

# The Metaphysics of Propositions: A Philosophy of Mind Seminar

Wednesdays at 9:50–12:15

Room B301, Zhenhua Building

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Scan the QR code to add me on WeChat

## Course Description:

Of all the tools in the philosopher's toolkit, the proposition is among the most widely used. Among its many other roles, a proposition is said to be the thing that we believe, assume, or even perceive. And yet it is entirely unclear what, metaphysically speaking, a proposition is. Is it a set of possible worlds? Or does a set of possible worlds lack the sort of structure a proposition must have to fulfill its theoretical role? If a proposition does have a structure, what is that structure and how does the proposition get it? In this course, we will examine different answers to these questions. But we will try to do so in a way that prioritizes the theoretical role: given that the proposition is supposed to do  $x$ ,  $y$ , and  $z$ , what kind of entity does  $x$ ,  $y$ , and  $z$  best?

This course is a graduate-level seminar in the philosophy of mind. While there are many ways to design such a seminar, I have designed this one to be discussion-based and research-oriented. We will read and discuss one book on the metaphysics of propositions. We will then practice a series of “research activities”, including comprehensive presentations, constructive papers, and reviewer reports.

**Required Texts:** Jeffrey C. King, Scott Soames, and Jeff Speaks's *New Thinking about Propositions* (2015, Oxford University Press)

**Optional Texts:** The literature on propositions is vast. Thankfully, a lot of it can be evaded. But here are some texts that I think cannot be evaded:

- *Inquiry*, written by Robert Stalnaker
- *Frege's Puzzle*, written by Nathan Salmon
- *Propositional Content*, written by Peter Hanks
- *The Routledge Handbook of Propositions*, edited by Adam Russell Murray and Chris Tillman

(I will provide a PDF file of one of these texts if you send me a picture of a happy cat; four pictures gets you four PDFs.)

**Letter Grade Distribution:** In this course I will use the following scale to convert between numerical and letter grades:

96.00 - 100.00	A+	70.00 - 74.99	B-
90.00 - 95.99	A	67.00 - 69.99	C+
85.00 - 89.99	A-	63.00 - 66.99	C
80.00 - 84.99	B+	60.00 - 62.99	C-
75.00 - 79.99	B	00.00 - 59.99	D

**Grade Distribution:** Your overall grade is determined by the following:

Participation	30%
Presentation	20%
Reviewer Report	10%
Paper	40%

**Course Goals:** My goal is to help you become a productive junior researcher. In service to that goal, I offer the following three smaller goals:

- (a) to improve your ability to fruitfully read and discuss contemporary research;
- (b) to develop your ability to produce research in the form of constructive papers;
- (c) to practice some of the research activities attached to the production of such research.

## Assignments

**Participation:** This course is a discussion-based seminar. I will not lecture. Instead, you and I will discuss and think through the reading material together. Consequently, your participation is essential. If you have taken a course of mine before, you know how I think about participation: we should be engaged in a soccer match, not a game of ping-pong. To that end, everyone must come to class prepared to discuss. Being prepared to discuss means, at a minimum, that you have read all of the material, you have come up with questions or thoughts to share, and you are ready to respond to the questions and thoughts shared by your peers.

To help you develop good discussion skills, I will employ a few techniques. First, I will “guide” our discussions by asking questions that should lead us to cover key aspects of the material. Second, I will track who is contributing to the discussion so that everyone can fairly participate. Finally, I will sometimes “cold call” on students, though I promise to do so impartially.

**Paper:** After we finish reading *New Thinking about Propositions*, you will begin writing a constructive paper that engages with one of the issues

presented in the book. As a constructive paper, it should contain the following elements: (i) a review of the literature surrounding the issue, (ii) an original argument for a claim about that issue, (iii) an objection to that argument, and (iv) a reply to that objection. This paper will serve as the basis for the other assignments in this course.

**Presentation:** Sometime during Weeks 10–11, you will give one presentation on the issue you chose to write about. As part of that presentation, you must summarize the “state of the literature” surrounding that issue. Such a summary must include the main positions concerning that issue, who endorses what position, and their reasons for or against endorsement.

**Reviewer Report:** By the end of Week 12, you should have a rough draft of your paper. You will send that rough draft to another student. You will also receive a rough draft from another student. For the rough draft you receive, you are responsible for writing a “reviewer report” for that paper, as if it were being submitted to a journal for publication. As part of the reviewer report, you must constructively suggest some of the ways in which the paper could be improved.

## Reading List and Schedule:

Below is a tentative schedule of the material that we will cover throughout the semester.

**Acronyms:** NTP =<sup>df</sup> King, Soames, and Speaks’s *New Thinking about Propositions*

**Week 1:** NTP Introduction (Optional)

**Week 2:** NTP Chapters 1 + 2 (approximately 20 pages)

**Week 3:** NTP Chapter 3 (approximately 22 pages)

**Week 4:** NTP Chapter 4 (approximately 24 pages)

**Week 5:** NTP Chapter 5 (approximately 20 pages)

**Week 6:** NTP Chapter 6 (approximately 36 pages)

**Week 7:** NTP Chapter 7 (approximately 20 pages)

**Week 8:** NTP Chapter 8 (approximately 19 pages)

**Week 9:** NTP Chapter 9 (approximately 19 pages)

**Week 10:** NTP Chapters 10–12 (Optional)

**Week 11:** NTP Chapters 10–12 (Optional)

(**NB:** if you take a picture of yourself next to a statue at East Lake and send it to me before Week 5, I will give you 1 extra credit point.)