



AUPHI 200, 1B01
Metaphysics: Theories of Reality
Winter 2024

Instructor: Tom Oberle

E-mail: toberle@ualberta.ca

Office Hours: Online, Fridays 10:00am – 12:00pm (see eClass) or by appointment.

Course location, days, and times: AU C014, Tuesdays and Thursdays, 4:00pm – 5:30pm.

Prerequisites: It is your responsibility as a student to ensure that you have the appropriate prerequisites for the course.

The University of Alberta respectfully acknowledges that we are situated on Treaty 6 territory, traditional lands of First Nations and Métis people.

Course Information

Course Description:

Have you ever wondered why the universe exists rather than nothing at all? Some philosophers have argued God must exist in order to explain the world. Others think a naturalistic explanation will do just fine. Or have you ever wondered if the ultimate nature of reality is different from how it appears to us? Ancient Indian philosophers certainly thought so. For philosophers in the Advaita Vedānta tradition, the world that we perceive around us is merely an illusion (*māyā*). The only thing that really exists is *Brahman*, the eternal, infinite, and divine ground of all being. Furthermore, you as an individual are not distinct from Brahman. The self (*ātman*) and Brahman, according to Advaita, are identical. What about the human mind? Have you ever wondered whether consciousness is a purely physical brain process? Or is it something non-physical and distinct from the brain? Can the universe itself be conscious?

If you have ever wondered about any of these questions, then you've been wondering about *metaphysical* questions! Over the course of five units, we'll explore these questions (and more!) from a variety of different perspectives, time-periods, and cultures. Some of the answers we'll explore to these questions will be familiar to you. But some will be novel and perhaps even a bit strange! Perhaps contrary to your first impression, these metaphysical issues have significant relevance for your life as well. In the final unit of this course, we'll explore the implications that the different views of reality we'll explore in this course have for the meaning and purpose of human life.

Though metaphysics can be a challenging discipline, it is highly rewarding because it expands the limits of our thought and allows us to consider alternative possibilities and diverse views of the world. As philosopher Bertrand Russell [wrote](#),

“Philosophy, though unable to tell us with certainty what is the true answer to the doubts which it raises, is able to suggest many possibilities which enlarge our thoughts and frees them from the tyranny of custom...it removes the somewhat arrogant dogmatism of those who have never travelled into the region of liberating doubt, and it keeps alive our sense of wonder by showing familiar things in an unfamiliar aspect”.

Course Objectives and Expected Learning Outcomes:

By the end of this course, students will be able to:

1. **Accurately explain** key aspects of philosophical theories and arguments by completing short writing assignments,
2. **Identify** key features and ideas of philosophical texts by completing unit quizzes,
3. **Read and comprehend** classical and contemporary philosophical texts,
4. **Analyze, evaluate, and compare** philosophical theories and arguments by writing well-organized, well-argued, and clearly articulated essays.

THINKERS

As Critical Thinkers, Augustana students can:

- read, view, listen, and reflect carefully and extensively
- consider ethics
- engage in issues from a variety of perspectives, cultures, or traditions, acknowledging different ways of knowing
- approach problems using evidence, reasoning, and creativity
- Thinkers reflect and reason through complex ideas and discoveries that move our world forward.



RESEARCHERS

As Researchers, Augustana students can:

- design and execute projects from conception to fruition
- analyze and synthesize data, concepts, and ideas
- assert their own perspective on a topic through argument, presentation, or interpretation
- use information literacy skills to assemble and evaluate the most suitable materials
- Researchers find and assemble ideas that enable us to explore new possibilities.

COMMUNICATORS

As Communicators, Augustana students can:

- clearly convey ideas, creative work, and research in an artistic or scholarly manner
- present information confidently, showing command of oral, digital, written, visual, or artistic expression
- employ effective strategies tailored to engage specific audiences
- write logically and grammatically
- Communicators convey ideas confidently and strategically in ways that connect to their audiences.

COLLABORATORS

As Collaborators, Augustana students can:

- work well in groups and are prepared to take leadership roles

- support, motivate, and build a team from within
- collaborate and be sensitive to social dynamics, especially when under pressure
- demonstrate an openness to other points of view, actively listening and fully engaging with the ideas of others
- Collaborators engage with, support, and motivate others to develop constructive and creative ideas.

Texts: All readings are posted online to eClass.

Instructional Support Fees: N/A

Grade Distribution:

Component	Weighting	Date
Attendance	10%	N/A
2 (take-home) essays	28% (14% each)	March 10 April 7
4 in-class reading responses (RR)	12% (3% each)	February 15 March 7, 28 April 11
5 in-class unit quizzes (UQ)	20% (4% each)	February 8, 29 March 14 April 4, 18
Final Exam	30%	TBD

The weighting of each assignment represents the percentage of the final grade that each assignment is worth. Your instructor will provide detailed instructions and expectations in class and on eClass for each assignment. The two paper assignments are due at 11:59pm on their respective due dates and must be submitted online via eClass. All other assignments will be completed during class.

Course Work:

Attendance

Attendance for this course is mandatory. However, 3 ‘free’ absences are allowed throughout the course, no questions asked. If a student misses 4 classes or more, they will receive 0% for the attendance component of their final grade. If a student uses all three of their free absences, they may only have additional excused absences for serious and legitimate reasons, such as serious and/or prolonged illness or personal crisis. *Please see ‘Missed In-Class Assignments’ below.*

Reading Responses

Students will have the opportunity to complete 4 in-class reading responses, each worth 3% of their final grade. The assignments are meant to encourage students to do the readings prior to class, think philosophically about the issues addressed in the readings each given week, and to communicate philosophical ideas clearly and effectively in writing. Assignments will occur on a Thursday at **the start** of class and will pertain to the readings for that day. For each assignment, students will respond to a prompt provided by the instructor asking them to explain and evaluate a portion of the assigned readings.

Responses should be roughly 250-300 words or two paragraphs in length. Students will write their assignment in an exam booklet provided by the instructor without the aid of notes or any other resources.

Unit Quizzes

Students will have the opportunity to complete 5 quizzes at the end of each unit in this course, each worth 4% of their final grade. Quizzes will occur on a Thursday at the **end of class** and will be comprehensive for their respective units. Each quiz will be comprised of multiple choice and short-answer questions. Responses to short-answer questions should be roughly 3-4 sentences in length. These assignments are meant to encourage students to memorize and comprehend key ideas and concepts for each unit, a basic skill required to do well on paper assignments and the final exam.

Missed In-Class Assignments

Please note there will be no opportunities to make up for missed in-class assignments (reading responses and unit quizzes). The reason for this policy is that the answers to reading responses and unit quizzes will either be posted to eClass shortly after the assignment deadline or else will be discussed explicitly during class, and hence posted to eClass in the slides.

Essays

Students will write two papers for this course, roughly 900-1100 words in length, each worth 14% of their final grade. *These are take-home assignments.* For each paper assignment, the instructor will provide several topics to choose from in advance of the deadline. The instructor will also provide detailed instructions on eClass and in class for how to write a philosophy paper.

Final Exam

The final exam will be in-person and will be comprised of several long-answer questions selected from a larger pool of questions, which will be released to students **1 week** prior to the final exam date.

Policy for Late Papers

Late paper assignments will be penalized 3% per day for 1 week (7 days) including weekends and holidays, **after which late papers will not be accepted.** So, if you scored 100% (A+) on your assignment and you submitted your assignment 7 days late, a penalization of 21% would translate

to receiving a B+. If you scored 80% (A-), an assignment submitted 7 days late would receive a D+, etc.

Your instructor will grant extensions for paper assignments if you contact your instructor in advance of the assignment deadline (that is, not on the day the paper is due) and your reasons for seeking an extension are **serious** and **valid**. These may include sickness, religious observance, personal crisis, etc. Forgetting to submit an assignment or having a busy schedule are not valid reasons for seeking an extension.

Academic Integrity

The University of Alberta 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 please familiarize yourselves with:

Code of Student Behaviour

(<https://www.ualberta.ca/governance/resources/policies-standards-and-codes-of-conduct/code-of-student-behaviour>) 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. (GFC 29 SEP 2003)

Undergraduate Students' Guide to Academic Integrity (<https://www.ualberta.ca/current-students/academic-resources/academic-integrity/index.html>).

eClass/Evaluative Material

Sample evaluative material will be posted on-line on *eClass*. Go to the U of A or Augustana home page and click the “eClass” link at the top of the page.

Recording of Class Sessions

Audio or video recording of lectures, labs, seminars or any other teaching environment by students is allowed only with the prior written consent of the instructor or as a part of an approved accommodation plan. Recorded material is to be used solely for personal study, and is not to be used or distributed for any other purpose without prior written consent from the instructor.

Policy

Policy about course outlines can be found in <https://calendar.ualberta.ca/content.php?catoid=34&navoid=10107#evaluation-procedures-and-grading-system> of the University Calendar.

Cell Phone Use

Out of respect for the instructor and other students wanting to learn, texting and other cell phone use is not allowed in the classroom.

Determination of Final Grades:

Final grades are assigned by taking the score for each course component and calculating a total course percentage using results on specific assignments that are individually weighted as defined on the course outline. A student's final grade will be converted from a percentage to a letter grade, which will appear on the student's transcript. The final distribution of student grades is not on the basis of a curve or historic distribution; rather, letter grades reflect a student's level of achievement of goals/outcomes in the course. Grades are unofficial until approved by the department chair.

For assignments marked in percentages, the percent, letter grade, and four-point equivalents in this course will be as indicated in the following table:

Descriptor	Percentage Grade	Letter Grade	Four-Point Scale
Excellent	90–100%	A+	4.0
	85–89%	A	4.0
	80–84%	A-	3.7
Good	77–79%	B+	3.3
	74–76%	B	3.0
	70–73%	B-	2.7
Satisfactory	67–69%	C+	2.3
	64–66%	C	2.0
	60–63%	C-	1.7
Poor	55–59%	D+	1.3
Minimal Pass	50–54%	D	1.0
Failure	0–49%	F	0

Course Schedule and Readings:

Week	Dates	Topic	Readings	Assignments
Unit 1: What is Metaphysics?				
1	January 30	Introduction	No assigned reading.	

	February 1	What is Metaphysics and Ontology?	Michael Rea, <i>Metaphysics, The Basics</i> , Chapter 1. Uriah Kriegel, <i>What is Ontology? A Dialogue</i> .	
2	February 6	The Grounding Approach	Jonathan Schaffer, <i>On What Grounds What</i> , Selections.	
	February 8	The Fundamentality Approach	Ted Sider, <i>Writing the Book of the World</i> , Chapter 1: Structure.	UQ 1
Unit 2: Why is There a World?				
3	February 13	Classical Theism	William Lane Craig and J.P. Moreland, <i>Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview</i> , Chapter 26: The Existence of God II.	
	February 15	Axiarchism	Philip Goff, <i>Why? The Purpose of the Universe</i> , Chapter 5: Cosmic Purpose Without God.	RR1
4	February 19-23 Reading week: No Class			
5	February 27	Naturalism	Stephen Maitzen, <i>Against Ultimacy</i> .	
	February 29	Hinduism – Advaita Vedānta	Anantanand Rambachan, <i>The Advaita Worldview</i> , Chapter 6: Brahman as God.	UQ 2

			Śaṅkara's commentary on the Brahma-Sūtra, Section 2.i.32-33.	
Unit 3: Appearance and Reality				
6	March 5	Advaita Vedānta - the ultimate nature of reality.	Anantanand Rambachan, <i>The Advaita Worldview</i> , Chapter 5: Brahman as the World. Śaṅkara's commentary on the Chāndogya Upanisad, Discourse VI, section 1 (pages 291-295).	RR 2 Paper 1 (March 10)
	March 7	Advaita Vedānta – the ultimate nature of reality.	Śaṅkara's commentary on the Brahma-Sūtra, section 2.1.14-17, 19-20 (pages 326 – 339, 345 - 346).	
7	March 12	Advaita Vedānta – the nature of the self (<i>ātman</i>).	Anantanand Rambachan, <i>The Advaita Worldview</i> , Chapter 1: The Human Problem. Katha Upanisad, Sections 1-2 (pages 375 – 387).	UQ 3
	March 14	Advaita Vedānta – the nature of the self (<i>ātman</i>).	Anantanand Rambachan, <i>The Advaita Worldview</i> , Chapter 3: The Nature of the Ātman.	
Unit 4: Mind				
8	March 19	Substance Dualism	René Descartes, <i>Meditations on First Philosophy</i> , Meditations 1-2.	

	March 21	The Mind-Body Problem	Jaegwon Kim, <i>What Could Pair a Soul to a Body?</i>	
9	March 26	Physicalism	Barbara Gail Montero and David Papineau, <i>Naturalism and Physicalism.</i>	
	March 28	Property Dualism	Thomas Nagel, What is it Like to be a Bat?	RR 3
10	April 2	Panpsychism	Thomas Nagel, <i>Panpsychism.</i>	
	April 4	Cosmo-panpsychism	Philip Goff, <i>Why? The Purpose of the Universe</i> , Chapter 6: A Conscious Universe.	UQ 4 Paper 2 (April 7)
Unit 5: Purpose				
11	April 9	Theistic Purpose	William Lane Craig, <i>The Absurdity of Life Without God.</i>	
	April 11	Atheistic Purpose	Kerry Walters, <i>Atheism, A Guide for the Perplexed</i> , Chapter 7: Sisyphus' Question.	RR 4
12	April 16	Liberation (<i>moksa</i>) in Advaita Vedānta	Anantanand Rambachan, <i>The Advaita Worldview</i> , Chapter 7: Liberation.	
	April 18	Cosmic Purpose		UQ 5

			Philip Goff, <i>Why? The Purpose of the Universe</i> , Chapter 7: Living with Purpose	
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