

# Cogs 498h: Information and the Information Society

## Spring 2011 Syllabus

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**Hours:** MWF 10:00-11:50; 1:00-1:50

TU 5:00-5:50

**Course Info:** TU 6:00, LI 209

### Course Description

This course will consist of a careful study of Luciano Floridi's *Philosophy of Information* (PI). From the publisher, "PI is the philosophical field concerned with (1) the critical investigation of the conceptual nature and basic principles of information, including its dynamics, utilisation, and sciences, and (2) the elaboration and application of information-theoretic and computational methodologies to philosophical problems. This book lays down, for the first time, the conceptual foundations for this new area of research. It does so systematically, by pursuing three goals. Its metatheoretical goal is to describe what the philosophy of information is, its problems, approaches, and methods. Its introductory goal is to help the reader to gain a better grasp of the complex and multifarious nature of the various concepts and phenomena related to information. Its analytic goal is to answer several key theoretical questions of great philosophical interest, arising from the investigation of semantic information."

The course will be taught in a seminar format, meeting once a week around a conference table in the library. Individual sessions will be a mix of lecture, discussion and paper reading on the part of selected students.

### Required Text

Floridi, L. (2011). *The philosophy of information*. Oxford.

### Assignments

The course consists of five seniors and seven freshmen and sophomore students. The seniors will play the role of mentor, editor and co-author on seven papers each; the freshmen and sophomores will be co-author on five papers under the tutelage of the seniors. Each senior will work with each freshman and sophomore on a paper as laid out in the course calendar below. The material is difficult, and it is therefore expected that the underclass students will be willing to learn from the seniors who will be willing to work carefully one-on-one with them. Students are also expected to do all of the reading for the course, even on weeks that they do not have papers due.

### Grading

60%	Papers
20%	Co-authorship (Teamwork) Scores
20%	Course Participation

### Paper Requirements and Evaluation

The topic for your papers must be targeted at the reading assignment for the day. Your paper should be longer than three pages and no longer than four. It must be in Times New Roman, 12 point font and formatted according to the MLA style as indicated in the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, 6<sup>th</sup> Edition. (Copies are available in the library, bookstore and at Barnes & Noble.) Be sure to include a title. Staple the paper in the top, left corner. **Late papers will not be accepted!**

Your papers will be evaluated according to the following qualities, though they will not be graded according to an average based on an individual assessment of each area. (In other words, I will consider the paper as a whole looking at the following for guidance.)

- *Focus* – Does the paper stick to its topic, addressing necessary details while avoiding extraneous ones?
- *Organization* – Is the paper well-organized with respect to the order and presentation of ideas? Are ideas properly subordinated throughout the paper?
- *Clarity* – Is the paper generally clear and the prose readable? Is the thesis and argument explicit?
- *Argument* – Is the paper well-reasoned on the basis of sound and cogent argument? Is evidence interpreted adequately?
- *Factuality* – Are the factual assertions advanced in the paper true? Are they adequately supported by documentation as needed?
- *Documentation* – Is the selection and use of sources appropriate for the topic? Is the paper properly documented with citations to your sources?
- *Format* – Does the paper adhere to the formatting guidelines of the 6<sup>th</sup> edition of the MLA style manual?
- *Grammar* – Is language used according to the rules of grammar? Is it properly academic?

At the end of the semester, student paper grades will be skewed to account for variations in individual competence and collaboration that might affect one's performance as a team member using a mathematical procedure to be explained in class.

When it comes to help with academic writing, I have found no book better than Joseph M. Williams, *Style: Toward Clarity and Grace*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990. This book is not a writing manual for beginning students, but a carefully prepared handbook for those who already know how to write in general and wish to address academic audiences. If you wish to work in academia, regardless of field, this book is a must read.

### **Determination of Co-authorship (Teamwork) Scores**

At the end of the semester, each senior will be asked to evaluate their experience with each freshman and sophomore and vice versa. I will then examine these subjective rankings to remove bias from the individual peer evaluations and transform them into grades using a procedure of aggregate scoring to be explained in class.

### **Determination of Course Participation Grades**

At the end of the semester, each student will rank each of the other students in the class for course participation according to the criteria laid out below. I will then examine these subjective rankings to remove bias from the individual peer evaluations and transform them into grades using a procedure of aggregate scoring to be explained in class. I reserve the right to re-order the ranking in the event that it seems someone was treated unfairly. However, I've only had to do this one time in ten of using peer evaluations to determine course participation scores.

## **Academic Honesty**

All work submitted in this course must be prepared by the student expressly for this course. A student who submits work that is plagiarized, bought, borrowed from the archives of a fraternity, copied from another student, etc., *will fail the course*. (If you don't believe me, ask around.) I fully support the University's Academic Honor Code. To avoid confusion, students should keep in mind that plagiarism occurs not only when someone copies an author word for word, but also when someone uses another's ideas without giving credit, even if the ideas are paraphrased. Always document your sources!

## **Attendance**

For a seminar such as this, my attendance policy differs from my regular lecture courses. It is quite simple: don't miss!

## **Course Participation**

Course participation grades are not automatic. They are based on oral contributions to the collective learning experience of the class as a whole in terms of asking pertinent questions, answering questions correctly or, at least, provocatively, making insightful observations, and offering other meaningful expressions of interest in the material that help encourage learning. I begin by assuming a C for each student's course participation grade and move from there. Students should realize that *it is possible to talk a lot in class and receive a low grade for course participation*. Absences are also grounds for a low participation grade.

## **Electronic Technology in the Classroom (Cell Phones, Laptops, Etc.)**

The use of laptops, cell phones, gaming devices and other electronic contraptions is not permitted in class. Students caught using them will be asked to leave. (You can wear a watch, if you must, but please don't sit staring at it during my lectures.)

## **Email**

I do not read my UE email at home and, as a consequence, I will only answer email from that account during my scheduled office hours. Even then, I am not apt to sustain long, academic dialogues in this forum. For extended discussion, please come visit me in person. Office hours are posted above.

## **Food in the Classroom**

No eating in class.

## **Help with Reading Philosophy**

Philosophical material is often difficult to read. It can be slow-going even for those of us versed in the literature. Here are some questions to keep in mind while reading that will help you better understand a text:

- What is the overall agenda of the text? Usually, but not always, this will be stated clearly in the introduction.
- What is the main point of the passage(s) in question? What is the author asking you to believe? How does this belief (i.e., claim to knowledge) fit within the overall framework of the text?
- What reasons does the author give for accepting the belief? (In scholarly writing, it's not so much the belief that counts, but the reasons the author offers in support of it. If there is no good reason for accepting a belief, then we should not accept it.)
- What does the belief in question imply or entail? That is, what else should we believe if we accept the belief in question?

- Finally, an old trick from Descartes, what do you think the philosopher under consideration is going to say next? (You might find it helpful to contrast what he should say with what he actually does say.)

## How to Write a Philosophy Paper (by Peter B. M. Vranas)

### 0. INTRODUCTION

1. **Keep in mind two main goals:**
  - a. To *think deeply* about a philosophical issue (preferably an issue that you find interesting, important, and puzzling), *reaching a (tentative) conclusion* that leaves you to a large degree satisfied.
    - Philosophy is not sophistry: you should only defend conclusions in which you believe. You should be open, however, to the possibility that your views will change while you are thinking or writing about an issue: you may start with the intention of defending a particular conclusion and end up defending an opposite conclusion.
    - Even if philosophical questions have no unique right answer, they do have *better* and *worse* answers; if you believe that anything goes, then you are not in a proper frame of mind for writing a philosophy paper.
  - b. To *write down your thoughts* in a clear, precise, concise, and organized way.
2. **How to choose a paper topic**
  - a. Choose a topic that you find *important* and *exciting*: it's better if working on the paper feels worthwhile and fun.
  - b. Choose a topic on which you have something *new* to say: if you agree with everything the readings or your instructor said on a particular issue, then you have no paper topic (related to that issue).
  - c. Especially for short papers, choose a very *narrow* topic and examine it in detail: *depth* is much more important than *breadth*. (E.g., don't try to defend—or attack—relativism in general; choose a specific version of relativism.)
3. **The content of a philosophy paper**
  - a. When writing about an issue, start with what other people have said about the issue: don't reinvent the wheel.
  - b. But other people's views should be only a starting point: the bulk of the paper should consist of your own views, not of exposition.
  - c. And your own views should be not just stated, but should be supported by arguments.
  - d. Rather than passing over in silence objections to your views, you should consider the most plausible objections you can think of, you should reply to these objections, you should consider plausible rejoinders to your replies, and you should respond to these rejoinders. It's like a dialogue; the longer it gets, the better, provided that the participants keep making new points rather than repeating themselves. (Note that one might object to an argument in *three* ways: by objecting to the argument's *premises*, to its *reasoning*, or to its *conclusion*.)

### 1. FIRST STEP: PREPARATION

1. Start working as *early* as possible. Don't expect to produce a decent paper if you start on the eve of the due date.
2. Consulting extra sources is often helpful but is *not* necessary: it's far more important to study carefully the required readings and to *think* deeply about your topic.
3. Before you start writing the paper, make an *outline* that lists in an organized way the points you want to make.

### 2. SECOND STEP: WRITING

1. **Organization**
  - a. The paper should have a concise and informative *title*. ('First paper' is *not* an acceptable title.) The title should make clear the *topic* of the paper (e.g.: 'The death penalty') or, even better, the *thesis* you are going to defend (e.g.: 'Against the death penalty'). Avoid 'journalistic' or 'literary' ti-

- ties (e.g.: 'Death of a penalty') whose point the reader cannot understand before reading the paper itself.
- b. The *introductory paragraph* is very important and you should do three things in it. (i) State briefly the *topic* of the paper. (Avoid banal openings like 'Topic X has been a great mystery and source of controversy since the dawn of humanity'.) (ii) Take a stand on the topic: formulate your *thesis* as precisely as it's possible at this early stage. (iii) Announce the *plan* of the paper; namely, what you will do in the remainder (or in each section) of the paper.
  - c. It's advisable to divide the paper into numbered and titled sections. Start each section by saying what you will do in the section. End each longer section by summarizing what you have done in the section.
2. **Reasoning**: Make sure that your arguments are either deductively valid or inductively strong, and that they contain no irrelevant or redundant premises. It helps to lay out the arguments in standard premise/conclusion form.
  3. **Justification**
    - a. Every statement in the paper must be justified, except for uncontroversial statements ('The Earth is round'). Avoid uncontroversial statements that just express your personal opinion ('I feel that the death penalty prevents many murders').
    - b. One way to justify a statement is to provide a reference ('Jones (1996: 437) concluded that the death penalty prevents many murders'). References should be precise so that they can be checked: *include page numbers*. Keep quotations to a minimum: paraphrasing usually demonstrates better your grasp of the material.
    - c. It's not justified to ridicule people or views. Remember that the authors of most readings are intelligent people: try to present the most plausible understanding of their views ('*Principle of Charity*') rather than presenting these views in a way that makes them appear to be obviously false.
    - d. Acknowledge your debts: presenting other people's ideas as if they were your own is called 'plagiarism' and is a serious violation of ethical conduct. (Example of acknowledging debts: this handout is partly based on handouts by David Brink, Edwin Curley, Jeanine Diller, Mika Manty, and Katie McShane, and feedback from Elizabeth Anderson.)
  4. **Originality** consists in producing new ideas. A minimal degree of originality, which consists in going beyond the readings, is required; originality exceeding this minimal degree is highly desirable.
  5. **Clarity** is probably the most important virtue that philosophical writing must have.
    - a. Don't presuppose that your reader is familiar with the texts to which you are referring: your intended audience should not be the instructor, but should rather be an intelligent philosopher possibly unfamiliar with the texts.
    - b. If your instructor doesn't understand what you want to say by a sentence, then the sentence is probably not sufficiently clear. To see if your instructor finds your writing sufficiently clear, give to your instructor a draft of the paper.
    - c. It's *not* OK to write *first* an obscure sentence and *then* to explain what you meant.
    - d. To promote clarity: (i) use short sentences; (ii) prefer active to passive voice and affirmative to negative constructions; (iii) avoid pretentious words and jargon; (iv) define the technical terms that you use.
    - e. It is very important for clarity to use *transition phrases* indicating (i) that you are moving to a new step in the reasoning (e.g., to a new objection, or from an objection to a reply to that objection) and (ii) whether what you are saying is supposed to support *your* view or the view of an *opponent*. Examples: 'I turn now to my argument for the second premise'; 'One might object to the first premise that ...'; 'My reply to this objection is ...'; 'One might rejoin that ...'; 'I reply ...'.
  6. **Conciseness** consists in saying many things in few words.
    - a. Think of the *maximum* length of the paper as a limit within which you are trying to cram as much thought as you can (*not* as a number of pages you have to fill by multiplying the number of words you use to make your points). But don't let the quest for conciseness result in obscurity: *clarity* is paramount.
    - b. To promote conciseness, *avoid*: (a) wordiness; (b) digressions; (c) banalities; (d) too long quotations; (e) unnecessary repetitions. (It is not *unnecessary* repetition to summarize at the end of a section what you have done in the section.)

7. **Precision** is almost as important as clarity. General rule: be *meticulous*, even nit-picking, in saying *exactly* what you mean and in avoiding ambiguity. Achieving precision requires thinking about every single word.
  - a. **Avoid ambiguous pronouns** (like 'this', 'that', 'it', 'he', 'his'): repeat nouns. 'John used Bill's gun to kill his dog' should be 'John used Bill's gun to kill John's dog' or 'John killed his dog by using Bill's gun'.
  - b. **Avoid extreme words** (like 'completely', 'absolutely', 'always'). Replace 'It is always wrong to X' with 'It is usually wrong to X' or 'It is almost always wrong to X' (except if you show in the paper that it's really *always* wrong to X).
  - c. **Avoid immodest expressions**. 'In this paper I will prove conclusively that X' should be something like 'In this paper I will argue that X' or 'In this paper I will give reason to believe that X'. Avoid words like 'proof' or 'demonstration'.
  - d. **Avoid category mistakes**. Incorrect: 'the likelihood of this situation is quite improbable'. A *likelihood* is a *number* and thus can be *high* or *low* but not *probable* or *improbable*; it's a *situation* that can be probable or improbable. Correct: 'the likelihood of this situation is quite low'; or: 'this situation is quite improbable'.
  - e. **Avoid unnecessary variation** (which is encouraged in literature papers). If you are making three points, don't say 'The first argument ... The second remark ... The third point'; choose the most accurate word and repeat it.
  - f. **Give names to theses (arguments, etc) for ease of reference**. It's much easier and clearer to refer to a thesis as 'conclusion C3' rather than as 'the conclusion of the first argument in this section'.
8. **Language**
  - a. A philosophy paper differs from a literature paper. The style should be factual: avoid excessive use of metaphors. *It's OK to use 'I'; it's even advisable*, because it facilitates the use of the active voice.
  - b. The style need not be excessively formal, but the paper should not be a transcript of how you talk: avoid slang.
  - c. Plural of 'phenomenon': 'phenomena'. Similarly: criterion/criteria; thesis/theses; hypothesis/hypotheses. Avoid confusing: then/than; their/there; principal/principle; adapt/adopt; affect/effect; complementary/complimentary; its/it's.
9. **Other matters**
  - a. Don't spend too much time on the concluding paragraph: it can be as short as a single sentence that repeats your thesis. On the other hand, the concluding paragraph is a good place at which to mention possible extensions of your argument or problems that you were unable to address.
  - b. The format of the paper (e.g., font size and type, margins, single- vs double-spaced, title page or not, footnotes vs endnotes, references in footnotes or in a list of references) does not matter except if your instructor indicates otherwise. But it's a good idea to *number the pages* so that the instructor's comments can refer to specific page numbers.
  - c. There is no minimum length requirement, but keep close to the *maximum* length unless you write very concisely.

### **3. THIRD STEP: REVISING**

1. Write the paper in (at least) two drafts. After writing the first draft, set it aside for a while, then read it through and make handwritten changes and corrections before typing the second draft.
2. It's a very good idea to give a draft to your instructor for comments. The more complete your draft is, the more you should benefit from this process. But *don't expect your instructor to catch every problem*.
3. Spell-check the final draft and *proofread* it carefully for spelling, grammar, punctuation, and coherence of argument. Check also that you in fact do in the paper what you promise in the introductory paragraph that you will do.

## Course Calendar

**Week 1: January 11<sup>th</sup>** – *Tron: Legacy* in IMAX 3D (Tickets \$14.50)

**Week 2: January 18<sup>th</sup>**

- Reading Assignment: Chapter 1 – What is the Philosophy of Information?
- Paper Teams: Burrows & Caldwell / Reuter & Girdler

**Week 3: January 25<sup>th</sup>**

- Reading Assignment: Chapter 2 – Open Problems in the Philosophy of Information
- Paper Teams: Sigler & Graham / Slinker & Gress / Will & Harrison

**Week 4: February 1<sup>st</sup>**

- Reading Assignment: Chapter 3 – The Method of Levels of Abstraction
- Paper Teams: Burrows & Martin / Reuter & Toth

**Week 5: February 8<sup>th</sup>**

- Reading Assignment: Chapter 4 – Semantic Information and the Veridicality Thesis
- Paper Teams: Sigler & Caldwell / Slinker & Girdler / Will & Graham

**Week 6: February 15<sup>th</sup>**

- Reading Assignment: Chapter 5 – Outline of a Theory of Strongly Semantic Information
- Paper Teams: Burrows & Gress / Reuter & Harrison

**Week 7: February 22<sup>nd</sup>**

- Reading Assignment: Chapter 6 – The Symbol Grounding Problem
- Paper Teams: Sigler & Martin / Slinker & Toth / Will & Caldwell

**Week 8: March 1<sup>st</sup>**

- Reading Assignment: Chapter 7 – Action-Based Semantics
- Paper Teams: Burrows & Girdler / Reuter & Graham

**Week 9: March 15<sup>th</sup>**

- Reading Assignment: Chapter 8 – Semantic Information and the Correctness Theory of Truth
- Paper Teams: Sigler & Gress / Slinker & Harrison / Will & Martin

**Week 10: March 22<sup>nd</sup>**

- Reading Assignment: Chapter 9 – The Logical Unsolvability of the Gettier Problem
- Paper Teams: Burrows & Toth / Reuter & Caldwell

**Week 11: March 29<sup>th</sup>**

- Reading Assignment: Chapter 10 – The Logic of Being Informed
- Paper Teams: Sigler & Girdler / Slinker & Graham / Will & Gress

**Week 12: April 5<sup>th</sup>**

- Reading Assignment: Chapter 11 – Understanding Epistemic Relevance
- Paper Teams: Burrows & Harrison / Reuter & Martin

**Week 13: April 12<sup>th</sup>**

- Reading Assignment: Chapter 12 – Semantic Information and the Network Theory of Account
- Paper Teams: Sigler & Toth / Slinker & Caldwell / Will & Girdler

**Week 14: April 19<sup>th</sup>**

- Reading Assignment: Chapter 13 – Consciousness, Agents and the Knowledge Game
- Paper Teams: Burrows & Graham / Reuter & Gress

**Week 15: April 26<sup>th</sup>**

- Reading Assignment: Chapter 14 – Against Digital Ontology
- Paper Teams: Sigler & Harrison / Slinker & Martin / Will & Toth

**Week 16: May 3<sup>rd</sup>**

- Reading Assignment: Chapter 15 – A Defence of Informational Structural Realism