

HPSC0065 Philosophy of Information

Course Syllabus

2023-24 session | Dr Phyllis Illari | Email Address phyllis.illari@ucl.ac.uk

Course Information

Information is now a vitally important scientific concept, while changes in information and communication technologies have rapidly altered our personal and working lives. This course examines these changes. It looks at philosophical approaches to information, and the implications of the 'information revolution' for such issues as society, personal identity, and scientific knowledge.

Basic course information

Course website:	
Moodle Web site:	https://moodle.ucl.ac.uk/course/view.php?id=7468
Assessment:	1 essay (3,000 words)
Timetable:	www.ucl.ac.uk/timetable
Prerequisites:	None
Required texts:	See reading list for required reading each week
Course tutor(s):	Dr Phyllis Illari
Contact:	phyllis.illari@ucl.ac.uk
Web:	
Office location:	22 Gordon Square, Room 1.2

Schedule

UCL Week	Topic	Date	Activity
6	The information revolution		Reading for class
7	The method of abstraction		Reading for class
8	Society: Organization and Trust		Reading for class
9	Personal identity		Reading for class
10	How to plan a philosophy essay		Thinking about essay, re-reading
11	Reading Week		No classes, work on essay plan
12	Knowledge		Reading for class, work on essay
13	Constructionism		Reading for class, work on essay
14	Mind and cognition		Reading for class, work on essay
15	Information ethics		Reading for class, work on essay
16	Essay workshop		Think more about your essay, re-reading

Assessments

Summary

	Description	Deadline	Word limit
Essay plan	Plan for feedback, possibly including peer feedback, no grade	8 November 2023	2 pages
Essay	1 Essay, as discussed in class, 100% of final grade for course	18 December 2023 17.00	3,000

Assignments

Essays must be submitted via Moodle. Essay topics to be distributed on Moodle. In order to be deemed 'complete' on this module students must attempt the 3,000 word essay.

Specific Criteria for Assessment for this Module:

The departmental marking guidelines for individual items of assessment can be found in the STS Student Handbook.

Details of college and departmental policies relating to modules and assessments can be found in the STS Student Handbook www.ucl.ac.uk/sts/handbook

All students taking modules in the STS department are expected to read these policies.

Course-specific guidance to be presented and discussed in class.

Aims & objectives

Aims:

To introduce students to thinking about the rapid growth of information and communication technologies known as the information revolution; allowing them to explore the philosophical consequences of the information revolution for timely topics such as personal identity, society, and scientific knowledge. A key focus of the course is on situating even esoteric philosophical issues in a context in which they are societally significant, using history and social science readings.

The course will contribute to skills development as for all philosophical courses: clarity and rigour in assessing arguments in difficult texts, and in constructing arguments, and ability to take part in such arguments orally and in writing. This course also examines philosophical methodology, looking at how we select philosophical questions, and examining two different styles of writing about philosophical issues in science and technology.

Objectives:

By the end of this module students should be able to:

- Explain the information revolution, and a little of the recent history of information and communication technologies, with a particular focus on its ethical and societal significance.
- Understand and explain some of the philosophical issues caused by the rapid technological change of the information revolution, such as how we should conceive of personal identity, society and knowledge.
- Understand, be able to explain and use, key concepts in philosophy of information such as the information revolution, levels of abstraction, organisational concepts, personal identity, and information ethics.
- Construct clear and rigorous arguments concerning these topics, applied to real world cases, showing a sensitivity to choice of question and style of writing chosen to answer it.

Reading list

Best General Introductions:

See section on Moodle with Reading List links.

Lecture Readings:

1 The information revolution

Essential Reading

- **James Beniger: *The Control Revolution: Technological and Economic Origins of the Information Society*, 1989 Harvard University Press, Ch 1 'Introduction'.**
- **Floridi: *The Ethics of Information*, OUP, 2013, Ch1 'Ethics after the information revolution'.**

Questions

1. What does information mean to you?
2. What kinds of technological change are intended in talking of the 'information revolution'? How do they compare with, for example, the technological change of the industrial revolution?
3. Is it really a revolution? In what sense?
4. In what ways are you a member of the new information society?
5. How is life different for those who cannot or do not participate in the new information society? Who are they?
6. How do you use search engines/information sites like Wikipedia/apps/etc? When do they *not* help?

Extra Reading

- Floridi: *The Fourth Revolution: How the Infosphere is shaping reality*, OUP, 2014, Chs 1 'Time hyperhistory' and 4 'Self-understanding: The four revolutions'.
- Anthony Beavers: In the Beginning Was the Word and Then Four Revolutions in the History of Information in H. Demir (ed), *Luciano Floridi's Philosophy of Technology: Critical Reflections*, Springer, 2011.
- Bynum: 'Philosophy in the information age', *Metaphilosophy*, 2010, 41(3) 420-442.
- James Beniger: *The Control Revolution: Technological and Economic Origins of the Information Society*, 1989 Harvard University Press (the rest of it!).
- Daniel Bell: *The coming of post-industrial society*, Basic Books, 1976.

2 The method of abstraction

Essential Reading

- **Floridi: *The Ethics of Information*, OUP, 2013, Ch 3 'The method of abstraction'.**

Questions

1. What kinds of things do we describe in terms of levels?
2. What's an observable? What's a level of abstraction?
3. What kinds of things can we describe using these new concepts?
4. What are the implications of thinking everything is described – and even interacted with – at some level of abstraction or other?

Extra Reading

- Herbert Simon: 'The Architecture of Complexity', in his *The Sciences of the Artificial*, MIT Press; 3rd Edition edition (31 Oct. 1996)
- The Π Research Network: *The Philosophy of Information: An Introduction*, published by the Society for the Philosophy of Information, 2013, Ch 2 'What is the philosophy of information today?' and Ch 1 'A quick history of the philosophy of information'.

3 Society: organization and trust

Essential Reading

- **Peter Galison: 'The Ontology of the Enemy: Norbert Wiener and the Cybernetic Vision', *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (Autumn, 1994), pp. 228-266.**
- **Safiya Umoja Noble: *Algorithms of oppression: how search engines reinforce racism*, New York University Press: 2018, Ch 2.**

Questions

1. What is cybernetics? What were its core ideas?
2. What were the main influences on Wiener?
3. How are those ideas still influential?

4. What is an algorithm? How often are they involved in our lives?

5. What would it mean for algorithms to be 'objective'?

Extra reading

- Donna Haraway "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. Routledge (1991)
- Frank Webster: *Theories of the information society*, Routledge, 2006, especially Ch 2 'What is an information society?'
- Floridi: *The Fourth Revolution: How the Infosphere is shaping reality*, OUP, 2014, Ch 8, 'Politics: the rise of the multi-agent systems'.
- Floridi: *The Ethics of Information*, OUP, 2013, ch 11 'Distributed Morality'.
- The Π Research Network: *The Philosophy of Information: An Introduction*, published by the Society for the Philosophy of Information, 2013, Ch 5 'Society'.
- Manuel Castells: *The rise of the network society*, Wiley-Blackwell, 2011. The Culture of Real Virtuality (the rest).

4 Personal Identity

Essential Reading

- **danah boyd: *It's Complicated: The social lives of networked teens*, Yale University Press, 2014, Ch 1 'Identity'.**
- **Marya Schechtman: 'The Story of my (Second) Life: Virtual Worlds and Narrative Identity', in *Philosophy and Technology* (2012) 25:329–343.**

Questions

1. What are the biological and psychological criteria for personal identity? Do you think they capture personal identity?
2. How could ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies) affect your identity?
3. What is the place of interpersonal relationships in the creation of personal identity?
4. What does narrative have to do with personal identity?

Extra Reading

- Sherry Turkle: *Alone Together*, Basic Books, 2011.
- Floridi: *The Ethics of Information*, OUP, 2013, ch 11, 'The informational nature of selves'.
- Floridi: *The Fourth Revolution: How the Infosphere is shaping reality*, OUP, 2014, Ch 3, Ch 5.
- The Π Research Network: *The Philosophy of Information: An Introduction*, published by the Society for the Philosophy of Information, 2013, Ch 15 'Personal identity'.
- Luciano Floridi The Construction of Personal Identities Online, *Minds & Machines* (2011) 21:477–479
- Soraj Hongladarom Personal Identity and the Self in the Online and Offline World, *Minds & Machines* (2011) 21:533–548
- Dave Ward Personal Identity, Agency and the Multiplicity Thesis, *Minds & Machines* (2011) 21:497–515
- Janice Richardson: The Changing Meaning of Privacy, Identity and Contemporary Feminist Philosophy, *Minds & Machines* (2011) 21:517–532
- Eric T. Olson: The Extended Self, *Minds & Machines* (2011) 21:481–495

5 Thinking about a philosophy essay plan

Think about what you want to write about: both a theoretical topic and a case. In class we will discuss two different types of philosophy essay (theory-led and case-led), and what to put in an essay plan. Then we will workshop your ideas.

6 Knowledge

Essential Reading

- **Radder, Hans: 'Which Scientific Knowledge is a Common Good?' in *Social Epistemology*, 2017,**

Vol.31(5), pp.431-450.

- **Schafer: 'Information Quality and Evidence Law: a new role for social media, digital publishing and copyright law?' in Floridi and Illari (eds) *The Philosophy of Information Quality*, 2014 Springer, pp217-38.**

Questions

1. What is knowledge? Why do we want it?
2. What kinds of technologies have changed the way we build knowledge lately?
3. Think about information, and knowledge. How are they related? Do you think one notion is more fundamental?
4. What does Floridi mean by 'integrated'? Do you think knowledge has to be integrated? Does it have to be 'accounted for'?
5. What would the sceptic say? Does it matter?

Extra reading

- Safiya Umoja Noble: *Algorithms of oppression: how search engines reinforce racism*, New York University Press: 2018, Chapter 3, 4, 5.
- Boon, M. (2011) In defence of engineering sciences: On the epistemological relations between science and technology. *Techné* 15:1, 49-71.
- Nercessian, N. (2005), Interpreting scientific and engineering practices: integrating the cognitive, social, and cultural dimensions. In M. E. Gorman, R. D. Tweney, D. C. Gooding, & A. P. Kincannon (Eds.), *Scientific and technological thinking* (pp. 17-56). Mahwah, NJ, US: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers.
- The Π Research Network: *The Philosophy of Information: An Introduction*, published by the Society for the Philosophy of Information, 2013, Ch 8 'Knowledge'.
- Ghezzi, Chumber and Brabazon: 'Educating Medical Students to evaluate the quality of health information on the web' in Floridi and Illari (eds) *The Philosophy of Information Quality*, 2014 Springer, pp 183-99.
- The Π Research Network: *The Philosophy of Information: An Introduction*, published by the Society for the Philosophy of Information, 2013, Ch 9 'Science'.
- Floridi: *The Philosophy of Information*, OUP, 2011, Ch 12 'Semantic Information and the Network Theory of Account'.
- Kusch, M. 2002. *Knowledge by Agreement. The Programme of Communitarian Epistemology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

7 Constructionism

Essential Reading

- **Lawrence Lessig: *Code Version 2.0*, Basic Books 2006, Ch 1 'Code is law'.**
- **Floridi: 'A Defence of Constructionism: Philosophy as Conceptual Engineering', *Metaphilosophy*, Vol. 42, No. 3, April 2011, pp282-304.**

Questions

1. What is the infosphere? How is it created? Who or what controls it?
2. Is cyberspace completely free? How might it be restricted in hidden ways?
3. What does Floridi mean by poiesis'?
4. What is 'maker's knowledge'?
5. Why does Floridi say that philosophy is 'conceptual engineering' or 'conceptual design'?

Extra reading

- Floridi: *The Ethics of Information*, OUP, 2013, Ch 8 'The constructionist values of homo poieticus'.
- Federica Russo: 'The homo poieticus and the bridge between physis and techne' in H. Demir (ed), *Luciano Floridi's Philosophy of Technology: Critical Reflections*, Springer, 2011.
- Lawrence Lessig: *Code Version 2.0*, Basic Books 2006 (the rest!)

8 Mind and Cognition

Essential Reading

- **A. M. Turing: 'Computing Machinery and Intelligence', *Mind*, 59, No. 236 (Oct., 1950), pp. 433-460.**
- **Andrew Pickering: *The Cybernetic Brain*, University of Chicago Press (15 Dec. 2011), Chapter 2, *Ontological Theatre*.**

Questions

1. What is Turing trying to do?
2. Why is it important? What does it help us understand?
3. What are we doing when we construe the mind as an information-processor? Is it?
4. Does that even make sense? How is it related to Pickering's idea of 'ontological theatre'?

Extra reading

- The Π Research Network: *The Philosophy of Information: An Introduction*, published by the Society for the Philosophy of Information, 2013, Ch 10 'Cognition'.
- Von Neumann: *The Computer and the Brain*, Yale University Press; 2nd Revised edition (1 Sept. 2000)
- Andrew Pickering: *The Cybernetic Brain*, University of Chicago Press (15 Dec. 2011)
- Floridi: *The Fourth Revolution: How the Infosphere is shaping reality*, OUP, 2014, Chs 6 'Intelligence inscribing the world' and 7 'Agency enveloping the world'.
- The Π Research Network: *The Philosophy of Information: An Introduction*, published by the Society for the Philosophy of Information, 2013, Ch 11 'Mind' and Ch 13 'Computation' (and possibly Ch 1: section 1.2 on Turing and 1.3 on Shannon).

9 Information ethics

Essential Reading

- **Floridi: *The Ethics of Information*, OUP, 2013, ch4 'Information ethics as e-nvironmental ethics'**
- **Virginia Eubanks: *Automating Inequality*, St Martin's Press, 2018, Ch 3 'High-tech homelessness in the city of angels'.**

Questions

1. What is information as a resource, a product, or a target?
2. What does Floridi mean by the information cycle?
3. In what ways is Floridi's information ethics all-embracing?
4. How are people and social systems involved in the cycle of information?
5. How can the cycle of information go wrong?
6. Does it really make sense to promote the flourishing of information?

Extra Reading

- Manuel Castells: *The rise of the network society*, Wiley-Blackwell, 2011, Ch 5 'The Culture of Real Virtuality'.
- The Π Research Network: *The Philosophy of Information: An Introduction*, published by the Society for the Philosophy of Information, 2013, Ch 4 'Ethics'.
- Raphael Cohen-Almagor 'Content Net Neutrality – A Critique' in H. Demir (ed), *Luciano Floridi's Philosophy of Technology: Critical Reflections*, Springer, 2011.
- Volkman: 'Why information ethics must begin with virtue ethics' in Allo (ed.) *Putting information first*, 2011, Wiley-Blackwell, pp131-152
- Lucas: 'Levels of Abstraction and morality' in Demir (ed.) *Floridi's Philosophy of Technology* (Springer, Forthcoming)
- Floridi: *The Ethics of Information*, OUP, 2013, ch2 'What is information ethics?', ch7 'The morality of artificial agents', ch15 'Global information ethics'

10 Essay workshop

Think about your essay plan feedback, and think more about how your ideas there relate to readings and discussions later in the course. In class I will cover some general advice, and we will spend time workshopping your ideas together, and in small groups.