

PHILOS 762: Metaphysics  
**Social Ontology**

Fall 2018  
McMaster University

Instructor: Dr. Megan Stotts

Office: University Hall 314

Office hours: Tuesday 1:00–2:00pm, Thursday 11:00am–12:00pm, or by appointment

Office phone: 1-905-525-9140, ext. 24125

Email address: [stottsm@mcmaster.ca](mailto:stottsm@mcmaster.ca)

**Course Meetings:** Wednesdays 11:30am–2:00pm, location TBA

**Course Website:** Important information about the course, as well as some of the assigned readings, will be posted on Avenue to Learn.

**Course Description:**

Social ontology is the study of the nature and structure of the social world. It includes, for instance, work on the nature of social conventions, social norms, social institutions, collective attitudes, and social groups. With particular attention to social institutions and social groups, we will read and discuss two recent books in the field: Raimo Tuomela's *Social Ontology* (2013) and Brian Epstein's *The Ant Trap* (2015). As we'll see, Tuomela gives a key role to humans' collective intentionality in his metaphysics of social reality, whereas Epstein argues that social ontology ought to be less anthropocentric. Social ontology also has connections to and implications for many other subfields, such as normative social philosophy, action theory, philosophy of social science, philosophy of language, and philosophy of law, and we will explore some of those connections as we proceed.

**Course Objectives:**

1. Gain a clear understanding of the theories and arguments of the authors we study, as well as a clear understanding of points of agreement and disagreement among them.
2. Improve students' ability to argue for their own agreement or disagreement with the authors we study.
3. Improve students' philosophical communication skills (both spoken and written).

**Required Texts:**

*Social Ontology: Collective Intentionality and Group Agents*, by Raimo Tuomela. ISBN: 9780190612382

*The Ant Trap: Rebuilding the Foundations of the Social Sciences*, by Brian Epstein. ISBN: 9780199381104

Additional required readings will be posted on Avenue to Learn.

**Course Evaluation:**

Participation in seminar discussion: 10%

Reading responses: 35%

Term paper: 55%

**About Participation:**

Marks for participation will be awarded on the basis of both quantity and quality of contributions to class discussion. If you would like your mark to be in the A range, it would be advisable to ensure that you participate in class discussion multiple times each week. Contributions that are particularly successful in advancing our class discussion will count more in your favor. Participation marks are not awarded for merely attending class, and multiple absences will negatively affect your participation mark (in the absence of extenuating circumstances).

**About the Reading Responses:**

For 10 of our seminar meetings, please submit a 1–2 page (double-spaced) response to one of the assigned chapters or articles. Your response may include a bit of summary, but it should be primarily critical—you might raise an objection to an author's view, provide new support for an author's view, or consider multiple ways of interpreting a difficult passage or aspect of the reading and argue that one of those interpretations is correct. Responses will be graded on the basis of the quality of your argument and your level of engagement with the reading. The responses are due (via email) at 8:00am on the day we will discuss that reading. I will often choose one or two people to informally present their reading responses during class, so you should always be prepared to do this. At the end of the term, your lowest mark will be dropped, and your remaining 9 marks will be averaged together to determine your overall score for the responses. It is perfectly acceptable for your lowest mark to be a 0—that is, you can either skip one of the responses without penalty, or do all 10 and keep the best 9 scores.

**About the Term Paper:**

A term paper of 12–17 double-spaced pages will be due at 11:59pm on December 10. Papers should be submitted via email. A draft (which may be a partial draft) will be due on December 5 for an in-class workshop.

**Course Policies:**

- 1. Assignment Policies:** Extensions will be granted on a case-by-case basis. In the absence of an extension, late reading responses and term papers will be penalized 5% as soon as the deadline passes, and an additional 5% for every additional day they are late.
- 2. Academic Accommodations of Students with Disabilities:** Students who require academic accommodation must contact Student Accessibility Services (SAS) to make arrangements with a Program Coordinator. Academic accommodations must be arranged for each term of study. Student Accessibility Services can be contacted by phone 905-525-9140 ext. 28652 or e-mail [sas@mcmaster.ca](mailto:sas@mcmaster.ca). For further information, consult McMaster University's Policy for [Academic Accommodation of Students with Disabilities](#).
- 3. Changes to the course outline:** The University reserves the right to change dates and/or deadlines etc. for any or all courses in the case of an emergency situation or labour disruption or civil unrest/disobedience, etc. If a modification becomes necessary, reasonable notice and communication with the students will be given with an explanation and the opportunity to comment on changes. Any significant changes should be made in consultation with the Department Chair. The instructor reserves the right to make changes to this course outline as well. Any changes by the instructor will be announced via email or in class.

**Academic Integrity Statement:**

You are expected to exhibit honesty and use ethical behaviour in all aspects of the learning process. Academic credentials you earn are rooted in principles of honesty and academic integrity.

Academic dishonesty is to knowingly act or fail to act in a way that results or could result in unearned academic credit or advantage. This behaviour can result in serious consequences, e.g. the grade of zero on an assignment, loss of credit with a notation on the transcript (notation reads: "Grade of F assigned for academic dishonesty"), and/or suspension or expulsion from the university.

It is your responsibility to understand what constitutes academic dishonesty. For information on the various types of academic dishonesty please refer to the Academic Integrity Policy, located at [www.mcmaster.ca/academicintegrity](http://www.mcmaster.ca/academicintegrity)

The following illustrates only three forms of academic dishonesty:

1. Plagiarism, e.g. the submission of work that is not one's own or for which other credit has been obtained.
2. Improper collaboration in group work.
3. Copying or using unauthorized aids in tests and examinations.

## *Schedule*

**September 5:**

Searle, "Collective Intentions and Actions"

Searle, *Speech Acts*, Ch. 3

**September 12:**

Searle, "A Taxonomy of Illocutionary Acts"

Searle, *Making the Social World*, Ch. 5

**September 19:**

Tuomela, *Social Ontology*, Intro–Ch. 2

**September 26:**

Tuomela, *Social Ontology*, Ch. 3–4

**October 3:**

Tuomela, *Social Ontology*, Ch. 5–6

***Midterm Recess*****October 17:**

Tuomela, *Social Ontology*, Ch. 7–8

**October 24:**

Tuomela, *Social Ontology*, Ch. 9

Bennett, *Making Things Up* (selections)

Schaffer, “On What Grounds What”

**October 31:**

Epstein, *The Ant Trap*, Intro–Ch. 4

**November 7:**

Epstein, *The Ant Trap*, Ch. 5–9

**November 14:**

Gilbert, “Walking Together”

Epstein, *The Ant Trap*, Ch. 10–12

**November 21:**

List and Pettit, “Group Agency and Supervenience”

Epstein, *The Ant Trap*, Ch. 13–14

**November 28:**

Epstein, *The Ant Trap*, Ch. 15–end

**December 5:**

In-class term paper workshop