



Philosophy of the Universe (PHIL210)

Term: Summer 2026

Course Dates: From July 13, 2026 - July 31, 2026

Course Times: Mon-Fri, 11:00 - 1:00

Classroom: Online (Zoom)

Instructor: Robert Ragsdale

Pronouns: he/him

Email: rragsdal@umd.edu

Office Hours: By appointment

Course Description

This course will explore how philosophy can help us understand our place in the cosmos. The course covers a variety of topics at the intersection of science and philosophy. How does the world we observe emerge from the microscopic world science tells us about? What are the laws of nature? What is time? What is life? The course's emphasis is not on leading students to particular conclusions about these topics. Instead, it is to learn how to ask these questions critically and to understand what would count as evidence that is relevant to their answer.

Learning Outcomes

After successfully completing this course you will be able to:

- Explain some of the key philosophical questions within cosmology, specifically questions concerning the relationship between the image of the world we receive from science and the image we receive from common sense.
- Become familiar with the methodology of philosophy and its interaction with scientific methodology.
- Acquire the ability to analyze philosophical arguments critically, rigorously and independently.
- Respond critically to philosophical readings orally and in writing.
- Shows ability to represent problems abstractly and explore possible solutions independently.

Required Resources

- Course Website: elms.umd.edu (all readings except for the book listed below will be made accessible here)
- Texts to be purchased:
Sean Carroll, *The Big Picture*. ISBN-13 : 978-1101984253 (can purchase on Amazon for \$8.00)

Course Structure

This course will meet synchronously on Zoom five days a week and consist of a two-hour lecture per meeting. Students are expected to attend each meeting. Lectures will include student discussions and group work. Students will also need to complete various assignments each week: three (3) quizzes per week, two (2) weekly reading exercises, two (2) mini papers, and a final exam. These assignments are designed to give students an opportunity to engage with and think critically about the relevant philosophical issues.

Tips for Success in this Course

- Participate. Discussions and group work are a critical part of the course. You can learn a great deal from discussing ideas and perspectives with your peers and professor. Participation can also help you articulate your thoughts and develop critical thinking skills.
- Manage your time. Make time for your online learning and participation in discussions each week. Give yourself plenty of time to complete assignments including extra time to handle any technology related problems.
- Login regularly. Log in to ELMS-Canvas several times a week to view announcements, discussion posts and replies to your posts. You may need to log in multiple times a day when group submissions are due.
- Do not fall behind. This class moves at a quick pace and each week builds on the previous. It will be hard to keep up with the course content if you fall behind in the pre-work or post-work.
- Use ELMS-Canvas notification settings. Canvas ELMS-Canvas can ensure you receive timely notifications in your email or via text. Be sure to enable announcements to be sent instantly or daily.
- Ask for help if needed. If you need help with ELMS-Canvas or other technology, IT Support (<https://umd.service-now.com/itsupport>, email: itsupport@umd.edu, or call 301-405-1500). If you are struggling with a course concept, reach out to me, and your classmates, for support.

Policies and Resources for Undergraduate Courses

It is our shared responsibility to know and abide by the University of Maryland's policies that relate to all courses, which include topics like:

- Academic integrity
- Student and instructor conduct
- Accessibility and accommodations
- Attendance and excused absences
- Grades and appeals
- Copyright and intellectual property

Please reference and review the [Office of Undergraduate Studies' Course-Related Policies](#) and follow up with me if you have questions.

Course-Specific Policies

For this course, some of your assignments will be collected via LockDown Respondus on our course ELMS page. I have chosen to use this tool because it can help me verify the integrity of student work. Download LockedDown Respondus software at the following link: https://itsupport.umd.edu/itsupport?id=kb_article_view&sysparm_article=KB0011975

Course Guidelines

Names/Pronouns and Self-Identifications:

The University of Maryland recognizes the importance of a diverse student body, and we are committed to fostering inclusive and equitable classroom environments. I invite you, if you wish, to tell us how you want to be referred to in this class, both in terms of your name and your pronouns (he/him, she/her, they/them, etc.). Keep in mind that the pronouns someone uses are not necessarily indicative of their gender identity. For more information about names and gender markers, visit the [LGBTQ+ Equity Center](#).

Additionally, it is your choice whether to disclose how you identify in terms of your gender, race, class, sexuality, religion, and dis/ability, among all aspects of your identity (e.g., should it come up in classroom conversation about our experiences and perspectives) and should be self-identified, not presumed or imposed. I will do my best to address and refer to all students accordingly, and I ask you to do the same for all of your fellow Terps.

Communication with Instructor:

Email: If you need to reach out and communicate with me, please email me at ragsdal@umd.edu. Please DO NOT email me with questions that are easily found in the syllabus or on ELMS (i.e. When is this assignment due? How much is it worth? etc.) but please DO reach out about personal, academic, and intellectual concerns/questions.

While I will do my best to respond to emails within 24 hours, you will more likely receive email responses from me on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays from 8:00am-10:00am EST

ELMS: I will send IMPORTANT announcements via ELMS messaging. You must make sure that your email & announcement notifications (including changes in assignments and/or due dates) are enabled in ELMS so you do not miss any messages. You are responsible for checking your email and Canvas/ELMS inbox with regular frequency.

Communication with Peers:

With a diversity of perspectives and experience, we may find ourselves in disagreement and/or debate with one another. As such, it is important that we agree to conduct ourselves in a professional manner and that we work together to foster and preserve a virtual classroom environment in which we can respectfully discuss and deliberate controversial questions. I encourage you to confidently exercise your right to free speech—bearing in mind, of course, that you will be expected to craft and defend arguments that support your position. Keep in mind, that free speech has its limit and this course is NOT the space for hate speech, harassment, and derogatory language. I will make every reasonable attempt to create an atmosphere in which each student feels comfortable voicing their argument without fear of being personally attacked, mocked, demeaned, or devalued.

Any behavior (including harassment, sexual harassment, and racially and/or culturally derogatory language) that threatens this atmosphere will not be tolerated. Please alert me immediately if you feel threatened, dismissed, or silenced at any point during our semester together and/or if your engagement in discussion has been in some way hindered by the learning environment.

Major Assignments

Reading Responses

- There are three (3) Reading Responses for the course due each week.
- Reading Responses are designed to give students an opportunity to think and write critically about philosophical views introduced in the course. Students will turn in Reading Responses on the ELMS-Canvas page.
- Instructions and due dates for Reading Responses will be posted on the ELMS-Canvas page.

Papers

- There are two (2) Mini Papers for the course, due in weeks 2 and 3. Each paper is worth 10% of your course grade.
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Mini-Paper 1	500 words	Due: July 23
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Mini-Paper 2	500 words	Due: August 2
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Quizzes

- There will be three (3) quizzes assigned each week (9 quizzes total)
- Quizzes are designed to test knowledge of key ideas and concepts presented in lecture. Quizzes are assigned on MWF and will be due by the end of the following day (11:59pm).

Participation & Engagement

- Students are expected to attend and participate in each meeting (asking and answering questions, offering a comment). Students will receive a participation score for each meeting.
- Peer discussion and good-faith engagement will be a major determiner of your participation grade in the class.
- Specifically, students will receive 1 participation point per meeting, totaling 15 points, which will be weighted for 10% of the student's total grade.

Final Exam

- July 31, 11:00 -1:00
- Students will take the final exam on ELMS using LockDown browser on Friday, July 31 during the regularly scheduled class time (11:00 - 1:00). A study guide will be provided during the final week.

Grading Structure

Assignment	Percentage %
Reading Responses	30%
Quizzes	20%
Participation	10%
Mini Papers	20%
Final Exam	20%
Total	100%

Academic Integrity

The University's Code of Academic Integrity is designed to ensure that the principles of academic honesty and integrity are upheld. In accordance with this code, the University of Maryland does not tolerate academic dishonesty. Please ensure that you fully understand this code and its implications because all acts of academic dishonesty will be dealt with in accordance with the provisions of this code. All students are expected to adhere to this Code. It is your responsibility to read it and know what it says, so you can start your professional life on the right path. As future professionals, your commitment to high ethical standards and honesty begins with your time at the University of Maryland.

Please visit the [Office of Undergraduate Studies' full list of campus-wide policies](#) and reach out if you have questions.

For this course, some of your assignments will be collected via Turnitin on our course ELMS page. I have chosen to use this tool because it can help you improve your scholarly writing and help me verify the integrity of student work. For information about Turnitin, how it works, and the feedback reports you may have access to, visit [Turnitin Originality Checker for Students](#).

Additionally, students may naturally choose to use online forums for course-wide discussions (e.g., Group lists or chats) to discuss concepts in the course. However, collaboration on graded assignments is strictly prohibited unless otherwise stated. Examples of prohibited collaboration include: asking classmates for answers on quizzes or exams, asking for access codes to clicker polls, etc.

AI policy for this course

AI use is prohibited.

AI assistance (TerpAI, ChatGPT, Gemini, Grammarly, etc.) is not permitted for coding, research, writing, editing, or any other part of the assignment process. Even though you may use these tools in the future, this approach will help you build a solid understanding of the subject matter. If you have questions or suggestions for potential exceptions, please contact me, and I would be happy to talk more.

A student may be asked to meet with the instructor to provide an oral defense of any of their written work, and the grade that work receives may be determined in part or in whole by the quality of that defense.

[See the University of Maryland guidelines on Generative AI for Teaching & Learning](#) for more information.

Grades

- All assessment scores will be posted on the course ELMS page. If you would like to review any of your grades (including the exams), or have questions about how something was scored, please email me to schedule a time for us to meet and discuss.
- It is possible that the ELMS tool that computes final averages is not reliable until all the grades are in. If you want to calculate your grade, I always encourage you to calculate your grade based on the tables in this document.

All assessment scores will be posted on the course ELMS page. If you would like to review any of your grades (including the exams), or have questions about how something was scored, please email me to schedule a time for us to meet and discuss.

Late work will not be accepted for course credit so please plan to have it submitted well before the scheduled deadline. I am happy to discuss any of your grades with you, and if I have made a mistake I will immediately correct it. Any formal grade disputes must be submitted in writing and within one week of receiving the grade.

Final letter grades are assigned based on the percentage of total assessment points earned. To be fair to everyone I have to establish clear standards and apply them consistently, so please understand that being close to a cutoff is not the same as making the cut (89.99 \neq 90.00). It would be unethical to make exceptions for some and not others.

Final Grade Cutoffs									
A+	97.00%	B+	87.00%	C+	77.00%	D+	67.00%	F+	
A	94.00%	B	84.00%	C	74.00%	D	64.00%	F	<60.0%
A-	90.00%	B-	80.00%	C-	70.00%	D-	60.00%	F-	

Resources & Accommodations

Accessibility and Disability Services

The University of Maryland is committed to creating and maintaining a welcoming and inclusive educational, working, and living environment for people of all abilities. The University of Maryland is also committed to the principle that no qualified individual with a disability shall, on the basis of disability, be excluded from participation in or be denied the benefits of the services, programs, or activities of the University, or be subjected to discrimination. The [Accessibility & Disability Service \(ADS\)](#) provides reasonable accommodations to qualified individuals to provide equal access to services, programs and activities. ADS cannot assist retroactively, so it is generally best to request accommodations several weeks before the semester begins or as soon as a disability becomes known. Any student who needs accommodations should contact me as soon as possible so that I have sufficient time to make arrangements.

For assistance in obtaining an accommodation, contact Accessibility and Disability Service at 301-314-7682, or email them at adsfrontdesk@umd.edu.

Emergency Preparedness

Emergencies on campus can happen at any time. To prepare, visit prepare.umd.edu or use the emergency symbol in the UMD App to review information. Resources for persons with disabilities are available on the [emergency preparedness page of the ADA Coordinator's website](#).

Student Resources and Services

Taking personal responsibility for your own learning means acknowledging when your performance does not match your goals and doing something about it. I hope you will come talk to me so that I can help you find the right approach to success in this course, and I encourage you to visit [UMD's Student Academic Support Services website](#) to learn more about the wide range of campus resources available to you.

In particular, everyone can use some help sharpening their communication skills (and improving their grade) by visiting [UMD's Writing Center](#) and schedule an appointment with the campus Writing Center.

You should also know there are a wide range of resources to support you with whatever you might need ([UMD's Student Resources and Services website](#) may help). If you feel it would be helpful to have someone to talk to, visit [UMD's Counseling Center](#).

Basic Needs Security

If you have difficulty affording groceries or accessing sufficient food to eat every day, or lack a safe and stable place to live, please visit [UMD's Division of Student Affairs website](#) for information about resources the campus offers you and let me know if I can help in any way.

Veteran Resources

UMD provides some additional support to our student veterans. You can access those resources at the office of [Veteran Student life](#) and the [Counseling Center](#). Veterans and active duty military personnel with special circumstances (e.g., upcoming deployments, drill requirements, disabilities) are welcome and encouraged to communicate these, in advance if possible, to the instructor.

Notice of Mandatory Reporting

Notice of mandatory reporting of sexual assault, sexual harassment, interpersonal violence, and stalking: As a faculty member, I am designated as a "Responsible University Employee," and I must report all disclosures of sexual assault, sexual harassment, interpersonal violence, and stalking to UMD's Title IX Coordinator per University Policy on Sexual Harassment and Other Sexual Misconduct.

If you wish to speak with someone confidentially, please contact one of UMD's confidential resources, such as [CARE to Stop Violence](#) (located on the Ground Floor of the Health Center) at 301-741-3442 or the [Counseling Center](#) (located at the Shoemaker Building) at 301-314-7651.

You may also seek assistance or supportive measures from UMD's Title IX Coordinator, Angela Nastase, by calling 301-405-1142, or emailing titleIXcoordinator@umd.edu.

To view further information on the above, please visit the [Office of Civil Rights and Sexual Misconduct](#).

Course Evaluation

Please submit a course evaluation through Student Feedback on Course Experiences in order to help faculty and administrators improve teaching and learning at Maryland. All information submitted to Course Experiences is confidential. Campus will notify you when Student Feedback on Course Experiences is open for you to complete your evaluations at the end of the semester. Please go directly to the [Student Feedback on Course Experiences](#) to complete your evaluations. You may access the evaluation reports for courses for which 70% or more students submitted their evaluations.

Copyright Notice

Course materials are copyrighted and may not be reproduced for anything other than personal use without written permission.

Course Schedule

Most of the readings for this course come from the required text, *The Big Picture* (abbreviated TBP). All other readings will be made available on ELMS.

Week 1:

Meeting 1: Naturalism & the Laws of Nature. TBP, Ch. 1-3

Meeting 2: Determinism. TBP, Ch. 4-5

Meeting 3: Time's Arrow. TBP, Ch. 7-8

Meeting 4: Philosophical Methodology: Bayesianism. TBP, Ch. 9-10

Meeting 5: Philosophical Methodology: Radical Doubt. TBP, Ch.11 + Descartes' *First Meditation*

Week 2:

Meeting 6: Fine-Tuning

Meeting 7: Emergence. TBP, Ch. 12-14

Meeting 8: Emergence. TBP, Ch. 15-16, Dennett, *Real Patterns* (excerpts)

Meeting 9: Philosophy of Quantum Mechanics. TBP, Ch. 22-24

Meeting 10: Why Does the Universe Exist? TBP, Ch. 25 + Parfit, *Why Anything? Why This?*

Week 3:

Meeting 11: Mind & Consciousness. TBP, Ch. 37-39

Meeting 12: Consciousness. TBP, Ch. 40-42, Jackson, "What Mary Didn't Know."

Meeting 13: The Mental & Physical. TBP, Ch. 26, 43-44

Meeting 14: Moral Naturalism. TBP, Ch. 45-48

Meeting 15: Final Exam

Note: This is a tentative schedule, and subject to change as necessary – monitor the course ELMS page for current deadlines. In the unlikely event of a prolonged university closing, or an extended absence from the university,

adjustments to the course schedule, deadlines, and assignments will be made based on the duration of the closing and the specific dates missed.