

WESTERN UNIVERSITY
DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY
Undergraduate Course Outline 2026-27
Digital Humanities 2126F/Philosophy 2078F (650):
Ethics for a Digital World

INSTRUCTOR INFORMATION

Instructor: Dr. Ryan Robb
Office: Zoom
Office Hours: Wednesdays, 4:30 – 6:30
Email: rrobb@uwo.ca

COURSE DESCRIPTION

We spend an increasingly considerable portion of our lives online. What moral considerations ought to guide our conduct as digital citizens? This class will engage with materials that address the philosophical issues raised by this central question. More specifically, what's the relationship between our virtual identities, our physical identities, and our moral value as humans? How is online activity changing our ability to accurately understand our world and make informed choices? How do we conceptualize and respect digital property rights and human dignity?

LEARNING OUTCOMES

The primary objective of this course is to help students improve their critical thinking skills. Specifically, students should expect to improve their abilities to understand the arguments made in the readings and respond with arguments of their own in their two course essays.

The secondary goal of the course is to familiarize students with recent attempts by scholars to identify and address the ethical issues that emerge in our increasingly digital lives. This goal will be satisfied by testing student comprehension of the materials on the quizzes and course exams.

COURSE SCHEDULE

Unit 1 (Weeks 1 to 3, September 9th to 29th): Ethical Theory and Digital Life

Week 1: Introduction to Philosophy and Ethics

What is Philosophy? (no reading)

What is Ethics/Ethical Theory? (no reading)

Week 2: Ethics and the Digital World... Same Old Theory, New Context

Matthews – Internet Ethics

Douglas – Toward a Just and Fair Internet: Applying Rawls's Principles of Justice to Internet Regulation

Westerstrand – Reconstructing AI Ethics Principles: Rawlsian Ethics of Artificial Intelligence

Week 3: Same old Theory, New Context (Part II)

Muller-Salo – Leading Good Digital Lives

Austin – Digital Power and *Law's Rule*

Unit 2 (Weeks 4 to 7, September 30th to November 3rd): The Digital World and Moral Agents

Week 4: The Impact of the Digital on Individual Identity

Schechtman – The Story of my (Second) Life: Virtual Worlds and Narrative Identity

Bortolan – Becoming Oneself Online: Narrative Self-Constitution and the Internet

Week 5: The Impact of the Digital on Individual Value

Wolfendale – My Avatar, My Self: Virtual Harm and Attachment

Lundgren – There is No Scarcity Problem

Week 6: The Impact of the Digital on True Belief

Frost-Arnold – Trustworthiness and Truth: The Epistemic Pitfalls of Internet Accountability

O'Neill – Trust and Accountability in a Digital Age

Levy – Fake News: Rebuilding the Epistemic Landscape

Week 7: The Impact of the Digital on Individual Privacy

Wright – Self-Censorship and the Constriction of Thought and Discussion under Modern Communications Technologies

Marmor – Privacy in Social Media

Unit 3 (Weeks 8 and 9, November 4th – 17th): – Algorithms and Moral Agents

Week 8: The Impact of Algorithms on Individual Privacy

Nunan and DiDomenico – Big Data: A Normal Accident Waiting to Happen?

Mittelstadt – From Individual to Group Privacy in Big Data Analytics

Week 9: The Impact of Algorithms on Individual Choice

Schuster and Lazar – Attention, Moral Skill, and Algorithmic Recommendation

Schultz – Attention, Diversion, and Distraction Technologies

Unit 4 – (Weeks 10 to 12, November 18th to December 9th): – Digital Property and Moral Agents

Week 10: Digital Property

Graham – Defining Property

Vica and Socaciu – Mind the Gap! How the Digital Turn Upsets Intellectual Property

Whitman, Murad, and Cox – Psychological Reactance to Anti-Piracy Messages explained by Gender and Attitudes

Week 11: Hacktivism

Blankenship – The Hacker's Manifesto

Serracino-Inglott – Is it ok to be an Anonymous?

Bellaby – An Ethical Framework for Hacking Operations

Week 12: The Internet and Gender Discrimination

Lewis – Dear The Internet, This is Why You Can't Have Anything Nice

Lawford-Smith and Megarry – Is there Collective Responsibility for Misogyny Perpetrated on Social Media?

Adam – Cyberstalking and Internet Pornography: Gender and the Gaze

This Reading Schedule is Subject to Change Given Sufficient Prior Notice**TEXTS**

All the readings for this course will be made available on OWL BrightSpace as the course proceeds. There is no cost to students to access these readings.

METHOD OF EVALUATION

Quizzes: 10% (4 multiple choice quizzes, worth 2.5% each)

Mid-Term Exam: 20% (covering material from weeks 1 to 6)

Essays: 50% (2 essays, 1100 – 1300 words, worth 25% each)

Final Exam: 20% (covering material from weeks 7 to 12)

ASSESSMENT SCHEDULE**Quizzes**

Quiz #1: Open September 23rd, closes September 29th at 11:59 p.m. EDT

Quiz #2: Open October 21st, closes October 27th at 11:59 p.m. EDT

Quiz #3: Open November 11th, closes November 17th at 11:59 p.m. EST

Quiz #4: Open December 2nd, closes December 9th at 11:59 p.m. EST

Essays

Essay #1 – Due Friday, October 9th by 11:59 p.m. EDT on OWL

Essay #2 – Due Wednesday, December 9th by 11:59 p.m. EST on OWL

Exams

Mid-Term – Opens Wednesday, October 28th at 9 a.m., closes Tuesday, November 3rd at 11:59 p.m. EDT

Final – Scheduled by the Office of the Registrar, during the December 2026 Final Exam period.

ACADEMIC CONSIDERATION

Students may request academic consideration in cases of extenuating circumstances – that is, personal circumstances beyond the student's control that have a substantial but temporary impact on the student's ability to meet essential academic requirements.

1. Requests for academic consideration are made to the Academic Advising office of Faculty in which the student is registered.

2. Requests for academic consideration include the following components:

a. Self-attestation signed by the student;

- b. Indication of the course(s) and assessment(s) relevant to the request;
- c. Supporting documentation as relevant

Requests without supporting documentation are limited to one per term per course.

Documentation for medical illness, when required, includes the completion of a Western Student Medical Certificate (SMC) or, where that is not possible, equivalent documentation, by a health care practitioner. Requests linked to examinations scheduled by the Office of the Registrar during official examination periods as well as practice laboratory and performance tests typically scheduled in the last week of term always require formal supporting documentation.

Policy on Academic Consideration – Undergraduate Students in First Entry Programs

Quizzes – Each multiple-choice quiz will provide students with 90 minutes of writing time. Each will be available for students to take for 7 (seven) days, according to their own schedule. Owing to that scheduling flexibility, quizzes not completed by the end of the window during which they are open will not be able to be made up.

Essays – The first essay is due on Friday, October 9th by 11:59 p.m. EDT on OWL. Any essay not submitted by that time will be **subject to a 5% per day late penalty**, weekends included, up to a maximum of 10 days, or 50% of your grade on the essay. At that point, a grade of 0 will be recorded.

Students who wish to avoid the late penalty will **need to submit formal supporting documentation** to the Academic Advising office of the Faculty in which the student is registered. In other words, students are **NOT** able to submit a ‘undocumented absence’ to avoid this late penalty. A suitable alternative deadline for the submission of the essay will be established in consultation with Professor Robb once consideration has been granted.

The second essay is due on the last day of classes, i.e., Wednesday, December 9th by 11:59 p.m. EST on OWL. Owing to Senate regulations barring the submission of course work after the last day of classes for the term, a failure to meet that deadline will automatically result in a grade of 0.

Essay submissions after the final day of the course will only be permitted when **formal supporting documentation** is submitted to the Academic Advising office of the Faculty in which the student is registered. A suitable alternative deadline for the submission of the essay will be established in consultation with Professor Robb once consideration has been granted.

Exams – The Mid-Term and Final exams will be timed; students will have 4 hours of writing time for both once they begin. The Mid-Term Exam will be open for students to take at any point during Week 7. The Final Exam will be scheduled by the Office of the Registrar during the December 2026 Final Exam period (with an anticipated 4-day writing window). Owing to the flexibility included in this exam scheduling, students who fail to complete an exam during the designated period will be unable to write a make-up without the submission of formal supporting documentation to the Academic Advising office of the Faculty in which the student is registered.

All requests for academic consideration for the duration of this course are to be made to the Academic Advising office of the student's Faculty of Registration, NOT to Professor Robb.

E-MAIL POLICY

I am **not** able to respond to philosophical concerns or questions over email (i.e., I don't have the time to discuss concepts/arguments covered in the course materials by email). I will address those concerns or questions during my Zoom office hours (or by appointment) or in the Unit Discussion Forums on OWL BrightSpace. If you need to make an appointment with me or you have some private issue you would like to communicate to me, feel free to use email. Otherwise, please attend my Zoom office hours (or make an appointment).

STATEMENT ON THE USE OF GENERATIVE AI

In this course, the use of AI (e.g., ChatGPT...) is **prohibited**. If unauthorized AI use is suspected, the instructor will ask for **research notes, rough drafts, essay outlines**, and other materials used in **preparing assignments**. Students are expected to **retain** these materials until after final grades have been entered. In the unlikely event of concerns being raised about the authenticity of any assignment, students may be asked to produce these materials; an inability to do so may weigh heavily against them.

SCHOLASTIC OFFENCES

Scholastic offences are taken seriously, and students are directed to read the appropriate policy, specifically, the definition of what constitutes a Scholastic Offence, at the following Web site: http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/scholastic_discipline_undergrad.pdf

Statement on the use of plagiarism-checking software

All required papers will be subject to submission for textual similarity review to the commercial plagiarism detection software under license to the University for the detection of plagiarism. All papers submitted for such checking will be included as source documents in the reference database for the purpose of detecting plagiarism of papers subsequently submitted to the system. Use of the service is subject to the licensing agreement, currently between The University of Western Ontario and Turnitin.com (<http://www.turnitin.com>).

Statement on the use of proctoring software

Examinations in this course will be conducted using ProctorTrack remote proctoring service. By taking this course, you are consenting to the use of this software and acknowledge that you will be required to provide **personal information** (including some biometric data) and the session will be **recorded**. Completion of this course will require you to have a reliable internet connection and a device that meets the technical requirements for this service. More information about this remote proctoring service, including technical requirements, is available on Western's Remote Proctoring website at: <https://remoteproctoring.uwo.ca>.

DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY POLICIES

The Department of Philosophy policies that govern the conduct, standards, and expectations for student participation in Philosophy courses are available in the Undergraduate section of the Department of Philosophy website <http://uwo.ca/philosophy/undergraduate/policies.html> . It is your responsibility to understand the policies set out by the Senate and the Department of Philosophy, and thus ignorance of these policies cannot be used as grounds of appeal.

AUDIT

Students wishing to audit the course should consult with the instructor prior to or during the first week of classes.

ACADEMIC ACCOMMODATION AND ACCESSIBLE EDUCATION

Academic Accommodation is “a means of adjusting the academic activities associated with a course or program of student in order to permit students with disabilities to participate in those activities at the University and to fulfill the essential requirements of a course or program.”

<https://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academicpolicies/appeals/Academic%20Accommodationdisabilities.pdf>. Students with disabilities are encouraged to register with Accessible Education at the earliest opportunity. “Accessible Education plays a central role in Western's efforts to ensure that its academic programs are accessible for all students”

<http://academicsupport.uwo.ca/accessibleeducation/index.html>

SPECIAL EXAMINATIONS

A Special Examination is any examination other than the regular examination, and it may be offered only with the permission of the Dean of the Faculty in which the student is registered, in consultation with the instructor and Department Chair. Permission to write a Special Examination may be given on the basis of compassionate or medical grounds with appropriate supporting documents. To provide an opportunity for students to recover from the circumstances resulting in a Special Examination, the University has implemented Special Examinations dates. These dates as well as other important information about examinations and academic standing can be found [here](#).

RELIGIOUS ACCOMMODATION

Western's Policy on Accommodation for Religious Holidays can be found here:

https://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/accommodation_religious.pdf.

In the case of mid-term tests, notification is to be “given in writing to the instructor as early as possible, but not later than **one week** prior to the writing of the test”.

COURSE ASSIGNMENTS

The last day of scheduled classes in any course will be the last day on which course assignments will be accepted for credit in a course. Instructors will be required to return assignments to students as promptly as possible with reasonable explanations of the instructor's assessment of the assignment.

ACADEMIC ADVISING

Your Home Faculty's Academic Advising Office will support or refer whenever you have an issue that is affecting your studies, including information on adding/dropping courses, academic considerations for absences, appeals, exam conflicts, and many other academic related matters. Do not hesitate to reach out to them if you are struggling and unsure where to go for help.

Contact info for all Faculties is here: https://registrar.uwo.ca/faculty_academic_counselling.html

MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT

Students who are in emotional/mental distress should refer to Mental Health@Western (<https://uwo.ca/health/>) for a complete list of options about how to obtain help. Immediate help in the event of a crisis can be had by phoning 519.661.3030 (during class hours) or 519.433.2023 after class hours and on weekends (24/7 availability).

GENDER-BASED AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Western University [is committed to reducing incidents of gender-based and sexual violence](#) (GBSV) and providing compassionate support to anyone who is going through or has gone through these traumatic events. If you are experiencing or have experienced GBSV (either recently or in the past), you will find information about support services for survivors, including emergency contacts at the following website:

https://www.uwo.ca/health/student_support/survivor_support/get-help.html. To connect with a case manager or set up an appointment, please contact support@uwo.ca.