

# Social Ontology

Instructor: Augie Faller  
Location: Dalton Hall 2  
Time: MoWe 10:10AM - 11:30AM  
Office: Old Library 122  
Office Hours: Mo 3–4PM and Th 2–3pm, or by appointment  
Email: afaller@brynmawr.edu

## Course Description

The claim that something is *socially constructed* is often accompanied by the claim that it *isn't real*. And yet it is undeniable that many social constructs have an effect on our daily lives. The value of the stock market, the rulings of the Supreme Court, the daily enforcement of gender norms—how could these not be real? But if the social is real, what is its place in nature? Can it be explained by the non-social, and, if so, how? Should social scientific or historical explanations differ in structure from those of natural science?

We will start with the question of *methodological individualism*: do all social explanations reduce to explanations about individuals? We will then move to the metaphysics of social construction. As we will see, insights from the philosophy of science, e.g., of realism and natural kinds, will form a useful backdrop for reasoning about social kinds. One application will be *social groups*. Social groups are things like teams, the Supreme Court, races, and genders. What kind of thing is a social group? Is it a set, a plurality, or *sui generis*? And, importantly, what role, if any, should political purposes play in answering these questions? We will study these questions both at a general level and in the specific case of social classes like genders and races. Finally, we will take a step back with a meta-metaphysical question: has the emphasis on fundamentality in contemporary metaphysics led metaphysicians to sideline important questions about the non-fundamental?

**Prerequisites:** One philosophy course or permission of instructor.

## Learning Outcomes

By participating in this course, students will be able to:

1. Understand the major positions in several theoretical and applied areas of social metaphysics and philosophy of social science.
2. Critically apply these theories to areas discussed and not discussed in the class.
3. Produce high-quality philosophical writing that meets the field's expectations regarding structure, argumentation, and evidence.

## Course Website

The course Moodle will contain the syllabus, readings, and other materials. It will also have course announcements and individual access to recorded grades.

Two good online reference resources are The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (open access) and Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy (access through the library).

## Evaluation

Assignment	Description	Value
In-class contributions	Students are expected to attend class and to contribute regularly to discussion.	10%.
Presentations	Later in the semester, students will present a reading in pairs.	20%
Summary Paper	Students will practice summary of arguments.	10%
Papers	Three papers, about 5–6 pages each.	60%*

\* The three papers must add up to 60%, but students can choose a value of each paper between 15% and 35% ea. You will choose the value when you submit the paper.

Extensions can be granted on papers, but you need to talk to me a few days in advance.

## Grading

Grades are ultimately a way for me to hold you accountable to yourself. **Please communicate with me about extenuating circumstances you encounter during the semester.** I want every student perform to the best of their ability in this course!

- Extensions will be granted if asked for before the assignment due date with no penalty.
- Late assignments without an extension will be docked 1/3 a letter grade for each day they are late.
- Grades will be rounded at the end of the semester to the nearest whole value.

### Grade breakdown:

Paper 1: 10%

Papers 2–4: Lowest grade worth 15%, middle 25%, highest 30%

Contributions to class (including participation): 20%

Grade	Grade Points	Percentage Range
A	4.0	94–100%
A-	3.7	90–93%
B+	3.3	87–89%
B	3.0	83–86%
B-	2.7	80–82%
C+	2.3	77–79%
C	2.0	73–76%
C-	1.7	70–72%
D	1.0	60–69%
F	0	0–59%

## Notes on Academic Integrity

I regard plagiarism as a very serious matter. In this class, plagiarism consists of work taken partially or entirely from an uncited source (online content, a peer, a published article, etc.)

and assumed as your own. If I have reasons to suspect plagiarizing, I will ask that you report yourself to the Bryn Mawr Honor Board. See the Bryn Mawr Honor Code and Honor Board Hearing Process in the Student Handbook for more information.

## **Suggested Inclusiveness Guidelines**

The words we use can have an impact on others beyond what we intend. This applies especially when it comes to important social identities and categories like race, gender, ethnicity, nationality, sexuality, and ability (among others). Racially inclusive behavior avoids assuming someone's racial or ethnic identity as well as knowledge or characteristics based on identity. Race- and gender-inclusive language uses words that recognize and affirm how people describe, express, and experience their race and gender. Gender-inclusive language avoids assuming a male speaker ('freshman', 'upperclassman', 'mankind', etc.), erasing non-binary gender identifications ('men and women'; do use 'Latinx' instead of 'Latino/a'), and conflating biological sex with gender expression ('women have a uterus'). Race-inclusive language avoids using racially-loaded terms except when explicitly discussing the term itself (and even then please be mindful of how your speech affects other students).

Here are some helpful guidelines for how to be more inclusive in our speech and writing:

<https://content-guide.18f.gov/our-style/inclusive-language/>

Following these guidelines is essential to fostering an inclusive environment at Bryn Mawr.

## **Students with a Disability**

Students with Disabilities: Your access in this course is important. I encourage any students who think they may need accommodations in this course because of the impact of a learning difference to meet with me early in the semester. Students who attend Bryn Mawr should also contact Access Services Coordinator Deborah Alder at [dalder@brynmawr.edu](mailto:dalder@brynmawr.edu) or 610-526-7351 as soon as possible, to verify their eligibility for reasonable accommodations. Haverford Students should contact the Office of Disabilities Services at 610-896-1324 or [hc-ads@haverford.edu](mailto:hc-ads@haverford.edu).

## **Schedule of Readings**

All readings will be available through the course Moodle.

### **1 Explanation and Ontology in the Social Sciences**

#### **Week 1: Laws of History and Methodological Individualism**

**M:** Introduction to Course

**W:** Brian Epstein, *The Ant Trap*, Chapter 1

Optional: John W. N. Watkins, "Historical Explanations in the Social Sciences"

## **Week 2: Methodological Individualism cont.**

**M:** LABOR DAY

**W:** Brian Epstein, *The Ant Trap*, Chapters 2 and 3  
Optional: Wilhelm Windelband, "History and Natural Science"

## **Week 3: Methodological Individualism cont.**

**M:** Richard W. Miller, "Methodological Individualism and Social Explanation"  
Optional: Steven Lukes, "Methodological Individualism Reconsidered"

**W:** Sally Haslanger, "Failures of Methodological Individualism: The Materiality of Social Systems"

\*\*\*Summary assignment due between Wednesday and Friday end of day\*\*\*

## **Week 4: Social Construction**

**M:** Ian Hacking, *The Social Construction of What*, Chapter 1  
Optional: Ian Hacking, *The Social Construction of What*, Chapter 2

**W:** Sally Haslanger, "Social Construction: The Debunking Project", up to page 318 (rest optional)  
Optional: Sally Haslanger, "Ontology and Social Construction"

## **Week 5: Social Construction Cont.**

**M:** John Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality*, Chapter 1

**W:** Amie Thomasson, "Foundations for a Social Ontology"

## **Week 6: Artifact Kinds**

**M:** Crawford Elder, *Real Natures and Familiar Objects*, Chapter 7 "Artifacts and Other Copied Kinds"

**W:** Amie Thomasson, "Realism and Human Kinds"

\*\*\*First paper due between Wednesday and Friday end of day\*\*\*

## **Week 7: Fall Break**

Enjoy the break!

## **Week 8: The Ontology of Groups**

**M:** Gabriel Uzquiano, "The Supreme Court and Its Members"

**W:** Katherine Ritchie, "Social Structures and the Ontology of Social Groups"

## **Week 9: Marxism and Class**

**M:** Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*

**W:** Erik O. Wright, "Class Boundaries in Advanced Capitalist Societies"

## **2 Gender and Race**

### **Week 10: The Metaphysics of Gender**

**M:** Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, Excerpt

**W:** Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Sex/Gender: Biology in a Social World*, Selection

### **Week 11: The Metaphysics of Gender Cont.**

**M:** Sally Haslanger, "Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them to Be?"  
Optional: Elizabeth Barnes, "Realism and Social Structure"

**W:** Talia Mae Bettcher, "Trans Women and the Meaning of "Woman""

### **Week 12: Metaphysics of Gender Cont.**

**M:** Robin Dembroff, "Real Talk on the Metaphysics of Gender"

**W:** Catch up day

\*\*\* Paper 2 due between Wednesday and Friday end of day\*\*\*

### **Week 13: The Metaphysics of Race**

**M:** Sally Haslanger, "Tracing the Sociopolitical Reality of Race"  
Optional: Charles Mills, *Blackness Visible*, Chapter 3

**W:** Chike Jeffers, "Cultural Constructionism"

### **Week 14: The Metaphysics of Race, Cont.**

**M:** Quayshawn Spencer, "How to Be a Biological Racial Realist"

**W:** Joshua Glasgow, "Is Race an Illusion or a (Very) Basic Reality?"

### **Week 15:**

**M:** TBD

**W:** TBD

\*\*\*Final assignment due during finals week\*\*\*