**PHIL S183: Philosophy of Technology**

Yale Summer Session A 2022 Course Syllabus

Instructor:Max DuBoff (max.duboff@yale.edu)

**Class times**: Tuesdays and Thursdays 1:00 – 4:15pm EDT

**Class meeting format:** Zoom (link on Canvas; internet connection and video and audio access required)

**Course Description:**

You’re reading this on the internet. That’s no surprise, of course; so many aspects of our lives are now lived on or close to the internet, aided by a wide variety of technologies. Together we’ll explore technology as a whole, focusing on the internet, with one main question in mind: how should we act? Philosophy of technology will allow us to evaluate the internet and our relation to it, with important consequences beyond the internet as well. Among other questions, we’ll discuss: How should we access and respond to information? Should we value online experiences and friendships as much as in-person ones? Can algorithms be racist, and if they are, how do we make them less so? Should we cancel people online? How does the internet change us, and why does it matter?

The goal of the philosophy of technology is to step back and reflect on the ethical impact of technology. Over the course of the summer session, we will apply classic debates in ethics to case studies in modern developments in technology. We will learn how to apply philosophical thinking and argument to questions about our ethical obligations, the nature of being human, and what it means for us to lead a good life.

This course serves as an in-depth introduction to the fields of applied ethics and technology studies. No previous experience of philosophy or technology studies is expected. This course fulfils the Yale humanities requirement.

**Learning objectives:**

By the end of this course, you will be able to:

* Identify key ethical challenges arising from the development of technologies, esp. on the internet
* Understand core concepts from philosophical ethics and how they apply to technological issues
* Independently analyze how particular technologies promote or impede wellbeing and how they ought or ought or not to be used
* Critically evaluate your own ethical views and the views of others using philosophical argument
* Express systematic ethical arguments, in speech and writing

**Summary of Course Assignments:**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Assignment | Percent of Final Grade |
| Class participation | 10% |
| Reading responses | 10% |
| Argument analysis | 15% |
| Midterm paper | 20% |
| Final paper | 30% |
| Personal reflection project | 15% |

**Office Hours:** Times TBA, or by appointment. These are times I reserve outside of class when I will be available to talk to online. You can pop in unannounced or reserve an appointment by emailing me. We can use this time to answer any questions you have, chat about course material, talk about ideas you’re interested in or feel puzzled about, talk about your progress, discuss feedback on your work, or address concerns you have. This course also might have Teaching Assistants (TAs) with whom you can meet for help and feedback.

**Required Readings:**

“Readings” includes print, video, and audio pieces. All readings will be supplied through Canvas or publicly available on the web. When applicable, access to a Netflix account will be provided if you do not already have it. You must complete readings **before** the corresponding class. Readings are mandatory unless specified as optional. Sometimes you are only required to read excerpts, not the whole thing. Where applicable, this is noted; the rest of the reading in those cases is optional.

Many of the readings will present controversial ideas and opposing points of view. Your task are to: (a) try to understand the arguments and ideas; (b) be curious about the claims being made; (c) critically evaluate the ideas and arguments.

The primary function of syllabus readings here is **not** to communicate facts for you to learn and memorize (like a chapter from a chemistry textbook).Many of the readings present excellent and worthwhile ideas and arguments, and you may conclude that some are even correct. But this does **not** mean that all, or even any, of the readings, serve the purpose of:

* Presenting the correct view, for you to memorize and accept without question
* Illustrating flawless arguments

The readings on this syllabus **do** serve these purposes:

* Present interesting, worthwhile philosophical ideas and questions
* Introduce you to useful ethical concepts
* Introduce you to philosophical argumentation techniques
* Illustrate philosophical skills such as how to critically evaluate ideas and arguments in ethics
* Give examples of interesting, worthwhile arguments for ethical conclusions

There are several types of “readings” (broadly defined) on this syllabus: academic philosophy articles; philosophical analyses for a broader audience, either by professional philosophers or by philosophically informed others; journalists’ descriptions of forms of technology and their impact; and science fiction (SF). You will be asked to read all this material **as philosophers**, thinking deeply about how we should act based on and in relation to various technologies. Although the readings beyond academic philosophy will hopefully be fun, they won’t necessarily be easier! Critical engagement with all these texts is the goal.

**Course Schedule** (subject to change; Canvas will have the most up-to-date version at the course’s start):

**WEEK 1**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Date** | **Class Topic** | **Readings** |
| Tuesday May 31st 1:00-4:15pm | Class 1: Introduction—Technology, Ethics, and Philosophical Argument*Mini Workshop: Forms of Philosophical Argument* | Langdon Winner, “Technologies as Forms of Life” (1983) (16 pp.)Shelly Kagan, “Preliminaries,” in *Normative Ethics* (1997) (22 pp.)Crash Course Philosophy, [“#2 How to Argue—Philosophical Reasoning”](https://youtu.be/NKEhdsnKKHs?t=222) 3:42-end, and [“#3 How to Argue—Induction and Abduction”](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-wrCpLJ1XAw) (16:16 total)Olivia Bailey, “But How Do I Participate?” (4 pp.) |
| DUE Wednesday June 1st 9:00pm: Reading Response on Class 2 readings |
| Thursday June 2nd 1:00-4:15pm | Class 2: Information and the Internet*Mini Workshop: Criticizing Ethical Arguments* | Jeroen van den Hoven et al.,[“Privacy and Information Technology”](https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/it-privacy/#ImpInfTecPri) Sec. 2-4, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2020) (9 pp.)Philosophy Tube, [“Data”](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fCUTX1jurJ4) (2020) (26:14)C. Thi Nguyen, [“Escape the Echo Chamber”](https://aeon.co/essays/why-its-as-hard-to-escape-an-echo-chamber-as-it-is-to-flee-a-cult), *Aeon* (2018) (12 pp.)**SF:** William Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 4-5, 5-7, 51 (1984) [CW: violence] |
| DUE Friday June 3rd 11:59pm: Week 1 Personal Reflection, Observe and Ask |

**WEEK 2**

|  |
| --- |
| DUE Monday July 6th 9pm: Reading Response on Class 3 readings |
| Tuesday June 7th1:00-4:15pm | Class 3: Simulation and Authenticity*Mini workshop: What is a Thesis?**Mini workshop: Paragraph Structure* | Robert Nozick, “The Experience Machine,” in *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, 42-45 (1974)Renè Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy* 1 (1641) (4 pp.) [“Is Virtual Reality…Real? with David Chalmers,”](https://www.earwolf.com/episode/is-virtual-reality-real-with-david-chalmers/) *Factually!* podcast (2022) (1:19:41) Paul Bloomfield, “Social Media, Self-Deception, and Self-Respect,” in *Social Media and the Value of Truth* (2013) (7 pp.)**SF:** Aliette de Bodard, [“The Long Tail”](https://www.wired.com/story/future-of-work-long-tail-aliette-de-bodard/) (16 pp.)Optional: *The Matrix* (2:16:00); James Pryor, [“What’s So Bad About Living in the Matrix?”](http://www.jimpryor.net/research/papers/matrix/plain.html) in *Philosophers Explore the Matrix* (2005) (13 pp.) |
| DUE Wednesday July 8th 9pm: Reading Response on Class 4 readings |
| ThursdayJune 9th 1:00-4:15pm | Class 4: Virtual Friendship*Mini Workshop: The Goals of Philosophical Writing**Mini Workshop: Structuring a Paper* | Adam Briggle, “Real Friends: How The Internet Can Foster Friendship,” *Ethics and Information Technology* (2008) (9 pp.)Shannon Vallor, “Flourishing on Facebook: Virtue Friendship & New Social Media,” *Ethics and Information Technology* (2012) (14 pp.)**SF:** Black Mirror San Junipero (1:01:00) [CW: brief sex scene 20:13-20:53] |
| DUE Friday June 10th 11:59pm: Week 2 Personal Reflection, Personal Technology Challenge |
| DUE Friday June 10th 11:59pm: **Argument Analysis** |

**WEEK 3**

|  |
| --- |
| DUE Monday June 13th 9pm: Reading Response on Class 5 readings |
| TuesdayJune 14th 1:00-4:15pm | Class 5: Algorithms, Bias, Surveillance*Mini Workshop: How to Use Quotes in a Paper**Mini Workshop: Writing an Introduction* | BBC Ideas, [“What Exactly Is an Algorithm? Algorithms Explaned”](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZnBF2GeAKbo) (7:53)*Coded Bias*, Netflix documentary (1:30:00)Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, 8, 12-18 (2019)**SF:** [“Mother of Invention”](https://slate.com/technology/2018/02/mother-of-invention-a-new-short-story-by-nnedi-okorafor.html) by Nnedi Okorafor (2018) (18 pp.)Optional: Safiya Noble, “Introduction,” *Algorithms of Oppression* (2018) (13 pp.); [“Why Search Engines Aren’t Unbiased with Safiya Noble,”](https://www.earwolf.com/episode/why-search-engines-arent-unbiased-with-safiya-noble/) *Factually!* podcast (2020)  |
| DUE Wednesday June 15th 9pm: Reading Response on Class 6 readings |
| ThursdayJune 16th 1:00-4:15pm | Class 6: Exam Proctoring Surveillance*Mini Workshop: Objections and Replies* | Shea Swauger, [“Our Bodies Encoded: Algorithmic Test Proctoring in Higher Education,”](https://hybridpedagogy.org/our-bodies-encoded-algorithmic-test-proctoring-in-higher-education/) *Hybrid Pedagogy* (2020) (10 pp.)Mozilla, [“Face Detection, Remote Testing Software & Learning at Home While Black—Amaya’s Flashlight”](https://twitter.com/mozilla/status/1490688952738721794?s=20&t=i-AXM-6yhwoPDfn2s3zjRQ&fbclid=IwAR1rSGE6G-lt_4B1RQRONyPpxyjnSN52zcrEDASbXyfz5h_eJ8j0YtIaWlA) (2022) (1:33)Simon Coghlan, Tim Miller, and Jeannie Paterson, “Good Proctor or ‘Big Brother’? Ethics of Online Exam Supervision Technologies,” *Philosophy & Technology* (2021) (21 pp.) |
| DUE Friday June 17th 11:59pm: Week 3 Personal Reflection, Personal Ethics Challenge |

**WEEK 4**

|  |
| --- |
| DUE Monday June 20th 9pm: Reading Response on Class 7 readings |
| TuesdayJune 21st 1:00-4:15pm | Class 7: Cancel Culture | ContraPoints, [“Canceling”](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OjMPJVmXxV8) (2020) (1:40:00) [CW: alcohol, others as noted in video]Loretta Ross, “[I’m a Black Feminist. I Think Call-Out Culture Is Toxic.](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/17/opinion/sunday/cancel-culture-call-out.html)” *New York Times* (2019) (3 pp.)Neil Levy, “Virtue Signaling Is Virtuous,” *Synthese* (15 pp.) |
| DUE Tuesday June 21st 11:59pm: **Mid-term paper** |
| DUE Wednesday June 22nd 9pm: Reading Response on Class 8 readings |
| ThursdayJune 23rd1:00-4:15pm | Class 8: Cancel Culture (cont.) | Olufemi O. Taiwo, “[What Incivility Gets Us (And What it Doesn’t)](https://blog.apaonline.org/2019/09/03/what-incivility-gets-us-and-what-it-doesnt/),” Blog of the APA (2019) (6 pp.)Paul Billingham and Tom Parr, “Online Public Shaming: Virtues and Vices,” *Journal of Social Philosophy* (2020) (17 pp.)C. Thi Nguyen and Bekka Williams, “Moral Outrage Porn” 147-151, 158-166**SF:** *Community* S5E8, “App Development and Condiments” (on Netflix) (2014) (21:00)Optional: [“Cancel Culture,”](https://www.buzzsprout.com/1112270/8656464-cancel-culture) *You’re Wrong About* podcast (2021) |

**WEEK 5**

|  |
| --- |
| DUE Monday June 27th 9pm: Reading Response on Class 9 readings |
| TuesdayJune 28th 1:00-4:15pm | Class 9: Internet and Enhancement | Richard Heersmink, “The Internet, Cognitive Enhancement, and the Values of Cognition,” *Minds & Machines* (2016) (16 pp.)Jessica Berg, “Surrogate Decision Making in the Internet Age,” *American Journal of Bioethics* (2012) (6 pp.)Teresa Blankmeyer Burke, “A Disability Response to Surrogate Decision Making in the Internet Age,” *American Journal of Bioethics* (2012) (2 pp.)**SF:** Kurt Vonnegut, “Harrison Bergeron” (1961) (5 pp.) |
| DUE Wednesday June 29th 9pm: Reading Response on Class 10 readings |
| ThursdayJune 30th 1:00-4:15pm | Class 10: Internet and Enhancement (cont.) | Robert Sparrow, “Egalitarianism and Moral Bioenhancement,” *The American Journal of Bioethics* (2014) (8 pp.)Jia Tolentino, “The I in the Internet” pp. 2-20 (2019)Mark Miller and Ben White, [“The Warped Self,”](https://aeon.co/essays/social-media-and-the-neuroscience-of-predictive-processing) *Aeon* (2021) (8 pp.)**SF:** Isaac Asimov, “The Last Question” (1956) (9 pp.) |
| DUE Friday July 1st 11:59pm: Week 5 Personal Reflection, Looking Back and Looking Forward |
| DUE Friday July 1st 11:59pm: **Final paper** |

**Explanation of Assignments**

Further details of assignments and what is expected of you will be discussed and distributed in class.

10%: Course participation (every class)

Attendance is mandatory in summer sessions, and any unexcused absence will significantly harm your participation grade. Good participation is a matter of coming prepared and on time, remaining engaged throughout class, listening to other students, contributing to discussion, completing and engaging in class activities, and serving as a good classroom citizen. We will spend time in the first session discussing participation and setting norms for the class. You will receive feedback on your participation.

10%: Reading Responses (due the evening before every class)

By 9 pm EDT the evening before each class, you are required to post one comment about the reading for the next day’s class. Most days I will provide a recommendation about what you should think about. These should be 2-4 sentences. Each class, we will discuss some of your reading responses. You have one “free” reading response that you do not need to submit over the course of the summer session. If you do choose to take advantage of this, please send me an email noting that you are using your “free” question that day.

15%: Argument Analysis (due Friday of Week 2)

A 2-3 page short writing assignment, double-spaced. In this writing assignment, I will give you a selection of excerpts from readings related to topics we have discussed so far. 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.

20%: 4-5 page midterm paper (due Tuesday of Week 4)

A midterm paper, double spaced, on your choice of topic (options to be distributed on Canvas), due by 11:59pm on the Tuesday of Week 4. You will be required to meet with me or a TA to discuss an outline of your paper.

30%: 6-7 page final paper (due Friday of Week 5)

A final paper, on your choice of topic (options to be distributed on Canvas), due by 11:59pm on the Friday of Week 5. You will be required to meet with me or a TA to discuss an outline of your paper. With approval beforehand, you’re welcome to pursue an alternative project of similar scope, such as making a podcast or vlog, or writing an op-ed or policy brief.

15%: Personal Reflection Project (each component due at the end of a week of class)

For this part of the course you will be invited to reflect on the role of ethics and technology in your own life through guided written reflections and personal challenges (detailed guidance for this assignment will be given in class). The project will be graded through four short, informal write-ups. You must submit the write-up for each component by the end of Friday of the corresponding week (note: none for Week 4). You will be graded on sincere engagement with the task.

Week 1: Observe and Ask. List some of the roles that technologies play or have played in your life, and brainstorm ethical questions that might be raised about them (e.g. whether or not they improve your wellbeing; whether or not there are ethical reasons against using them)

Week 2: Personal Technology Challenge. Take up a personal challenge to altering your own use of technology and observe what it’s like (you may select from examples I’ll distribute or make your own. For instance: go off social media for 24 hours; try researching the answers to questions you have without using the internet for a day). Report on the experience.

Week 3: Personal Ethics Challenge and Reflection: take up a challenge to engage in critical assessment of your own ethical views (e.g. record an ethical decision you face during the week and reflect on analyse your decision; note an ethical view that you hold strongly and think of the best reasons someone might have to disagree with you; record and assess an ethical disagreement you have with someone). Report on the experience.

Week 5: Reflection and Looking Forward. Look over the questions you raised in Week 1 and the challenges you engaged in weeks 2 and 3. Reflect on how your thinking has developed (e.g.: What do you think about your answers to the questions you raised in Week 1? Were the outcomes of the challenges what you expected? Did you learn anything from them? How, if at all, will you apply what you’ve learned after this class is over?)

**Course Policies**

**Inclusion:** This course aims to foster a learning community which will tackle difficult questions from a variety of perspectives with respect, open-mindedness, and warmth. The course is designed to be actively inclusive of, and draw on the strengths of, every possible student. It is my intent that all students in class are treated respectfully regardless of gender, sexuality, disability, age, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, race, culture, and politics. Your suggestions are encouraged and appreciated, and I invite you to let me know as soon as possible if you have any concerns or suggestions about this, by emailing me, speaking to me in office hours, and/or leaving feedback via Canvas.

**Late Papers/Assignments:** Extensions will be automatically granted if you email me more than 24 hours before an assignment is due and tell me your plan for when to turn it in. Last-minute requests for extensions will be granted with a reason, and late assignments without notice will be docked a grade rank each day they’re late (e.g. A- to B+). Despite this policy, be cautious of taking extensions, because the summer session goes by very quickly and it’s easy to get behind. If you require an extension beyond the end of the Summer Session (July 1st), Yale Summer Session policy requires the request to be approved by the Dean of Summer Session.

**Absences:**Yale Summer Session requires attendance at all class sessions. You may not miss class unexcused, and given the compressed timeline of the summer session, it’s difficult to catch up. Excuses for absence will only be granted in exceptional circumstances such as illness or emergency. If this applies to you, please don’t hesitate to get in touch and try to let me know as soon as is possible.

**Plagiarism and Academic Integrity:** Plagiarism is using someone else’s words or ideas without acknowledging the original source, and it is a serious matter. If you take any text from somebody else, you must make it clear that 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. “Cite” means: clearly indicate that these numbers, ideas, arguments, images etc. are not your own creation or discovery, and give a reference for the source. Further resources for how to cite sources are found below. Though it’s sometimes easy to tell what constitutes academic dishonesty (e.g. paying for someone else to write your essay; copy and pasting pages of text and presenting it as if you wrote it), sometimes things are less clear. If you have any questions about what does or does not constitute plagiarism, just ask, and/or check out [this site](https://poorvucenter.yale.edu/writing/using-sources/understanding-and-avoiding-plagiarism)! I’ll be happy to help. It’s always better to ask than plagiarize accidentally. Plagiarism is a serious offense and will be treated according to university policy, and work containing plagiarized material will result in an automatic failing grade for that assignment.

**Disabilities:** Any student with a documented disability needing academic adjustments or accommodations for class is requested to speak with me or email me as soon as possible. All discussions will remain confidential.

**Behavior**: harassment, intimidation, and other kinds of inappropriate behavior towards students, staff or faculty will not be tolerated and will be reported to the Dean of the Yale Summer Session. Please contact me or the Dean as soon as possible if you are the victim of any behavior of this kind from students, staff or faculty. If you’re unsure, it’s still okay to get in touch to ask; your query will be dealt with respectfully.

Canvas is the website on which most course information (including readings, rubrics for assignments, etc.) will be posted. The link is: [canvas.yale.edu](file:///C%3A%5CUsers%5Ckew64%5CAppData%5CLocal%5CMicrosoft%5CWindows%5CINetCache%5CContent.Outlook%5C01S6ENL3%5Ccanvas.yale.edu). Once you log in, you can view information for any course you are taking at Yale. We’ll do a short tutorial of Canvas’s features on the first day of class.

**Acknowledgement:** Many thanks to Jennifer Demaree-Cotton for the architecture of this syllabus.