Phil 301H: Information Ethics  
Fall 2011 Syllabus

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Course Description

There is no doubt that the transmission speed, reach and quantity of information have increased dramatically over the past decade. Drawing from several sources, Luciano Floridi paints an apt portrait:

"To have some simple, quantitative measure of the transformations experienced by our generation, consider the following findings. In a recent study, researchers at Berkeley’s School of Information Management and Systems estimated that humanity had accumulated approximately 12 exabytes of data in the course of its entire history until the commodification of computers, but that it had produced more than 5 exabytes of data just in 2002: ‘print, film, magnetic, and optical storage media produced about 5 exabytes of new information in 2002. Ninety-two percent of the new information was stored on magnetic media, mostly in hard disks. [...] Five exabytes of information is equivalent in size to the information contained in 37,000 new libraries the size of the Library of Congress book collections’ (Lyman and Varian [2003]). In 2002, this was almost 800 MB of recorded data produced per person. It is like saying that every newborn baby came into the world with a burden of 30 feet of books, the equivalent of 800 MB of data on paper. This exponential escalation has been relentless: ‘between 2006 and 2010 [...] the digital universe will increase more than six fold from 161 exabytes to 988 exabytes.’"

Along with this increase, we are witnessing the birth of new legal and moral problems that cannot be adequately addressed using theory that has been fitted to a brick and mortar world. Thus, changes in the information climate are inviting us to rethink the moral enterprise from the ground up. Consequently, information ethics is not the application of existing theory to a new set of problems, but rather the construction of a new theory fitted to a new world, what we might call, speaking on Floridi’s behalf, an information ecology.

This class will explore the need for reassessment of the traditional ethical enterprise and inspect what must be transformed in light of changes in the current information climate. Specific issues will also be treated, but only insofar as they affect the need for a new theoretical basis in ethics.

Required Text


Miscellaneous articles available at https://public.me.com/afbeavers. (Password protected).

Assignments

The students in the course will be divided into two groups, senior writers and junior writers. The senior writers will play the role of mentor, editor and co-author on six papers each; the junior writers will be co-author on six papers under the tutelage of the senior writers. Each senior will work with each junior on a paper as laid out in the course calendar below. The material is difficult, and it is therefore expected that all students will be willing to work carefully one-on-one with each other. Please bring two copies to class on the day your papers are due. 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, 6th* 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 6th 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’ titles (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 & Assignments

Senior Writers:  
Ben Deutsch  
Chris Graham  
Chris Harrison  
Ashleigh Hilbert  
Drew Reisinger  
Isaac Wafzig  

Junior Writers:  
Andrew Bollinger  
Susan Caldwell  
Taylor Martin  
Derrick McDowell  
Karolina Toth  
Jesse Willingham

Week 1: August 30th – Introduction & Initial Lectures

Week 2: September 6th
- Reading Assignment:
  - Beavers – Between Angels and Animals: The Question of Robot Ethics, or Is Kantian Moral Agency Desirable (unfinished manuscript)  
  - Beavers – Moral Machines and the Threat of Ethical Nihilism  
- Paper Teams: Deutsch & Bollinger, Graham & Caldwell, Harrison & Martin

Week 3: September 13th
- Reading Assignment:
  - Floridi – Information Ethics: On the Philosophical Foundations of Computer Ethics  
- Paper Teams: Hilbert & McDowell, Reisinger & Toth, Wafzig & Willingham

Week 4: September 20th
- Reading Assignment:
  - Floridi and Sanders – Artificial Evil and the Foundations of Computer Ethics  
- Paper Teams: Deutsch & Caldwell, Graham & Martin, Harrison & McDowell

Week 5: September 27th
- Reading Assignment:
  - Floridi – On the Intrinsic Value of Information Objects and the Infosphere  
- Paper Teams: Hilbert & Toth, Reisinger & Willingham, Wafzig & Bollinger

Week 6: October 4th
- Professor in Washington: No class

Week 7: October 11th
- Fall Break: No class
Week 8: October 18th
- Reading Assignment:
  - Allen, Varner and Zinser – Prolegomena to Any Future Artificial Moral Agent
- Paper Teams: Deutsch & Martin, Graham & McDowell, Harrison & Toth

Week 9: October 25th
- Reading Assignment:
  - Floridi and Sanders – On the Morality of Artificial Agents
- Paper Teams: Hilbert & Willingham, Reisinger & Bollinger, Wafzig & Caldwell

Week 10: November 1st
- Reading Assignment:
  - Floridi – Ethics after the Information Revolution (Floridi, pp. 3-19)
  - Beavers – In the Beginning Was the Word and then Four Revolutions in the History of Information
- Paper Teams: Deutsch & McDowell, Graham & Toth, Harrison & Willingham

Week 11: November 8th
- Reading Assignment:
  - Brey – Values in Technology and Disclosive Computer Ethics (Floridi, pp. 41-58)
- Paper Teams: Hilbert & Bollinger, Reisinger & Caldwell, Wafzig & Martin

Week 12: November 15th
- Reading Assignment:
  - Wiegel – The Ethics of IT-Artifacts (Floridi, pp. 201-218)
- Paper Teams: Deutsch & Toth, Graham & Willingham, Harrison & Bollinger

Week 13: November 22nd
- Reading Assignment:
  - Allen – Artificial Life, Artificial Agents, Virtual Realities: Technologies of Autonomous Agency (pp. 219-233)
- Paper Teams: Hilbert & Caldwell, Reisinger & Martin, Wafzig & McDowell

Week 14: November 29th
- Reading Assignment:
  - Tavani – The Foundationalist Debate in Computer Ethics (Floridi, pp. 251-270)
- Paper Teams: Deutsch & Willingham, Graham & Bollinger, Harrison & Caldwell

Week 15: December 6th
- Reading Assignment:
  - Floridi – The Ethics of the Information Society in a Globalized World (Floridi, pp. 271-283)
- Paper Teams: Hilbert & Martin, Reisinger & McDowell, Wafzig & Toth

Week 16: December 13th
- Measurement and Evaluation