

# PHIL 183: Philosophy of Technology

**Instructor:** Daniel Moerner ([daniel.moerner@yale.edu](mailto:daniel.moerner@yale.edu))

**Office Hours:** Wednesday, 10 am – 12 pm, Connecticut 102

**Class Times:** Tuesday/Thursday, 9 am – 12:15 pm, Summer Session B

**Course 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, often working together with historian, 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. Our focus in this course will be the applied ethics of technology. Focusing on specific case studies, we will try to ask questions like the following: 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? Is it ethical to pursue global-scale solutions to global warming without the consent of every individual or every nation? 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? Who's responsible when a drone kills someone? How much should we worry about nuclear war or the possibility that we are living in the Matrix?

Over the course of the summer session, we will investigate five major issues in the applied ethics of technology, including moral dilemmas, consent and privacy, human enhancement, distributed responsibility, and technological risk. Our goal will both be to start to think about how to answer some of the specific questions above, but also to come to a deeper understanding of obligations, rights, and the nature of being human.

This course has no prerequisites and is an appropriate first philosophy course for any student. This course meets the Yale Writing Requirement. A major focus of this course will be developing our writing skills through writing assignments, mini-workshops on writing, and one-on-one meetings.

**Texts:** No texts are required for purchase. All readings will be supplied through Canvas.

## **Course Requirements:**

### 1. 10%: Course Participation and Attendance

Attendance is mandatory in summer sessions, and **any** unexcused absence will significantly harm your participation grade. In this course, you will also be graded on the quality of your participation. Good participation is a matter of both making positive contributions in class and serving as a good classroom citizen. We will spend time in the first session discussing

participation and setting norms for the class, and you will receive feedback from me on the quality of your participation at the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> week.

2. 10%: Reading Questions

By 9 pm before each class, please email me a question or thought you have about the reading for the next day's class. These should be 2-4 sentences. Each class, we will discuss some of these reading questions.

3. 15%: 3-page short writing assignment (due Monday, Week 2)

A 3 page short writing assignment, double-spaced, due at 5 pm on the Monday of Week 2. In this writing assignment, I will give you a selection of excerpts from our readings for Thursday, Week 1. You will be asked to pick one excerpt, identify what conclusion the author is trying to establish, and identify the premises the author uses to support that conclusion. Finally, say whether or not you think the author is successful in establishing this conclusion. No introduction or conclusion will be necessary. Further details on this assignment will be distributed in class.

4. 30%: 6-7 page midterm paper (due Friday, Week 3)

A 6-7 page midterm paper, double spaced, on a topic to be distributed on Canvas, due by 5 pm on the Friday of Week 3. You will be required to meet with me to discuss an outline of your paper.

5. 35%: 6-7 page final paper (due Friday, Week 5)

A 6-7 page final paper, on your choice of topics to be distributed on Canvas, due by 5 pm on the Friday of Week 5. You will be required to meet with me to discuss an outline of your paper.

**Policy Statements:**

1. Late Papers and Extensions: For each day that a paper is late, it will be penalized 2/3rds of a letter grade. Late papers will only be accepted up to two 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.
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.
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. All discussions will remain confidential.

## Schedule of Readings:

### Week 1: Moral Dilemmas

Tuesday, 7/3: Introduction

*Mini Workshop: How to Make an Argument*

Multimedia: Excerpt from *The Good Place* (to be shown in class)

Thursday, 7/5: The Trolley Problem (Case Study: Self-Driving Cars)

*Mini Workshop: How to Read a Philosophy Paper*

Peter Singer (1972), "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 1 (3): 229-243.

Jeff McMahan (1993), "Killing, Letting Die, and Withdrawing Aid," *Ethics*, 103 (2), 250-279. (Only read 250-268.)

Frances Kamm (2007), "Does Distance Matter to the Right to Rescue?," *Intricate Ethics* (Oxford), short excerpt.

Excerpt on Self-Driving Cars from *Wired* magazine.

### Week 2: Consent and Privacy

Short Writing Assignment due 5 pm Monday, 7/9.

Tuesday, 7/10: Consent (Case Study: Geo-engineering)

*Mini Workshop: What is a Thesis?*

Tom Christiano (2012), "A Second Form of Philosophical Anarchism," §4 of "Authority," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

Daniel Brudney (1991), "Hypothetical Consent and Moral Force," *Law and Philosophy*, 10 (3): 235-270. (Shorter excerpt to be assigned.)

Pak-Hang Wong (2016), "Consenting to Geoengineering," *Philosophy and Technology*, 29: 173-188.

Thursday, 7/12: Privacy (Case Study: Right to Be Forgotten)

Judith Jarvis Thomson (1975), "The Right to Privacy," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 4 (4): 295-314.

James Rachels (1975), "Why Privacy is Important," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 4 (4): 323-333.

Jeffrey Toobin (2014), "The Solace of Oblivion," *New Yorker*, September 29, 2014.

### **Week 3: Enhancement**

Tuesday, 7/17: What Makes Us Human?

*Mini-Workshop: How to Write an Introduction*

Karl Marx (1844), "Alienated Labor," in *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*.

Andy Clark (2003), *Natural-Born Cyborgs* (Oxford), Introduction & Chapter 1

Thursday, 7/19: Case Studies: Genetic and Non-Genetic Enhancement

Russell Powell, Guy Kahane, and Julian Savulescu (2012), "Evolution, Genetic Engineering, and Human Enhancement," *Philosophy and Technology*, 25: 438-458.

Julie Tannenbaum (2014), "The Promise and Peril of the Pharmacological Enhancer Modafinil," *Bioethics*, 28 (8): 436-445.

Midterm Paper Due Friday, 7/20, 5 pm

### **Week 4: Responsibility**

Tuesday, 7/24: The Problem of Many Hands

*Mini-Workshop: How to Use Quotes in a Paper*

Dennis Thompson (1980), "Moral responsibility and public officials: the problem of many hands," *American Political Science Review*, 74: 905-916.

Neelke Doorn (2010), "A Rawlsian approach to distribute responsibilities in networks," *Science and Engineering Ethics*, 16: 221-249.

Thursday, 7/26: Case Studies: Twitter and Autonomous Weapons

Zeynep Tufekci (2017), *Twitter and Teargas* (Yale University Press), excerpts

Robert Sparrow (2007), "Killer Robots," *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 24 (1): 62-77.

## **Week 5: Technological Risk**

Tuesday, 7/31: Extinction (Case Study: Nuclear War)

Nick Bostrom (2002), "Existential Risks: Analyzing Human Extinction Scenarios and Related Hazards," *Journal of Evolution and Technology*, 9.

Richard Rhodes (1986), *The Making of the Atomic Bomb* (Simon & Schuster), excerpts.

Brian Martin (1982), "Critique of Nuclear Extinction," *Journal of Peace Research*, 19 (4): 287-300.

Thursday, 8/2: The Matrix and the Experience Machine

Jim Pryor (2005), "What's So Bad About Living in the Matrix?",  
<http://www.jimpryor.net/research/papers/matrix/plain.html>

David Chalmers (2005), "The Matrix as Metaphysics," <http://consc.net/papers/matrix.html>

Robert Nozick (1974), "The Experience Machine," very short excerpt from *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (Basic Books).

Multimedia: Excerpts from *The Matrix* and *Westworld* (to be shown in class)

Final Paper Due Friday, 8/3, 5 pm