Phil 111: Freshman Seminar in Philosophy: Information, Technology and Society  
Fall 2010 Syllabus

**Instructor:** Dr. Anthony Beavers
**Email:** tb2@evansville.edu
**Office Phone:** 488-2682 / **Cell:** 455-0186
**Website:** http://faculty.evansville.edu/tb2
**TI:** Clayton Moore (email forthcoming)

**Course Description**

The Freshman Seminar in Philosophy affords freshmen and sophomores the opportunity to engage philosophical reflection on a single theme chosen by the instructor. This semester we will take a careful look at the current climate of informational and biological technologies with an eye toward their potential impact on the future of humanity. Throughout the course, we will also raise several questions concerning the philosophy of technology more generally. Is the future destined by the technology of the past? Are we headed toward things that strike us in 2010 as good, bad or both in different respects? Where should we be concerned? Students should prepare to be excited, startled, and sometimes bothered, by the portrait that will unfold before us.

**Required Texts**


**Assignments**

Each student will be required to read all of the assignments, write two thought papers, take a midterm and final exam, and post eight questions to the class discussion board. Details follow.

**Grading**

20% - Papers – 10% Each  
20% - Mid-Term Exam  
30% - Final Exam  
15% - Discussion Board Questions – 1.875% each  
15% - Class Participation

**Paper Guidelines, Recommendations and Evaluation**

Both papers must be 900 to 1100 words in length. References are not required, but should you use them, consistently format them (along with a bibliography) using either MLA or APA style. An abstract is not required. Submit electronic copies to Turnitin.com before the start of the class in which they are due, and bring three print copies, stapled in the top, left corner to class. 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, we 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? Are important ideas explicitly stated?

• **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 MLA and APA style if references are used.

• **Grammar** – Is language used according to the rules of grammar? Is it properly academic?

• **Presentation** – Is the paper presented professionally? Is the ink and font readable? Is it properly stapled? (This should be obvious, but apparently it is not.)

**Midterm and Final Exams**

The midterm examination will consist of a single question on broad themes raised in Floridi. The exam will cover the whole book which will be discussed in class the week of 10/4. To facilitate conversation and close examination of the text, the class will be divided into two discussion groups for the week. Each will meet separately three times with the TI. The midterm will then follow Fall Break on 10/13.

The final examination will consist of an assimilating essay on Kurzweil. Students should plan on using the whole two hour exam period to complete the exam.

**Discussion Board Questions**

Discussion board questions are due by 10pm the night before we begin each chapter in Kurzweil as indicated on the calendar below. During this exercise, each student will be required to post one question on the reading assignment that has not already been posted by someone else. Questions will be evaluated before the start of class, and ranked as good, passing or bad. Those ranked good will be used in class to structure discussion on that chapter of Kurzweil and our technological climate more generally.

**Policies and “Rules”**

It would be a wonderful world, if classrooms could run without rules, but experience has repeatedly taught me that they are necessary. The following stem primarily, but not exclusively, from two sources. The first is a matter of maintaining respect for honest students with a genuine desire to know. Being fair makes it imperative that they have every opportunity to learn and that they are not lost among the students who take a class only to meet a requirement and who, as a consequence, may only be looking for the highest grade in exchange for the least amount of learning.

The second is to help me maintain my concentration in the classroom. Most of my difficulty with this latter issue derives from the fact that class lecture is a form of conversation. Once I perceive that my interlocutor is no longer listening, my priority automatically shifts from delivering a message to re-establishing contact, and I lose my train of thought. One student in a class can easily throw me off.
It is my hope that the following will respond adequately to these issues and that we will be able to conduct class at a level befitting an institution of higher learning. (In other words, we’re not in high school anymore!)

**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 Policy**

I do not have an attendance policy per se. However, this course is structured in such a way that students who do not show up regularly may (will?) have trouble passing it. After all, it is difficult to participate if you’re not present, and I frequently test on material that is not in the reading. (Since I do not have an attendance policy, there is no reason to send excuses for missing class, whether by email or by phone. Your reasons for missing class are private and do not concern me. Please, in other words, keep them to yourselves.)

**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. Consideration for the course participation grade will take into account any meaningful attempts to answer questions posted to the discussion board and any discussion that develops as a result.

**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 / Office Hours**

I do not read my UE email at home and, as a consequence, I will only answer student email 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.) Furthermore, during office hours, I will defer to students who show up in person, and this means that I may not be able to answer your email in the short term. In addition to the office hours listed above, I am available by appointment, either in person or by Skype.

**Food in the Classroom**

No eating in class.

**Packing Up to Go**

Often the most critical minutes in a class session are the last five, where conclusions are drawn and assignments are made. Please do not start to pack up your belongings before the end of class.
Stay at Home Policy

I easily lose focus when students aren’t paying attention, whether because they are talking to each other, passing notes, studying for another class, etc. If you do not wish to pay attention, please take advantage of my lack of an attendance policy and stay at home. After all, you get nothing for just showing up without paying attention, and I’m probably going to dock your participation grade just the same as if you had stayed at home.

Course Calendar

8/25  In class video, *Frontline: Digital Nation*, pt. 1
8/27  In class video, *Frontline: Digital Nation*, pt. 2
8/30  Syllabus Review. Introduction to course. Comments on video
9/1   **Reading Assignment: Kurzweil, Prologue and Chapter 1. The Six Epochs**
9/4   In class writing workshop. Preparation for the first paper. Bring writing tools and actual paper
9/6   Crick Lecture: Dr. Dennis Barbour (Washington University), “Control Points in the Brain: Manipulating Neural Networks.” 4pm, Vectren Lecture Hall, KC 100. Note the unusual meeting time and place
      Discussion board question due by 10pm on 9/9
9/13  Discussion: Kurzweil, Chapter 2
9/15  Discussion: Kurzweil, Chapter 2
9/17  Discussion: Kurzweil, Chapter 2
9/20  **Reading Assignment: Kurzweil, Chapter 3. Achieving the Computational Capacity of the Human Brain**
      Discussion board question due by 10pm on 9/19
9/22  Discussion: Kurzweil, Chapter 2
9/24  Discussion: Kurzweil, Chapter 2
9/29  Reaction and Discussion: Crick Lecture
10/1  Discussion: Floridi and the Fourth Revolution
10/4  Reading Week: Discussion group meetings about Floridi
10/11 Fall Break. No classes
10/13 **Midterm Examination on all of Floridi**
10/15 **Reading Assignment: Kurzweil, Chapter 4. Achieving the Software of Human Intelligence: How to Reverse Engineer the Human Brain**
Discussion board question due by 10pm on 10/14
10/18 Discussion: Kurzweil, Chapter 4
10/20 Discussion: Kurzweil, Chapter 4
10/22 **Reading Assignment: Kurzweil, Chapter 5. GNR: Three Overlapping Revolutions**
Discussion board question due by 10pm on 10/21
10/25 Discussion: Kurzweil, Chapter 5
10/27 Discussion: Kurzweil, Chapter 5
10/29 **Reading Assignment: Kurzweil, Chapter 6. The Impact . . .**
Discussion board question due by 10pm on 10/28
11/1 Discussion: Kurzweil, Chapter 6
11/3 Discussion: Kurzweil, Chapter 6
11/5 **Reading Assignment: Kurzweil, Chapter 7. Ich bin ein Singularitarian**
Discussion board question due by 10pm on 11/4
11/8 Discussion: Kurzweil, Chapter 7
11/10 Discussion: Kurzweil, Chapter 7
11/12 In class writing workshop. Preparation for the second paper. Bring writing tools and actual paper
11/17 **Reading Assignment: Kurzweil, Chapter 8. The Deeply Intertwined Promise and the Peril of GNR**
Discussion board question due by 10pm on 11/16
11/19 Discussion: Kurzweil, Chapter 8
11/22 Discussion: Kurzweil, Chapter 8
11/24 Thanksgiving Break. No classes
11/26  Thanksgiving Break. No classes

11/29  Reading Assignment: Kurzweil, Chapter 9. Responses to Critics
       Discussion board question due by 10pm on 11/28

12/1   Discussion: Kurzweil, Chapter 9

12/3   Discussion: Kurzweil, Chapter 9

12/6   Reading Assignment: Kurzweil, Epilogue

12/10  Final Exam: 12:30-2:30pm. Assimilating exam on all of Kurzweil