

Personal Identity and What Matters, Spring 2025

Lecture Location

GYM 347

Class Time

Tuesday,
Thursday

3:30pm –
4:45pm

Professor

Zach Thornton
(he/him)

Email

zthornton@vt.edu
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Office Hours

Mon. & Wed.:
1:00pm –
2:00pm

Required Texts

All texts will be provided on Canvas

Course Overview

This course is an introduction to metaphysical and first-personal normative issues around *survival*.

The goal of this course is to survey views on three topics: persons, survival, and what matters in survival. These topics are deeply interrelated, and we will be learning about all of them throughout the semester. However, the course will introduce these topics sequentially.

First, we will investigate the metaphysics of *persons*. Questions we will try to answer are: Are persons made entirely of matter? What is a person's parts? Are you (synchronically) identical to a person, and if so, which person are you? Are you (synchronically) identical to a human animal?

Second, we will investigate theories of survival. Questions we will try to answer are: What is persistence? How do we persist through change? Are you (diachronically) identical to a person in the future? What are the sufficient conditions (if any) for you to persist as/be identical to a person in the future?

Third, we will investigate the first-personal significance of survival. Questions we will try to answer are: What is the first-personal normative *oomph* that survival/persistence (at least) sometimes has? When does survival have this first-personal normative oomph? And when it does, what makes it the case/explains the fact that it does?

The goal is to obtain a holistic understanding of these topics and their relation to one another (or, least, as much of an understanding as possible in one semester). If this class is successful, students will be able to identify specific topics of interest for them and write a paper that could become a draft of a potentially publishable paper.

Class Expectations and Policies

1. **Class Discussions:** Philosophy classes are only as good as the discussions that happen in them. As such, you will be expected to come to class having completed the readings and prepared to talk. You will also be expected to treat your peers with respect. **Attendance and participation is required and a core learning experience of this course.**
2. **Accessibility:** I am committed to making this course accessible to everyone. If there is something that I can do to make this course more accessible for you, please come and speak to me. If you need disability-related accommodations, please contact VT's Services for Students with Disabilities (<https://www.ssd.vt.edu/index.html>). Note, however, that you do not need to have an officially recognized or diagnosed disability to seek accommodations: you just have to come speak with me.
3. **Changes to the Syllabus:** The reading list on the syllabus is not a contract, and may change according to student interests or time constraints. I will announce any changes via email, and will update Canvas accordingly.

Assignments

Assessment	Percent of Final Grade	Description
Participation		Participation will be graded according to engagement in the course throughout the semester, primarily through class discussions.
Argument reconstructions		You must write one argument reconstruction per week (excluding the first and last weeks, and spring break of course) with 3 weeks of dropped reconstructions. This means that 10 total reconstructions will be graded. No more than one reconstruction can be written per week. Argument reconstructions are due before the class we discuss the paper. I highly recommend taking notes on every paper in preparation for the possibility of writing an argument reconstruction on it. In your reconstructions, you must... 1. Identify the main claim of the paper. 2. Identify and make explicit the premises of the main argument in support of the main claim. 3. Specify the connections of support from the premises to the (sub)conclusion(s). 4. Finally, identify what you believe to be the weakest premise of the argument, and explain why. Excellent argument reconstruction will... (i) Be written such that the connections of support from the premises to the conclusion are logically valid. (ii) Make explicit all the premises of the main argument. (iii) Make explicit important sub-arguments for premises in the main argument. (iv) Raises a worry for the argument that could be developed into a contribution to the literature or be developed to support a plausible alternative positive proposal.
Presentations		You will lead 3 classes. This means that there will be one non-Zach led class most weeks. When leading a class, you must...

		(i) Prepare a handout that will include important terms, cases and arguments. (ii) Prepare discussion questions. You can write an argument reconstruction on the paper you present. For your first presentation, you must meet with Zach at least 24 hours prior to the time you present.
Final Paper		Your final paper will be journal length article (6000 – 8000 words) on a topic of your choice related to class. It should be prepared as a piece of professional philosophical scholarship and will be evaluated as such.

Course Schedule

Note: this schedule may change throughout the semester

Dates	Topic	Assignments and Assessments
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Unit 1: *Introduction*

Week 1: What do we want from a theory of survival?

Tuesday, Aug 26

Katherine Hawley, *How Things Persist*,
Introduction

John Perry, “The Importance of Being Identical”

Thursday, Aug 28

Derek Parfit, “Personal Identity”

Unit 2: *The Metaphysics of Persons*

Week 2: Are people made of matter?

Tuesday, Jan 28

“Personal Identity” cont.

Thursday, Jan 30

Dean Zimmerman, “Material People”

Week 3: Which person are we?

Tuesday, Feb 4 “Material People” cont.

Thursday, Feb 6 Galen Strawson, “The Self”

Unit 3: Persistence

Week 4: How do we survive change?

Tuesday, Feb 11 W.V.O. Quine, “Identity, Ostension, and Hypostasis”

Thursday, Feb 13 Sally Haslanger, “Persistence Though Time”

Week 5: Does psychological continuity determine survival?

Tuesday, Feb 18 Sydney Shoemaker, “Identity, Properties, and Causality”

Thursday, Feb 21 David Lewis, “Survival and Identity”

Week 6: Does physical continuity determine survival?

Tuesday, Feb 25 Bernard Williams, “The Self and the Future”

Thursday, Feb 27 Mark Johnston, “Human Beings”

Unit 4: What Matters in Survival

Week 7: Is identity what matters in survival?

Tuesday, Mar 4 Trenton Merricks, *Self and Identity*, Ch. 1

Thursday, Mar 6 Trenton Merricks, *Self and Identity*, Ch. 3

Week 8: Spring Break

Tuesday, Mar 11 Spring break

Thursday, Mar 13 Spring break

Week 9: Is the first-personal significance of survival multidimensional?

Tuesday, Mar 18 Zach Thornton, “What Matters in Personal Transformation”

Thursday, Mar 20 J. David Velleman, “Self to Self”

Week 10: Is psychological connectedness what matters in survival?

Tuesday, Mar 25 Parfit *Reasons and Persons*, Ch. 10-11

Thursday, Mar 27 Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, Ch. 12 - 13

Week 11: Should we revise our ordinary views about survival?

Tuesday, Apr 1 Parfit *Reasons and Persons*, Ch. 14

Paper writing workshop

Thursday, Apr 3 Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, Ch. 15

Week 12: What is the overall value of survival?

Tuesday, Apr 8 Susan Wolf, “Self Interest and Interest in Selves”

Thursday, Apr 10 Ernest Sosa, “Surviving Matters”

Week 13: Is metaphysics irrelevant to the first-personal significance of survival?

Tuesday, Apr 15 Johnston, “Reasons and Reductionism”

Thursday, Apr 17 Christine Korsgaard, “Personal Identity and the Unity of Agency: A Kantian Response to Parfit”

Week 14: When is it appropriate to have first-personal concern for a future person?

Tuesday, Apr 22	Jennifer Whiting, “Friends and Future Selves”
Thursday, Apr 24	David Brink, “Special Concern and Personal Identity”
	Zach Thornton “Prudence Without Persistence”
	<i>Week 15: Can we anticipate life after a personal transformation?</i>
Tuesday, April 29	LA Paul, “Who Will I Become?”
Thursday, May 1	Paper Presentations
	<i>Week 16: Is it coherent to say that we can “become someone new”?</i>
Tuesday, May 6	Paul & Das, "Transformative Choice and the Non-Identity Problem"
FINAL EXAM PERIOD:	No final exam, only final paper
May 13, 7:45am – 9:45 am	Final Paper due at end of final exam period (9:45am) Incompletes must be approved by me prior to the deadline.