

244 Introductory AI & Data Ethics

(Current as of September 4, 2026)

University of Wisconsin – Madison

Class Time: 11:00–11:50 MWF	Discussion Sections:	
Location: L196 Education	301 Tues 8:50–9:40 2121 Mosse	304 Tues 12:05–12:55 2653 Mosse
Course Website:	302 Tues 9:55–10:45 2121 Mosse	305 Tues 1:20–2:10 2653 Mosse
canvas.wisc.edu/courses/529369	303 Tues 11:00–11:50 2121 Mosse	306 Tues 2:25–3:15 2653 Mosse
Instructor: Matthew J. Maxwell	TA: Patricia Yumbe Neri	TA: Kenneth Quek
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Office Hours: W 12–2	Office Hours: M 12–2	Office Hours: F 1:30–3:30

Course Description

Introduction to contemporary moral and political issues in Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Data Ethics, integrating urgent problems, controversies, and continuously updated case studies. Introduces basic technical concepts such as the bias/variance tradeoff, the reference class problem, and the proof paradoxes. Covers topics such as data and privacy, the impacts of automation on society, and the use of algorithms in medicine and criminal law.

Learning Outcomes

The Department Learning Outcomes for this course are:

1. Describe some of the key questions related to AI and data ethics
2. Explain some of the positions that philosophers have defended related to AI and data ethics

In addition you will be able to:

3. Critically evaluate ethical arguments in relation to data and artificial intelligence.
4. Interpret complex texts accurately and analyze them logically.
5. Communicate precisely, concisely, and confidently in both writing and speech.
6. Discuss controversial ethical and social questions in a productive manner.

Required Texts

The primary text for this class is *Contemporary Debates in the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence*, (eds. Nyholm, Kasirzadeh, and Zerilli). Download or read this book *for free* from <https://onlinelibrary-wiley-com.ezproxy.library.wisc.edu/doi/book/10.1002/9781394258840>. You may have to log in to your wisc account to get access.

Other required texts will be available via either the library or the course Canvas site.

Credit Hour Explanation (4 credits)

This class meets for a total of 4 class period hours each week over the semester and carries the expectation that students will work on course learning activities (reading, writing, studying, etc.) for about 2 hours outside of the classroom for every class period hour.

Prerequisites

None

Classroom Discussion Norms

Discussion is one of the most important parts of this class. Here are a few guidelines to make the most of it!

- Listen actively and with an ear to understanding others' views. (Don't just think about what you are going to say while someone else is talking.)
- Criticize ideas, not individuals. We all can learn something from each other, even if our views don't necessarily align.
- Allow everyone the chance to speak.
- If you think something is missing from the conversation, don't wait for someone else; make the contribution yourself.
- Ask questions when you do not understand. Chances are that others also do not understand.
- Try not to silence yourself out of concern for what others think. So long as your contribution is sincere (i.e. not trolling), your perspective is likely useful.
- No recordings, please. Some of our discussions could be misunderstood outside of a philosophy classroom context.

Teams

Much of the work for this class will be done in teams of four or five. You will be assigned to a team in the first week of discussion section and will stay with your team for the entire semester. Please sit with your team in lecture as well as in discussion section.

Assignments

Readiness Assurance Tests (RATs)

There will be four readiness assurance tests throughout the semester. These are opportunities for you to test your individual and team knowledge of a topic and will be administered in discussion sections one week before the Multi-Day In-Class Essays.

Attendance Quizzes

Attendance is required for this course and will be taken via weekly quizzes in both lecture and discussion section. These quizzes will be graded "credit/no credit" and may only be taken during the class period.

If circumstances require that you will be absent for an extended period, contact the instructor and your TA.

If you are absent without contacting me for 3 weeks straight I will assume you have abandoned the class and you will not receive a passing grade.

Multi-Day In-Class Essays

These three essays will be written in-class over the course of three days. The schedule for weeks with in-class essays will be:

- Day 1 (Monday): Receive the assignment and write the first draft.
- Day 2 (Tuesday): Discuss drafts with your team in discussion section.
- Day 3 (Wednesday): Revise/rewrite your essay in light of team discussion.

You **must** complete a first draft, discussion, and final revision in order to receive credit for this assignment. More detailed instructions and additional materials will be provided with each essay prompt.

Final Exam

The final exam will be an essay similar to the in-class essays outlined above. However, there will be no discussion or second draft—you are expected to complete the essay in one session.

Grades

Assignment	Weight	Notes
RATs	15%	(3 × 15%)
Attendance Quizzes	25%	
Multi-Day Essays	45%	
Final Exam	15%	

Grade	A	AB	B	BC	C	D	F
%	100-93%	92-88%	87-83%	82-78%	77-70%	69-60%	Below 60

Course Schedule

(Subject to change. See Canvas for the latest version.)

Date	Topic	Readings	Assignments
9/2	Introductions	Mullainathan “We’re building the wrong AI”	
9/7	What is AI?	3Blue1Brown <i>Neural Nets Playlist</i> 1–3 & LLMs, Shanahan “Talking about Large Language Models”	
9/14	Fairness	Kahneman et al. “Noise”, Mitchell “Can we make algorithms fair?” (in Nyholm et al.)	
9/21	Fairness cont’d	Cox “Comment on <i>State v. Loomis</i> ”, Narayanan “What if algorithmic fairness is a category error?” (in Nyholm et al.)	
9/28	Statistical Evidence	McCain “Lottery Paradox”, McCain “Proof Paradoxes”, Weisberg “Bertrand’s Paradox”	RAT
10/5		no reading	Essay
10/12	Big Data	TBD	
10/19	Explainability	TBD	
10/26	Work	TBD	
11/2	Relationships	TBD	RAT
11/9		no reading	Essay
11/16	The Alignment Problem	TBD	
11/23		Thanksgiving Break	TBD

Date	Topic	Readings	Assignments
11/30	Consciousness and Creativity	TBD	
12/7	Superintelligence	TBD	RAT
12/15	Final Exam!	12:25–2:25, Location TBD	Final Exam

Email Policy

I check my email twice per day on weekdays; in the morning and in the afternoon. Any emails I get in the evening will (probably) be seen in the morning. You can expect a response within 24 hours on weekdays. If I haven't gotten back to you in 48 hours, please send a reminder.

I do not typically check email on weekends or holidays.

Please plan ahead so that you receive a timely response!

Electronic Devices

The use of electronic devices, such as laptops, tablets, and cell phones, is prohibited in this class (with the exception of reasonable accommodations). Research and the instructor's experience has shown that these are severely detrimental to your and your classmates' attention. Please bring a paper notebook and pen or pencil for note-taking and the occasional in-class assignment.

Accommodations

While some discomfort is expected when discussing difficult topics, harm is never a positive outcome. Some of the material in this course may be extremely personal or otherwise distressing to some students. If this is the case for you, please reach out to me so that we can make adjustments or devise alternatives as necessary.

If you have learning accommodations through the McBurney Center, please let me know as early in the semester as possible. More information is available at <https://mcburney.wisc.edu/>

A Note on Plagiarism

All work turned in for this course must be your own. When using the words and ideas of others you must cite them as appropriate. While AI tools may be appropriate for some purposes, they are not appropriate for generating responses or writing essays in this class (and will frequently lead to poor essays and wrong answers). Work that I determine is substantially not your own will, at minimum, receive a score of 0 and may be subject to further sanctions.

Academic Statements & Policies

Additional statements and policies regarding this course are available at <https://guide.wisc.edu/courses/#syllabustext>