Properties have been one of the more interesting, important and contentious issues in metaphysics since at least Aristotle’s criticism of Plato. But what are Aristotle’s views about properties? The question is surprisingly difficult to answer. Some scholars characterize Aristotle as rejecting Platonic realism, the view that properties are universals which can exist uninstatiated, in favour of so-called Aristotelian realism, the view that properties are universals which only exist instantiated. Others ascribe to Aristotle conceptualism, the view that properties are universals which only exist as mental entities. Still others see Aristotle as advocating trope theory, the position that properties are individuals. And still others believe that Aristotle adheres to nominalism, the view that, strictly speaking, there are no properties. In this seminar, we’ll ask whether any of the ascriptions of these –isms to Aristotle are true. This will require care in both the historical and the philosophical issues.

In the first third of the course, we’ll survey the historical issues by a close reading of passages from Plato’s Parmenides and Aristotle’s Categories, Physics and Metaphysics. In the second third of the course, we’ll survey the philosophical positions taken on properties in contemporary metaphysics by reading Armstrong’s Universals: An Opinionated Introduction. After this background work, we’ll be able to address the central question of the seminar, connecting the historical and the philosophical issues in the final third of the course. Students should come away from the seminar with improved facility with both textual interpretation and philosophical argumentation.

Texts

The bookstore will have

McKeon ed. The Basic Works of Aristotle.

Assessment

The course is a seminar. Participation is crucial both for the seminar to go well and for you to benefit from the seminar. Preparation through doing the assigned reading before each meeting is, in turn, important for being able to participate. Although dense, the reading will be of a below average number of pages for a seminar.

1. A very short weekly email. Each week a short email, asking a substantive question or identifying a problem you’ve had on the weekly reading, is due before the beginning of each class. The aim here is to
encourage participation. This is an ungraded requirement but the final grade can be mildly influenced, positively or negatively, by the quality of the weekly papers and/or participation in discussion.

2. A roughly 5 pg. **short paper** due in class on November 5 and worth 1/3rd of the final grade. The aim here is to develop skills of textual interpretation and philosophical argumentation. The short paper may be on either a historical or a philosophical topic.

3. A roughly 12 pg. **term paper**, worth 2/3rd of the final grade, due December 9 at 2 PM in the Philosophy Department office, Assiniboia 2-40. The term paper may be on either a historical or a philosophical topic, but one of your short and term papers should be on a historical topic. I can’t read drafts but please come talk to me about your topic. Late papers will not be accepted without a documented medical excuse.

**Prereq’s**

Like any 400-level course, the prerequisite for the course is “successful completion of 6 units of course weight in Philosophy, including a 200-level course.” However, highly recommended background for this course is at least one of a metaphysics or ancient philosophy survey, such as 200, 230 or 333 at the University of Alberta.

**Policy**

Of course, all work must be your own and all sources must be clearly cited. But plagiarism isn’t just quoting stuff without citation. If the *thought* expressed by your sentence isn’t your own, you must say who conveyed that thought to you. And don’t rely on web sources; most of them suck. The University of Alberta asks me to tell you that it “is committed to the highest standards of academic integrity and honesty. Students are expected to be familiar with these standards regarding academic honesty and to uphold the policies of the University in this respect. Students are particularly urged to familiarize themselves with the provisions of the Code of Student Behaviour (online at [www.ualberta.ca/secretariat/appeals.htm](http://www.ualberta.ca/secretariat/appeals.htm)) and avoid any behaviour which could potentially result in suspicions of cheating, plagiarism, misrepresentation of facts and/or participation in an offence. Academic dishonesty is a serious offence and can result in suspension or expulsion from the University. Policy about course outlines can be found in § 23.4(2) of the University Calendar.”

**Selected Bibliography**

In the first third of the course, we’ll survey the historical issues by a close reading of the relevant material in Plato and Aristotle. We’ll read Plato’s *Parmenides* 126-35 and Aristotle’s *Categories* 1-5, *Physics* 1.7 and 2.1-3, and *Metaphysics* 7. In the second third of the course, we’ll survey the philosophical positions taken on properties in contemporary literature by reading Armstrong, D.M. *Universals: An Opinionated Introduction*. After this background work, we’ll be able to address the central questions of the seminar, connecting the historical and the philosophical issues.

We’ll begin with an overview of Plato, looking at *Parmenides* 126-35. Some believe that Aristotle came to certain of his views about predication from reflection on the Third Man Argument in Plato’s *Parmenides* 131e-32b and *Aristotle’s Peri Ideon* 83.34-85.13. For the interpretation of Plato see
Vlastos, G. 1954 “The Third Man Argument in the Parmenides,” *Philosophical Review* 63: 319-349. We’ll discuss section IA, pp. 319-29. This and the other *Philosophical Review* and *Mind* articles can be accessed through a campus server at [www.jstor.org](http://www.jstor.org).

Sellars, W. 1955 “Vlastos and the Third Man” *Philosophical Review* 64: 405-37. See also Vlastos’s reply immediately following the Sellars article.


We’ll next do an overview of Aristotle’s *Categories* 1-5. For the alleged influence of the Third Man Argument on Aristotle see:


We’ll next study in turn two of Aristotle’s central metaphysical notions, ontological dependence and homonymy. Nonsubstances and universal substances depend on, and are inseparable from, individual substances. Aristotle often refers to ontological dependence by the word separation and its cognates. On the topics of separation and ontological dependence see:


Aristotle uses the notion of separation elsewhere. For example, Aristotle criticizes the Platonists for separating Platonic Ideas from sensible particulars, for example, at *Peri Ideon* 84.23-4 and *De Anima* 432a14. And he holds that the soul is inseparable from the body at *De Anima* 414a20.

Important notions in Aristotle’s metaphysics are homonymy and focal meaning. See:


A claim of homonymy is made in many places. For example, he argues for the homonymy of goodness at *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.6 and the homonymy of body at *De Anima* 412b. One of these would make a good essay topic.

Next we’ll turn to applications of these notions in Aristotle. There’s a formidable literature on whether nonsubstantial individuals are recurrent – found in more than one subject. Much of this debate centers on whether nonsubstantial individuals are separable from individual substances. See:


In *Metaphysics* Zeta, Aristotle considers several candidates for the substance of a thing. Good, brief overviews of recent scholarly work the *Metaphysics* include


After an overview of Zeta, we’ll focus on a few of the moves made in this work most relevant to our themes. Some initial questions concern the relation between this work and the *Categories*. In the *Categories*, Aristotle holds that individual substances are primary substances yet in Zeta he argues that the form of a thing is its substance. Does Zeta reject the *Categories* position? Or does Zeta complement the *Categories* by asking a different line of question?

Zeta 3 rejects matter as a candidate for substance despite its plausibility as subject, since it is neither separate nor a this. For discussion, we’ll look at


In Zeta 6, Aristotle considers essence as a candidate for substance and argues that a thing is identical with its essence. For discussion, we’ll look at


Aristotle argues throughout Zeta that substance is form yet he argues, in Zeta 13, that no universal is a substance. There’s a humongous literature on this. Some ascribe to Aristotle the view that there are individual or particular forms; see the M. Frede 1987 article listed above. Others claim that Zeta 13 excludes some universals but not others; see, for example,


In the second third of the course, we’ll survey the philosophical positions taken on properties in contemporary literature by reading Armstrong, D.M. *Universals: An Opinionated Introduction*. After this background work, we’ll be able to address the central questions of the seminar, connecting the historical and the philosophical issues, in the final third of the course.