

# PHIL 2250: Science, Technology and Values

Instructor

**Ian Everitt**

[Click to email](#) (best way to contact me)

Office Hours: By appointment (email me to set up a time to meet over Webex)

## Course Overview

### Focus I

Many of us find it very difficult to go an extended period of time without our smart phones. We might reach for it, feel it or even hear it vibrate, and we may even experience swings in our emotions. *So*, we might wonder, *does this mean I'm addicted to my phone?* Maybe. But there may be an explanation that better accounts for these symptoms: our cellphones are genuine extensions of our minds. That is, your cellphone may be a very real part of what makes you... you.

In this class, we will be exploring questions like the one posed above. Today, we are experiencing a rapid development of new technology that is changing the way we live in and perceive our world. Because this development is so rapid, it is difficult to assess whether, for instance, the benefits of some piece of technology outweigh its potential drawbacks. Using the tools philosophy affords us, we will be attempting to answer some questions we have about the value of technology and the scientific practices used to produce that technology.

### Focus II

Value questions are everywhere. Oftentimes, they take the form of ethical questions, like whether it's always wrong to break a promise. Value questions also arise in what's called aesthetics. You seek to answer these sorts of questions when you debate with your friends over which Avengers movie was the best. Questions about value arise in nearly every situation where we are inclined to use words like "good" and "bad" to describe some act, idea, or object.

This course will provide you with an introduction to the philosophical study of value questions surrounding technology. The readings, assignments, and optional meetings will not only introduce you to important issues in technology and philosophy but will also help you develop the critical thinking skills you will need to understand and assess them.

To this extent, our investigation will focus on four central puzzles in the philosophy of technology:

- To what extent, if at all, is it wrong to seek to enhance human capacities with technology?
- Does social media present a threat to our wellbeing?

- Technology has advanced to a stage where computers must be programmed to make decisions with moral consequences. How, then, should we program these computers?
- Many of our technological pursuits negatively affect non-human animals and the environment. How, if at all, should we balance this pursuit with our concerns about non-human animals and the environment?

As we will soon see, there are no settled answers to the value questions we will be exploring. So, in order to sort out which proposals might be better, we will need to investigate the arguments. What answers have philosophers and scientists given to these questions, and what reasons do they give to support their answers? Is their reasoning plausible? Asking critical questions like these is crucial; if we don't understand the reasoning given to defend some stance, we will be unable to understand whether that stance is any good.

## Texts

Selected readings available on Elearning.

## Assignments and Grading

This course will have four graded components:

- **Participation (35%).** You are expected to participate in weekly discussions on Elearning. Each week, you will be tasked with writing a very brief reflection (150-250 words) on the reading for the week. This reflection should consist of what you learned and/or what you found particularly interesting about the reading. You will then post your reflection to the relevant discussion forum on the day the assigned reading should be completed. Lastly, you will be asked to briefly reply (around 100 words) to reflections offered by two other students. A more detailed explanation of these weekly discussions can be found in the “Weekly Discussions” section on Elearning
- **Engaged Reading Exercises (15%).** You will be asked to turn in five Engaged Reading Exercises (each worth 3%) over the course of the semester. You may turn in **one ERE per week**, and it must be turned in on the day of the assigned reading. You may not do an ERE on Jim Pryor’s “How to Read a Philosophy Paper” or John Corvino’s “The Fact/Opinion Distinction.”

To complete an ERE, you will need to be able to edit pdf files. You should be able to do so using whatever pdf reader you are using on your computer already. If not, there are plenty of free pdf editors online. As you are reading, highlight what you take to be the important bits, note words you are unfamiliar with, write out questions you have about the material, write your own thoughts, etc. The guidelines are not too strict here. The goal of these exercises is to give me insight into how I can help you to become a better analytic reader and thinker. So, you should try to complete these EREs in whatever way comes naturally.

- **Short Writing Assignments (20%).** You will be asked to complete two short writing assignments (approximately two double-spaced pages each) throughout the semester. These assignments are designed to allow you to critically engage with the readings and our class discussions. These short papers will be combined to determine your performance for this portion of the course (so it's 10% for each paper).

- **Long writing assignment (30%).** You will be asked to complete one long writing assignment (approximately six double-spaced pages). This assignment will give you the opportunity to not only use the skills you cultivated from the short writing assignments, but you will have the option to do more expansive research and the freedom to argue for your own philosophical position.

**Important Assignment Information:** To the extent that it's possible, I aim to grade the short and long writing assignments anonymously. So please put only your WIN/Student ID number—not your name—on your papers (see the assignment prompts for further details). Furthermore, I only accept Word documents. If you submit a pdf file or a Pages file, I will not grade your assignment. The details for the writing assignments (including instructions and grading rubrics) will be made available through Elearning.

### Grading Scale:

- A: 93-100% (Excellent)
- BA: 88-92% (Highly proficient)
- B: 83-87% (Proficient)
- CB: 78-82% (Highly competent)
- C: 73-77% (Competent)
- DC: 68-72% (Developing)
- D: 60-67% (Weak)
- E: 0-59% (Did not meet assignment criteria)

## Advice and Resources

**Doing philosophy.** Many of the reading assignments for this course are short. But don't let that fool you—philosophy is hard. How do you deal with this? Well, here are some suggestions: (i) Read the material more than once. (ii) After reading an essay, try and summarize the main claims and arguments in your own words—this will help you come up with questions and objections. (iii) Start the written assignments early (doing this will help you review your answers with a clear head). (iv) Most importantly, if you're puzzled about something, you can attend the optional online meetings to talk through your questions, or I'd be happy to meet with you individually on Webex. For more resources on doing philosophy, see:

- Jim Pryor, "[How to Read a Philosophy Paper](#)" and "[How to Write a Philosophy Paper](#)"

**Academic resources.** The [Academic Resource Center](#) provides valuable academic resources including College Success Seminars, Academic Coaching, and Supplemental Instruction. The [Writing Center](#) provides students with help on papers and writing assignments.

**Accommodations for disabilities.** I am happy to make accommodations to assist students with documented disabilities (e.g., physical, learning, psychiatric, vision, hearing, etc.). Those wishing to arrange accommodations must contact Disability Services for Students. A disability determination must be made by this office before we can provide any accommodations. More information can be found [here](#).

**Sexual Harassment, Assault, Contact, Exploitation.** Federal law and [WMU policy](#) prohibit sexual harassment, sexual assault, non-consensual sexual contact, sexual exploitation, harm to others, stalking, intimate partner violence and retaliation. By law, when campus officials are aware that such behavior occurs, they must investigate and take action to protect students' safety. According to WMU's new sexual assault policy, most WMU employees are not confidential resources, which means that information you reveal may be shared with campus investigators, whether you want this to happen or not. Many victims/survivors prefer to seek confidential support and services. The [YWCA](#) offers 24/7, free support, which will inform and empower you to decide what options to pursue—emotional support, evidence collection (rape kit), pregnancy and STI tests, emergency contraception, counseling, filing a police report, seeking a protection order, initiating criminal prosecution, and/or reporting to WMU. The YWCA crisis line, available 24 hours, is (269) 385-3587. If you've experienced sexual or gender-based violence, and wish to have WMU investigate and take action, you may contact the Office of Institutional Equity directly at (269) 387-6316 or ask someone (preferably someone you trust) to report on your behalf.

**Mental Health.** WMU's [Mental Health Services](#)' professional staff members work with students to resolve personal and interpersonal difficulties, many of which can affect the academic experience. These include conflicts with or worry about friends or family, concerns about eating or drinking patterns, and feelings of anxiety and depression.

## Course Policies

In order to help ensure a successful class, please heed the following rules and policies:

- **Due Dates & Late Papers.** Barring unusual circumstances, the due dates on the syllabus are non-negotiable. If you need to miss an assignment (for religious observances, illness, etc.), it is best to inform me in advance. Late papers will be subject to a grade penalty.
- **Religious Observances.** The University is a diverse, multicultural enterprise and—as a community—we jointly embrace both individual responsibility and dignified respect for our differences. It is our general policy to permit students to fulfill obligations set aside by their faith. It is our intent that students who must be absent from scheduled classes to fulfill religious obligations or observe practices associated with their faith not be disadvantaged. However, it is the student's responsibility to make arrangements with his or her instructors in advance. It is in the student's best interests to approach each instructor expeditiously and with sufficient notice that the rights and responsibilities of the instructor are not disrupted.
- **Civility Policy.** Each member of our academic community is encouraged to be thoughtful and sensitive in their choice of words and behaviors. We should be aware of how our behavior affects others. Furthermore, we carry a responsibility to challenge those who communicate intolerance, hatred, and bigotry. Words and actions matter. Everyone is asked to do their part in creating a healthy and positive university community and a culture that truly values each member's uniqueness, experiences, and perspectives.
- **Classroom Environment.** In order to maintain a classroom environment that promotes learning and discussion, I ask that you arrive to class on time. Additionally, [research](#) indicates that the use of computers, tablets, cell phones, and the like *undermine* attention, note taking, and learning. Despite these findings, I will allow the use of electronic devices for the purpose of referencing the readings. I will, however, advise you against the use of electronics as a reference tool and urge you to bring hard

copies of the readings to class. If you decide to use a laptop, tablet, or phone in class and it becomes a distraction to you or your classmates, I may ask you to refrain from using it further.

- **Cheating & Academic Honesty.** As a student at WMU, you are responsible for making yourself aware of the University policies that pertain to Academic Honesty. These policies include cheating, fabrication, falsification and forgery, multiple submission, plagiarism, complicity, and computer misuse. In this class, you will be expected to abide by these obligations. This means that all work presented as original must, in fact, be original; the ideas and contributions of others (be they quotes, summaries, or paraphrases) must be appropriately acknowledged. More information about the WMU Academic Honesty rules, as well as the rights of accused students, can be found [here](#).

## Class Topics, Schedule, and Due Dates

Week	Date	Readings, Deadlines, & Reminders
1	Sep 3	<b>No Readings:</b> Course Introduction
<b>How should I approach studying and thinking about philosophy?</b>		
2	Sep 8	Read: Jim Pryor, "How to Read a Philosophy Paper" Read: John Corvino, "The Fact/Opinion Distinction"  Reflection due by 5:00 pm: John Corvino, "The Fact/Opinion Distinction"
2	Sep 10	Responses to reflections due by 5:00 pm
<b>1. Should we enhance human capacities?</b>		
3	Sep 15	Read: Julian Savulescu, "Justice, Fairness, and Enhancement"  Reflection due by 5:00 pm
3	Sep 17	Responses to reflections due by 5:00 pm
4	Sep 22	Read: John Harris, "Is Gene Therapy a Form of Eugenics?"  Reflection due by 5:00 pm
4	Sep 24	Responses to reflections due by 5:00 pm
5	Sep 29	Read: Sarl R. R. Nijssen et al., "Has your smartphone replaced your brain?"  Reflection due by 5:00 pm
5	Oct 1	Responses to reflections due by 5:00 pm
5	Oct 3	<b>First Short Writing Assignment due by 11:59 pm</b>
<b>2. Does social media present a threat to our wellbeing?</b>		
6	Oct 6	Read: Tom Miles, "U.N. investigators cite Facebook role in Myanmar crisis" Read: Steve Stecklow, "Why Facebook is losing the war on hate speech in Myanmar"

		Reflection due by 5:00 pm: Steve Stecklow, "Why Facebook is losing the war on hate speech in Myanmar"
6	Oct 8	Responses to reflections due by 5:00 pm
7	Oct 13	Read: C. Thi Nguyen, "Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles"  Reflection due by 5:00 pm
7	Oct 15	Responses to reflections due by 5:00 pm
8	Oct 20	Read: Lavinia Marin and Sabine Roeser, "Emotions and Digital Well-being"  Reflection due by 5:00 pm
8	Oct 22	Responses to reflections due by 5:00 pm
<b>3. What parameters should be set around programming computers?</b>		
9	Oct 27	Read: Gunter Meissner, "Artificial intelligence: consciousness and conscience"  Reflection due by 5:00 pm
9	Oct 29	Responses to reflections due by 5:00 pm
9	Nov 1	<b>Second Short Writing Assignment due by 11:59 pm</b>
10	Nov 3	Read: John Tasioulas, "First Steps Towards an Ethics of Robots and Artificial Intelligence"  Reflection due by 5:00 pm
10	Nov 5	Responses to reflections due by 5:00 pm
11	Nov 10	Read: Sven Nyholm and Jilles Smids, "The Ethics of Accident-Algorithms for Self-Driving Cars"  Reflection due by 5:00 pm
11	Nov 12	Responses to reflections due by 5:00 pm
<b>4. How should we balance our technological pursuits with our concerns about non-human animals and the environment?</b>		
12	Nov 17	Read: David Havlick, "Reconsidering Wilderness: Prospective Ethics for Nature, Technology, and Society"  Reflection due by 5:00 pm
12	Nov 19	Responses to reflections due by 5:00 pm
12	Nov 21	<b>Rough draft of Final Paper due by 11:59 pm.</b>
13	Nov 24	<b>No Reading:</b> Peer review of Research Paper rough drafts.
13	Nov 26	Thanksgiving Break
14	Dec 1	Read: Verna Jans et al, "Balancing animal welfare and assisted reproduction"  Reflection due by 5:00 pm

14	Dec3	Responses to reflections due by 5:00 pm
15	Dec 8	Read: Patrick D. Hopkins and Austin Dacey, "Vegetarian Meat: Could Technology Save Animals and Satisfy Meat Eaters?"  Reflection due by 5:00 pm
15	Dec 10	Responses to reflections due by 5:00 pm
15	Dec 12	<b>Final Draft of Final Paper due by 11:59 pm</b>
16	Dec 15	<b>No class:</b> Finals week
16	Dec 17	<b>No class:</b> Finals week