

APHI 380 – AI in Society: Ethical and Legal Issues

Course syllabus, Spring 2026

“The proper evaluation of AI’s meaning and value necessitates a thorough consideration of the social and cultural dynamics that nurtured it.” (I. Hipólito)

Instructor: Alessandra Buccella (Dr. B) – abuccella2@albany.edu

Teaching Assistant: Caelan Knapp - cdknapp@albany.edu

Class time and place: Mondays & Wednesdays, 11:40 AM – 1:00 PM, HU 129

Office hours

- **Dr. B:** Tuesdays, 1-3 pm, HU 253 and by appointment (either in person or on zoom).
- **Caelan (TA):** Mondays, 1:10 – 2:10 pm, HU 255 and by appointment.

Course description

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is everywhere. But what are the most relevant ethical and legal issues surrounding the deployment and use of these technologies to address societal problems? In this course, we will identify and critically discuss some of the most prominent issues surrounding AI’s impacts on society and examine different theoretical approaches to AI safety and governance. The specific topics discussed may vary with semesters, but they typically include multiple and diverse perspectives on issues like algorithmic bias, explainability, trustworthiness, and regulation, as well as the role AI researchers and society at large can play in making sure AI technologies benefit humanity instead of harming it. The course will also explore the political implications of AI and big data, with a particular focus on distributive justice, human rights, and the security risks posed by malicious uses of AI.

After taking this course, you will be able to:

- Demonstrate knowledge of the conventions and methods of philosophy in relation to AI
- Recognize and critically analyze distinctively philosophical, ethical, and legal issues surrounding AI and its applications.
- Demonstrate an understanding of AI and computing as expressions of the cultural contexts of the people who created them.
- Understand the continuing relevance of ethical concerns for the development, deployment, and use of AI in society.
- Interpret, analyze, and evaluate the assumptions, goals, and methods of AI ethics.
- Write and speak clearly, sharpening your critical thinking skills.

Readings

All required readings are available on the Brightspace page of the course. You are responsible for downloading/printing the material and for reading everything carefully **before** each class. I

especially encourage you to work through the readings with your group to better distribute the workload and stay up to speed.

What you need to do to succeed in this course:

- Do the readings. Readings will be challenging at times, but I expect you to read carefully and come to class with notes and questions. A suggestion: divide up the reading load among members of your group!
- Show up to class, be on time, don't leave early unless it is an emergency. If you must miss a class or part of a class, please let me know in advance.
- Actively participate. This can be done in many ways; you don't have to raise your hand and speak up in class if you don't feel comfortable doing it.
- Complete the assignments on time (for my extension policy, see below).
- Respect the teacher, your classmates, and yourself. This means several things. For example:
 - Hateful or discriminatory speech/behavior will not be tolerated.
 - Everyone's time and energy are valuable: honor them by paying attention in class, staying on top of your work, and being responsive when I try to communicate with you.

Assessment

Your final grade will be made up of:

- Attendance and Participation (10%)
- Exam #1 (18.75%)
- Exam #2 (18.75%)
- Exam #3 (18.75%)
- Exam #4 (18.75%)
- Final project (15%)

[Lowest-score exam dropped if SIRF course evaluations response rate >70%]

Exams

Exams will be written in class, and they will each consist of 5 open-ended questions on the material covered up to that point. Each question is worth max. 10 points. Exam grades will be displayed on Brightspace as percentages.

Conversion to letter grades:

A: 93-100%

A-: 90-92%

B+: 87-89%

B: 83-86%

B-: 80-82%

C+: 77-79%

C: 73-76%

C-: 70-72%

D+: 67-69%
D: 63-66%
D-: 60-62%
E: < 60%

Groups

Groups will be formed in Week 3 and will remain the same until the end of the course. Groups will engage in class discussions together and are encouraged to work through the readings together, too.

Final project

For the final project, you will individually create a material for ‘Public Education Campaign’ to raise awareness about one social or ethical issue with AI. The format is flexible: it can be an online story or series of social media posts, a short video, a flyer or brochure, a poster, and more: be creative!

The 10 best projects will be featured at the 2026 UAlbany showcase (April 30th, 2026) and will be made available to attendees!

Religious Commitments

If you think your religious commitments may impact your course work at any point during the semester, please let me know as soon as possible so that we can discuss the best strategy for accommodating your needs.

Academic Integrity

All forms of academic dishonesty, including but not limited to cheating and plagiarism, will not be tolerated and might result in failing the course. As UAlbany students, you commit yourselves to respecting the Standards of Academic Integrity Policy. You should familiarize yourselves with the policy and its subsections at <https://www.albany.edu/dean-students/community-standards/standards-academic-integrity> and take advantage of the resources offered by the University Libraries regarding cheating, plagiarism, and how to properly cite your sources.

A note about Generative AI use (ChatGPT etc.)

Generative AI chatbots like ChatGPT, Gemini, Claude, etc. do not replace your own ability to think. Indeed, extensive use of chatbots has been recently linked to declining academic performance, increased procrastination, and memory loss (<https://tinyurl.com/2byaafxh>).

In this course, using the words of AI chatbots as your own on *any* assignment is considered cheating. As such, it will result in being failed for the course and reported to the appropriate UAlbany authorities.

AI chatbots can be helpful in summarizing the readings for you or to create study guides based on class materials. However, you should **always** double-check against other sources **everything** that comes from a chatbot: these tools have no understanding of the difference between truth and falsity and often make stuff up!

Other ground rules for the use of AI chatbots in this course, including disclosure policies and the consequences for inappropriate or illegitimate chatbot use, will be established through collective deliberation during the first weeks of class.

(Dis)ability and Learning

Students with disabilities who would like to request accommodations should get in touch with Disability Access and Inclusion Student Services (DAISS) at <https://www.albany.edu/dean-students/disability>. All information and documentation you provide is confidential.

Even if you do not require specific accommodations, please let me know if there is anything I can do (within reason) to make the course more accessible and facilitate your learning.

Use of electronics in the classroom

You are allowed to use computers or tablets in the classroom if you so choose, but be aware that they will interfere with your ability to follow what's going on in class. Multitasking is NOT good for you: <https://time.com/4737286/multitasking-mental-health-stress-texting-depression/>

You are encouraged to take notes by hand, if you can (especially in preparation for the in-class exams).

Communications

You are expected to check your university email account (username@albany.edu) **once a day**. I will try to answer your emails within 24 - 48 hours (excluding weekends): if you don't receive an answer from me by then, feel free to reach out again!

...Last but not least: don't forget to take care of yourself!

Tentative schedule and list of readings

Week 1: Introductions and course ground rules

01/21 *No required reading*

Week 2: Why 'AI Ethics'?

1/26 Hipólito, “The Human Roots of Artificial Intelligence”

1/28 Buccella, “Ethically charged decisions and the future of AI Ethics”

Week 3: The reality of current AI ethics

2/02 Bietti, “From Ethics Washing to Ethics Bashing”

2/04 Ali et al., “Walking the walk of ethics”

Week 4: Understanding the AI industry

2/09 *Exam #1*

2/11 Slee, “Incompatible incentives in private sector AI”

Week 5: What AI can’t do

2/16 *Discussion of Slee continued*

2/18 Collins, “Embedded or embodied? a review of Hubert Dreyfus’ *What Computers Still Can’t Do*” (From beginning to section 5)

Week 6: What AI (still) can’t do

2/23 Collins, “Embedded or embodied? a review of Hubert Dreyfus’ *What Computers Still Can’t Do*” (Section 6)

2/25 *Exam #2*

Week 7: Responsibility gaps

3/02 Vallor & Vierkant, “Find the Gap: AI, Responsible Agency and Vulnerability”

3/04 *Discussion continued*

Week 8: Data and privacy

3/09 Engelmann & Nissenbaum, “Countering privacy nihilism”

3/11 *Discussion continued*

Week 9: Spring Break

Week 10: Data, Property, and Identity

3/23 Kehlenbach, “Data dispossession: against the property model of data”

3/25 *Exam #3*

Week 11: Algorithmic bias

3/30 Castro, “What’s wrong with machine bias”

4/01 *Discussion continued*

Week 12: AI governance and regulation

4/06 Stark, Greene & Hoffman, “Critical Perspectives on Governance Mechanisms for AI/ML Systems”

4/08 *Discussion continued*

Week 13: AI and democracy

4/13 Weyl, Tang & ‘Plurality’ community, “Information Technology and Democracy: a Widening Gulf”

4/15 *Discussion continued*

****Friday 4/17: Submit final project by 11.59 pm****

Week 14:

4/20 *Discussion of podcast episode “Attachment Hacking and the Rise of AI Psychosis”:*

<https://www.humanetech.com/podcast/attachment-hacking-and-the-rise-of-ai-psychosis>

4/22 Class replaced by Kevin De Liban lecture (More info to come)

Week 15: Last week

4/27 *Case-studies workshop*

4/29 *Exam #4*