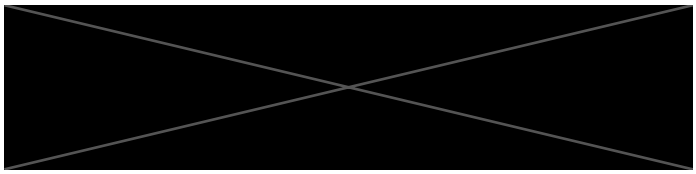
Ethics in the Digital Age



Course description: In this course, we'll critically evaluate some ethical issues concerning technology by focusing on debates over social media, biomedical technology, and artificial intelligence. For example, is social media responsible for the rapid spread of fake news? When is it okay to use genetic engineering technology like CRISPR, if ever? And what sorts of limits should we place on the development of artificial intelligence so that things don't go haywire? We'll first cover basic ethical theory and then address these (and other) issues case-by-case.

Required Texts: All course texts are either freely available online, or will be made available via the 'Resources' tab on Collab.

Assignments and grading

***Online journal*: ONCE** a week, I will provide you with a set of guiding questions that are related to the that week's reading. You will write a 100-200 word journal entry responding to *one* of those questions and post it to our online discussion forum by 11:59 PM the night before our next class meeting. **You will turn in ONE online journal post for each of our Wednesday class meetings, so your posts are due by Tuesday at 11:59 PM.** Late journal entries will not be accepted.

Additionally**, you must respond to ONE of your classmates's posts per week** – again, in 100-200 words. In responding to these posts, you should either (a) raise an objection to your classmate or, if you agree with your classmate, (b) raise critical concerns/questions with your classmate's post. Basically, you should move the conversation on the topic one step further, treating your classmate's post as the text you're engaging with.

The guiding questions will vary. They will sometimes ask you about your own view on a subject; other times, they will ask you to consider the merits and demerits of a particular argument: and so on. However, answering them will be key to active classroom participation, and we will talk about the questions in class. Thus, they should not consist merely in a summary of the reading – they require critical engagement. That is, they should ideally go beyond the course readings.

What does it mean to 'go beyond what was said in the course readings'? This will vary from prompt to prompt, but the basic idea is that you should ask your own questions of the material, or raise your own objections to a view, and so on. These replies do not have to be wholly original, but they must show that you've thought over the issues on your own terms.

Writing assignments: Three shorter assignments (~750-1000 words) and one longer assignment (~1250-1500 words). The shorter assignments are due on the first three Fridays, and the long assignment is due on the final day of class.

Short Assignments: In these assignments, I'll ask you to engage with one of the objections we've considered in class. This will involve (i) explaining a view X, (ii) explaining why a particular objection to view X is an objection, and (iii) providing reasons to think that objection to view X is **successful** or **unsuccessful**. In effect, this amounts to you arguing **FOR or AGAINST a particular position.**

When I comment on them, I'll respond by either providing a defense of the position that you're objecting to, or objecting to the view that you defend.

(This isn't to show that every view is wrong! It's just to show how one might move the conversation one step forward – this should help you structure the long assignment.)

Long Assignment: Your longer assignment will be similar to your shorter assignments, but you'll take it one step further. If you think that a particular objection is successful, **you will critically evaluate a reply on behalf of the view you are arguing against.** If you think that a particular objection is unsuccessful, **you will critically evaluate a reply on behalf of the objector you are arguing against.**

Here's what the structure should look like. First, you'll explain the view you're considering. Second, you'll explain an objection to that view and why that objection *is* an objection. Third, you'll provide some reasons that you agree or disagree with this objection. Fourth, you'll consider a reply on behalf of someone who holds the opposite view and present further reasons to think that their new reply is unsuccessful.

I'll provide you with some topics to choose from for each of these assignments, but you can run ideas by me if you want to pick your own topic.

Participation/classtime: Participation is an integral component of this course. As such, you must first and foremost attend all class meetings in order to complete the course objectives.

At the beginning of the course, you will be assigned to a small group with which you will remain for the rest of the semester. Class time will consist of alternating activities between small groups and lecture. Participation involves working constructively with your group members and engaging in active discussion with the rest of your classmates. Both of these factors will be taken into account when calculating your participation grade.

You are allowed ***one*** unexcused absence. After that, you should contact me and let me know about any extenuating circumstances. Each further unnotified absence will result in a **1/3rd of a letter grade** being deducted from your participation grade.

How to Write: Writing philosophy is quite different from other writing you've done in academia. We'll cover what this genre of paper writing looks like, but I encourage you to reach out via email or stop by my office hours if you have any questions, want to discuss paper structures, etc.

Grading scheme:

Journal: 10%
Short assignments: 15% each
Long assignment: 25%
Participation: 20%

Class Policies:

Extensions: I will grant paper extensions under extraordinary circumstances.

Late papers: Papers turned in late will be penalized 1/3rd of a letter grade for every day they are late. For instance, a paper that's turned in a week late will lose $2\frac{1}{3}$ letter grades. This means that I will grade it starting at a C+.

Communication: If you send me an email, you can expect a reply from me within 24 hours (except for weekends; I will reply first thing Monday morning).

Reading/assignment schedule

(All readings available through collab)

Week 1: Ethical Theory Primer

Monday –N/A
Tuesday – **Read:** Christopher Woodard, *Taking Utilitarianism Seriously* (selection on collab). **Post:** Journal entry.
Wednesday – **Read:** Russ Shafer-Landau, *The Fundamentals of Ethics* (selection on collab)
Thursday – cont.
Friday – **Read:** Shannon Vallor, "Virtue Ethics, Technology, and Human Flourishing", **Submit:** Short Assignment 1

Week 2: Social Media

Monday – No class
Tuesday – **Read:** Reginia Rini, "Fake News and Partisan Epistemology", **Post:** Journal Entry
Wednesday – **Read:** Paul Billingham & Tom Parr, "Online Public Shaming: Virtues and Vices".
Thursday – cont.
Friday – **Read:** Robert Simpson, "The Ethics of Quitting Social Media", **Submit:** Short Assignment 2

Week 3: Biomedical Technology

Monday – **Read:** Bonnie Steinbock, "Opting for Twins in In Vitro Fertilization: What Does Procreative Responsibility Require?".
Tuesday – **Read:** Michael Sandel, "The Case Against Perfection"; **Post:** Journal Entry
Wednesday – cont.
Thursday – **Read:** Robert Sparrow, "Yesterday's Child"

Friday – cont., **Submit:** Short Assignment 3

Week 4: Artificial Intelligence

Monday – **Read:** Carissa Véliz, "Moral zombies: why algorithms are not moral agents"
Tuesday – **Read:** Frances Kamm, "The Use and Abuse of the Trolley Problem: Self-Driving Cars, Medical Treatments, and the Distribution of Harm". **Post:** Journal Entry.
Wednesday – cont.
Thursday – **Read:** Clinton Castro & Adam K. Pham, "Is the Attention Economy Noxious?"
Friday – cont., **Submit:** Long Assignment