

Deadline: Wednesday, December 17, 2025 by 11:59 p.m. on Canvas. (If you encounter technical difficulties with Canvas, you may e-mail the paper to me, butlera@iastate.edu.)

Overview: I am asking you to *apply* the philosophical theory (from a class reading) in a discussion of a situation described in the newspaper or magazine story. The class readings will not explicitly tell you how to do this. You will need to *select those parts* of the class reading that you judge to be relevant (not all of it is relevant); and you will need to *select those parts* of the newspaper or magazine article that you judge to be relevant to raising that philosophical question (not all of it is relevant). Your explications should not cover the entire articles. Your “critical discussion” (judgment) should engage with the parts you explicated.

Paper Guidelines: Your paper should be 4-6 pages long (approximately 1000-1800 words: double-spaced, standard margins, standard font). Your paper should include

- (1) an explication of relevant parts (especially arguments or ethical principles) of one of the articles we read in class (reading #1);
- (2) summary of the relevant features of the situation described or an explication of the argument offered by one of the newspaper or magazine articles (reading #2); and
- (3) judgment by you (supported by reasons) about how the article from class would apply to the newspaper or magazine story. (E.g., what would the author of the article from class say about the situation described in the magazine or newspaper story? Do you agree?)

There should be at least one full page for (1); at least one full page for (2); and (3) your critical discussion (judgment) should be at least two pages.

Suggested Organization of Paper

(1) Pick one article from the suggested articles we've read in class.

Explicate the relevant parts of the philosophical approach. If it's an argument, explain the argument. Do not just list premises and conclusions.

(2) Pick one of the supplied magazine/newspaper articles.

Pick a problem that's described in the article.

Provide summary of the relevant parts.

If the article is an opinion article, you may also wish (not required!) to incorporate the author's argument. If so, explain the argument. Do not just use a big quotation.

(3) Bring the two parts into conversation with each other, and evaluate the discussion.

This is where you use your philosophical imagination to think about how the author of (1) would judge the situation from (2).

You might discuss whether you agree with that assessment. Why or why not?

(Notice: what you write for (1) and (2) sets the stage for what you do in part (3).)

IMPORTANT: Provide **reasons** to support your judgment in (3).

Evaluation Criteria: I read papers from the perspective of an intelligent adult who has not been reading anything from class. You need to provide enough information for this adult to understand your discussion. Papers will be graded on accuracy in (1) and (2) and plausibility in (3)'s critical discussion (i.e., how well your reasons support your judgment). Simply stating your position is not enough; provide me with **reasons** to adopt your point of view. Grammatical mistakes will count against the grade only if they impede reading the paper.

Use of resources, including AI tools: The large majority (at least 75%) of the paper should be the student's own work (the student's own ideas, paraphrases, and expressions). When a student submits the paper for a grade, the student implicitly represents the submission as meeting that standard. By submitting the paper, the student assumes responsibility (good and/or bad) for the content of the paper. Questions about permitted resources should be directed to the instructor.

Citation: For these paper assignments, it is sufficient to use just the readings and notes from class. Provide specific page numbers where the passage may be found, not the entire range of pages for the whole article. Students are not expected to consult secondary resources (websites, bots, books, journals, people, etc.). However, students are not forbidden to use such resources. Any resources used or consulted must be cited, and copied text must appear in quotation marks. In cases where writing assistance tools are used (e.g., Grammarly, ChatGPT, etc.), there should be an explanation of how the tool was used (e.g., listing all of the prompts used and output, etc.). Reference lists and explanations of how resources were used do not count towards the paper's word count total. Any citation style is acceptable, provided that it gives specific information about where to find the cited material.

Academic Dishonesty: Failure to cite sources constitutes plagiarism, a type of academic dishonesty. All cases of plagiarism or other academic dishonesty will be referred to the Dean of Students Office of Judicial Affairs. Students will receive no credit for the assignment and may face stricter penalties up to and including failing the course.

Late Policy: For each 24 hour period that a paper is late, 5 points will be deducted from the paper grade. If the paper is not received within 2 calendar days (48 hours) of the original due date (if the paper is not received by Friday, December 19 at 11:59 p.m.), the student will receive zero points for the paper. Penalty-free extensions may be granted prior to the original deadline for exceptional circumstances. The instructor will be the sole arbiter of what constitutes "exceptional circumstances."

TOPICS

Write your paper on **one** of the following topics. These topic descriptions are intended to prompt your thinking about the central philosophical claims, and organize your thoughts around a concrete case. You are not obligated to cover every single element in the topic description. But your paper should include (1) an explication of the relevant claims or argument from the article read in class (reading #1); (2) summary of the relevant features of the situation described by the newspaper or magazine article (reading #2); and (3) judgment by you (supported by reasons) about how the article from class would apply to the newspaper or magazine story. (E.g., what would the author of the article from class say about the situation described in the magazine or newspaper story? Do you agree?)

TOPIC 0. Your Choice

Any other topics must be cleared with me before the end of class, Friday, December 5, 2025. You risk a failing grade on the paper for failure to clear a topic with me first.

TOPIC 1. Large Datasets, Large Language Models, and Military Decision-Making

Re-read one of the following articles from class:

- (1a) danah boyd and Kate Crawford, "Critical Questions for Big Data"
- (1b) Ben Green, "The flaws of policies requiring human oversight of government algorithms"
- (1c) Sven Nyholm, "Can a machine be a moral agent?"

AND read magazine article:

- (2) James O'Donnell, "Generative AI is learning to spy for the US military." *MIT Technology Review*, April 11, 2025.

<https://www.technologyreview.com/2025/04/11/1114914/generative-ai-is-learning-to-spy-for-the-us-military/>

In the magazine article (2), O'Donnell describes how the US Pentagon has developed generative AI tools to collect and interpret vast sources of data, identify threats, and interpret those in light of political sentiment. Choose one of the philosophical analyses. Using boyd and Crawford's article (1a), you might discuss the risks and limits of using large datasets to reach important decisions. Using Green's article (1b), you might discuss the effects of investing in expensive software licenses for major decision-making or whether human-in-the-loop provides adequate oversight of generative AI outputs. Using Nyholm's article, you might discuss whether the human involvement is sufficient to fill the "responsibility gaps" of automated military decision-making.

TOPIC 2. Personalized Pricing

Re-read one of the following articles from class:

- (1a) Jeffrey Moriarty, "Why online personalized pricing is unfair"
- (1b) Claire Benn and Seth Lazar, "What's Wrong with Automated Influence?" (pp. 125-128 and 138-144)

AND read one newspaper article:

- (2a) Geoffrey A. Fowler, "The hidden way using a rewards card can cost you more." *Washington Post*, October 18, 2025.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2025/10/18/starbucks-loyalty-program-surveillance-pricing/>

- (2b) Max Chafkin, "AI flight pricing can push travelers to the limit of their ability to pay." *Bloomberg Businessweek*, August 4, 2025.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2025-08-04/how-ai-can-raise-airline-ticket-prices>

Choose one of the newspaper articles. In the first newspaper article (2a), Fowler describes how companies, such as Starbucks, use loyalty programs to collect information about their buyer behavior. In the second newspaper article (2b), Chafkin describes the dynamic pricing model developed by Fetcherr and reports on discussion of possible adoption by Delta Airlines. Choose one of the philosophical analyses. Using Moriarty's article (1a), discuss whether these personalized pricing algorithms are unethical. Alternatively, using Benn and Lazar's article (1b), discuss whether the personalized pricing algorithms and targeted ads are exploitative. Whichever philosophical analysis you select, provide reasons to support your judgment.

TOPIC 3. Is AI sycophancy manipulative? Should it be regulated?

Re-read one of the following articles from class:

- (1a) Claire Benn and Seth Lazar, "What's Wrong with Automated Influence?" (pp. 125-128 and 134-148)
- (1b) Alexis Elder, "Should you buy yourself a friend"

And read the following magazine article:

- (2) Rebecca Bellan, "AI sycophancy isn't just a quirk, experts consider it a 'dark pattern' to turn users into profit." *Tech Crunch*: August 25, 2025.

<https://techcrunch.com/2025/08/25/ai-sycophancy-isnt-just-a-quirk-experts-consider-it-a-dark-pattern-to-turn-users-into-profit/>

In the magazine article (2), Bellan describes how AI chatbots are designed to flatter users and promote prolonged engagement. Choose **one** of the philosophical analyses. Using Benn and Lazar (1a), discuss whether these design choices are manipulative or ethically troubling. Using Elder (1b), discuss whether the calls for safeguards should be implemented by government regulation.