

Introduction to Philosophy: Personal Identity and the Self

PHIL 001H (W)
Syllabus – Fall 2024

Important Information:

Instructor: Rosanna Picascia

E-mail: rpicascl@swarthmore.edu

Day/Time/Location: MWF, 11:30am-12:20pm, Science Center 145

Office Hours: Wednesdays 2pm-4pm, Beardsley 210

Course Description:

This course examines a wide range of interrelated questions concerning personal identity and the self through the lens of pre-modern Indian philosophy as well as early modern and contemporary Western philosophy. In particular, the course addresses the following questions: 1) What are human persons, metaphysically speaking? Are we physical things? Mental things? Bundles of physical and mental things? 2) What are the conditions under which a person remains numerically the same person over time? 3) Do people have selves that constitute their identity over time or is the self an illusion? 4) What are the practical and moral implications of our conception of personal identity? In addressing these questions, students will have the opportunity to foster new ways of thinking about perennial philosophical puzzles in dialogue with great thinkers from diverse cultural, historical, and linguistic backgrounds.

Course Goals:

(1) To learn how to read, think, and write about complex philosophical problems in a way that is both personally engaging and academically rigorous; (2) To learn how to construct a productive conversation among philosophers from diverse backgrounds; and (3) To learn how to converse with one's peers about seemingly intractable problems in philosophy.

Course Readings:

You do not need to purchase any course materials. All the course materials will be available through Moodle.

Assignments:

Papers

You will write **two** 5-6 page papers (double-spaced, 12-pt font). Each paper will follow the traditional philosophical format: presenting and explaining a philosopher's argument on a particular philosophical question, anticipating objections to the argument, and developing your own argument in response.

Each paper will have two parts: a *first draft* and a *final draft*. You will have two opportunities to receive feedback on your first draft. First, one class day will be dedicated to a peer review workshop, where you will meet in small groups, present the central argument of your paper, and receive critical feedback from your peers. Second, you will meet with your course WA for additional feedback. You will revise your paper in light of the feedback received from both your WA and peers.

Three short writing assignments

Throughout the semester, you will complete three short (i.e. no more than 1 page) “skill building” writing assignments. Each of the assignments isolate and focus on one skill that is essential to writing philosophy papers. The assignments will be posted on Moodle and each will be available for and completed within a 24-hour period.

Course engagement

I define course engagement as the completion of any concrete course-related participation activity. Examples of course engagement include (but are not limited to) the following: participating in small group work, attentive listening, asking questions in class, contributing to class discussion, and coming to office hours.

Your grade will be based on 1) the completion and submission of small group activities centered on constructing or responding to arguments and 2) your own documentation and self-assessment of your course engagement. Regarding the first component, there will be weekly small group activities that will be collected and assessed for completion. Regarding the second component, three times during the semester, you will document your class engagement by filling out a self-assessment rubric.

Grading:

- A. Paper #1: 30% of grade*
- B. Paper #2: 30% of grade*
- C. Three short writing assignments: 20% of grade*
- D. Course engagement: 20%*

Laptop and phone policy:

Laptops (and phones) are not permitted because they are bad for the classroom environment. The best evidence available suggests that laptops distract from learning, not only for the laptop users, but additionally, for those around them. Exceptions will be made based on need (see Accommodations Statement below).

Printing primary reading material:

Since the course material is available online or in pdf format, you will need to print out the **primary reading material**, which we will reference in class. Supplemental reading does not need to be printed.

Instead, make note of anything from the supplemental reading that you wish to discuss in class and bring those notes to class.

There is no charge for printing. Here is a list of printers available in public computing areas and residence halls- <https://kb.swarthmore.edu/display/PRIN/Printing+for+Students>

Accommodations Statement:

If you believe you need accommodations for a disability or a chronic medical condition, please contact Student Disability Services via email at studentdisabilityservices@swarthmore.edu to arrange an appointment to discuss your needs. As appropriate, the office will issue students with documented disabilities or medical conditions a formal Accommodations Letter. Since accommodations require early planning and are not retroactive, please contact Student Disability Services as soon as possible. For details about the accommodations process, visit the Student Disability Services website. You are also welcome to contact me privately to discuss your academic needs. However, all disability-related accommodations must be arranged, in advance, through Student Disability Services.

Tentative Course Calendar

Week 1 (9/2) Introduction to the course

9/4 (W): Overview of course content; in-class activity

First assignment: Read syllabus by next class

9/6 (F): Finish up in-class activity; discuss syllabus

UNIT I: Theories of the Self and Person in Pre-modern India

Week 2 (9/9): The Buddhist theory of the selflessness of persons

Required primary reading:

1. Olivelle, Patrick (trans.). Selections from chapter 8 of the Chāndogya Upaniṣad. In *The Early Upaniṣads*. [Section 8.7-8.12: Prajāpati instructs Indra and Virocaṇa on the true self, pp. 279-287]
2. Siderits, Mark. *Buddhism as Philosophy*, “Chapter 2: Empty Persons” [***the primary reading is contained in this chapter. It is selections from the *Anatta-lakkhaṇa sutta* (pp. 51-52) and the *Milindapañha* (pp. 67-71 and pp. 77-78).

Week 3 (9/16): A Nyāya challenge: Inferring the existence of the self

Required primary reading:

Dasti, Matthew, and Phillips, Stephen (trans.). *The Nyāyasūtra: Selections from Early Commentaries* [Chapter 4: Self, pp. 74-85]

Required background:

Watson, Alex. Self or No-self? The Ātman Debate in Classical Indian Philosophy. In Tuske (ed.) *Indian Epistemology and Metaphysics*. [only read Section 1: Nyāya versus Buddhism].

Optional commentary:

Chadha, Monima. “The Self in Early Nyāya: A Minimal Conclusion.” *Asian Philosophy*, 23:1 (2013), pp. 24-42.

Week 4 (9/23): Mīmāṃsā on Perceiving the Self and the Cārvāka/Materialist analysis of the self

Required primary reading:

1. Das, Nilanjan (trans). Selections from Kumārila on the self in the *Śloka-vārttika (Verse Glossary)*. [read verses 107-139, pp. 12-14].

Required commentary:

1. Taber, John. "The Mīmāṃsā Theory of Self-Recognition." *Philosophy East and West*, 40:1 (1990), 35-57 (only read 37-43).
2. Gokhale, Pradeep. *Lokāyata/Cārvāka: A Philosophical Inquiry*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. [Chapter 5: Aspects of Materialism in Cārvāka-darśana; you can skip the last two sections entitled "A comparative note" and "Social and axiological implications"].

Optional commentary:

1. Watson, Alex (trans.). Selections from Jayanta Bhaṭṭa's *Nyāyamañjarī (Blossoms of Reasoning)*. [read section 2.1 on the denial of the self by the Cārvāka materialists and section 2.2 on the Mīmāṃsā argument regarding whether the self can be perceived]
2. Watson, Alex. "Four Mīmāṃsā Views Concerning the Self's Perception of Itself." *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 48 (2020), 889–914. [only, the Introduction, View 1, and View 2; pp. 890-901].

DUE: Tuesday 9/24 on Moodle by 9AM

[Short writing assignment #1: Argument reconstruction.](#) Opens on Moodle Monday 9/23 9AM.

Unit II: Persons and their Persistence in Early Modern and Contemporary Western philosophy

Week 5 (9/30): John Locke and the psychological criterion of personal identity

Required reading:

John Locke, Of Identity and Diversity. In John Perry's (ed.) *Personal Identity*.

Required background:

Gordon-Roth, Jessica, "Locke on Personal Identity", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2020 Edition). [you only need to read Section 1: Locke on Persons and Personal Identity: The Basics AND Section 3: The Early Modern Reception of Locke's Picture of Persons].

DUE: Friday 10/4 on Moodle before class time

[First draft of paper #1.](#) Friday's class will be a paper workshop.

Week 6 (10/7): Bernard Williams against the Psychological Criterion

Required reading:

Williams, Bernard. The Self and the Future. In *Problems of the Self*.

Optional reading:

Parfit, Derek. *Reasons and Persons*. [chapter 10: What we believe ourselves to be].

Fall Break: October 14th- October 18th

Week 7 (10/21): Does personal identity even matter?

Required reading:

Parfit, Derek. "Personal identity." *The Philosophical Review*, 80:1 (1971), 3-27.

Watch (for Friday):

The Prestige

DUE: Tuesday 10/22 on Moodle by 9AM

Short writing assignment #2: Raising a targeted objection. Opens on Moodle Monday 10/21 9AM.

Week 8 (10/28): Ethical consequences of the reductionist view: Detachment and altruism

Required reading:

1. Wallace, Vesna and Alan Wallace (trans). *Guide to a Bodhisattva's Way of Life by Śāntideva*. [Chapter 8: The Perfection of Meditation]. *Only verses 1-103 (pp. 89-102)

2. Siderits, Mark. Buddhism as Philosophy. [Chapter 3: Buddhist ethics, only sections 3.4 and 3.5, pp. 101-113].

DUE: Monday 10/28 in class.

Final (graded) draft of paper #1. Physical copy must be submitted in class.

Week 9 (11/4): Are metaphysical facts of personal identity relevant to the justification of our person-related practices and practical concerns?

Required reading:

Wolf, Susan. "Self-interest and Interest in Selves"

Optional commentary:

Harris, Stephen. "Altruism in the Charnel Ground: Śāntideva and Parfit on Anātman, Reductionism and Benevolence"

UNIT III: Other Views and Wider Themes in the Philosophy of Personal Identity

Week 10 (11/11): Animalism

Required reading:

Olson, Eric. "An Argument for Animalism,"

Optional commentary:

Stephan Blatti, "Animalism" *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*

Week 11 (11/18): The narrative view of identity and the characterization question

Required reading:

1) Schechtman, Marya. *The Constitution of Selves*, chapter 4: The characterization question.

2) Lynne Rudder Baker, "Making sense of ourselves: self-narratives and personal identity," [you can skip the second section "Dennett on fictional selves"]

3) Appiah, Kwame Anthony. "Can we choose our own identity?" *The Guardian*, August 31, 2018.

Week 12 (11/25): Catch up

No class on Monday- I will be at a conference.

Wednesday's class will be dedicated to any catch up.

DUE: Monday 11/25 on Moodle before class time

First draft of paper #2 (paper workshop will be held Monday 12/2)

Week 13 (12/2): The Person Life View

Required reading:

Schechtman, Marya. *Staying Alive: Personal Identity, Practical Concerns, and the Unity of Life*.
[chapters 5 and 6]

DUE: Tuesday 12/3 on Moodle by 9AM

Short writing assignment #3: Responding to objections. Opens on Moodle Monday 12/2 9AM

Week 14 (12/9): Catch up

Final paper due Thursday, Dec. 19th by 5pm

Drop off physical copy at my office in Beardsley #210. Early papers welcome!