

Ethics in the Digital Age

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Course Assistants: Andrew Pitel; Eamon Duede; Sam Segal

Meeting Times: The majority of this course will be run *asynchronously*. We will not meet during the officially scheduled lecture times. Instead, each week I will assign readings and post short lectures on the reading. Each week you will also be required to complete a short assignment, by Thursday at 9 pm Central Time. Discussion sections will be held *synchronously*, either offline or online at the discretion of the CA, and as conditions permit. Optional student hours will be held synchronously online.

Student Hours: Tuesdays, 9-11 am, Central Time, on Zoom.

Summary: Advanced technology is now integrated into every part of our lives. Often without thinking carefully about the consequences, we have built the Internet, shared our lives on Twitter and Facebook, invested in self-driving cars, and pursued research on technological enhancement of the human body. The goal of philosophy of technology is to step back and reflect on these developments, by bringing together the work of philosophers, historians, anthropologists, and sociologists. Part of the goal of this reflection is to think about the norms that we should use to guide continued technological development.

The philosophy of technology is an exciting and broad field. This course serves as an in-depth introduction to the fields of applied ethics and technology studies. Over the course of the quarter, we will pair classic debates in applied ethics with case studies from recent developments in technology. Our goal is to come to a deeper understanding of how we should act in the digital age. Some of the questions we will discuss include: What should a self-driving car do in a crash when every likely outcome leads to the death of some number of innocent people? Do people have a right to be forgotten on the internet? What should be our privacy expectations when it comes to contact tracing? To what extent should it be legitimate to pursue genetic enhancement of humans? What would be the moral implications of legalizing drugs like Adderall? Who's responsible when someone is harassed on Twitter? How much should we worry about nuclear war or the possibility that we are living in the Matrix? Is anything wrong with violent video games? In what ways do biases emerge in supposedly neutral technological tools? What makes a good meme?

This course has no prerequisites and is an appropriate first philosophy course for any student.

Texts: All texts and multimedia will be made available through Canvas.

Course Requirements:

1. 15%: Section Participation and Attendance: Attendance in discussion sections is mandatory, and unexcused absences will significantly harm your participation grade. Participation is also mandatory in section. Good participation is a matter of both making positive contributions in class and serving as a good classroom citizen.
2. 45%: 9 weekly mini-assignments, due Thursday of each week at 9 pm Central Time. These will take a variety of forms, but you should expect to produce 2-3 pages of writing each week. These assignments will be graded on a simplified scale from 0 to 5. Evidence of a serious attempt to tackle the assignment will be sufficient to receive full marks. Note that I will provide detailed instructions for each week's assignments beyond the outline in this syllabus.

3. 40%: 6–7 page final paper: A 6–7 page final paper, double spaced, on your choice of topics to be distributed on Canvas. Due on the last day of reading period.

Policy Statements:

1. Late Papers and Extensions: For each day that the final paper is late, it will be penalized 2/3rds of a letter grade. Late papers will only be accepted up to four days after the assignment is due. For reasons of fairness, extensions will only be granted in cases of clear need. Please contact me as soon as you think that you may need an extension so we can work out an appropriate plan. Weekly mini-assignments can only be turned in at most one day late, for a 40% penalty.
2. Plagiarism and Academic Integrity: You must document all of your source material. If you take any text from somebody else, you must make it clear the text is being quoted and where the text comes from. You must also cite any sources from which you obtain numbers, ideas, or other material. If you have any questions about what does or does not constitute plagiarism, ask! Plagiarism is a serious offense and will be treated according to university policy. It is also your responsibility to make sure you have turned in a readable pdf or docx for all paper assignments.
3. Disabilities: Any student with a documented disability needing academic adjustments or accommodations is requested to email me by the end of the first week of class. All discussions will remain confidential.

Tentative Schedule: (subject to change; note that mini-lectures will also be posted on Canvas at the start of each week to supplement the readings and multimedia excerpts)

Week 1: Self-Driving Cars

- Multimedia: Excerpt from *The Good Place*
- Reading #1: Jeffrey Gurney, "Crashing into the Unknown", pp. 182–222 and 245–267
- Reading #2: Bonnefon et al, "The Social Dilemma of Autonomous Vehicles"
- Mini-assignment, due 10/1 at 9 pm Central: Choose one dilemma a self-driving car might be faced with, and make an argument as to how it should respond.

Week 2: What Makes Us Human?

- Multimedia: "Meet the Biohackers"
- Multimedia: Tweet about remembering
- Reading #1: Andy Clark, *Natural-Born Cyborgs*, Introduction & Chapter 1
- Reading #2: Julie Tannenbaum, "The Promise and Peril of the Pharmacological Enhancer Modafinil"
- Reading #3: Smids Nyholm and Berkers, "Robots in the Workplace"
- Mini-assignment, due 10/8 at 9 pm Central: Argument analysis of a paragraph of one of our assigned readings.

Week 3: Privacy

- Reading #1: Judith Jarvis Thomson, "The Right to Privacy"
- Reading #2: Helen Nissenbaum, "A Contextualist Approach to Privacy Online"
- Reading #3: Jeffrey Toobin, *The Solace of Oblivion*
- Mini-assignment, due 10/15 at 9 pm Central: Online discussion board post and reply on the issue of privacy.

Week 4: Online Shaming

- Multimedia: *Black Mirror*, Season 3, Episode 6

- Reading #1: Aline Maya, “Hated in the Nation and #DeathTo: What are the Consequences of Trial by Twitter?”
- Reading #2: Kathryn J. Norlock, “Online Shaming”
- Mini-assignment, due 10/22 at 9 pm Central: Twitter research project on online shaming.

Week 5: COVID-19

- Reading #1: Ben Bramble, *Pandemic Ethics*, Chapter 6, “Vaccine Trials”
- Reading #2: Mike Otsuka, “Should there be human challenge vaccine trials for COVID-19?”
- Reading #3: Ben Bramble, *Pandemic Ethics*, Chapter 7, “Triage”
- Reading #4: Floridi Luciano, “Mind the App: Considerations on the Ethical Risks of COVID-19 Tracing Apps”
- Mini-Assignment, due 10/29 at 9 pm Central: Reflection on COVID-19

Week 6: Virtual Reality

- Multimedia: Excerpt from *The Matrix*
- Reading #1: Robert Nozick, “The Experience Machine”
- Reading #2: Jim Pryor, “What’s So Bad About Living in the Matrix?”
- Mini-Assignment, due 11/5 at 9 pm Central: Reflection on whether you would enter the experience machine

Week 7: Violent Video Games

- Multimedia: Video games, TBD
- Reading #1: Morgan Luck, “the Gamer’s Dilemma”
- Reading #2: Shannon Vallor, “Moral Deskillling and Upskilling in a New Machine Age: Reflections on the Ambiguous Future of Character”
- Mini-assignment, due 11/12 at 9 pm Central: Online discussion-board posts and reply.

Week 8: Technology and Social Justice

- Multimedia: Excerpt on digital surveillance, TBD
- Reading #1: Langdon Winner, “Do Artifacts Have Politics?”
- Reading #2: Anupam Chander, “The Racist Algorithm?”
- Mini-assignment, due 11/19 at 9 pm Central: Find and discuss bias in a previous reading from the course.

(Thanksgiving Break)

Week 9: Technology and Memes

- Multimedia: Memes to be distributed in class
- Reading #1: Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”
- Reading #2: Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch”
- Mini-assignment, due 12/3 at 9 pm Central: Create a meme and reflect on it.

Monday, December 7: Final paper due at 5 pm Central Time