

## Group Video and Class Discussion Project: Topics and Guidelines

**1. Assignment:** In teams of five, your assignment is to become informed on one of three issues in ethics and technology, and then produce a short video about it. These videos will be viewed in class, after which we will informally discuss them together, under your direction. Here are the specifics:

**The Video:** Your group's video should be roughly 8-10 minutes in length. It should introduce the particular moral issue that you have been assigned, and then survey some of the main reasons for and against either side of that issue. At minimum, try to come up with at least **two reasons** in favor of **each side** of the issue that you are discussing.\* Though you will be examining reasons for *both* sides, your video should ultimately try to persuade or steer your viewers toward *one* particular side of the issue or the other—namely, whichever side your team believes to be correct.

\* Note: For the purposes of our course, when brainstorming reasons for and against each position, the focus of your efforts should be on the *moral* reasons for and against; though you *may* also appeal to practical and/or legal reasons—especially in instances where you are able to make a case that these other sorts of reasons might also be morally relevant.

**The Class Discussion:** We will watch your video in class on the day of your project assignment, after which your team will then moderate a discussion about it.

**2. Grading Rubric:** When grading, I will look for the following (roughly, in order of importance):

### Video

- *Follows Instructions* (listed above)

The video must clearly and carefully present the moral issue, detail some of the reasons for either side of it, and make a persuasive case for your conclusion on the matter.

- *Clarity* (of the facts, ideas, and/or arguments presented)

Your video should be created with a general audience in mind, such that the layperson would be able to easily understand and learn from it (and perhaps be persuaded by it).

- *Careful, Contemplative Reasoning*

It should be evident that you have actually thought carefully about your assigned issue, and have put some time and genuine consideration into coming up with clear and persuasive reasons for the moral positions that you discuss. In short, this is not meant to be the sort of project that can be completed successfully the night before it is due.

- *Creativity* (of your method of presenting ideas and arguments)

Avoid projecting walls of text onto a screen, or delivering long monotone monologues, elementary school book-report style. Be creative with your approach! If some of your team members are actors, perhaps include a skit. If there are artists, perhaps a short cartoon or illustration. You get the idea. Most of all, try to have fun with it.

- *Quality* (of the video itself)

The quality of the video and audio should at least be clear enough to watch and hear. But, videos with superior production value are certainly welcome, and encouraged.

## Class Discussion

- *Preparedness*

It should be apparent that each of your team members has come to class prepared to discuss the issue—not only in the prepared portions of your presentation (if any), but also in the thoughtfulness of your team’s responses to any questions and comments.

- *Class Engagement & Facilitation of Discussion*

Ask yourself, What sort of classroom experience do *you personally* value the most? Do you prefer for class to be fun? to raise interesting and thought-provoking questions? to provide helpful and insightful potential answers to those questions? to be engaging? and encouraging of discussion? ‘Yes’ to all of the above? Then strive for that. Do not plan to deliver a straight lecture or some uninterrupted presentation; rather, plan to come to class with the intention of simply introducing your video, and then helpfully guiding a fun and productive discussion about it.

- *Civility*

It should go without saying that our discussion will remain civil and respectful. This means no insulting of classmates, or shouting at or over them, and it also means giving others the opportunity to share their own views. We will also strive whenever possible to keep our comments constructive and productive, with the goal of moral progress and learning as we work through these difficult issues together, in a group effort.

Note: Your grade will also take into consideration peer assessments of your performance, submitted by your teammates. So, please do your best to contribute your fair share to your group’s success.

## Some Tips for Discussion Day

- **Take Part in the Conversation.** Avoid simply nodding silently for 50 minutes as your classmates discuss. Don’t forget that *you* are the experts in the room. (Not to mention, this is *your* assignment.) Be sure to regularly insert your expertise into the conversation. For example, highlight aspects of your classmates’ comments that are interesting or important; or explain how their opponent might push back on what they have just said; or expose relationships between ideas by explaining how their point ties into to something else from your research. In short, don’t forget that you are filling the role of the *instructor* on this day.
- **Don’t Force It.** Sometimes the opposite problem occurs, and students over-prepare several hours’ worth of material. Then, in their insistence on covering absolutely all of it, they regularly shut down conversation in order to make time to rush through every last bit of their material. Don’t do this. (You’ll probably see me do this too now and then over the course of this semester, but hey I’m not proud of those moments.)
- **Don’t Save the Best for Last.** That said, you should probably open with your best, most interesting claims / observations / conversation pieces. This will serve to (a) hook your audience and get them excited, and (b) ensure that your favorite stuff gets discussed, in case you run out of time (because you probably will).
- **Prepare to Be Adaptive.** Audiences are frequently unpredictable. Something that you *thought* would be super interesting may fall totally flat. You can try re-framing it. (Maybe you didn’t pitch it clearly enough.) But, it might just be that they don’t find this point as interesting as you do. Don’t be afraid to abandon what you had planned to say about it and move on to your next item. Or, maybe you’re on issue #2 when your audience brings up what you’d planned as issue #5. Don’t be afraid to re-arrange the order of your presentation on the fly. Your audience is excited to discuss issue #5 *now!* Consider letting them do so.

**3. Submitting Your Work:** Your video should be posted online, and a link emailed to me at least half an hour before class time on the day that it is due. Late work will not be accepted.

The easiest way to post your work will be to upload it to YouTube, and then email me the link. (Note: Your team may wish to set the video to 'Unlisted' on YouTube when you upload it, unless you prefer that it be public.) If you prefer not to use YouTube (or some similar service), you may also elect to email me the video file, and I'll upload it myself to my W&M YouTube account, unlisted. However, in this case, you must email me the video at least 24 hours in advance of class time, so that I'll have sufficient time to do this.

**4. Technology:** Virtually all phones and laptops these days are equipped with video-making capabilities, as well as video-editing software. However, if this is an issue for your team, and you require access to additional equipment and/or assistance, you may wish to make use of Swem Library's [Media Services](#), which are free to all students.

**5. Samples:** You may find it helpful to view some of the videos that students have completed for me in the past. Past topics have included [resurrecting extinct species](#), as well as [cultural appropriation](#), and the life of medieval philosopher [Peter Abelard](#). These should give you some sense of what the work of W&M philosophy students typically looks like. (But, think of these examples as the minimum bar to aim for. You are encouraged to aim to produce something even *better* than these! For example, [this student presentation](#) on the work of philosopher Thi Nguyen.)

**6. How to Begin:** Begin by reading your particular prompt (on the pages below). I then encourage you to do some preliminary brainstorming and research on your own, by yourself. As you begin to familiarize yourself with the issue and read articles about it, ask yourself: What is *my* moral stance on this issue? *Why* do I believe this? Why do others disagree? What *reasons* do they have for their stance?

After you have all thought about the issue on your own, you should then arrange to meet up with your teammates to discuss and share your thoughts from your preliminary research with one another. From there, you can then do some further brainstorming as a group, and also decide what direction you'd like to go with your project (philosophically, as well as artistically), and how best to divide up the work, and so on.

It may help to keep in mind that there will be a class discussion about your assigned issue after you've posted the video. One sign of your video's success would be that it generates a lot of discussion amongst your classmates after they've viewed it in class. So, as you proceed, you should do so with the goal of producing a video that is engaging to watch, exciting to the mind, and which entices viewers into wanting to continue thinking about and discussing this issue after watching it.

**7. Specific Topics:** Specific prompts for the three project topics are found on the pages below.

## Day One (Monday, 4/15): De-Platforming and Social Media

**The Issue:** There seems to be an awful lot of division, hatred, and misinformation going around these days. Do we have a moral duty to actively make it more difficult for these sorts of voices to be heard? That is, do we have a duty to “de-platform” certain people or beliefs?

[‘[No-Platforming](#)’ is the practice of refusing to give a person, or group of people, or a set of beliefs, etc., any public platform from which to speak, or share, or spread their views. No-platforming might include, for example, deleting a tweet or suspending a social media account, denying a permit to a rally organizer, refusing to allow someone to rent out a public venue where they want to give a talk, or refusing to publish pieces which endorse, promote, or normalize some particular belief.]

Let’s focus on the form most relevant to technology ethics: De-platforming on social media.<sup>1</sup> Recent examples of this include removing content from [climate change deniers](#), presidential [election deniers](#), COVID [anti-vaxxers](#), COVID [conspiracy theorists](#), [white nationalists](#), and [QAnon](#) conspiracy theorists.

In politics: In January 2021, Twitter permanently suspended president Donald Trump’s account for tweets related to the January 6<sup>th</sup> insurrection. ([here](#); see also [here](#)). January 2022, they permanently removed Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene’s account for repeatedly spreading COVID misinformation. ([here](#)) Note that president Trump signed an executive order in 2020, forbidding censorship on social media—an order which social media platforms essentially ignored, and which president Biden reversed in 2021. ([here](#))

In 2022, Elon Musk further fanned the flames of this controversy after buying Twitter and vowing ([by tweet](#)) to end censorship on that platform, in the name of protecting free speech. (Though some question whether speech on Musk’s Twitter (“X”), really is all that free; [here](#).)

**Question:** Do social media sites have a moral obligation to refuse to provide a platform to certain beliefs or ideologies? Is it at least *permissible* for them to censor certain beliefs?

[Note 1: It is uncontroversial that content such as racial hate speech, death threats, or calls to incite or organize domestic terrorist attacks, and so on, should be prohibited. But, what about content which is not so obviously immediately and directly harmful – e.g., content promoting climate change denial, anti-vaccination, or the claim that the 2020 presidential election was stolen? Should these beliefs be censored as well? For the purposes of this assignment, you should focus your discussion on this sort of content, which is where most of the present controversy is focused.]

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<sup>1</sup> Though the recent controversy mostly focuses on *social media*, be aware that the debate over de-platforming initially gained momentum regarding *non*-internet platforms, in the wake of the white nationalist rally in Charlottesville in the summer of 2017. E.g.:

- **Rallies:** In August and September of 2017, many cities denied permits to white supremacist and alt-right groups who had sought to hold rallies across the U.S. (e.g., [Berkeley](#), [Syracuse](#), and more). Many other cities *granted* the permits (e.g., [Boston](#)). Interestingly, even the organizers of the Charlottesville rally had initially been *denied* a permit, until [the ACLU advocated](#) for their freedom of speech, stating, “The ACLU of Virginia stands for the right to free expression for all, not just those whose opinions are in the mainstream or with whom the government agrees.” (a verdict they stood by even after the event; listen [here](#))
- **Public Talks:** In October of 2017, Richard Spencer (one of the main organizers of the Charlottesville rally and the guy from the [‘punch a Nazi’ video](#)) was initially denied a request to give a [talk at the University of Florida](#)—a decision that was later overturned after threats of a lawsuit which charged the university with violating free speech. Interestingly, around that same time, Texas A&M University successfully [cancelled a campus rally](#) (a ‘White Lives Matter’ rally) organized by Spencer.
- **Editorials:** In November of 2017, *The New York Times* published a [profile piece on a Nazi sympathizer](#) from Ohio. The article immediately drew fierce criticism for portraying the subject as just a regular guy like you and me—seemingly *normalizing* Nazi principles and beliefs. Critics demanded that the article be removed, but [the editor](#) and [the author](#) ultimately stood by the article.

[Note 2: The question is not, Should the government *legally require* such sites to censor their content. But rather, *morally* speaking, *should* those companies censor some content? Legality and morality are two separate and very different issues. Consider: It is morally wrong to lie to your friends, so you shouldn't do it. But, there probably shouldn't be a law against it!]

For further discussion, see [this news report](#) on the issue. See also [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#). Facebook CEO, Mark Zuckerberg, speaks out against this sort of censorship, [here](#).

### Optional Additional Readings

If you want to see what professional philosophers are saying about this issue, you might also wish to check out the following articles, available on Blackboard under 'Additional Readings':

- Robert Simpson and Amia Srinivasan, "No Platforming" (2018)
- Uwe Peters and Nikolaj Nottelmann, "The Epistemic Dilemma of No-Platforming" (2021)

## Day Two (Wednesday, 4/17): Facial Recognition

**The Issue:** Facial recognition technology is here. A brief timeline of some notable events:

- June 2016: CBP (Customs and Border Protection) begins using facial recognition in airports. Its 'biometric verification' program catches its first passport imposter in August, 2018 ([here](#)).
- August 2017: Police use the tech to identify and catch an MS-13 gang member ([here](#)) and later (June 2018) a mass shooter ([here](#)).
- September 2017: Apple launches 'Face ID'. (Users can now use their faces to unlock their phones, log in to apps, and authenticate purchases.)
- February 2018: Police officers in China begin wearing glasses with facial recognition abilities ([here](#)).
- May 2018: Taylor Swift uses facial recognition at her concert in order to cross-check audience members against a database of her known stalkers ([here](#)).
- June 2018: ICE begins using the technology to identify and deport undocumented immigrants ([here](#); [here](#)).
- July 2018: Microsoft president Brad Smith calls for Congress to pass legislation regulating the use of facial recognition ([here](#)); again in December ([here](#)). (interview [here](#); Dec. 2019 tweet with video [here](#)).
- Fall 2018: Starting in Seattle ([here](#)), and increasingly elsewhere ([here](#)), schools across the country begin using the technology to restrict entry to school grounds.
- December 2018: Delta launches the nation's first facial recognition airport terminal, where passengers show their faces rather than their ID's (see [here](#) or [here](#)). Many U.S. airports now use this tech ([here](#)).
- May 2019: San Francisco, then many cities/states ban the tech ([here](#)). The movement slows by 2022 ([here](#)).
- December 2019: China implements mandatory face scans for all new mobile phone users ([here](#)).
- By end of 2020: China fully launches its nationwide mass surveillance system, including over 600 million surveillance cameras with facial recognition ([here](#), [here](#)), as well as its social credit system ([here](#); [here](#)).
- 2021: Online sleuths use facial recognition to help the FBI catch January 6<sup>th</sup> insurrectionists ([here](#)).
- December 2021: U.S. sanctions China's use (abuse) of its facial recognition system to identify (and then confine in concentration camps) its Uyghur Muslim population – over 1 million people ([here](#); [here](#)).
- Jan 2023: Madison Square Garden sparks controversy after using facial recognition to identify and ban attorneys litigating their company from entering their venues ([here](#)).
- Feb 2023: The U.S. military begins program to install facial recognition on its military drones ([here](#)).
- March 2023: NYC grocery store begins using facial recognition to track and catch shoplifters ([here](#)).
- Early 2024: EU votes on AI Act, which bans facial recognition – with some exceptions for police ([here](#)).

It's well past time to start considering the moral implications of this technology.

Some argue that it could make us *safer* and *more secure* (among other benefits, such as enhanced convenience, efficiency, etc.). Others argue that its use infringes on our fundamental *right to privacy* (among other drawbacks, such as its potential for abuse, and detriment to well-being).

**Question:** Should we pass legislation to prohibit public use of facial recognition technology?

(For example, should we prohibit public surveillance cameras from using facial recognition? How about cameras inside of privately-owned stores? Should it be illegal to sell or use an app on your phone that tells you the identities of people whenever you point your camera at them? etc.)

For further discussion of this issue, listen [here](#), or see [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), or [here](#).

### Optional Additional Readings

If you want to see what professional philosophers are saying about this issue, you might also wish to check out the following articles, available on Blackboard under 'Additional Readings':

- Evan Selinger & Brenda Leong, "The Ethics of Facial Recognition Technology" (2022)
- Marcus Smith & Seumas Miller, "Ethical Application of Biometric Facial Recognition" (2022)

## Day Three (Friday, 4/19): Machine-Based Morally Significant Decision-Making

**The Issue:** Artificial intelligences are increasingly being put in charge of decisions (or are at least assisting with decisions) that have a tremendous impact on human well-being. For example, AI's are now making decisions about:

- matters of **criminal justice**, e.g.,
  - risk assessment algorithms (such as [Compas](#) and [Equivant](#)) that recommend to judges whether or not to allow a defendant out of jail on bail as they await trial ([here](#)).
  - predictive algorithms (such as [PredPol](#)) that recommend to police officers which neighborhoods to patrol ([here](#))
- **medical** diagnoses and prescribed treatments ([here](#))
- job recruitment, applications, and **hiring** ([here](#))
- approval of **government benefits** such as welfare ([here](#) and [here](#))
- **credit lending**, i.e., automated credit-scoring, followed by automated approval or denial for credit cards, mortgages, and other loans ([here](#) and [here](#)) [...*Is this our future??*]
- And many more... (in education, transportation, and even the world of dating...)

Almost certainly, an AI has *already made* a decision (or at the very least, has been *consulted* by a human making a decision) which has affected your life in some morally significant way. And this is [likely to increase](#) as you get older. The question is, *Should it?*

Maybe AI decision-making is a good thing. Maybe it could help us become faster and more efficient, ultimately improving and even saving human lives (e.g., by spotting potential criminals, or diseases, much earlier than a human could)? Or maybe it's not so good. Might it end up diminishing human agency, or perpetuating and locking in historic biases?

**Question:** Is it morally acceptable for AI's to make morally significant decisions for humans beings? (For instance, is it permissible for AI's to make decisions in the examples listed above?)

[Side note: If your team decides that (morally) machines should *not* make these kinds of decisions, then it may be helpful for your team to also consider whether you believe that machine-based decision-making should be *legally* prohibited as well (or regulated, etc.).]

For further discussion: Watch this report on the general issue ([here](#)); and these videos about A.I. in criminal justice system ([here](#) and [here](#) ; or [this article](#) – audio version [here](#))<sup>2</sup>, and job hiring ([here](#)); some articles about A.I. in healthcare ([here](#) and [here](#)).

For the Video Assignment: Briefly introduce the issue, and then discuss at least **two reasons in favor** of the use of artificial intelligence in morally significant decision-making, and **two reasons against**. Then, decide which side of this issue your team ultimately agrees with, and explain why.

### Suggested Additional Readings

If you want to see what professional philosophers are saying about these issues, you might also wish to check out the following articles, all available on Blackboard under 'Additional Readings':

- Clinton Castro, "What's Wrong With Machine Bias?" (2019)
- Gabrielle Johnson, "Algorithmic Bias: On the Implicit Biases of Social Technology" (2021)
- Giorgia Lorenzini, et al., "Artificial Intelligence and the Doctor-Patient Relationship" (2023)

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<sup>2</sup> A lot has been written about the use of A.I. in the criminal justice system; e.g., see also [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).