CSCI 395.46
PHILO 200.02
The Ethical Challenges of Information Technology
Fall 2020
Teacher: Tony Doyle, tdoyle@hunter.cuny.edu
Office hours: Fridays, 10-11 (on Bb Collaborate), and by appointment

How the Course Will be Organized:
This will mainly be an asynchronous class. It will be divided into weekly modules. The module for the coming week will be posted no later than the previous Saturday. Each module will include the following: (1) Topics for the week, (2) readings for the week, (3) links to the lectures (posted in the relevant weekly module by 9:45am, Eastern Time, Tuesdays and Fridays),* (4) and exercises on the readings and lectures. The work for Tuesday's class will be due at 6pm on Wednesday; the work for Friday's class will be due at 6pm on Sunday. I will have these graded by 9:45am on Tuesdays and Fridays. In addition to the bi-weekly exercises, there will be four major assignments: two reflection papers, a midterm, and a final exam. All work has to be submitted on Blackboard. Our first class, on Friday, August 28, will be held live at 9:45am.

* There will possibly be occasional live classes; I will announce these beforehand.

In addition to your CUNY First account, you will need your NetID (to access many of the readings).

For a complete schedule of the class, see **Course Schedule** under **Syllabus** in the left menu on Blackboard.

Course Description:
Information technology has rocked our world. Its steady advance has had unforeseen and far-reaching social, legal, and moral implications. This course will focus on the moral challenges raised by the digital revolution in the context of big data, privacy, surveillance, and intellectual property. In other words, this class will look at the challenges of information technology from the moral point of view. For instance, is it wrong for commercial entities to gather and share colossal amounts of data about us with third parties without our consent or even knowledge? If so, how should society and government respond? Is the massive commercial collection and analysis of personal information promoting racial discrimination? Is this same collection and analysis of personal information increasing inequality? If so, is this increased inequality morally acceptable? More generally, how has information technology affected our autonomy, that is, our ability to act in the light of our own values, free of manipulation? Why is autonomy morally important?

After a look at ethical theory, we focus mainly on big data, privacy, and surveillance. In my opinion, these are the areas that have been most profoundly affected by information technology since roughly 1970 and particularly since the widespread adoption of the internet since the mid-1990s. Some of the questions we will ask in this context are: What is big data and what social consequences has it had? Are these consequences overall good or bad, morally speaking? What makes privacy worth having? How have information technology and big data adversely affected

privacy? Under what circumstances is surveillance morally justified? How should we respond to ever-growing surveillance in public places? Are we justified in taking serious measures to block or hinder the collection and analysis of information about us? Later, we will also look at the following: Should driverless cars be programmed to make life or death decisions? If so, should they favor the lives of their occupants over others'? What challenges does digitization present for intellectual property and copyright? Should our laws and regulations regarding copyright in particular be thoroughly revised in the light of digitization and networking?

This course will help you read the literature on the ethical implications of the revolution in information technology and to develop and argue for your own views about these implications. This is not a course about memorization. It is a course about ideas, specifically the ethical ideas that we now need to consider in the light of how information technology has transformed our world. The emphasis will be on arguments for and against the benefits of information technology, particularly how it has affected privacy and autonomy. The goal is to develop a richer, deeper understanding of the social, ethical, and policy issues in societies in which information technology plays a central role.

Topics to be covered:
1. Ethical theory
2. Big data
3. Privacy and autonomy
4. Anonymity
5. Surveillance
6. Obfuscation
7. Self-driving cars and trolley problem
8. Digitization and intellectual property and copyright
9. The possibility that we could be living in a computer simulation

Required texts:

Viktor Mayer-Schoenberger and Kenneth Cukier, *Big Data: A Revolution that Will Transform How We Live, Work, and Think* (Dolan, 2013)

Cathy O'Neil, *Weapons of Math Destruction* (Broadway Books, 2017)

Other readings will be available through Blackboard; see Class Schedule (under Syllabus in Bb) and weekly modules for details.

Course Objectives
1. Develop an understanding of ethical theory.
2. Appreciate the implications that digital technology has had for race, inequality, privacy, anonymity, and human autonomy.
3. Learn about the moral dilemmas posed in the design of driverless (autonomous) cars and the easy availability of copyrighted materials on the internet.
4. Effectively apply ethical theories to 2 and 3 above.

Expected Learning Outcomes

You will learn to:
1. Explain the fundamental principles of ethical theory as they apply to a digital context.
2. Offer cogent arguments to defend moral positions.
3. Evaluate critically current information practices and policies from the point of view of moral philosophy.
4. Analyze and explain the social impact of big data, privacy, anonymity, surveillance, and autonomous technology.
5. Apply ethical principles to a broad range of issues in information technology including big data, privacy, anonymity, surveillance, and autonomous technology.
6. Improve your ability to write a critical essay, that is, an essay in which you have to examine a theory or issue carefully and defend it against criticisms.
7. Improve your ability to express your thoughts in clear prose

Written requirements and percentages for final grade:

Regular exercises on the reading and lectures	25%
Reflection papers (2; 500 words each)	20%
Midterm	25%
Final	30%

Class meetings. There will be no class on September 18, September 29 (Monday schedule) and November 27 (Thanksgiving break). Note: We *will* have class on Wednesday, November 25 (Friday schedule). Our last class will be December 8.

Important dates:
September 25: First reflection paper
October 20: Midterm
November 25: Second reflection paper
December 18: Final exam; due at noon

Course policies:

1. Exercises on the readings and lectures: *No late work accepted; no make ups*. These will be a bi-weekly occurrence. You will be able to miss up to five of these exercises with no penalty.

2. Reflection papers: Unless you can present a compelling documented excuse—for instance, death in the immediate family, serious illness, arrest, court date—you will lose a full grade for

every class day that the paper is late. In other words, an *A* paper due at 11am on Tuesday will receive an *B* if submitted between 11:01am on Tuesday and 11:00am on Friday, and so on.

2. Midterm and the final: *No make-ups without a compelling, documented excuse.*

3. Submitting work: All work has to be submitted through Blackboard. *I will accept nothing by email.*

4. Email: Unless otherwise noted, I will answer emails Monday-Friday, 9:00-5:00, excluding holidays. Please do not send emails on a whim. Please make sure, before you send an email, that the question that you're asking is important or that it's about an issue that you have genuinely been unable to resolve. If you have questions specifically about Blackboard or other questions about technology, please get in touch with the student help desk.

Withdrawals: Withdrawal is your responsibility and has to be completed by Hunter's deadlines. The last day to withdraw with a W grade is November 5. If you fail to withdraw by then, you'll receive a WU for *unofficial withdrawal*.

Rubrics: Specific rubrics on the assignments—exercises, papers, midterm, and final—are posted in Blackboard under Rubrics.

Technology needed: You will need a reasonably good wifi connection to stream the lectures or to join live sessions.

Academic Integrity:
Hunter statement on academic integrity: "Hunter College regards acts of academic dishonesty (e.g., plagiarism, cheating on examinations, obtaining unfair advantage, and falsification of records and official documents) as serious offenses against the values of intellectual honesty. The college is committed to enforcing CUNY Policy on Academic Integrity and will pursue cases of academic dishonesty according to the Hunter College Academic Integrity Procedures. Plagiarism, dishonesty, or cheating in any portion of the work required for this course will be punished to the full extent allowed according to Hunter College regulations."

I expect all work, from the bi-weekly exercises to the exams and reflection papers, to be your own and not done in consultation with anyone else.

Cheating. Cheating on a bi-weekly exercise, test, or an exam will result in an automatic F for the exercise. I will also pass your name along to the college's student disciplinary committee for possible further sanctions.

Plagiarism. Plagiarism is wrong. It involves fraudulently attempting to pass someone else's ideas as your own. Don't copy material from the internet or from another student's work. All work that you submit should be original to the class. Don't submit work that you've already submitted for another class. Plagiarism will result in an automatic F for the assignment, and I will pass your name along to the student disciplinary committee. Plagiarism doesn't pay: if you try it, you will almost certainly get caught. If you plagiarize, you will almost certainly be caught.

ADA Statement:

"In compliance with the ADA and with Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, Hunter College is committed to ensuring educational access and accommodations for all its registered students. Hunter students with disabilities and medical conditions are encouraged to register with the Office of Accessibility for assistance and accommodation. For information and appointments contact the Office of Accessibility, located in room E1214 or call 212-772-4857 or TTY 212-650-3230."

Hunter College Policy on Sexual Misconduct:

In compliance with the CUNY Policy on Sexual Misconduct, Hunter College reaffirms the prohibition of any sexual misconduct, which includes sexual violence, sexual harassment, and gender-based harassment retaliation against students, employees, or visitors, as well as certain intimate relationships. Students who have experienced any form of sexual violence on or off campus (including CUNY-sponsored trips and events) are entitled to the rights outlined in the Bill of Rights for Hunter College.

a. Sexual Violence: Students are strongly encouraged to immediately report the incident by calling 911, contacting NYPD Special Victims Division Hotline (646-610-7272) or their local police precinct, or contacting the College's Public Safety Office (212-772-4444).

b. All Other Forms of Sexual Misconduct: Students are also encouraged to contact the College's Title IX Campus Coordinator, Dean John Rose (jtrose@hunter.cuny.edu or 212-650-3262) or Ms. Colleen Barry (colleen.barry@hunter.cuny.edu or 212-772-4534) and seek complimentary services through the Counseling and Wellness Services Office, Hunter East 1123.