

Philosophy (PHI) 381
METAPHYSICS
Spring 2026, Syracuse University

Instructor: Dr. Daniel Murphy

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Class location/time: Mon., Wed., Fri., 9:30am–10:25, Huntington Hall 101

Office hours:

- TBD
- or by appointment.

Course Description

This course is an advanced introduction to metaphysics. We'll focus mostly on issues about human persons. (1) What are we? (Are you the human-shaped animal in your chair? That animal's brain? An immaterial soul? Maybe you don't exist at all?) (2) How do we persist through time? (Suppose you borrow \$5 from a friend, whose memories are then transferred to a robot. To whom do you owe \$5, the human or robot?) (3) What is free will, and do we have it? Investigating these issues about ourselves will also raise (4) some metaphysical issues about the world more generally, such as the nature of time and puzzles about material objects.

Readings

Required text: *What Are We? A Study in Personal Ontology*, by Eric T. Olson (2007, Oxford University Press).

All other required readings will be provided through Blackboard.

Course Work and Preparing for Class

Blackboard:

All required work will be posted to the course Blackboard site. There will be a **module** for every week, including Blackboard **pages** for each day of class.

Reading and writing:

You should come to class having carefully read, and prepared to discuss, the reading(s) assigned for that day of class (indicated on Blackboard).

On some days of class, there will also be **short writing assignments** ("SWAs") to complete beforehand (indicated on Blackboard). (More on SWAs below under "Course Grade".)

AI policy:

All generative-AI tools are prohibited in this course because their use inhibits achievement of the course learning objectives. This policy applies to all stages of project and writing processes including researching, brainstorming, outlining, organizing, and polishing. Do not use Generative-AI tools to create any content (i.e., images and video, audio, text, code, etc.). If you have any questions about a feature and whether it is considered Generative-AI, ask your instructor.

Course Grade

- *Class Engagement: 14%*

Based on your engagement in class, which includes attending (on time), paying attention, following instructions, contributing to discussions. Also affected by some homework that doesn't fit in any other grade category.

Attendance. If you have good reason to miss class, inform me in advance to get your absence excused. Any unexcused absence after 1 would hurt your class engagement grade, and any after 5 may result in a direct penalty to your final course grade.

Technology in class. Phones must be quiet and out of sight while class is in session. Laptops may be used only to help with what's going on in class (taking notes, looking at an assignment or text we're discussing).

- *Short writing assignments (SWAs): 16%*

You'll see when these are assigned on Blackboard, along with instructions for each entry.

Format and submission system:

- Keep your SWA entries in a single, double-spaced document. Start each SWA with a heading ("SWA #1", "SWA #2", etc.), and include at least a couple blank lines between SWAs.
- I'll grade your SWAs in two batches (roughly half-way through the semester, and again at the end). When you submit "batch 1", you'll submit your single document containing all your SWAs up to that point. You'll then start a new document for the rest of the semester ("batch 2").
- To make sure you're completing SWAs on time, there will be text box submission links on Blackboard, where you'll simply copy and paste from your SWA document.

Grading:

- Here's what I'll look for when I grade the SWA batches:
- **Completion:** did you complete the SWAs? Are they of the assigned length? Were some or many submitted late?
- **Instructions:** do your SWA documents conform to formatting instructions? Do individual entries follow the prompts' instructions? The prompts vary, but I emphasize the importance of **engaging texts with specificity**, including **specific page citations**. Any time a prompt has you identify or explain something from a reading, your SWA entry must be "anchored" to the reading with specific page citations. **Any SWA documents that persistently fail to cite texts as appropriate may get failing grades.**

- *Exams: 50%*

Three in-class exams, worth 16.5%, 16.5%, and 17% respectively.

Accommodations. If you're entitled to extra time or a separate location and wish to make use of either for any exam, you must (1) take that exam with CDR. You must (2) notify me of such a decision in advance and (3) schedule with CDR.

Absences. If you have compelling and documentable grounds for missing class on an exam day, contact me in advance to let know, and so we can arrange a make-up time.

- *Formal Essay: 20%*

Will be due during the final exam period.

Syracuse University Policy Statements

Academic integrity. As a pre-eminent and inclusive student-focused research institution, Syracuse University considers academic integrity at the forefront of learning, serving as a core value and guiding pillar of education. Syracuse University's Academic Integrity Policy provides students with the necessary guidelines to complete academic work with integrity throughout their studies. Students are required to uphold both course-specific and university-wide academic integrity expectations such as crediting your sources, doing your own work, communicating honestly, and supporting academic integrity. The full Syracuse University Academic Integrity Policy can be found by visiting teachingexcellence.syr.edu/academic-integrity and selecting, "Expectations and Policy."

Upholding Academic Integrity includes the protection of faculty's intellectual property. Students should not upload, distribute, or share instructors' course materials, including presentations, assignments, exams, or other evaluative materials without permission. Using websites that charge fees or require uploading of course material (e.g., Chegg, Course Hero) to obtain exam solutions or assignments completed by others, which are then presented as your own violates academic integrity expectations in this course and may be classified as a Level 3 violation. All academic integrity expectations that apply to in-person assignments, quizzes, and exams also apply online.

Students found in violation of the policy are subject to grade sanctions determined by the course instructor and non-grade sanctions determined by the School or College where the course is offered. Students may not drop or withdraw from courses in which they face a suspected violation. Any established violation in this course may result in course failure regardless of violation level.

Disability-related accommodations. Syracuse University values access and inclusion; we are committed to a climate of mutual respect and full participation. There may be aspects of the instruction or design of this course that result in barriers to your inclusion and full participation in this course. I invite any student to contact me to discuss strategies and/or accommodations (academic adjustments) that may be necessary to ensure equitable access, and to collaborate with the Center for Disability Resources (CDR) in this process.

If you would like to discuss disability-related accommodations or register with CDR, please visit [Center for Disability Resources](#). Please call 315.443.4498 or email CDRspecialist@syr.edu for more detailed information.

CDR is responsible for coordinating disability-related academic accommodations and will work with the student to develop an access plan. Since academic accommodations are generally not provided retroactively, please contact CDR as soon as possible to initiate this process.

Discrimination and harassment. The University does not discriminate and prohibits harassment or discrimination related to any protected category including creed, ethnicity, citizenship, sexual orientation, national origin, sex, gender, pregnancy, reproductive health decisions, disability, marital status, political or social affiliation, age, race, color, veteran status, military status, religion, sexual orientation, domestic violence status, genetic information, gender identity, gender expression or perceived gender.

Any complaint of discrimination or harassment related to any of these protected bases should be reported to Sheila Johnson-Willis, the University's Chief Equal Opportunity & Title IX Officer for Faculty and Staff. She is responsible for coordinating compliance efforts under the various laws including Titles VI, VII, IX and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. She can be contacted at Equal Opportunity, Inclusion, and Resolution Services, 621 Skytop Road, Suite 1001, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY 13244-1120; or by email: equalopp@syr.edu; or by telephone: 315-443-4018.

Title IX. Federal and state law, and University policy prohibit discrimination and harassment based on sex or gender (including sexual harassment, sexual assault, domestic/dating violence, stalking, and sexual exploitation). If a student has been impacted by any prohibited behavior based on sex or gender, they can obtain confidential counseling support, 24-hours a day, 7 days a week, from the [Sexual and Relationship Violence Response Team](#) at the Counseling Center (315-443-8000, Barnes Center at The Arch, 150 Sims Drive, Syracuse, New York 13244). Incidents of sexual or relationship violence or harassment can be reported to the University's Title IX Coordinators (Sheila Johnson Willis, Chief Equal Opportunity Officer and Title IX Officer for Faculty and Staff, 315-443-4018, equalopp@syr.edu or Pamela Peter, Director/Coordinator of Student Title IX Case Management, 315-443-0211, titleix@syr.edu). Reports to law enforcement can be made to the University's Department of Public Safety (315-443-2224, 005 Sims Hall), the Syracuse Police Department (511 South State Street, Syracuse, New York, 911 in case of emergency or 315-435-3016 to speak with the Abused Persons Unit), or the State Police (Campus Sexual Assault Victims Unit, 844-845-7269). I will seek to keep information you share with me private to the greatest extent possible, but as a professor I have mandatory reporting responsibilities to share information regarding sexual misconduct, relationship violence, stalking, harassment, and crimes I learn about with the University's Title IX Officer to help make our campus a safer place for all and to ensure you have access to available resources.

Religious observances. Syracuse University's Religious Observances Policy recognizes the diversity of faiths represented in the campus community and protects the rights of students, faculty, and staff to observe religious holy days according to their traditions. Under the policy, students are given an opportunity to make up any examination, study, or work requirements that may be missed due to a religious observance, provided they notify their instructors no later than the academic drop deadline. For observances occurring before the drop deadline, notification is required at least two academic days in advance. Students may enter their observances in MySlice under Student Services/Enrollment/My Religious Observances/Add a Notification.

Health and wellness. Well-being and mental health are significant predictors of academic success. It is critical to take care of yourself physically and emotionally and to effectively navigate stress, anxiety, and depression. Please familiarize yourself with the range of resources the Barnes Center provides (<https://ese.syr.edu/bewell/>) and seek out support for mental health concerns as needed. Counseling services are available 24/7, 365 days, at 315-443-8000.

(TENTATIVE) CALENDAR

See Blackboard for all required work, much of which isn't mentioned below. This calendar covers topics, readings, and exams (but not all assignment).

Wk. 1 Course Intro / Freedom and Determinism / Soft Determinism

M 1/12 no required reading

UNIT 1:

PERSONAL AGENCY (FREE WILL)

W 1/14 Robert Kane, "The Free Will Problem"

F 1/16 Theodore Sider, “Free Will and Determinism” (part)

Wk. 2 Soft Determinism / Libertarianism

M 1/19 *no class (Martin Luther King Jr. Day)*

W 1/21 Peter van Inwagen, “Freedom of the Will” (part); Derk Pereboom, “Determinism *al Dente*” (part)

F 1/23 Michael McKenna, “Resisting the Manipulation Argument”; Roderick Chisholm, “Human Freedom and the Self”

Wk. 3 Libertarianism / No Free Will?

M 1/26 Sider, part; Richard Swinburne, selection from *Mind, Brain, and Free Will*

W 1/28 no new required reading

F 1/30 Sider, part; van Inwagen, part; Michael Huemer, “Free Will and Determinism in the World of *Minority Report*” (part)

Wk. 4 No Free Will? / Time

M 2/2 no new required reading

UNIT 2:

STAGE-SETTING FOR PERSONAL ONTOLOGY (TIME, PERSISTENCE, MATTER)

W 2/4 Ned Markosian, “Time”

F 2/6 no new required reading

Wk. 5 Persistence

M 2/9 *Exam 1*

W 2/11 Sally Haslanger, “Persistence Through Time”

F 2/13 no new required reading

Wk. 6 Material Objects

M 2/16 Sider, “Temporal Parts”, §3

W 2/18 van Inwagen, “The Doctrine of Arbitrary Undetached Parts”

F 2/20 no new required reading

Wk. 7 Personal Identity

M 2/23 Judith Thomson, “People and Their Bodies”

W 2/25 no new required reading

F 2/27 Derek Parfit, “Divided Minds and the Nature of Persons”

Wk. 8 Personal Identity

M 3/2 Richard Swinburne, selections from *Mind, Brain, and Free Will* and *Are We Bodies or Souls?*

W 3/4 no new required reading

F 3/6 *Exam 2*

Wk. 9 Spring Break

M 3/9 *no class*

W 3/11 *no class*

F 3/13 *no class*

**UNIT 3:
PERSONAL ONTOLOGY**

Wk. 10 Intro / Animals

M 3/16 Eric Olson, *What Are We? A Study in Personal Ontology*: preface; ch. 1 (“The Question”)

W 3/18 Olson, ch. 2 (“Animals”)

F 3/20 no new required reading

Wk. 11 Material Objects Constituted by Animals

M 3/23 Olson, ch. 3 (“Constitution”)

W 3/25 no new required reading

F 3/27 no new required reading

Wk. 12 Brains

M 3/30 Olson, ch. 4 (“Brains”)

W 4/1 no new required reading

F 4/3 no new required reading

Wk. 13 Four-Dimensional Objects

M 4/6 Olson, ch. 5 (“Temporal Parts”)

W 4/8 no new required reading

F 4/10 no new required reading

Wk. 14 Bundles / Souls

M 4/13 *Exam 3*

W 4/15 David Hume, selection from *A Treatise of Human Nature*; Olson, ch. 6 (“Bundles”)

F 4/17 René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*: Sixth Meditation (part); Olson, ch. 7 (“Souls”)

Wk. 15 Souls / Nihilism

M 4/20 no new required reading

W 4/22 *The Questions of King Milinda* (selection); Olson, ch. 8 (“Nihilism”)

F 4/24 no new required reading

Wk. 16

M 4/27 Olson, ch. 9, §1

Final Exams Period

Formal Essay