

**THE UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN ONTARIO
DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY**

**Undergraduate Course Outline
2021-2022**

Philosophy 4900G: Honours Capstone Seminar

Term: Winter

Instructor: Robert J. Stainton

Class Days and Hours: Tu 3:30-5:30; Th 3:30-4:30

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

This seminar will introduce finishing Honours students to a specific area of contemporary philosophical research. Students will read and present on material recently published in the instructor's areas of expertise.

The specific topic for Winter 2022 will be the metaphysics of words. Metaphysics is the theory of "being". It encompasses issues such as what really exists, what fundamental categories things fall into, and how higher- and lower-level facts relate. For instance, questions about existence include whether free will really exists, whether God exists, and whether there are mind-independent facts. Regarding ontological categories, there seem to be abstract, concrete material and mental things: e.g., irrational numbers, rocks and tickling sensations respectively. There also seem to be both descriptive facts and normative facts: e.g., that Ottawa is the capital of Canada is descriptive whereas that it is permissible to kill in self-defense seems normative. As for levels of facts, some philosophers hold that abstract, ethical and mental facts must ultimately derive from purely physical ones, while others think that the former are basic and irreducible. They reject monism and reductionism.

A case study in metaphysics which has taken off as the "hot topic" in the last two years is the existence, nature and source of words. Do words really exist, or are they artifacts of a naïve pre-scientific view of language, just animal species are sometimes held to be? Many linguists believe just this. If words exist, which category do they belong to? Are words abstract, physical or mental things? Might they be a blend of all three? Philosophers have defended conflicting answers. What makes it the case that a word exists and has the properties it does? Physical facts? Human minds? Collective intentions? Related to these issues of categorization and reduction, how can a word be created, undergo change to its sound and/or meaning, and eventually cease to exist? Numbers can't do things like that! Finally, is there a normative correctness to words? Is there a right/wrong way to use a word? And if so, where does that correctness come from? From past or present common usage, say, or instead from the dictates of authorities and experts?

Influential authors we will begin with may include: Leonard Bloomfield, Sylvain Bromberger, Herman Cappelen, John Hawthorne, David Kaplan, Ernie Lepore, W.V.O Quine, Georges Rey and Linda Wetzel.

Students will be guided through the process of identifying recent articles and selecting “cutting edge” papers that could contribute to active research in metaphysics in general and on the metaphysics of words in particular. They may either address the case study or, if they wish, draw on lessons learned specifically from the metaphysics of words to speak to other issues about “being”, i.e., about what really exists, what categories things fall into, and about what reduces to what. Are races, genders or social classes unreal, e.g., in the way words are sometimes said to be? Is group responsibility reducible to individual responsibility, e.g., in the way that words are sometimes thought to reduce to the physical?

OBJECTIVES

The main objectives are to introduce key concepts, positions and arguments in philosophy of language; to fine-tune students’ general skills as budding professional philosophers; and, in particular, to hone their ability to undertake original philosophical research.

AUDIT

Students wishing to audit the course should consult with the instructor prior to or during the first week of classes.

DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY POLICIES

The **Department of Philosophy Policies** which govern the conduct, standards, and expectations for student participation in Philosophy courses is available in the Undergraduate section of the Department of Philosophy website at <http://uwo.ca/philosophy/undergraduate/policies.html>. It is your responsibility to understand the policies set out by the Senate and the Department of Philosophy, and thus ignorance of these policies cannot be used as grounds of appeal.

ACCOMMODATION

Students seeking academic accommodation on medical grounds for any missed tests, exams, participation components and/or assignments worth 10% or more of their final grade must apply to the Academic Counselling office of their home Faculty and provide documentation. Academic accommodation cannot be granted by the instructor or department. Documentation shall be submitted, as soon as possible, to the Office of the Dean of the student’s Faculty of registration, together with a request for relief specifying the nature of the accommodation being requested. The UWO Policy on Accommodation for Medical Illness and further information regarding this policy can be found at http://uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/accommodation_medical.pdf.

SELF- REPORTED ABSENCE FORM

Students who experience i) something unexpected, which is ii) either an illness or injury (e.g., flu, pneumonia, temporary mental health crisis) or an extenuating circumstance (e.g., death of a close family member or friend); iii) of 48 hours or less; such that iv) it is sufficiently severe to temporarily render them unable to meet academic requirements (e.g., attending lectures or labs, writing tests or midterm exams, completing and submitting assignments, participating in

presentations) should self-declare using the online Self-Reported Absence portal.

This option should only be used in situations where the student expects to resume academic responsibilities within the 48 hour time span. For longstanding medical issues or extensions beyond 48 hours students should seek assistance from their Academic Counsellor.

Before using an SRA, students are urged to review the following conditions in place for self-reporting of medical or extenuating circumstances:

http://westerncalendar.uwo.ca/PolicyPages.cfm?Command=showCategory&PolicyCategoryID=1&SelectedCalendar=Live&ArchiveID=#SubHeading_322

https://www.registrar.uwo.ca/academics/academic_considerations/self_reported_absences_faqs.html

Note in particular that the System-Reported Absence system was not intended to alter the situations in which students may request academic consideration. Those remain (i)-(iv) above. The change pertains only to the manner in which students may provide evidence of those situation: they may now do so via an online honour system, as opposed to submitting a letter from a medical professional, funeral director, etc.

For extensions not resulting from (i)-(iv) so that it would be inappropriate to use an SRA, students should instead contact the instructor prior to the deadline to make arrangements. A request of those sort would be appropriate, for instance, when a student has multiple assignments due on the same date or other finds themself unusually overwhelmed.

EVALUATION OF ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

At least three days prior to the deadline for withdrawal from a course without academic penalty, students will receive assessment of work accounting for at least 15% of their final grade. For 3000- or 4000-level courses in which such a graded assessment is impracticable, the instructor(s) must obtain an exemption from this policy from the Dean and this exemption must be noted on the corresponding course syllabus. In rare instances and at the Dean's discretion, other courses could receive a similar exemption, which also must be noted in the course syllabus.

COURSE ASSIGNMENT

The last day of scheduled classes in any course will be the last day on which course assignments will be accepted for credit in a course. Instructors will be required to return assignments to students as promptly as possible with reasonable explanations of the instructor's assessment of the assignment.

ACADEMIC OFFENCES

Scholastic offences are taken seriously and students are directed to read the appropriate policy, specifically, the definition of what constitutes a Scholastic Offence, at the following Web site: http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/scholastic_discipline_undergrad.pdf

PLAGIARISM CHECKING

All required papers may be subject to submission for textual similarity review to the commercial plagiarism detection software under license to the University for the detection of plagiarism. All papers submitted for such checking will be included as source documents in the reference database for the purpose of detecting plagiarism of papers subsequently submitted to the system. Use of the service is subject to the licensing agreement, currently between The University of Western Ontario and Turnitin.com <http://www.turnitin.com>.

SUPPORT SERVICES

Registrarial Services <http://www.registrar.uwo.ca>

Student Support Services <https://student.uwo.ca/psp/heprdweb/?cmd=login>

Services provided by the USC <http://westernusc.ca/services/>

Student Development Centre <http://www.sdc.uwo.ca/>

Students who are in emotional/mental distress should refer to Mental Health@Western <http://www.uwo.ca/uwocom/mentalhealth/> for a complete list of options about how to obtain help. Immediate help in the event of a crisis can be had by phoning 519.661.3030 (during class hours) or 519.433.2023 after class hours and on weekends.