existentially Loaded Behind our Backs’, *Review of Symbolic Logic* 1: 42–55.

Optional reading:

- Marek, J. (2019), ‘Alexius Meinong’, in E. Zalta (ed.), *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/meinong>, esp. section 5.

- Priest, G. (2014), 'Sein Language', *The Monist* 97: 30–442.
- Russell, B (1919), 'The Philosophy of Logical Atomism. V: General Propositions and Existence', *The Monist* 29: 190–206.

#### 4 September 29 — IMPOSSIBILIA

(NB. This is a Monday schedule at the GC, but we will meet anyway.)

- Priest, G. (2020), 'Imagination, Non-existence, Impossibility', pp. 157–165 of S. N. Mousavian and J. Fink (eds.), *The Internal Senses in the Aristotelian Tradition*, Springer, 2020.
- Priest, G. (2000), 'Objects of Thought', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 78: 498-502.

Optional reading:

- Berto, F., and Jago, M. (2018), 'Impossible Worlds', in E. Zalta (ed.), *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/impossible-worlds>.
- Reicher-Marak, M. (2019), 'Non-Existent Objects', in E. Zalta (ed.), *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/nonexistent-objects/>
- Priest, G. (2016), 'Thinking the Impossible', *Philosophical Studies* 173: 2649–66.

#### 5 October 6 — ABSENCES

- Sartre, J. P. (1984), *Being and Nothingness*, tr. H. Barnes, New York, NY: Washington Square Press, ch. 1. [Omit sections III and IV if you don't know much about Hegel and Heidegger. Section V will become relevant when we discuss nothingness.]

Optional reading:

- Sorensen, R. (2015), 'Perceiving Nothings', pp. 542–563 of M. Matthen (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Perception*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Farennikova, A. (2013), 'Seeing Absence', *Philosophical Studies*, 166: 429–454.
- Goldschmidt, T. (2016), 'A Demonstration of the Causal Power of Absences', *Dialectica* 70: 85.

#### 6 October 13 — NYĀYĀ ON ABSENCES

- Ganeri, J. (2019), 'Analytic Philosophy in Early Modern India', in E. Zalta (ed.), *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/legal-reas-prec>, Introduction and Sections 1 and 11.

- Chakrabarti, K. (1978), 'The Nāyaya-Vaiśeṣika Theory of Negative Entities', *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 6: 129–144.

Optional reading:

- Matilal, B. (1968), *The Navya-Nyāya Doctrine of Negation*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, pp. 1–5, 104–108.
- Shaw, J. (1988), 'The Nyāya on Double Negation', *Notre Dame Journal of Formal Logic* 29: 139–54.

## 7 October 20 — NEGATIVE STATES OF AFFAIRS

- Demos, R. (1917), 'A Discussion of a Certain Type of Negative Proposition', *Mind* 26: 188–196.
- Russell, B (1919), 'The Philosophy of Logical Atomism. III: Atomic and Molecular Propositions', *The Monist* 29: 190–206.

Optional reading:

- Molnar, G. (2000), 'Truthmakers for Negative Truths', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 78: 72–86.
- Mumford, S. (2007), 'Negative Truth and Falsehood', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 107: 45–71.
- Barker, S. and Jago, M. (2012), 'Being Positive About Negative Facts', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 85: 117–138.

## 8 October 27 — OMISSIONS AND NEGATIVE EVENTS

- Bernstein, S. (2015), 'The Metaphysics of Omissions', *Philosophy Compass* 10: 208–218.
- Varzi, A. C. (2006), 'The Talk I Was Supposed to Give', pp. 131–152 of A. Bottani and R. Davies (eds.), *Modes of Existence: Papers in Ontology and Philosophical Logic*, Frankfurt, Ontos Verlag.

Optional reading:

- Beebe, H. (2004), 'Causing and Nothingness', in J. D. Collins, N. Hall, and L. A. Paul (eds.), *Causation and Counterfactuals*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, pp. 291–308.
- Lewis, D. K. (2004), 'Void and Object', in J. D. Collins, N. Hall, and L. A. Paul (eds.), *Causation and Counterfactuals*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, pp. 277–290.

## 9 November 3 — HOLES

(NB. This is Columbia holiday, but we will meet anyway.)

- Lewis, D. K., and Lewis, S. (1970), 'Holes', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 48: 206–212; reprinted in D. K. Lewis, *Philosophical Papers. Volume 1*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1983, pp. 3–9.
- Varzi, A. (2019), 'The Magic of Holes', pp. 21-33 of G. Marsico and L. Tateo (eds.), *Ordinary Things and Their Extraordinary Meanings*, Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.
- Casati, R. and Varzi, A. (1994), *Holes and Other Superficialities*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, chs. 2, 3.

Optional reading:

- Lewis, D. K., and Lewis, S. (1996), 'Casati and Varzi on Holes', *Philosophical Review* 105:77-79; reprinted in D. K. Lewis, *Papers in Metaphysics and Epistemology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 183–186 (1999).
- Casati, R. and Varzi, A. C. (2004), 'Counting the Holes', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 82: 23–27.
- Miller, K. (2007), 'Immaterial Beings', *The Monist* 90: 349–371.

## 10 November 10 — HEIDEGGER ON NOTHINGNESS

- Heidegger, M. (1977), 'What is Metaphysics?', pp. 95–112 of D. E. Krell (ed.), *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings*, New York, NY: Harper and Row.
- Carnap, R. (1959), 'The Elimination of Metaphysics Through Logical Analysis of Language', pp. 60–81 of A. J. Ayer (ed.), *Logical Positivism*, New York, NY: The Free Press.

Optional reading:

- Heidegger, M. (1962), *Being and Time*, Oxford: Blackwell, ch. 1.
- Dresser, S. (2020), 'Peak Ellipsis', *Aeon*, <https://aeon.co/essays/heidegger-v-carnap-how-logic-took-issue-with-metaphysics>.

## 11 November 17 — NOTHINGNESS AND THE NULL INDIVIDUAL

- Priest, G. (2014), 'Much Ado about Nothing', *Australasian Journal of Logic* 11: Article 4, <https://ojs.victoria.ac.nz/ajl/article/view/2144>.
- Casati, F., and Fujikawa, N. (2017), 'Nothingness, Meinongianism and Inconsistent Mereology', *Synthese*, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-017-1619-1>.

Optional reading:

- Cotnoir, A., and Varzi, A. C. (2020), *Mereology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, chs 1, 2, esp 2.1.
- Oliver, A. and Smiley, T. (2013), 'Zilch', *Analysis* 73: 601–613.

**12 November 24 — NISHIDA ON NOTHINGNESS**

- Priest, G. (2014), 'Speaking of the Ineffable...', ch. 7 of J. Lee and D. Berger (eds.), *Nothingness in Asian Philosophy*, Milton Park: Routledge.
- Priest, G. (202+), '*Nothingness, the Ground of Reality, Heidegger, and Nishida*', ms.

Optional reading:

- Davis, B. (2019), 'The Kyoto School', in E. Zalta (ed.), *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kyoto-school>, esp. 3.1-3.3.
- Warago, R. (2005), *The Logic of Nothingness*, Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, ch. 4.
- Nishida, K. (2012), 'Basho', pp. 49-103 of J. Krummel and S. Nagamoto (trs.), *Place and Dialectic: Two Essays by Nishida Kitarō*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. WARNING: NOT AN EASY READ.

**13 December 1 — WINDUP SESSION. NO FURTHER READING****14 December 8 — OPTIONAL QUESTION SESSION**