

FREEDOM, RESPONSIBILITY AND HUMAN ACTION

PHL341H1S | Summer 2026

1. Instructor

Cassandra Williams

Email: [REDACTED]

Office Hours: MW5-5:30 / for 30 minutes after class ends (drop-in); or by appointment
Office hours are time set aside specifically for students to speak to me. Please come by to chat with me about anything related to the course or philosophy generally.

2. Delivery Method

Lectures (online synchronous): MW2-5

[REDACTED]

3. Course Description

It is widely supposed that humans are *agents* capable of *bringing about their own actions* in response to their *reasons for action*. Further, it is in virtue of these capacities that we *act freely* and hence are *morally responsible* for our behaviour. Yet these suppositions are fraught with difficulties. How can *an agent herself* be the cause of her actions? If her actions are *determined*, can she nevertheless be *free*? Is free will just an *illusion*? This intermediate-level course will survey traditional answers to these questions in the philosophy of action.

4. Learning Objectives

Upon completion of the course, students will have mastered key concepts related to free will and action theory and will be able to apply these concepts to contemporary debates in the philosophy of action. Additionally, students will have developed their own views about whether we have free will and about what the nature of action is.

Students will be better able to (1) extract philosophical arguments from classic and contemporary readings on the philosophy of action; (2) explain these arguments with clarity and precision; (3) critically evaluate and apply these arguments in novel contexts; (4) develop and defend a position on debates related to course topics; and (5) articulate philosophical ideas verbally in discussion and debate.

5. Assignments and Grading

Evaluation	Due date
Attendance, Participation, and Engagement (10%)	Ongoing
Short Essay (3pp) (take-home) (15%)	July 15, before 11:59pm
Long Essay Proposal (1pp) (take-home) (5%)	July 27, before 11:59pm
Long Essay (5-6pp) (take-home) (35%)	August 14, before 11:59pm
Final Exam (in-person) (35%)	During final exam period, date TBD

6. Assignment Descriptions

i. Attendance, Participation, and Engagement

There are twelve lectures for this class. Attendance and participation are mandatory. Grades will be a holistic assessment of engagement, taking into consideration attendance, active discussion, and general attentiveness during class, along with other demonstrations of engagement via email, office hours, etc.

ii. Short Essay

Essay topics and specific instructions will be posted on Quercus.

You will write one short critical essay for this class, of roughly 750 words (~3 pages) in length. Your task will be to explain a position discussed in class, and then to argue for your own personal take on it. The best essays will demonstrate clear engagement with, and creative critical evaluation of, lectures and assigned readings.

iii. Long Essay Proposal

As preparation for writing the *Long Essay*, you will write an essay proposal (maximum one page), explaining your approach to the topic, what position you will be defending, what readings you will draw on, and a rough sketch of your argument.

I will assign multiple topics for the *Long Essay*. However, you may also propose your own topic related to the course content **on the condition that you have discussed it with me in office hours and received my written approval prior to submitting the Long Essay Proposal.**

iv. Long Essay

Essay topics and specific instructions will be posted on Quercus.

Your task will be to argue for your own view about a debate we have examined in class. The best essays will demonstrate clear engagement with, and creative critical evaluation of, lectures and assigned readings.

v. Final Exam

There will be a cumulative in-person final exam to be held on a date to be determined during the August exam period.

*****Important*****

Please note that although the final exam is worth only 35% of your grade, a grade of 50% or higher on the final exam will be required to earn a grade of over 49% in the course. There will be no exceptions to this policy.

7. Required Texts & Technology

All readings will be made available through the course Quercus webpage.

Course lectures may only be accessed via the University of Toronto licenced version of Zoom: <https://utm.library.utoronto.ca/students/canvas/zoom>

Completion of course content may require access to technology adhering to the University of Toronto's Recommended Technology Requirements for Remote/Online Learning: <https://www.vicereprovoststudents.utoronto.ca/student-policies-guidelines/tech-requirements-online-learning/>

8. Policies

Late Work and Extensions

Late work is penalized at 10% per day, including weekends (e.g., if an assignment is due Friday at 5:00 pm, and it is submitted the following Monday at 6:00 pm, the grade will be reduced by 40%). We will not accept late work after 4 days.

Extensions must be arranged prior to the assignment deadline and will be granted only in exceptional circumstances and with appropriate documentation (e.g., letter from Accessibility Services or Registrar's Office) or a reasonable explanation of why documentation cannot be provided. As this is an accelerated course with frequent assignments, I advise caution when requesting extensions.

Email Policy

Emails **must** be sent from a Utoronto email address **and include the course code** and a clear statement of purpose in the subject line (e.g., "*PHL341 – I have a conflict with the in-class assignment*"). Before emailing, ensure that the answer to your email is not

contained in the syllabus or course website. Compliant emails will be responded to within two business days. If you do not receive an answer in that window, please send a follow-up. Email should be reserved for administrative matters. For philosophical questions or matters that cannot be easily dealt with via email, I will instead ask that you see me during office hours. If unable to attend my regularly scheduled office hours, please email me to arrange an alternative time to meet.

Student Conduct

The University of Toronto is committed to equity, human rights, and respect for diversity. All members of the learning environment in this course should strive to create an atmosphere of mutual respect where all members of our community can express themselves, engage with each other, and respect one another's differences. The University does not condone discrimination or harassment against any persons or communities

Academic Integrity

Students must adhere to the [Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters](#). **It is your responsibility to know what constitutes appropriate academic behaviour.** You are responsible for ensuring that you do not act in such a way that would constitute cheating, misrepresentation, or unfairness, including but not limited to, using unauthorized aids and assistance, personating another person, and committing plagiarism. For more information see [U of T Academic Integrity](#) website.

Some specifics to keep in mind:

- In written work, all sources used must be correctly cited, and if material is copied directly, appropriately cited and placed within quotation marks.
- If you work or study with friends, protect your work by not sharing or emailing your rough work or assignments. You can help friends by discussing your ideas together and comparing your notes from lectures, but all written assignments must be completed on your own.
- You can find help with your assigned work by seeing me in office hours or taking advantage of the many resources available on campus. I urge you to visit, in particular, the Office of Student Academic Integrity's website (<http://www.artsci.utoronto.ca/osai/students>), where you can find useful information on how to avoid plagiarism, and the Writing Centre's website (<http://writing.utoronto.ca>), where you can find further tips.

Statement on the Use of Generative AI

The point of philosophy is to bring your own creative thinking to bear on interesting texts and about issues central to the human condition, issues which humans have struggled to understand for thousands of years. Outsourcing this work to generative AI is incompatible with the course's learning objectives, and doing so is actively damaging to the originality and creativity of your thinking and writing (for a summary of research, see <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/05/27/opinion/writing-creativity-ai.html>).

Consequently, the use of generative artificial intelligence tools, including ChatGPT, Gemini, Claude, Microsoft Copilot and other AI writing assistants, for the completion of, or to support the completion of, an examination, term test, assignment, or any other form of academic assessment, is strictly prohibited and will be considered an academic offense in this course.

I have noticed in past courses that often *good students* will rely on generative AI not to “cheat” but as a study aid to summarize readings, clarify concepts, and suggest essay ideas. Aside from this being prohibited per the policy above, my experience is that *even using generative AI as an “aid” in this way makes your work worse than it would be otherwise.*

Accessibility

Students with diverse learning styles and needs are welcome in this course. If you have an acute or ongoing disability issue or accommodation need, you should register with Accessibility Services (AS) at the beginning of the academic year by visiting <http://www.studentlife.utoronto.ca/as/new-registration>. Without registration, you will not be able to verify your situation with your instructors, and instructors will not be advised about your accommodation needs. AS will assess your situation, develop an accommodation plan with you, and support you in requesting accommodation for your course work. Remember that the process of accommodation is private: AS will not share details of your needs or condition with any instructor, and your instructors will not reveal that you are registered with AS.

9. Student Support Services

College Registrars' Offices

Your College Registrar's Office is your hub for academic advising, support services, information and advice of all kinds. You should consult your college Registrar's Office as soon as you encounter any problems of an academic or personal nature.

<https://www.artsci.utoronto.ca/current/academic-advising-and-support/college-registrars-offices>

Student Mental Health Resources

- [U of T's Central Hub for Student Mental Health Resources](#)
- [Student Life Health and Wellness](#)
- MySSP: 1-844-451-9700 (or use the app)
- Good2Talk: Call: 1-866-925-5454 or Text: GOODTOTALKON to 686868

Tri-Campus Sexual Violence Prevention and Support Centre

The Centre has a location on all three campuses to help students who disclose to access supports and, in cases where the student chooses to formally make a report, the Centre will explain the process, and facilitate the making of the report to the University and/or to the Police. The Centre can be contacted through its confidential phone at 416-978-2266 or thesvpcentre@utoronto.ca.

Students are encouraged to call or email for an appointment, which will be booked as soon as possible. **Students in crisis or in need of immediate support related to sexual violence can contact Women's College Hospital Sexual Assault Care Centre at 416-323-6040.**

The PEARS Project

The PEARS Project is a grassroots, trauma-informed coalition that provides support and resources to survivors of sexual violence across the University of Toronto; it is founded and led by survivors through survivor-centred principles such as autonomy, consent, equity, mutual aid, support, and care.

<https://thepearsproject.wordpress.com/about/contact-us/>

Office of the Ombudsperson

As part of the University's commitment to ensuring that the rights of its individual members are protected, the University Ombudsperson is devoted to ensuring procedural fairness and just and reasonable outcomes.

The Ombudsperson offers confidential advice and assistance for complaints and concerns and can recommend changes in academic or administrative procedures where this seems justified. For information, see

<https://governingcouncil.utoronto.ca/ombudsperson>.

10. Class Schedule

Subject to change with notice.

Week	Date	Topic & Readings
Part I: Freedom		
1	July 6	1. The Problem of Free Will Required: a. Van Inwagen – “The Powers of Rational Beings: Freedom of the Will” (20pp)
1	July 8 ** Short Essay Assigned **	2. Compatibilism I Required: a. Frankfurt – “Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility” (11pp) b. Wolf – “Asymmetrical Freedom” (16pp) Supplementary: c. Frankfurt – “Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person”
2	July 13	3. Compatibilism II Required: a. Dennett – “Mechanism and Responsibility” (24pp) Supplementary: b. Fischer & Ravizza – “Moral Responsibility for Actions: Weak Reasons-Responsiveness” in <i>Responsibility and Control</i>
2	July 15 ** Short Essay Due by 11:59pm **	4. Libertarianism I Required: a. Kane – “Responsibility, Luck, and Chance” (24pp) Supplementary: b. Kane – “The Dual Regress of Free Will and the Role of Alternative Possibilities”

3	July 20 ** Long Essay Topics Posted **	5. Libertarianism II Required: a. Chisholm – “Human Freedom and the Self” (13pp) b. Steward – “Agency, Substance Causation, and Top-Down Causation” in <i>A Metaphysics for Freedom</i> (50pp)
3	July 22	6. Compatibilism III Required: a. Vihvelin, “Free Will Demystified: A Dispositional Account” (24pp)
4	July 27 ** Long Essay Proposal Due by 11:59pm **	7. Hard Determinism Required: a. Pereboom – “Determinism Al Dente” (25pp) Supplementary: b. Strawson – “The Impossibility of Moral Responsibility”
4	July 29	8. Is Free Will an Impossible Problem? Required: a. Nagel – “Freedom” (26pp)
5	Aug 3	No class: civic holiday
Part II: Action		
5	Aug 5	9. The Causal Theory of Action Required: a. Davidson – “Actions, Reasons, and Causes” (16pp) b. Velleman – “What Happens When Someone Acts?” (21pp)

6	Aug 10	10. Animal Agency Required: a. Hornett – “The Form of Agency” (12pp) b. Steward – “Animal Agency” (22pp) Supplementary: c. Dretske – “Minimal rationality” in <i>Rational Animals?</i>
6	Aug 12	11. ...and Beyond? Required: a. Fulda – “Natural Agency: The Case of Bacterial Cognition” (21pp) Supplementary: b. Williams – “Biosentientism” (unpublished manuscript available on Quercus, do not circulate)
6	Aug 13 ** Note this is Thursday ** Long Essay due Friday August 14 by 11:59 pm **	12. Optional exam review day