

24.134 Experiential Ethics (6-Unit) Syllabus

Summer 2024

Course Leaders

Karim Nader, Philosophy, knader@mit.edu

Sonia Maria Pavel, Philosophy, smpavel@mit.edu

Bess Rothman, Philosophy, bessroth@mit.edu

Welcome to Experiential Ethics! Through weekly, 1.5 hour-long (90 minute) discussion groups, you'll have the opportunity to explore ethical and social issues related to your own experiences—whether these are projects you're working on, internships, future goals, or your experiences at MIT. Each discussion group will be led by a Graduate Teaching Fellow (TF), and you will have short assignments to guide you through your ethical exploration, as well as a final project. Fundamentally, the class is driven by you: we want you (as a discussion group and as an individual) to explore these issues as you want to explore them, with our help and guidance along the way. All of us on the Teaching Team are excited to work with you this summer.

This course runs alongside 24.133, which is a less intensive version of Experiential Ethics. You will participate in a final showcase with classmates from 24.133.

Intended learning outcomes

By the end of the course, you will be able to:

- Identify your personal values and challenges you might face, such as in the workplace
- Identify and critically evaluate ethical dimensions of real-world situations from current events to your own life
- Explain philosophical concepts including ethical lenses, stakeholders, value-laden choice points, and structural injustice
- Communicate and defend your own ethical perspectives on real-world issues to different audiences
- Recognize and critically evaluate the social and political dimensions of your personal decision-making, scientific inquiry, and technology design
- Advocate for a real-world ethical decision facing a community you participate in

Time commitment

This is a 6-credit class, which means you can expect a total time commitment (including all homework and class time) of approximately 80 hours over the term.

Academic integrity

We take academic integrity very seriously. If you're in doubt about what counts as a breach of academic integrity, get in touch with your TF or refer to the [Academic Integrity Handbook](#). If academic dishonesty is proven, there will be severe disciplinary consequences, which may include any or all of: a redo of the assignment for a reduced grade; failure on the assignment; failure of the course; a letter in the student's file in the Office of Student Citizenship or referral to the Committee on Discipline. If you're tempted to plagiarize, it's always better to speak to your TF, the course leaders, your advisor, academic deans, or another trusted authority on campus who can help you.

Accommodation

If you have a disability, you have a right under the American with Disabilities Act to an accommodation. As a matter of Institute policy, requests for accommodation must first go through [Student Disabilities Services](#). If you are eligible, they will give you an accommodation letter that you should bring to your TF as soon as possible. That way you and your TF can work together to make sure all of the course content is accessible to you. We take this very seriously, and it is our top priority to support all of our students.

Inclusivity

MIT values an inclusive environment. Experiential Ethics seeks to foster community, collaboration, and respectful dialogue within discussion sections and across the course. We welcome individuals of all backgrounds, beliefs, ethnicities, national origins, gender identities, sexual orientations, religious and political affiliations – and other visible and nonvisible differences. All members of the class are expected to contribute to a respectful, welcoming, and inclusive environment for every other member of the class.

Sections and Graduate Teaching Fellows

- **Section 5** (Saturday at 11 am; [Zoom link](#)): **Benjamín Muñoz Rojas**, Political Science (benja_mr@mit.edu);
- **Section 6** (Monday at 6 pm; [Zoom link](#)): **Bess Rothman**, Philosophy (bessroth@mit.edu).

Assessment and grading

24.134 is graded A/B/C/etc. The grading distribution is as follows:

- | | |
|--|-----|
| • Attendance and participation | 30% |
| • Pre-session assignments and discussion questions | 10% |
| • Op-Ed assignment | 10% |
| • Advocacy assignment | 10% |
| • Independent project | 40% |

You must pass each portion of the class to pass the class as a whole. In order to pass the participation portion, you may have only one unexcused absence (including from discussion sessions and Fall Showcase). Missed classes and late assignments are excused with a note from Student Support Services.

To make sure expectations are clear, we have developed **rubrics** for each assessment that you will be able to consult in advance. Rubrics will be available on Canvas.

Participation

Participation is central to Experiential Ethics. We want you to work through ethical issues together with your peers, which requires participation. Your participation grade will not just be determined by the amount you participate, but also the manner. On the first day of class, the members of your discussion group and your TF will create ground rules for discussion. In addition to your contributions in discussion sections, your participation grade will also reflect your completion of the midterm and end-of-term evaluation forms.

Overview of assignments

As noted in the “Grading and Assessment” section above, there are two kinds of assignments for this class: writing assignments, and an independent project.

- **Writing assignments:**

Op-Ed Assignment (due after Week 4): Select a choice point faced by a community you’re in and write an op-ed to persuade them to make a particular choice. Make sure to consider several ethical lenses, options, and stakeholders. (~1000 words)

Advocacy Assignment (due Week 7): Research an issue you care about outside your work or school. Consider potential actions you could take to advocate on this issue. Submit either a) evidence that you did one of these

actions (e.g. a photo from a rally, a screenshot of a petition, etc.) or b) a short write-up of your research (~ 750 words). Working with a classmate is encouraged.

Pre- and post-session assignments: Occasionally, you will be asked to submit written discussion questions or reflections based on a week's material.

- **Independent project:** Your project for this class is highly flexible. We will provide you with certain options—write an 1,750-word essay, create a website, perform an interview on someone in your field and write a commentary about it, make a series of vlogs, etc. You may also propose your own. Details can be found in the [Project Guidelines](#).
- **Optional, Extra Credit: Philosophy Assignment** (due anytime throughout the course): You may either
 - a) Choose one of the supplemental philosophy readings [we will provide a list] and write a short paper reconstructing the argument. To reconstruct the argument, you should explain it in your own words and work through an example (not one in the paper) that illustrates the concept.
 - b) Choose one of the [SERC case studies](#) and analyze it in terms of at least two different class concepts (e.g. ethical lenses, structural injustice, etc.) Paper should be between 1250-1500 words.

Key Dates & Deadlines

Week 4 (Week of July 1)	Op-Ed Assignment Due
Week 5 (Week of July 8)	Deadline to meet with your TF to discuss project idea
Week 5 (Week of July 8)	Deadline to complete the Midterm Evaluation Form
Week 6 (Week of July 15)	Project Proposal Due
Week 7 (Week of July 22)	Advocacy Assignment Due
Week 9 (Week of August 5)	Workshop your project with your classmates and TF
August 20	Deadline to submit your project to your TF and upload your shareable component for Fall Showcase
September 10	Fall Showcase

Course schedule

Below is an overview of the class, including all assignment details and deadlines. Please note that every class discussion session starts on the hour (*not 5 minutes past*) and is a full 90 minutes long. Details subject to change - your TF will communicate in advance.

Week 1 (Week of June 10): Introduction - Ethics of Science and Technology

Overview: This week, we discuss the ethics of science and technology, while introducing the ethical lenses.

Pre-session assignment:

- None

Week 2 (Week of June 17): Effective Altruism

Overview: This week, we discuss a philosophical position which is very popular in the fields of science and technology, and debate its merits.

Pre-session assignments:

- Read Alice Crary's [Against 'Effective Altruism'](#)
- Browse <https://www.effectivealtruism.org/>,
<https://www.givingwhatwecan.org/en-US>,
<https://www.givingwhatwecan.org/en-US/what-is-effective-altruism>, etc.
- Download and complete the [Ethical Questions Assignment](#); submit to your TF

OPTIONAL supplemental reading:

- [BBC article](#) on Sam Bankman-Fried's involvement with the EA movement
- C. Thi Nguyen, [Gamification and Value Capture](#) (or watch [his lecture on gamification](#))
- Amia Srinivasan, [Stop the Robot Apocalypse](#)
- Peter Singer, [Famine, Affluence, and Morality](#)

Week 3 (Week of June 24): Decision-Making With Stakeholders in Mind

*If your session meets on Mondays, it will be rescheduled this week. Consult your TF for details.

Overview: This week, we practice applying a framework for integrating ethics and values into our work: the Ethics Protocol. The Ethics Protocol builds on the ethical lenses we encountered two weeks ago and the ethical thinking we did last week.

Pre-session assignments:

- Watch the [Ethics Protocol Video](#) (23 min)
 - Version with subtitles available [here](#)
- Read one of the following articles (whichever corresponds to the topic your group selected last week)
 - Navigation apps: "[Navigation Apps are Turning Quiet Neighborhoods Into Traffic Nightmares](#)," by Lisa Foderaro
 - Dockless scooters: "[Electric Scooters are Causing Havok. This Man Is Shrugging It Off](#)," by Nellie Bowles and David Streitfeld
 - Contact tracing apps: "[For States' COVID Contact Tracing Apps, Privacy Tops Utility](#)" by Lindsey Van Ness
 - Bus stop shade structures: "[L.A.'s Bus Stops Need Shade. Instead, They Got La Sombrita](#)" by Jesus Jiménez and Livia Albeck-Ripka ([pdf](#))
 - Deepfake Images: "[Explicit Deepfake Images of Taylor Swift Elude Safeguards and Swamp Social Media](#)" by Kate Conger and John Yoon
 - Choose your own example if you think something else would work better for your group!
- Complete the [Envisioning Futures Assignment](#)

OPTIONAL supplemental reading:

- "[Meant to Keep Malaria Out, Mosquito Nets Are Used to Haul Fish In](#)," by Jeffrey Gettleman; and a response article from the GiveWell Blog, "[Putting the Problem of Bed Nets Used for Fishing In Perspective](#)," by Jake Marcus
- T.M. Scanlon, "[Contractualism and Utilitarianism](#)" (start with section II)

Week 4 (Week of July 1): Values in Science and Technology

Overview: Here, we start looking at the broader, societal implications of our work. We consider the questions of whether science can be objective and whether technology can be value-neutral.

Pre-session assignments:

- Read "[Do Artifacts Have Politics?](#)" by Langdon Winner
 - You can consult the following video for an overview: "[Summary of 'Do Artifacts Have Politics?' by Langdon Winner](#)" by Tom Gorichanaz
- Watch Michael Weisberg, "[Should Science be Value-Free?](#)"

OPTIONAL supplemental reading:

- “Technologies as Forms of Life” by Langdon Winner
- “Knowledge, Human Interests, and Objectivity in Feminist Epistemology” by Elizabeth Anderson
- “The Image of Objectivity” by Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison
- “Inductive Risk and Values in Science” by Heather Douglas
- “Bias in computer systems” by Batya Friedman and Helen Nissenbaum
- Opinion: “Is Science Value Free?”

Week 5 (Week of July 8): Social Construction, Technology, and Justice

Overview: Here, we delve into the relationship between justice and technology, understood broadly. We think through issues here using real-world cases and the concept of *discriminatory design*.

Pre-session assignments

- Watch “From Park Bench To Lab Bench: What Kind of Future Are We Designing?” TEDxBaltimore talk by Ruha Benjamin
- Read Sally Haslanger - “Gender and Social Construction: Who? What? When? Where? How?”;
- Meet with your TF (10-15 min) to discuss your independent project (Details about the project can be found in the Project Guidelines)
- Complete the Midterm Evaluation Form and notify your TF that you've completed it

OPTIONAL supplemental reading:

- “Assessing Risk, Automating Racism,” by Ruha Benjamin (in *Science*)
- “Big Data’s Disparate Impact.” by Solon Barocas and Andrew Selbst
- Sasha Costanza- Chock, *Design Justice: Community-Led Practices to Build The Worlds We Need*, (2020).

Week 6 (Week of July 15): Social Structures and Structural Injustice

Overview: This week, we build on our understanding of social structures to discuss structural injustice. What is it, and what might it mean to say that we are responsible for it? We look at algorithmic injustice as a case study.

Pre-session assignments:

- Read Iris Marion Young, “Structure as the Subject of Justice” (sections I and II);

- Read Atoosa Kasirzadeh, “Algorithmic Fairness and Structural Injustice: Insights from Feminist Political Philosophy” (Sections 2 & 3)
- Submit independent project proposal (guidelines).

OPTIONAL supplemental reading:

- Iris Marion Young, “Responsibility and Global Justice: A Social Connection Model”
- Safiya Umoja Noble, Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism (2018)
- Virginia Eubanks, Automating Inequality: How High-Tech Tools Profile, Police, and Punish the Poor (2018)
- Mar Hicks, Programmed Inequality: How Britain Discarded Women Technologists and Lost Its Edge in Computing (2017),
- Charlton D. McIlwain, Black Software: The Internet and Racial Justice, from the AfroNet to Black Lives Matter (2020).

Week 7 (Week of July 22): Responsibility and Social Roles

Overview: We all have multiple distinct sets of responsibilities at a given time; e.g., those from among: employee, student, daughter/son, parent, scientist, teacher, manager, neighbor, doctor, etc. This week, we consider how occupying those roles can lead to ethical conflicts, and how we can navigate them responsibly.

Pre-session assignments:

- Read “How Not To Teach Ethics,” by Susan Silbey
- Read excerpts (noted on pdf) from “Role Morality,” by Patricia Werhane
- Advocacy Assignment due.

Optional Supplemental Reading:

- “What is My Role in Changing the System? A New Model of Responsibility for Structural Injustice,” by Robin Zheng.

Week 8 (Week of July 29): Project Workshop

Overview: This week, you workshop your independent project with your peers and TA. Your assigned TA will provide guidelines and expectations for workshopping.

Pre-session assignment:

- Prepare to workshop your project. Prepare to workshop your project. Workshop guidelines are [here](#). Before preparing, review the instructions for the final project in the [Project Guidelines](#).

Post-session assignment:

- Provide peer feedback on one or two of your classmates' project presentations (your TA will make the assignments). Include (1) one thing you like about your classmate's project that you think they should keep and/or build on; and (2) either a response to a question they posed to the group during their presentation or one thing you think they should clarify, improve, or delve deeper into.

Week 9 (Week of August 5): Ethics at MIT

Overview: This week, we think through some of the complicated and difficult ethical issues arising at our shared academic home, MIT. We consider what responsibilities we might have in virtue of benefitting from, and contributing to, MIT, as well as how we might go about fulfilling those responsibilities.

Pre-session assignments:

- Watch "[Working at MIT](#)," by Noam Chomsky
- Read "[Why is there so much Saudi money in American universities?](#)" NYT 2019
- Read MIT [philosophers respond](#) to [MIT's decision](#) not to cut financial ties
- Turn in [Advocacy Assignment](#).

OPTIONAL supplemental readings:

- "[Seven Dilemmas](#)," by Angela Chen and Gideon Lichfield
- "[The Problem With Philanthropy](#)," by Sally Haslanger
- "[On the Value of the Intellectual Commons](#)," by James Wilson
- "[On Joi and MIT](#)," by Lessig.

Week 10 (Week of August 12): Enacting Social Change and Living in Light of Your Values

Overview: Ethics is the study of how to live one's life. Living ethically requires navigating the world around you in responsible ways, as we've discussed throughout

this course. This week, we wrap up the course and discuss how we might live in light of our values and enact social change.

Pre-session assignments:

- Read “[Conclusion: Now Let's Multiply](#)” by Catherine D'Ignazio and Lauren Klein from Data Feminism;
- Sign up for a slot at the Showcase
- Last week to submit optional Argument Assignment (due Aug 13).

August 20: Deadline to submit your independent project to your TF and upload your shareable component to **THIS FOLDER** (11:59 p.m. ET)

September 10: Fall Showcase (in person)

Overview: Fall Showcase is the culminating event for the Experiential Ethics course. It gives you all an opportunity to present the projects you've been working on all summer long to members of the broader MIT ethics of technology community. More details about Fall Showcase and how to prepare for it can be found in the [Project Guidelines](#).

LATE SEPT: Deadline to complete the End of Term Evaluation Form (link to come) (11:59 p.m. ET) and notify your TF that you've completed it