

Philosophy and Technology

Spring 2025

MWF 10am (01) & 11am (02)

James Blair 142

Syllabus

Instructor

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Office Hours

James Blair 124
Mon, Wed noon-1pm
(and by appointment)

What Is This Class About?

In this course, we will look at a number of important moral and philosophical issues that have arisen in the wake of recent technological advancements (and several others that are likely to be made within your lifetime). We will consider the following questions:

- What is technology?
- Could we upload our minds into a simulation and live forever?
- Are we already in a computer simulation *right now*? How could we *know*?
- Will robots ever truly be conscious?
- Is your phone a part of your mind?
- Could life still be meaningful in the absence of death? or work?
- Should we grow meat in labs instead of factory-farms?
- Would it be wrong to clone ourselves?
- Can interactions in virtual spaces or with non-sentient robots ever be wrong?
- Should we geoengineer the planet to combat climate change?
- Should machines make life or death decisions?
- What ethical commands should driverless cars be given?

Throughout our investigation of these questions, our primary goal will be to make you a better thinker, writer, and communicator. That is, ultimately I hope to help you (i) think more carefully and critically, (ii) be able to better supply clear and persuasive *reasons* for your beliefs to others, and (iii) acquire some of the necessary tools that will enable you to further investigate moral and philosophical issues on your own.

Course Requirements

1. Exams (30%). You will take a mid-term exam (15%) and a final exam (15%).

2. Essays (30%). You will write two formal, argumentative essays. The first will be a short diagnostic paper, 600-900 words (about 2 - 3 pages), as a rough draft (5%) and then a revised draft (10%). The second (15%) will be a longer paper, 1200-1800 words in length (about 4 - 6 pages), which you will complete after receiving (and giving) peer comments on a draft (1% in participation).

3. Reading Response Papers (10%). Ten times, and **no more than once per week**, you will write an informal, 250-350 word essay (roughly 1 page), responding to assigned readings. (1% each) If you like, you may write an 11th response paper to replace your lowest score.

4. Quizzes (10%). You will take 11 short pop quizzes on the assigned readings. Your lowest quiz score will be dropped; i.e., your 10 best scores will constitute your quiz grade. (1% each)

5. Video Project and Discussion (10%). In small groups, you will create an 8-10 minute video on some issue in technology ethics. We'll watch your video in class—after which your team will guide an in-class discussion on the topic.

6. In-Class Participation (10%). A portion of your grade will depend on your ability to come to class (on time and prepared), participate in class discussion, abide by classroom COVID policies, and refrain from being disruptive or disengaged, or falling asleep, texting, using the internet, etc. (9%) (The remaining 1% will be determined by your participation in the in-class writing workshop.)

Assigned Readings

A *Pocket Style Manual*, by Diana Hacker & Nancy Sommers, 6th ed. or newer.

Assigned readings will be provided electronically, accessible on our course website:

<https://rintintin.colorado.edu/~vancecd/phil150w/phil150.html>

Course Policies

Frequently Asked Questions

Answers to frequently asked questions can be found here: <https://rintintin.colorado.edu/~vancecd/faq.pdf>

Two notes: (1) You are responsible for reading the FAQ by the end of the first week of class. (2) Please consult this syllabus and the FAQ first, whenever you have a question about the course.

COVID Policy

University policy: All students are expected to follow W&M COVID policies and guidelines, found here:

https://www.wm.edu/about/administration/emergency/current_issues/coronavirus/students/index.php

Classroom policy:

- (1) If you have tested positive: Do not come to class. You must isolate for 5 days, or until you have tested negative.
- (2) If you have symptoms consistent with COVID: Take a test. If it is positive, refer to (1), above. If negative, then you may attend class only if you wear an N95 or KN95 mask. Test & mask daily until you no longer have symptoms.
- (3) If you have come into close contact with someone who has tested positive: Take a test. If the test is positive, refer to (1), above. If negative, then you may attend class only if you wear an N95 or KN95 mask. Test and mask daily for at least 5 days after your last contact with the individual(s) who were positive with COVID.

NOTE: *These policies will be enforced, with zero tolerance for violators. Students found to be in violation will be sent home, and a portion of their participation grade will be deducted.*

Academic Integrity

All students of the William & Mary are responsible for knowing and adhering to the academic integrity honor code policy of this institution. Violations of this policy include: cheating, plagiarism, aid of academic dishonesty, fabrication, lying, and stealing. All incidents of academic misconduct shall be reported to the Honor Council. More honor code info at:

<https://www.wm.edu/offices/communityvalues/sarp/studenthandbook/honorcode/>

NOTE: *The honor code will be enforced, with zero tolerance for violators. Any student found to be in violation of this code will be subject to both academic sanctions from the faculty member (i.e., the student will automatically receive an F for the course) as well as non-academic sanctions (which include academic probation, suspension, or expulsion).*

Student Conduct

Students and faculty each have a responsibility for maintaining an appropriate learning environment. Those who fail to adhere to the code of conduct may be subject to discipline. More information at:

<https://www.wm.edu/offices/communityvalues/sarp/studenthandbook/>

Student Accessibility Services

If you qualify for accommodations because of a disability or any issue affecting accessibility, please submit to me a letter from Accessibility Services in a timely manner so that your needs may be addressed. More info can be found in the Campus Center (room 109), 757-221-2510, or at: [wm.edu/offices/deanofstudents/services/studentaccessibilityservices/](https://www.wm.edu/offices/deanofstudents/services/studentaccessibilityservices/)

Religious Observances

Campus policy regarding religious observances requires that faculty make every effort to reasonably and fairly deal with all students who, because of religious obligations, have conflicts with scheduled exams, assignments, or required attendance. Please let me know by the end of the drop/add period about any such conflicts, so that we can resolve them. More information at: [wm.edu/about/administration/provost/forfacstaff/holidays/religiousguidelines/index.php](https://www.wm.edu/about/administration/provost/forfacstaff/holidays/religiousguidelines/index.php)

Discrimination and Harassment

William & Mary policies on Discrimination and Sexual Harassment apply to all students, staff, and faculty. Any student, staff, or faculty member who believes that they have been the subject of sexual harassment and/or discrimination based upon race, sex, gender, national origin, sexual orientation, religious belief, political belief, disability, veteran status, age, or any other category protected by the Commonwealth or by federal law should contact the Office of Compliance & Equity in James Blair Hall. More Info: <https://www.wm.edu/offices/ce/equity/discrimination-harassment/>

Course Schedule

Below is a schedule of the topics that we will cover, along with a list of the reading(s) which you should complete before each class meeting. Please make special note of the due dates for **Papers**, **Exams**, and *Video Discussion Projects*.

Unit One		
Week 1	Introduction	or, What is this class about?
Wed 1/22	SNOW DAY	No readings
Fri 1/24	Philosophy and Technology	• Listen: Chalmers, Philosophy Bites: The Singularity
Week 2	Knowledge of the World	or, How do I know that I'm not in a simulation?
Mon 1/27	Descartes' Method of Doubt	• Descartes, "Meditations, I and II" • Nagel, "How Do We Know Anything?" and "Other Minds"
Wed 1/29	External World Skepticism	• Chalmers, "Reality+"
Fri 1/31	A Response to the Skeptic	• Moore, "Proof of an External World"
Week 3	The Nature of Reality	or, Seriously, how do I know anything??
Mon 2/3	The Simulation Argument	• Bostrom, "Why the Probability that You are Living in a Matrix is Quite High"
Wed 2/5	Skepticism Revisited	• Chalmers, "The Reality Question" • Chalmers, "The Matrix as Metaphysics"
Fri 2/7	Material Identity	• Dupré, "The Ship of Theseus"
Week 4	Surviving Through Time	or, Can I upload myself and live forever?
Mon 2/10	Personal Identity	• Perry, "Dialogue on Personal Identity & Immortality"
Wed 2/12	Uploading & Identity	• Chalmers, "Uploading & Personal Identity" (part 1)
Fri 2/14	Body and Soul	• Nagel, "The Mind-Body Problem" • Review: Descartes, "Meditation II"
Week 5	A.I. Consciousness	or, Could a machine have conscious experiences?
Mon 2/17	Artificial Intelligence	• Searle, "The Chinese Room" • Block, "The China Brain"
Wed 2/19	SNOW DAY	No readings
Fri 2/21	SNOW DAY	No readings
Week 6	The Nature of Consciousness	or, Is my phone a part of my mind?
Mon 2/24	Property Dualism	• Nagel, "What Is It Like To Be A Bat?" • Jackson, "The Qualia Problem"
Wed 2/26	Uploading & Identity Revisited	• Chalmers, "Uploading and Consciousness" • Chalmers, "Uploading & Personal Identity" (part 2)
Fri 2/28	Extended Minds Due: Paper 1 (DRAFT)	• Clark & Chalmers, "The Extended Mind"
Unit Two		
Week 7	Value & The Good Life	or, Can a virtual life be good?
Mon 3/3	Review: Mid-Term Exam	No readings
Wed 3/5	Mid-Term Exam	No readings
Fri 3/7	Value & Simulation vs. Reality Due Monday: Paper 1 (FINAL)	• Nozick, "The Experience Machine" • Chalmers, "The Value Question"
Spring Break	No classes 3/8 – 3/16	

Week 8	What We Value	or, Is tech altering our values? (for better or worse?)
Mon 3/17	Meaning & the Value of Work	• Danaher, "Will Life Be Worth Living in a World Without Work?"
Wed 3/19	A.I.-Generated "Art"	• Chiang, "Why AI Isn't Going to Make Art" • Trujillo, "AI Art is Art" • Silk, "The Ethics of AI Art"
Fri 3/21	Life Extension	• Bostrom, "The Fable of the Dragon Tyrant" and "The Ethics of Life-Extension"
Week 9	Biomedical Ethics	or, Is it ok to clone humans? or mandate vaccines?
Mon 3/24	Goodness & Immortality	• Williams, "The Makropulos Case" • Fischer, "Why Immortality is Not So Bad"
Wed 3/26	Human Cloning	• Kass, "Preventing a Brave New World"
Fri 3/28	Vaccine Mandates	• Flanigan, "A Defense of Compulsory Vaccination"
Week 10	Animal Ethics, part 1	or, Is factory-farming morally permissible?
Mon 3/31	Previous Topics, continued	No new readings
Wed 4/2	<i>Video Discussion: De-Platforming</i>	No readings
Fri 4/4	Animal Experimentation	• Cohen, "The Case for the Use of Animals"
Week 11	Animal Ethics, part 2	or, Should we grow meat in labs instead of animals?
Mon 4/7	Factory-Farmed Meat	• Norcross, "Puppies, Pigs, and People"
Wed 4/9	Cultivated (Lab-Grown) Meat	• Hopkins & Dacey, "Could Technology Save Animals and Satisfy Meat-Eaters?" • Milburn, "Chewing Over In Vitro Meat" (excerpt)
Fri 4/11	<i>Video Discussion: Facial Recognition</i>	No readings
Week 12	Killing Robots	or, Should A.I.'s kill? May we "kill" them in games?
Mon 4/14	Autonomous Weapons	• Roff and Sparrow: Excerpts on Autonomous Weapons and Moral Responsibility
Wed 4/16	<i>Video Discussion: AI Decision-Making</i>	No readings
Fri 4/18	Video Games	• Luck, "The Gamer's Dilemma"
Week 13	The Future of A.I.	or, So can we have sex with robots or what?
Mon 4/21	Sex Robots	• Danaher, "The Symbolic Consequences Argument in the Sex Robot Debate"
Wed 4/23	Writing Workshop Due: Paper 2 (DRAFT)	No readings
Fri 4/25	The Singularity & Existential Risk	• Parfit, Bostrom, Chalmers: Excerpts on Existential Threat, Singularity, and the Future of Humanity
Week 14	Programming Morality	or, What moral instructions should we give our cars?
Mon 4/28	The Trolley Problem Due: Paper 2 (FINAL)	No readings
Wed 4/30	Driverless Car Ethics	• Jenkins, "Autonomous Vehicles, Ethics, and Law: Toward an Overlapping Consensus"
Fri 5/2	Review: Final Exam	No readings
Final Exams		
Wed 5/7	Final Exam: 9am – noon	Section 02 (11am class)
Fri 5/9	Final Exam: 2pm – 5pm	Section 01 (10am class)