

Ethics in the Digital Age

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Last updated 9/19/2022

Course Assistants: Andrew Stone, Kévin Irakóze, Ben Conroy

Student Hours: Thursday, 10 am to noon, in Stuart 222, or on Zoom by appointment.

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, and pursued research on AI and the 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: Do people have a right to be forgotten on the internet? What should be our privacy expectations when it comes to social media? What is cryptocurrency? 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. 10%: Attendance and Participation: Attendance in discussion sections and lecture 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. 40%: 2 short writing assignments of 2–3 pages each. These will be **staggered** across the quarter for the entire class. One quarter of the class will write these assignments in Weeks 2 and 6; one quarter in Weeks 3 and 7, one quarter in Weeks 4 and 8, and one quarter in Weeks 5 and 9. You will be assigned your weeks randomly, and you can switch with another member of the class if you both agree. (I reserve the right to prohibit switching if it becomes too much of a burden on the CAs.)
3. 50%: 6–7 page final paper: A 6–7 page final paper, double spaced, on your choice of topics to be distributed on Canvas. Due Thursday, December 8.

Policy Statements:

1. Late Papers and Extensions: For each day that the final paper or short assignment is late, it will be penalized 2/3rds of a letter grade. Late papers will only be accepted for two days after the assignment is due. For the final paper, I have deliberately tried to put the deadline as late as possible in the quarter, so if you need an extension, you will need to take an incomplete in the course. Please contact me ASAP if you need an incomplete so we can work out an appropriate plan.

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 speak with me or email me by the end of the first week of class. I am also open to requests from students without a documented disability according to the university's definition. All discussions will remain confidential.

Schedule: (subject to change)

Week 1: Introduction & Privacy

- 9/27: Course Introduction
 - No assigned reading
- 9/29: Privacy
 - Required Reading: Judith Jarvis Thomson, “The Right to Privacy”

Week 2: Privacy, cont.

- 10/4: Privacy in the Digital Age
 - Required Reading: Helen Nissenbaum, “A Contextualist Approach to Privacy Online”
 - Required Reading: Jeffrey Toobin, “The Solace of Oblivion”
- 10/6: Online Shaming
 - Required Multimedia: *Black Mirror*, Season 3, Episode 6
 - Required Reading: Kathryn J. Norlock, “Online Shaming”
 - Required Reading: “Logically Identifies GhostEzra, Florida Man Behind World’s ‘Largest Anti-semitic Internet Forum’”

Week 3: Cryptocurrency

- 10/11: The Ethics of Currency
 - Required Reading: Claus Dierksmeier and Peter Seele, “Cryptocurrencies and Business Ethics”
 - Required Reading: Excerpt from Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the 21st Century*
- 10/13: The Metaphysics of Money
 - Required Reading: Simon Butler, “The Philosophy of Bitcoin and the Question of Money”
 - Required Reading: Excerpt from William Clare Roberts, *Marx’s Inferno*

Week 4: Intellectual Property

- 10/18: Intellectual Property
 - Required Reading: Edwin C. Hettinger, “Justifying Intellectual Property”
- 10/20: Digital Piracy
 - Required Reading: Hugh Breakey, “Deliberate, Principled, Self-Interested Law Breaking: The Ethics of Digital ‘Piracy’”
 - Required Reading: David Hales et al, “BitTorrent or BitCrunch: Evidence of a credit squeeze in BitTorrent?”

Week 5: Human Enhancement

- 10/25: Human Enhancement
 - Required Reading: Allen Buchanan, “Moral Status and Human Enhancement”
- 10/27: Case Studies
 - Required Reading: Julie Tannenbaum, “The Promise and Peril of the Pharmacological Enhancer Modafinil”
 - Required Reading: Davide Battiste, “Genetic Enhancement and the Child’s Right to an Open Future”

Week 6: Virtual Reality

- 11/1: The Matrix
 - Required Multimedia: Excerpt from *The Matrix*, by the Wachowskis.
 - Required Reading: James Pryor, “What’s So Bad About Living in the Matrix?”
- 11/3: Violent Video Games
 - Required Reading: Morgan Luck, “The Gamer’s Dilemma: An analysis of arguments for the moral distinction between virtual murder and virtual paedophilia”

Week 7: Algorithmic Bias

- 11/8
 - Required Reading: Langdon Winner, “Do Artifacts Have Politics?”
- 11/10
 - Required Reading: Anupam Chander, “The Racist Algorithm?”

Week 8: AI

- 11/15
 - Required Multimedia: Excerpt from *The Minority Report*, by Steven Spielberg
 - Readings TBD
- 11/17
 - TBD

(Thanksgiving)

Week 9: Technology & Memes

- 11/29: Memes
 - Required Reading: Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”
- 12/1: The Nature of Technology
 - Required Reading: Martin Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology”

Thursday, December 8: Final paper due at 9 pm Central Time