

SEAN NALTY

Doctor of Philosophy
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Syracuse University
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AREAS OF SPECIALIZATION

Metaphysics, Philosophy of Science, Metametaphysics

AREAS OF COMPETENCE

Ethics, Value and Wellbeing

EDUCATION

PhD., *Syracuse University* (2025)

Dissertation: “In Defense of Metaphysics: A Defense of the Value and Methodological Soundness of Metaphysics Understood as Structural Modeling”

Committee: Mark Heller (Advisor, Syracuse), Erica Shumener (Syracuse), Josh Hunt (Syracuse), Karen Bennett (Rutgers), Kris McDaniel (Notre Dame)

B.A., *Western Washington University* (2017)

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

- as Instructor of Record:
 - PHI 107: Theories of Knowledge and Reality — fall 2022
 - PHI 197: Human Nature — spring 2023, summer 2023, fall 2023, spring 2024, summer 2024
- as Teaching Assistant:
 - PHI 107: Theories of Knowledge and Reality — spring 2020 (J. Dowell)
 - PHI 192: Introduction to Moral Theory — spring 2021 (K. Singh)
 - PHI 197: Human Nature — fall 2019 (D. Bzdak), fall 2020 (C. Noble)

TEACHING AWARDS AND TRAINING

- Outstanding Teaching Assistant Award, *Syracuse University* (2024)
 - university-wide competitive award for excellence in teaching by a teaching assistant or graduate-student instructor
- Certificate in University Teaching, *Syracuse University, Graduate School* (2023)
 - awarded upon completion of the Future Professoriate Program and submission of a qualifying teaching portfolio
- Future Professoriate Program, *Syracuse University, Graduate School* (2022 – 2023)
 - annual lecture and workshop series focused on effective pedagogy and classroom skills

RESEARCH / ACADEMIC AWARDS AND FELLOWSHIPS

- Summer Dissertation Fellowship, *Syracuse University* (2022)
- University Fellowship, *Syracuse University* (2018—2019; 2021—2022)
- Outstanding Graduate Award, *Western Washington University* (2017)

PRESENTATIONS:

- “Species Essence with Evolved Character” — Meeting of the APA, Central Division, 2025
- “What is Metaphysics, Anyway?” — Syracuse Philosophy Working Papers Forum, 2024
- “Species Essence with Evolved Character” — Syracuse Philosophy ABD Workshop, 2024
- “The Aesthetic Argument Against Scientific Realism” — Syracuse Philosophy ABD Workshop, 2022

SERVICE AND VOLUNTEER POSITIONS:

- Session Chair — Meeting of the APA, Central Division, 2025
- Teaching Materials Organizer, *Syracuse Philosophy Graduate Student Organization* (fall 2019 — spring 2020)
- Submission Reviewer, *Syracuse University Graduate Philosophy Conference* (2019 – 2024)
- Commentor, *Syracuse University Graduate Philosophy Conference* (2019, 2024)

ADDITIONAL EMPLOYMENT

Indexer, *Fallenness and Flourishing* by Hud Hudson (Oxford University Press, 2021)

Proofreader, *Paradoxes of Time Travel* by Ryan Wasserman (Oxford University Press, 2017)

WORKS IN PROGRESS

- A paper, adapted from the first chapter of my dissertation, in which I explicate and defend a novel conception of metaphysics as characteristically concerned with the construction and comparison of models of worldly structure [in progress].
- A paper, adapted from the fourth chapter of my dissertation, in which I argue that the results of science indirectly constrain metaphysical theorizing [in progress].
- A short paper in which I argue against an intuitive-seeming account of the grounds of restrictedly general facts [completed draft].
- A paper in which I propose to clarify a persistent ambiguity in the philosophy of physics literature by means of a (loosely) Kantian-inspired division of *realist theories of the wave function* into ‘two-world’ and ‘two-aspect’ theories [in progress].
- A paper in which I argue that scientists’ practice of evaluating theories partly on the basis of aesthetic considerations undermines realism [completed draft].
- A paper in which I explore what I take to be a novel account of biological species based upon a technical, Millikan-inspired notion of ‘evolved character’ [completed draft].

GRADUATE COURSEWORK (* = AUDITED)

- LLEMM
 - PHI 651: Logic and Language (M. Rieppel)
 - PHI 687: Proseminar: Language, Epistemology, Metaphysics, and Mind (K. Edwards)
 - PHI 690: Independent Study: Mereology and Composition (M. Heller)
 - PHI 690: Independent Study: Vagueness and Fundamentality (M. Heller)
 - PHI 750: Philosophy of Action (K. Frost)
 - PHI 750: Consciousness (R. van Gulick)
 - PHI 750: Propositions (K. Edwards)
 - PHI 840: The Metaphysics of Ordinary Objects (K. McDaniel)
 - PHI 840: Free Will (M. Heller)
 - PHI 840: Ontological Commitment (M. Heller)*
- VALUE
 - PHI 693: Proseminar: Ethics and Political Philosophy (B. Bradley and D. Sobel)
 - PHI 860: Animal Ethics (B. Bradley)
 - PHI 860: Practical and Theoretical Reasoning (H. Paakkunainen)
- HISTORY
 - PHI 617: Proseminar: History of Philosophy (K. Richardson)
 - PHI 730: History of German Political Philosophy (F. Beiser)
 - PHI 730: Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason (F. Beiser)

PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS

American Philosophical Association (APA)

Philosophy of Science Association (PSA)

REFERENCES:

Mark Heller,

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Professor and Dissertation Advisor,

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Associate Professor of Philosophy, Syracuse University,

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Assistant Professor of Philosophy, Syracuse University,

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

The aim of this dissertation is to provide a defense of the value and methodological soundness of contemporary analytic metaphysics against a variety of recent anti-metaphysical and scientific critiques.

In Chapter 1, I attempt to answer (at least provisionally) a surprisingly difficult question: *what is metaphysics, anyway?* I suggest seven adequacy constraints on an answer to this question, and then test five historically and contemporarily influential candidate characterizations of metaphysics against these constraints. Finding each candidate lacking, I close by proposing an *ecumenical* conception of metaphysics — what I call the *structural modeling conception* — according to which metaphysics aims to furnish a *structural model* of mind-independent reality. It is this conception which is the subject of my subsequent defense.

Chapter 2 engages with a range of influential critiques of metaphysics united less in content than in a shared *quizzical* (Yablo, 1998) or *dismissive* (Bennett, 2009) attitude toward traditional metaphysical disputes. Borrowing a taxonomy from Bennett, I group these critiques into three broad camps: *antirealism*, *semanticism*, and *epistemicism*. After critically evaluating representatives of each camp, I conclude that none succeeds in demonstrating first-order metaphysical inquiry, conceived according to the structural modeling conception, to be inherently defective or misguided. Key to establishing this conclusion is the notion of *conditional epistemic progress*, which, in the context of the structural modeling conception, consists in the identification of *candidate world-structures*.

In Chapter 3, I turn my attention to a separate family of metaphysical critiques motivated by commitment to a thoroughgoing *philosophical naturalism*. Unlike the criticisms discussed in the previous chapter, the naturalist critic is motivated by a desire not to *dispense with* first order metaphysics, but rather to *reform* it. According to the naturalist critic, contemporary analytic metaphysics suffers from a disordered relationship with empirical science and a misplaced faith in *a priori* methods of inquiry, both of which may be corrected by assimilating the scope and methodology of metaphysics to that of science. My response is twofold: First, I argue that naturalistic metaphysics — conceived as *an alternative* to traditional metaphysics — is a problematically ambiguous and underspecified ideal. Second, I argue — in the spirit of Williamson (2013) — that the distinction between the *a priori* and *a posteriori* is neither deep nor explanatory, and that at least some of the alleged epistemic deficiencies imputed to metaphysics by the naturalist critic are present also in scientific methodology.

Finally, in chapter 4, I provide a sketch of what I take to be the proper relationship between science and metaphysics. According to this sketch, science both *expands* and *constrains* the space of metaphysical theorizing, while metaphysics both *interprets* and *unifies* scientific theories. The picture that emerges blurs the traditional boundary between science and metaphysics, and justifies a minimal naturalism according to which science and metaphysics are engaged in a single, unified project with a well-defined methodology.