# *Contemporary Debates in Metaphysics*

Theodore Sider, John Hawthorne, Dean W. Zimmerman, eds.

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## Chapter descriptions

**Chapter 1: Abstract entities (Chris Swoyer, Cian Dorr)** "Concrete" entities are the entities with which we are most familiar: tables, chairs, planets, protons, people, animals, and so on. "Abstract" entities are less familiar: numbers (for example, the number 7), properties (for example, the property of *being round*), and propositions (for example, the proposition *that snow is white*). Do abstract entities really exist? No one has ever seen, touched, or heard an abstract object; but Chris Swoyer argues that they exist nevertheless. Cian Dorr argues that they do not.

**Chapter 2, Causation and laws of nature (John W. Carroll, Jonathan Schaffer)** It just *happened* to be true, let us suppose, that everyone who ate at the Mar-T Cafe on April 8, 1990, wore a blue shirt. Other events are not so "accidental". For example, it's no accident that when the cook let go of the french fries, they fell into the fryer. In some sense, the fries *had to fall*, given that the cook let them go. When an event is *caused*, and when there is a law of nature governing its occurrence, it is in some sense *necessary* that the event occurs. Where does this necessity come from? Jonathan Schaffer argues that the necessity boils down to mere regularities. The necessity of the fries' falling boils down to the fact that fries everywhere, and every time, in fact do fall when they are released. John Carroll argues that there is more to it than this; causal and lawful necessity go beyond mere regularity.

**Chapter 3, Modality and possible worlds (Phillip Bricker, Joseph Melia)** The twentieth century writer Rex Stout wrote detective fiction, but he might have become a real detective instead. In some other possible world, he really does become a detective. In yet another world, Stout has yet another occupation: he is a salesman. For every occupation that Stout *could have had*, there is a possible world in which Stout *has* that occupation. Many things vary between different possible worlds: Stout has different occupations, different clothes, different hair color, different friends, and so on. The only things that hold constant in all possible worlds are the *necessary truths*: in every possible world, Stout is either a salesman or he isn't. Philosophers have found it convenient to speak in this way of "possible worlds", but what are possible worlds, really? Phillip Bricker argues that we should take possible worlds talk at face value. Other possible worlds, containing other Rex Stouts with their different occupations, clothes, and friends, really exist. Joseph Melia disagrees; we should instead regard talk of possible worlds as really being talk of more mundane entities, for example *stories* that describe the alternate occupations of Rex Stout and other nonactual matters.

**Chapter 4, Personal identity (Judith Jarvis Thomson, Derek Parfit)** You were once a young child. *You*, not someone else, did the things that you remember doing many years ago. But the person you are now is very different from the person you were then. Your experiences have changed you psychologically, and you have changed physically as well. What makes a person the same over time? What sorts of changes to a person count as changes to the *same person*? After all, there are some alterations that *destroy* a person, for example melting a person down into a kind of person soup. Judith Jarvis Thomson argues that a person remains the same so long as her physical body continues intact. Derek Parfit argues instead for a more psychological criterion for being the same person.

**Chapter 5, Time (Dean Zimmerman, J. J. C. Smart)** Time and space are analogous in various ways. Objects exist in both time and space; events can be separated by distances in both time and space; matter moves continuously through space and time. In recognition of the analogies, physicists lump the two together under the heading of "spacetime". How far does this analogy go? Very far indeed, answers J. J. C. Smart. Just as *objects that are distant in space are real* (for instance, Mars), objects that are distant in time are real (for instance,

dinosaurs). Just as there is nothing special about *here* (beyond the fact that it is the place where *I* am), there is nothing special about *now* (beyond the fact that it is the time when I am). Dean Zimmerman rejects these alleged analogies. The present is special; it is the only time whose events and objects are truly real.

**Chapter 6, Persistence (Theodore Sider, John Hawthorne)** Chapter 5 dealt with certain facets of the analogy between time and space; this chapter deals with a further facet. Objects that take up space are *spread out in space*. An office building, for example, is spread out over a certain region of space. If you look at a part of this region, the upper half, say, you will find a mere part of the building: the part consisting of the upper floors. Lower parts of the region contain other parts of the building, namely, the lower floors. Furthermore, if the building is dirty *at* the top and clean *at* the bottom, this is because of features of the parts: the upper parts are dirty and the lower parts are clean. According to Theodore Sider, objects that last over time are analogous; they are *spread out in time*. If the building was built in 1900 and torn down in 2000, it was only a mere part of the building — a *temporal part* — that existed in 1900. Separate temporal parts existed in 1901, 1902, and so on, just as separate parts of the building (the floors) are located in different regions of space. And if the building was originally built white but later painted red, the building was initially white because its earlier temporal part was white, and it was later red because its later temporal part was red. Some philosophers wholly reject the idea that objects are spread out in time; they claim that temporal parts do not exist. John Hawthorne rejects only part of the idea. While he agrees that temporal parts exist, he does not agree that the building was first white and later red because of the colors of its temporal parts. Instead, its temporal parts had its colors because of the colors had by the building itself. Hawthorne goes on to deny other components of the picture that objects are "spread out in time".

**Chapter 7, Free will (Robert Kane, Kadri Vihvelin)** Suppose that science could predict everything that happened in the world, down to the last motion of the last subatomic particle. Science could then predict exactly what a human being would do, in any circumstance. At first glance, this clashes with our ordinary picture of ourselves as *free*. Your choice to read a book on metaphysics was a free one; you could have spent the day watching television instead. Kadri

Vihvelin argues that there is in fact no such clash. Given a proper understanding of what free will is, a person can be free even if she is determined to do what she does. Robert Kane disagrees. If we are to have free will, the laws of nature cannot be fully deterministic; they cannot fully specify how each and every object behaves.

**Chapter 8, Mereology (James van Cleve, Ned Markosian)** A house is made up of bricks, wooden boards, wires, bathroom tiles, and so on. These bricks, boards, wires and tiles are *parts* of the house; the house is a single object that is *composed* of them. After the house is torn down, and the bricks, boards, wires, and tiles have been carted off to various junkyards, they obviously no longer compose a *house*. But do they compose *something*? This something would, like a deck of cards or a galaxy, be a *scattered object*, since its parts would not be in close proximity to each other. James van Cleve says yes, the scattered bricks, boards, wires, and tiles do compose something. Indeed, *any* objects whatsoever compose a further object. Ned Markosian says no. Although the bricks, boards, wires, and tiles composed something before they were scattered (namely, the house), after they were scattered they composed nothing at all.

**Chapter 9, Metaontology (Eli Hirsch, Matti Eklund)** Metaphysicians often disagree about *ontology*, about *what exists*. They disagree over whether there exist abstract objects (chapter 1), possible worlds (chapter 3), past and future objects (chapter 5), temporal parts (chapter 6), composite objects (chapter 8), and other entities. But some find these disagreements baffling. Suppose philosopher X argues that holes exist. According to him, there exist holes in pieces of cheese, shirts, and so on. Philosopher Y disagrees. She says that all that exist are the pieces of cheese and the shirts; to say that "there are holes" in these objects is just a figure of speech. Now, a third philosopher, philosopher Z, is mystified by this debate. Nothing is really at issue in the debate between philosophers X and Y, thinks philosopher Z. They are merely using words differently. Eli Hirsch defends the outlook of philosopher Z (as applied to debates over temporal parts and composite objects); Matti Eklund argues against this outlook.