

Philosophy of technology

Course syllabus

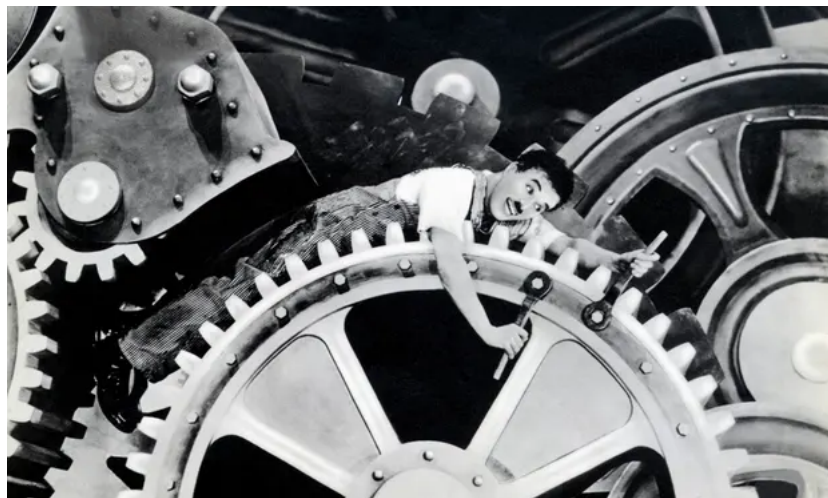
Tobias Henschen, Maud van Lier

Winter Semester 2022/2023

Times and room: Thursdays 11:45-13:15h, G304

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Course website: ILIAS (password: technology101)



Overview and goals

In the seminar, we will think critically about technology and its role in our lives and society. Questions we will discuss can be assigned to five thematic blocks. In a block on classical approaches, we will ask whether technology represents an ensemble of capitalist conditions of production (Marcuse), whether we are "chained to technology" and whether it is important to adopt a free relationship to technology (Heidegger). In a block on artificial intelligence, we will get to know some of the ethical problems that have emerged in society with the development of AI. We will also consider whether robots can be said to be conscious or able to recognize things. In a block on the internet, we will discuss problems of anonymity, transparency and limits of virtual presence. In a block on big data, we will ask whether the availability and computational analysis of large amounts of data make traditional science (theories and methods) obsolete, and whether the algorithms used to analyze these data can be said to yield objective results. In a block on surveillance technology, we will take up Foucault's idea of panoptism and discuss the dangers of misusing this technology.

Learning goals:

- Become acquainted with some of the most important questions, positions, and arguments in (contemporary and more recent) philosophy of technology.
- Develop the vocabulary and analytical skills to understand, evaluate, debate and write about the main arguments and positions of philosophy of technology.
- Move toward a reflective individual position on a particular topic in philosophy of technology.

Course requirements

To pass this course you need to attend class and actively participate in the discussion, which is a key component of this course. You may miss up to two sessions without explanation and without being sanctioned. In the case of sickness, further sessions may be missed if you demonstrate progress and engagement with the course material and are demonstrably not falling behind. Absences need to be announced to the instructors prior to the session. Compensatory work for missed sessions may be requested.

The examination (*Prüfungsleistung*) in the course consists of a portfolio of short essays and one final essay.

Portfolio (50% of the grade): The portfolio is a collection of up to 13 essays of 250–300 words that respond to questions on a list, which is accessible via ILIAS. At least 4 of these questions refer to movies that you are invited to watch as a group in H 308 on specific dates (cf. schedule below) or privately at home. Each question refers to a text that is assigned for a particular class, and you are expected to submit your short essays via ILIAS no later than 12pm (midnight) on the Wednesday immediately before that particular class. Late submissions will

not be accepted. The short essays won't be graded but regarded as fails if longer than 300 words, shorter than 250 words, or indicative of an obvious lack of effort to read the assigned text, to understand it, or to write clearly and understandable. You will receive feedback on your essays within a week. You may submit up to 13 short essays but need to submit a minimum of 10 essays to pass the portfolio. Your portfolio will be graded 1.0 if you pass at least 10 short essays.

Final essay (50% of the grade): The final essay is an essay of 1200-1500 words that responds to a question, which refers to one of the thematic blocks of the course. When composing your final essay, you are encouraged to use your portfolio as a point of departure. For each of the thematic blocks (classical criticisms, AI, internet, big data, privacy and surveillance), 2 or 3 questions will be available, from which you are supposed to select one. You may also come up with your own essay question. But you need to propose the question to the instructors by sending an email to tobias.henschen@uni-konstanz.de no later than 02/12/2023 and await their approval. The essay questions will, in any case, ask you to consider a thesis or argument contained in any of the texts that we have been discussing. Given this thesis or argument, the questions ask you, more precisely, to argue for or against it, to explain it, to offer an objection to it, to defend it against an objection, to discuss its possible consequences, to determine whether another thesis can be held consistently with it and so forth. When responding to such a question, your essay should begin by (1) stating your precise thesis (get to the point quickly and without digression, a florid preface or reference to a grand historical narrative is not required), (2) defining technical or ambiguous terms that are relevant to your thesis or argument, and (3) briefly explaining how you will argue for your thesis. In case the assignment asks you to evaluate someone else's argument, you should also (4) briefly explain that argument. The main body of your essay is supposed to (5) make an argument to support your thesis. Make the strongest possible argument instead of offering several weak arguments. Do not skip any steps, and do not rest your arguments on premises that the reader might find doubtful. If you use claims that the reader might find doubtful, you must try to give convincing reasons for accepting them. Say precisely what you mean and elaborate only if necessary. Make sure that your argument is valid, and that you make adequate use of logical indicators ("either ... or", "consequently", "therefore", "all", "not all", "some", "because" and so on). The main body of your essay should also (6) anticipate and answer possible objections to your argument or thesis. Refrain from making up unconvincing objections that you can reply to easily. Instead, always raise and answer the strongest objections that you can think of. Your final essay will need to be submitted by 02/28/2023, 23:59h, through ILIAS. Late submissions will **not** be accepted.

Important formalia

Cell phones and social media must not be used during classes.

You are welcome to send us emails if you have questions or want to make suggestions. If your email is of interest to all course participants, we will respond to them in class or in an email to all course participants. You can also use the

forum on ILIAS to make comments or ask questions anonymously.

The philosophy department's policy on plagiarism and cheating applies to both the portfolio essays and the final essay. Failing to indicate sources and correctly reference all ideas and quotes from other authors or your work in other assignments will result in failing the course component and possibly the course as a whole. Cases of suspected plagiarism will be reported to the Examination Board (*Prüfungsausschuss*).

Schedule

General topic	Date	Specific topic	Mandatory readings
Introduction	10/27		
Classical criticisms	11/3	Anti-capitalism	Marcuse (1941)
	11/10	Existentialism	Heidegger (1954/1977)
	11/17	Trust and Suspicion	Asle & Verbeek (2010)
Artificial intelligence	11/17	Movie 1: <i>Ex Machina</i> (H 308, 17-19h)	
	11/24	Do robots have consciousness?	Dennett (1997)
	12/1	Artificial intelligence and ethics	Etzioni & Etzioni (2017)
	12/8	Can robots be responsible?	Tigard (forthcoming)
Internet	12/8	Movie 2: <i>Ready Player One</i> (H 308, 17-19h)	
	12/15	Basic problems	Dreyfus (2008): chap. 2.
	12/22	Limits of virtual presence	Dreyfus (2008): chap. 3.
	1/12	Transparency and anonymity	Dreyfus (2008): chap. 4.
Big data	1/19	The end of all theory?	Anderson (2008), Bencivenga (2017)
	1/19	Movie 3: <i>Coded Bias</i> (H 308, 17-19h)	
	1/26	Ethics of algorithms	Mittelstadt et al. (2016)
Privacy and surveillance	2/2	"Panopticism"	Foucault (1975/1995)
	2/2	Movie 4: <i>The Truman Show</i> (H 308, 17-19h)	
	2/9	Ethical problems of surveillance technology	Selinger & Leong (2021)

References

Chris Anderson (2008): The End of Theory: The Data Deluge Makes the Scientific Method Obsolete. *Wired* (online).

Ermanno Bencivenga (2017): Big data and transcendental philosophy. *The Philosophical Forum* 48(2): 135-142.

Daniel C. Dennett (1997): Consciousness in Human and Robot Minds. In M. Ito, Y. Miyashita & Edmund T. Rolls (eds.), *Cognition, Computation, and Consciousness*.

Oxford: OUP.

Hubert L. Dreyfus (2008): *On the Internet*. London: Routledge.

Amitai & Oren Etzioni (2017): Incorporating Ethics into Artificial Intelligence. *The Journal of Ethics* 21: 403-418.

Michel Foucault (1975/1995): "Panopticism". In *Discipline and Punish*. New York: Vintage Books, 195-227.

Martin Heidegger (1954/1977): The Question Concerning Technology. In *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*. New York & London: Garland Publishing, 3-35.

Asle H. Kiran & Peter-Paul Verbeek (2010): Trusting Our Selves to Technology. *Knowledge, Technology, and Policy* 23: 409-427.

Herbert Marcuse (1941): Some Social Implications of Modern Technology. In *Technology, War, and Fascism*. London: Routledge (1998), 41-65.

Brent D. Mittelstadt et al. (2016): The ethics of algorithms: Mapping the debate. *Big Data & Society* (July-December): 1-21.