Experiential Ethics: 24.133
Summer, 2021

Course Leaders
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Course description

Welcome to Experiential Ethics! Through weekly, hour-long (60 minute) discussion groups of ~5 students, you'll have the opportunity to explore ethical and social issues related to your own experiences—whether these are projects you're working on, internships, future goals, or your experiences as an MIT student. Each discussion group will be led by a Graduate Teaching Fellow (TF), and you will have short weekly assignments to guide you through your ethical exploration, as well as a final project. Fundamentally, the class is driven by you: we want you (as a discussion group and as an individual) to explore these issues as *you* want to explore them, with our help and guidance along the way. All of us on the Teaching Team are excited to work with you this summer.

Grading and assessment

For the class to be student-driven, you have to be prepared to contribute to each session, which means reading, watching, or listening to the short, mandatory weekly assignments.

- Attendance and participation   50%
- Short weekly assignments   25%
- Final project   25%

You must pass each portion of the class to pass the class as a whole. In order to pass the participation grade, you may have only one unexcused absence (to make up for an unexcused absence, talk to your TF). Missed classes and late assignments are excused with a note from Student Support Services. For each unexcused day that an assignment is late, its grade drops by a third of a letter (e.g. A to A-).

Time commitment

This class is a 3-credit class, which means you can expect a total time commitment (including all homework and class time) of 40 hours over the term.

Participation

Participation is central to Experiential Ethics. We want you to work through ethical issues in the way that's best for you, which requires participation. Your participation grade will not just be determined by the amount you participate, but also the manner. On the first day of class, the members of your discussion group and your TF will create ground rules for discussion. You can also participate through posting on your discussion group's Slack channel or emailing with your TF.

Academic integrity

We take academic integrity very seriously. If you're in doubt about what counts as a breach of academic integrity, get in touch with your TF or refer to the [Academic Integrity Handbook](). If academic dishonesty is proven, there will be severe disciplinary consequences, which may include any or all of: a redo of the assignment for a reduced grade; failure on the assignment; failure of the course; a letter in the student's file in the Office of Student Citizenship or referral to the Committee on Discipline. If you're tempted to plagiarize, it's always better to speak to your TF, the course leaders, your advisor, academic deans, or another trusted authority on campus who can help you.

Accommodation

If you have a disability, you have a right under the American with Disabilities Act to an accommodation. As a matter of Institute policy, requests for accommodation must first go through [Student Disabilities Services](). If you are eligible, they will give you an accommodation letter that you should bring to your TF as soon as possible. That way you and your TF can work together to make sure all of the course content is accessible to you. We take this very seriously, and it is our top priority to support all of our students.

If you have concerns

If you have concerns with anything about the class for any reason, please contact your TF, the course leaders, or write through [this anonymous form](). (You can also contact the [Ombuds Office]().) Everyone in the class deserves to feel that they're in a positive and safe environment, and no issue is too small.

Graduate Teaching Fellows

Each discussion group will be assigned a Graduate Teaching Fellow. You will receive your Teaching Fellow assignment approximately one week before classes start.

- Javier Agüera Reneses, IDM, aguera@mit.edu
- Serena Booth, EECS, sbooth@mit.edu
- Timothy Loh, HASTS, timloh@mit.edu
- Saba Nejad, IDSS/TPP, snejad@mit.edu
- Ryan Ravanpak, Philosophy, ravanpak@mit.edu
- Eliza Wells, Philosophy, elizaw@mit.edu

Details subject to change

Some details of the syllabus may change over the course of the term, but the basic workload will remain the same. We will notify you if and when anything changes.

Overview of assignments

As noted in the "Grading and Assessment" section above, there are two kinds of assignments for this class: weekly assignments and a final project.

- **Weekly assignments:** (Due 24 hours before the start-time of your week's discussion group)

  - *Reflection videos*: At the beginning of the term (specifically, for Week 2), you will record a 2-minute reflection video about ethics and your own experiences. Details can be found on the Pre-Course Video Reflection Assignment sheet.

    At the end of the term, you will record another 2-minute reflection video. Details can be found on the Post-Course Video Reflection Assignment sheet.

  - *Weekly responses*: In weeks 2-4, 7, and 8, you will submit to your TF a 150-300 word response to that week's guiding question or assignment. All weekly responses are included in the syllabus below.

- **Final project:** Your final project for this class is highly flexible. We will provide you with certain options—write an 1,750-word essay, create a website, perform an interview on someone in your field and write a commentary about it, make a series of vlogs, etc. You may also propose your own. Details can be found in the Final Project Guidelines.

  Deadlines:

- *Before Week 5:* Meet with your TF to discuss final project idea
- *Before Week 6:* Submit your project proposal
- *During Weeks 8 and 9:* Present preliminary work to classmates
- *One week after your last class session*: Submit your final project

About data privacy for assignments: We want you to have ownership over your data and the assignments for the class. After the class is over, the Experiential Ethics team will delete the assignments you've submitted, unless you opt in to share them going forward.

Class schedule

Below are the general themes for the class. We'll cover each theme in 1-2 discussion sessions, for which we'll share short readings, podcasts and videos that will serve as catalysts for discussion. However, how the discussion goes will be up to you, your fellow group members, and your TF. We're also planning a virtual Ethics Field Trip that will take place roughly half way through the summer (details coming soon). Note that every class session starts on the house (not 5 minutes past) and is a full 60 minutes long.

Week 1 (Week of June 7): Introduction and Exploring Your Values

No readings or assignments to do before the Week 1 session

Week 2 (Week of June 14) and Week 3 (Week of June 21): Ethical Dilemmas and Personal Integrity

Overview: What would you do if you found yourself in an ethical "grey area" at work or in your lab? What if your responsibilities in the situation seemed unclear, or none of the possible options seemed quite right? We'll simulate some of these situations and introduce the concept of an *ethical lens* to help you think through them.

To read before the Week 2 session:
- [Inside Uber before its self-driving car killed a pedestrian](#) *Business Insider* (2018)
- [Microcase](#)

To do before the Week 2 session:
- Submit to your TF a 150-300 word response to this week's guiding question
- Submit the [Pre-Course Reflection Video Assignment](#)

Week 2 Guiding Question: Identify at least one individual or group (other than the pedestrian, Elaine Herzberg, and the driver, Rafaela Vasquez) who might have been able to prevent the fatal crash. Why did they act the way they did? (Think especially about constraints and incentives that they faced.) In your opinion, should they have acted differently?

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To read for the Week 3 session:
- Excerpts from [On 'responsibility' and 'engineers versus managers'](#)
- [How not to teach ethics](#) (Silbey 2018)

To do before the Week 3 session:
- Submit to your TF a 150-300 word response to this week's guiding question

Week 3 Guiding Question: Think of 3-5 roles that you occupy in your personal or professional life (e.g., student, intern, daughter). When might you experience a conflict between the obligations associated with different roles? If you were to face such a conflict, how would you decide what to do, or which role obligations to prioritize?

Week 4 (Week of June 28): Science, Technology, and Justice

Overview: Here, we delve into the relationship between science, technology, and justice. How can science, technology, and other related activities either contribute to or help alleviate injustices such as inequality, racism, sexism, and ableism? Using real-world case studies, we'll discuss concrete tools, strategies, and concepts for thinking through these tricky questions.

To watch/read before the Week 4 session:
- [From park bench to lab bench: What kind of future are we designing?](#) (Benjamin 2015; video)
- [Missed connections: what search engines say about women](#) (Noble, 2012)

To do before the Week 4 session:
- Submit your Week 4 Assignment to your TF (see below)

Week 4 Assignment: In her TED Talk, Ruha Benjamin uses park benches, as well as examples from biomedicine, to illustrate the concept of "discriminatory design."

Take a photo of something in your house or neighborhood that you think also illustrates the concept of "discriminatory design." Submit the photo to your TF, along with 150-300 words explaining how the design of this technology is discriminatory, and suggest how the design could be improved.

Week 5 (Week of July 5): Are Technology/Science and Values Inevitably Intertwined?

Overview: This week, we'll consider the argument that science and technology can never be "value-neutral." In our discussion, we'll ask questions like "If science and technology always encode values, does that mean that science can never be objective?" and "What does it mean to say that technology should be unbiased?"

To read before Week 5 session:
- ["Do artifacts have politics?"](#) (Winner 1980), **ONLY READ P. 121–128!!!**

To do before Week 5 session:
- No guiding question to answer this week
- Deadline to meet with your TF (10-15 min) to discuss your final project (Details about the final project can be found in the [Final Project Guidelines](#))
- Complete the **[midterm evaluation survey](#)**

Week 6 (Week of July 12): Decision-Making with Values in Mind

Overview: This week is about practical strategies for integrating ethics and values into our work. Using fun and thought-provoking games and activities, we'll both practice and critically analyze different approaches to ethical decision-making, research, design, engineering, and policymaking.

To watch before the Week 6 session:
- Watch video: *[Ethics Protocol](#)*

To do before the Week 6 session:
- No guiding question to answer this week
- Deadline to submit your final project proposal to your TF (Details about the proposal can be found in the [Final Project Guidelines](#))
- Complete the [Envisioning Futures Assignment](#)

Week 7 (Week of July 19): Case Study

Overview: This week, you will examine a case study created by the [Social and Ethical Responsibilities of Computing](#) group (SERC). SERC is a cross-cutting organization within the MIT Schwarzman College of Computing that is dedicated to facilitating the development of ethical habits in those who design and create technologies. It does so by developing pedagogical materials and peer-reviewed ethics case studies and by embedding active learning projects into a variety of MIT courses.

This week, we will also set aside some time to get your feedback on the class and see how your thinking has evolved over the summer so far.

To read before the Week 7 session:
- [The Case of the Nosy Neighbors](#) **(ONLY READ THROUGH END OF "PROJECT 1, GROWTH HACK")**

To do before the Week 7 session:
- No guiding question to answer for this week
- Complete one of the following two assignments, depending on which field trip session you are signed up for.
  - [Session 1 Field Trip Assignment](#) (Due Monday, July 19, 11:59 p.m. ET)
  - [Session 2 Field Trip Assignment](#) (Due Wednesday, July 21, 11:59 p.m. ET)

> **NOTE:** The workload this week will be somewhat higher than other weeks (prepare to spend about 3 hours total reading for class and completing the Field Trip assignment). Students should be spending an average of 5 hours/week (including class time) in a 3-unit class like Experiential Ethics, so hopefully the higher workload this week should even out and you should maintain an average workload of 5 hours/week (and if the workload ever becomes too much, please reach out to your TF to let them know!).

Week 8 (Week of July 26): Ethics at MIT

Overview: This week, we'll use the tools and approaches explored in earlier modules to think through some of the complicated and difficult ethical issues arising at our shared academic home, MIT. These issues might concern COVID-19 reopening decisions, external funding sources, divestment from the fossil fuel industry, and the recent "ethics of tech" movement.

To read before the Week 8:

- [Working at MIT](#) (Chomsky 1971; video)
- ["On Joi and MIT"](#) (Lessig 2019)
- Optional extra: ["Seven Dilemmas"](#) (Chen and Lichfield 2019)

To do before the Week 8 session:
- Submit to your TF a 150-300 word response to this week's guiding question

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Week 8 Guiding Question: In his article, Lessig makes at least three controversial claims (listed below). Pick one to discuss. Do you agree with Lessig? Why or why not?

1. If you are going to accept Type 3 or Type 4 money, you should always accept that money anonymously.
2. The *whole reason* why it was wrong for Joichi Ito to accept Epstein's money in this case is that doing so created "a great risk of great harm"--in other words, because doing so opened up the possibility that people within the Media Lab would discover the funding source and experience "real and substantial pain" upon coming to see that they were "supported in part by the gift of a pedophile."
3. Whether a donation should be accepted depends, at least in part, on the motives of the giver. In other words, it matters whether the giver is giving simply to support the university or the science the university advances, or whether they are giving to repair their reputation.

Week 9 (Week of August 2) and Week 10 (Week of August 9): Student Final Project Workshop and Class Wrap-Up

Overview: In these class sessions, you'll present your preliminary work on your final project and get feedback from your peers and TF (Details about the final project can be found in the [Final Project Guidelines](#))

One week after your final class (Week of August 16): Final project due

August 25:
- [Post-Course Reflection Video Assignment](#) due at 11:59 p.m. ET

September 28: EthicsFest (see below)

October 12:
- **[END OF TERM EVALUATION](#)** due.

Other course sessions

Field Trip (Week of July 19)

We will have virtual field trips on July 22 (6:30-8:00 p.m. ET) and July 24 (1:00-2:30 p.m. ET). Attendance at one of the two sessions is mandatory. Contact your TF if you have a conflict.

EthicsFest

On Tuesday, September 28 from 4-6 p.m. ET on campus, you will present your final project to the wider MIT community at EthicsFest. More details can be found in the Final Project Guidelines.