

PHI2180: Computer Ethics | Spring 2023 | Section 001

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Mon/Wed/Fri 11:45AM-12:35 PM | Location: Tolentine 305

Office: St. Augustine Center 174 | Office hours: Thurs 1:30-3:30 PM

Course description

Advances in digital computing have led to paradigmatic shifts in knowledge production, industry, and global politics. Today, computing infrastructures connect all aspects of society. Their effects demand ethical scrutiny, but the fast pace of innovation tends to confound this pursuit. The aim of PHI2180 is to orient you to the study of computer ethics, a well-established and continually evolving academic field. We draw richly from philosophy, indicating where historical research in the discipline clarifies the moral complexities of today's leading applications. We also read contemporary texts; watch videos; and engage in exercises from a wide range of disciplines.

At the beginning of the semester, we'll read seminal essays and explore terms including "technology"; "information"; "data"; "ethics"; "epistemology"; and "ontology." Our investigation will highlight these terms' various contextual definitions and implications. From there, the course addresses privacy and surveillance; data interpretation between humans and computers; automation and data science applications (i.e., machine learning and artificial intelligence); the impact of computing on the environment; cryptocurrency, and more.

"Computer Ethics" emphasizes the durability and reliability of theoretical reasoning as a guide for technological decision making. As you'll see, a substantial foundation in ethical theory outlasts cycles of tech development. By the end of the course, you will be prepared to think critically about the ethics of new innovations for years to come.

Required materials

All required reading and viewing assignments are available for free on Blackboard. Most are also hyperlinked through the syllabus, i.e., you can open the link from here. If a link doesn't work, check Blackboard for it. Videos are only hyperlinked through the syllabus: if you see that a video link is broken, let me know. I strongly recommend taking detailed written notes for reference in class.

Grading scale

A: ≥ 94 ; A-: 90—93.99; B+: 87—89.99; B: 84—86.99; B-: 80—83.99;
C+: 77—79.99; C: 76—76.99; C-: 70—73.99; D+: 67—69.99;
D: 64—66.99; D-: 60—63.99; F: 0—59.99

Course Policies

- *First things first*

One's college years should be intellectually and personally transformative. I'm excited to help you make the most of it! On the other hand, college can introduce new pressures and worries. The effects of stress are often invisible to others, which can be very isolating, but it need not be the case.

With this said, I am committed to facilitating a space where everybody feels seen and comfortable. Your academic development is crucial, but your well-being is priority. Do not hesitate to let me know if something is interfering with your class work. Likewise, feel free to tell me if something about the class isn't working for you. I may not be able to change it, but I take your feedback seriously.

My pronouns are she/her, and you're welcome to share yours (although this isn't required). I will try to learn your names quickly — please let me know if I mispronounce them (I won't be offended)!

In short, I am here to support you.

- *In class*

It's crucial that you arrive on time. Please bring paper and a pen/pencil every day. Taking notes in class will help you remember our discussions. Additionally, I encourage you to talk with your classmates before class officially starts. That's better for building community (and making things more fun) than using your devices.

For note-taking, it is not essential to write down everything from the slides. I will upload my slides to Blackboard 5 days prior to quizzes.

- *Email*

Please use my email address (emma.stamm@villanova.edu) rather than Blackboard to communicate with me outside of class. I will make every effort to reply to your messages promptly but may take more time to respond to email sent beyond standard business hours (M-F 9AM-5PM). If you email me over the weekend, I may not reply until Monday.

You are more than welcome to send me questions, but I encourage you to consult the syllabus and our Blackboard site first to make sure you haven't missed anything. Also, please check your Villanova account frequently. I will use email to make important announcements.

- *Office hours*

My drop-in office hours are on Thursdays from 1:30-3:30PM. My office is in the philosophy department, which is on the first floor of St. Augustine Center. You don't need an appointment — in fact, since office hours are drop-in, I can't reserve specific slots within that time frame (i.e., I can't promise that I won't be busy with another student when you come by).

Since office hours are drop-in, I cannot reserve specific slots within the time frame (i.e., I can't promise that I won't be busy with another student when you come by).

Please let me know if you'd like an appointment outside of my office hours. Normally, I can't accommodate requests for the same day or the next day, so I encourage you to plan ahead for such meetings.

- *Late work*

Unless previously arranged with me and/or excused by documented illness or emergency, all late assignments will be marked down one full letter grade per day late (e.g., an “A” would turn into a “B”). Reflection posts will be marked down 1.5 points per day late. If you cannot attend class when you are scheduled to deliver a response or participate in a group exercise, please let me know as soon as possible.

Due to my grading schedule, I may not give the same amount of feedback on late submissions as I do on timely ones. I will, however, make sure that you understand why you received your grade.

- *Academic integrity*

All students are expected to uphold Villanova's Academic Integrity Policy and Code. Any incident of academic dishonesty will be reported to the Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences for disciplinary action. Depending on the severity of the case, an F grade may be given for the assignment or for the course. For the College's statement on Academic Integrity, you should consult the [College of Liberal Arts and Sciences Academic Handbook](#). You may view the university's Academic Integrity Policy and Code, as well as other useful information related to writing papers, at the Academic Integrity Gateway web site: <http://library.villanova.edu/Help/AcademicIntegrity>

The above applies to the use of artificial intelligence for writing assignments. We will talk about this in class — it's very relevant.

Don't use A.I. unethically in Computer Ethics!

- *Office of Disabilities (ODS) and Learning Support Services (LSS)*

It is the policy of Villanova to make reasonable academic accommodations for qualified individuals with disabilities. To receive accommodations for a disability, please go to the Learning Support Services website (<http://learning.support.services@villanova.edu>) for registration guidelines and instructions. For physical access or temporarily disabling conditions, please contact the Office of Disability Services at 610-519-4095. If you are registered and need specific accommodations in this class, please let me know.

- *Note on controversial material and discussions*

Students are asked to approach the course material with an open mind and respect the various scholarly perspectives on it, as well as one another's opinions. Some of the materials and discussions will be challenging, both intellectually and emotionally, and some of them you might even find offensive or inappropriate. Part of our goal will be to elucidate why this is the case, and what the philosophical implications are. However, if you anticipate feeling unusually uncomfortable discussing any of the material or if you need to leave the room at certain critical moments for justifiable reasons, it is my role to accommodate students and make the classroom a secure and hospitable environment for everyone.

- *Absences for Religious Holidays*

Villanova University makes every reasonable effort to allow members of the community to observe their religious holidays, consistent with the University's obligations, responsibilities, and policies. If you expect to miss a class or assignment due to the observance of a religious holiday, you should discuss the matter with me as soon as possible, normally at least two weeks in advance. Absence from classes or examinations for religious reasons does not relieve students from responsibility for any part of the course work required during the absence. <https://www1.villanova.edu/villanova/provost/resources/student/policies/religiousholidays.html>

What you'll do for PHI2180 as expressed in your final grade

Here's the breakdown by percentage. Please note that each percentage point corresponds to one point on your final grade on a scale of 1-100. For example, if an assignment is worth 5 points, that's 5% of your final grade.

- *Grade component 1: Attendance—3% off for each unexcused absence (after 3 unexcused absences)*

You are permitted three unexcused absences without penalty. After that, each will cost you three points. In the event of illness or emergency leading to an absence, communication with me is key.

Although attendance is mandatory, your health is more important. If you are not feeling well, please stay home and rest. You may provide a doctor's note after an absence and still have it excused.

- *Grade component 2: Participation — 10% (10 points)*

My goal is to create an environment where everybody feels comfortable and excited to share their thoughts. After all, discussion is essential to philosophical training. Nevertheless, I understand that some people will feel more inclined to speak up than others. Please know that I do not take a harsh approach to participation grades. You may always ask me how I think you're doing with participation.

- *Grade component 3: Three reflection posts—30% (10 points each)*

Three times throughout the semester, you will submit a reflection post to Blackboard. Here, you will reflect on one or two readings — no more than two — assigned after the due date of the last reflection post. You will interpret and offer original opinions on them. You will not summarize or paraphrase the readings. The goal is to demonstrate your unique perspectives. If you choose to reflect on two separate readings, you may indicate points of comparison and/or contrast.

The target word count for these is **400**. Your posts may be a bit shorter or longer than that, but please keep it within close range of the target. Brevity takes skill: aim for quality and substance rather than length. Reflection posts are due **Sunday February 5; Sunday March 19; and Sunday April 16**.

- *Grade component 4: Two quizzes — 10% (5 points each)*

These are designed to make sure you're keeping up with the readings. There will be five questions on each quiz. Each question is worth one point. They will be administered via Blackboard. The first quiz is on **Wednesday February 22** and the second is on **Wednesday April 12**. Further information TBA.

- *Grade component 5: Midterm paper — 15% (15 points)*

Further information TBA.

- *Grade component 6: Option A: application ethics report; Option B: group presentation — 15% (15 points)*

Further information TBA. Note that the dates for group presentations are **Monday May 1 and Tuesday May 2**.

There are limited slots available for each option. The deadline for sign-up is **Wednesday January 25**.

- *Grade component 7: Final paper — 20% (20 points)*

Further information TBA.

Reading and assignment schedule

You are expected to come to class having completed the reading/viewing assignment for that particular day. Please read/watch the materials in the order listed next to the date. As noted above, all assigned materials are available on Blackboard — check there if links are not provided here, or if the links do not work.

Week 1: Introductions

Wed 1/18: Getting to know each other; syllabus review

Fri 1/20: Further syllabus review (please read the entire syllabus!); Juan Enriquez, [Ethics in the Age of Technology](#)

Week 2: Situating computer ethics

Mon 1/23: Joseph Weizenbaum, “On the Impact of the Computer on Society” pp. 549-555 (stop before “Incomprehensible Systems”)

Wed 1/25: Weizenbaum “On the Impact of the Computer on Society” pp. 555-conclusion; "[How a Radiation Treatment Machine Claimed the Lives of Five People](#)"; **deadline to sign up for assignment six**

Fri 1/27: James H. Moor, “Reason, Responsibility, and Relativity in Computer Ethics”; **report 1**

Week 3: Codifying ethics

Mon 1/30: Terrell Ward Bynum, “Norbert Wiener and the Rise of Information Ethics”

Wed 2/1: Noam Cohen, "[A 1970s Essay Predicted Silicon Valley’s High-Minded Tyranny](#)”

Fri 2/3: [ACM Code of Ethics](#); **report 2**

First reflection post due Sunday 2/5

Week 4: Technology and ideology

Mon 2/6: Langdon Winner, "Do Artefacts Have Politics?"

Wed 2/8: Langdon Winner, "Do Artefacts Have Politics?" (continuing our discussion); Michael Davis, “Thinking Like an Engineer”

Fri 2/10: Michael Davis, “Thinking Like an Engineer” (continuing our discussion); **report 3**

Week 5: Utilitarianism, panopticism, and surveillance

Mon 2/13: University College London, [The Panopticon](#); Michel Foucault, "Panopticism" pp. 1-6

Wed 2/15: Michel Foucault, "Panopticism" pp. 7-13; Ivan Manohka, "[Surveillance, Panopticism, and Self-Discipline in the Digital Age](#)" pp. 219-226 (stop before "Panopticism and Self-Discipline Today");

Fri 2/17: Manohka, "[Surveillance, Panopticism, and Self-Discipline in the Digital Age](#)," pp. 227-233; **report 4**

Week 6: Data monetization

Mon 2/20: Jathan Sadowski, "A Universe of Data" (from *Too Smart: How Digital Capitalism is Extracting Data, Controlling Our Lives, and Taking Over the World*)

Wed 2/22: Yeshimabeit Milner and Amy Traub, "[Data Capitalism and Algorithmic Racism](#)" pp.1-16

Fri 2/24: Yeshimabeit Milner and Amy Traub, "Data Capitalism and Algorithmic Racism" (pp. 17-end); **first quiz; report 5**

Week 7: Obfuscation and Black Data

Mon 2/27: Jathan Sadowski, "A Universe of Data" (continue discussing) Finn Brunton and Helen Nissenbaum, "[Vernacular Resistance to Data Collection and Analysis](#)"

Wed 3/1: Shaka McGlotten, "Black Data"

Fri 3/3: Shaka McGlotten, "Black Data" (continue discussing) and peer review of midterm papers

Midterm paper due Sunday 3/5

Week 8 (Mon 3/6- Sun 3/12): No classes: enjoy your mid-semester break!

Week 9: Communicating truth with technology

Mon 3/13: Virginia Jackson and Lisa Gitelman, Introduction to *Raw Data is an Oxymoron*, pp. 1-6

Wed 3/15: Jordan Frith, "Big Data, Technical Communication, and the Smart City" pp. 168-176 (stop before "When Data Cannot Speak for Themselves: Big Data and the Growth of Smart Cities")

Fri 3/17: Frith, "Big Data, Technical Communication, and the Smart City" (read to end); **report 6**

Second reflection post due Sunday 3/19

Week 10: Towards A.I.: ethics of digital knowledge production

Mon 3/20: Pedro Domingos, "A Few Useful Things to Know About Machine Learning" lessons 1-6 and lesson 13

Wed 3/22: Chris Anderson, "[The End of Theory](#)"

Fri 3/24: Nathan Jurgenson, "[View From Nowhere: On the Cultural Ideology of Big Data](#)"; **report 7**

Week 11: Towards A.I.: ethics of automated prediction

Mon 3/27: Rashida Richardson, Jason M. Schultz, and Kate Crawford, "[Dirty Data, Bad Predictions: How Human Rights Violations Impact Police Data, Predictive Policing Systems, and Justice](#)"

Wed 3/29: Sun-Ha Hong, "[Prediction as Extraction of Discretion](#)" (read through 3.3: "The Unmeasured")

Fri 3/31: Jerry Ratcliffe, "[The Philadelphia Predictive Policing Experiment](#)"; **report 8**

Week 12: The Atlas of A.I.

Mon 4/3: Kate Crawford, "Introduction: The Smartest Horse in the World" (from *The Atlas of A.I.*)

Wed 4/5: Kate Crawford, "Chapter One: Earth" (from *The Atlas of A.I.*)

Fri 4/7: Class not meeting (Easter recess)

Week 13: How to think about A.I.

Mon 4/10: Class not meeting (Easter recess)

Wed 4/12: Emily Tucker, "[Artifice and Intelligence](#)"; **second quiz**

Fri 4/14: Wendell Wallach and Colin Allen, "Why Machine Morality?"; **report 9**

Third reflection post due Sunday 4/16

Week 14: Wallach and Allen / blockchain; crypto; Web3

Mon 4/17: Wallach and Allen, "Philosophers, Engineers, and the Design of AMAs"

Wed 4/19: Ryan Haar, "[Cryptocurrency Terms to Know Before You Invest](#)"; Gilad Edelman, "[The Father of Web3 Wants You to Trust Less](#)"

Fri 4/21: Stephen Diehl, "[Web3 is BS](#)"; Stephen Diehl, "[In Praise of Line Goes Up](#)";

Optional: [Dan Olson, "Line Goes Up: The Problem With NFTs"](#); **report 10**

Week 15: More on blockchain; spillover

Mon 4/24: Andrew Chow, "[The Problem With NFTs: A Crypto Expert Responds to a Viral Takedown](#)"

Wed 4/26: Spillover day 1: continue discussing Wallach and Allen / crypto content / anything else that needs reviewing

Fri 4/28: **reports 11 & 12**; spillover day 2

Week 16: Group presentations

Mon 5/1: **Group presentations**

Tues 5/2 (following Friday schedule): **Group presentations**

Wed 5/3: Peer review day and farewell!

Final paper due Sunday 5/7