



Philosophy 2550G (570)
SPECIAL TOPICS IN PHILOSOPHY
Fall/ Winter 2025-2026

Instructor: M. Tait
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Course Information

Calendar Description:

This is a special topic in Philosophy course.

Extra Information: 3 lecture hours.

Course Weight: 0.50
Breadth: Category B
Subject Code: PHILOSOP

Notice: Unless you have either the requisites for this course (fulfilment of pre-requisites, no anti-requisite conflicts), or special permission from your Dean to enrol in it, you may be removed from this course and it will be deleted from your record. This decision may not be appealed. You will receive no adjustment to your fees in the event that you are dropped from a course for failing to have the necessary prerequisites.

**King's University College: Department of Philosophy
Philosophy 2550G (570): Special Topic: Philosophy of Artificial Intelligence
Winter 2026**

Instructor: Dr. Morgan Tait

Contact Information: Email: mtait8@uwo.ca

Office Hours: *Office Hours information can be found on Brightspace.* Please email to schedule an appointment to avoid conflicts.

Prerequisites: None

Antirequisites: None

Description:

This course is a general introduction to the philosophy of artificial intelligence (AI). The course examines key questions raised by AI related to consciousness, identity, learning, intelligence, and the nature of mind. The course also investigates the ethical implications of AI as well as its social and political impacts. No prior background in AI or philosophy is presupposed.

Course Objectives:

This course has three aims or objectives:

1. To introduce students to some of the key philosophical concepts, questions, and problems related to AI;
2. To help develop students' critical and analytical skills, especially in reading and writing philosophy, and examining, critiquing, or defending their beliefs;

- To provide students with the philosophical tools they need to grapple with outstanding contemporary problems associated with AI, especially as these are contested through the lenses of metaphysics, epistemology, political philosophy and the philosophy of science.

Requirements:

Deliverable	Weight	Due Dates
Participation: In-class Polls:	10%	Weekly
Participation: Discussion Posts:	10%	Weekly
Best 3 of 4 Expository Assignments:	40% (total)	See below
Final Paper Proposal (150 words):	5%	Feb. 27 th
Final Paper (1500 words):	35%	April 9 th

Note: there is no midterm or final exam for this course.

All assignments are due in the OWL Dropbox at 11:59 PM on the due date indicated. Late assignments are penalized 5%/day of the assignment's value per departmental policy. All written assignments will be turned in to TURNITIN at the instructor's discretion. Please consult the [Policy on Academic Consideration – Undergraduate Students in First Entry Programs](#) for more information.

Expository Assignments:

Four brief expository assignments of 250 words each will be assigned periodically throughout the course. Students will be given a list of 2 question prompts for each assignment from which they must choose 1 question to answer. The purpose of these assignments is to assess comprehension of key concepts introduced throughout the course. The lowest expository grade will be dropped, meaning the grade for this component (40% of the course grade) will be based on the best 3 expository grades. Students may also choose to write only 3 assignments. The due dates for the expository assignments are as follows:

Expository 1:	January 23 rd
Expository 2:	February 13 th
Expository 3:	March 13 th
Expository 4:	April 2 nd

Paper Proposal and Final Paper:

The final paper assignment for this course will be divided into two stages. In the first, students will develop an essay proposal in consultation with the instructor, due on Feb. 27th. A list of potential essay topics will be provided, but students will also be given the opportunity to create their own essay topic if desired. The proposal will outline a thesis and argumentative strategy to be developed and defended in the final paper. More detailed instructions for this and other assignments will be provided on the course Brightspace page.

Note Regarding In-class Polls and Discussion Posts:

In-class polls will be written periodically throughout both terms. Several minutes of class time will be allocated to responding to polls given during class, and subsequent discussion of poll results. There are no 'right answers' for student responses, however, the surveys will be graded for completion. Survey completions will be tallied at the end of the term to calculate a grade worth 10% of the course grade. If the course moves online, surveys will be completed remotely.

Discussion Posts are an in-class participation element wherein students will be given the opportunity to respond in written form to questions raised in class. This component will be graded for participation, and once again there are no 'right' or 'wrong' answers.

Method and Mode of Instruction:

We will proceed with an in-class lecture-discussion format. Students are encouraged to ask questions and participate in class discussion. It is expected that students complete the reading assignments indicated below to the best of their ability and participate fully in class discussion.

Texts:

All required texts for the course are available online through the links provided on this syllabus, or through the course OWL website in PDF form, **at no additional cost to students**. There are no required textbooks for this course.

Syllabus:

Please note that the schedule provided below is preliminary and may be subject to revision with advance notice. **Only those sections of the texts indicated by page numbers or chapter headings noted are required reading.** Wherever possible, PDFs of the readings indicated below will also be posted on the course website. Complete bibliographic citations will also be provided on the course website.

Unit 1: What is Intelligence?

Jan 6th: Introduction and explanation of course requirements; What is intelligence? Cartesian demons and Cartesian prejudices: Artificial General Intelligence (AGI) as a philosophical concept

Reading: Marvin Minsky: 'Why People Think Computers Can't'

Jan 13th: Classic thought experiments: The Turing Test, the Chinese Room, Extended Minds, the Computational Theory of Mind and the Simulation Argument

Readings: John Searle: 'The Chinese Room'; Nick Bostrom: 'Are You Living in a Computer Simulation?'

Unit 2: Meaning to 'Want' Things, 'Wanting' to Mean Things? Biological Agency, Artificial Agency

Jan. 20th and 27th: What exactly is 'deep' learning? A non-technical discussion of 'gradient descent', 'interpretability', 'reinforcement learning', and the 'scaling hypothesis'; Intelligence vs. understanding

Readings: Gary Marcus and Ernest Davis: Excerpts from Rebooting AI: Building Artificial Intelligence We Can Trust: Chapter 3; Judea Pearl and Dana Mackenzie: The Book of Why: pp. 349-370

February 3rd: Paperclips and oreo cookies: 'Free-floating rationales', what it means to have goals, and the problem of sub-goals: grown, not built

Readings: Lance Elliot: 'The AI Paperclip Apocalypse'; Dan Dennett: 'Darwin's "Strange Inversion of Reasoning"'

Reading Week: February 14th-22nd

Unit 3: Consciousness, Minds, and Personhood

February 10th: Are minds computers?; Zombies and artificial minds, real patterns, and the meaning of agency

Readings: Marvin Minsky: 'Why People Think Computers Can't' (from Week 1); Daniel Dennett: Real Patterns; Philip Goetz: The Zombie Threat to a Science of Mind

February 24th: Functionalism for minds, functionalism for consciousness?; Mary the colour scientist, who has never seen the colour red

Readings: Frank Jackson: Epiphenomenal Qualia; Parker Settecase: If an AI Tells You It's Conscious, Should you Believe It?

Unit 4: Superintelligence: If We Build It, Will Everybody Die?

March 3rd: If we build it, will everybody die? The control problem

Readings: Nick Bostrom: 'The Superintelligent Will: Motivation and Instrumental Rationality in Advanced Artificial Agents'; Excerpts from Stuart Russell: Human Compatible: Introduction

March 10th: The alignment problem and existential threats to humanity: superhuman intelligence, superhuman morals?

Readings: Excerpts from If Anyone Builds it, Everyone Dies, Chapter 4: 'You don't get what you train for'; Stuart Russell: 'Provably Beneficial Artificial Intelligence'; Gary Marcus: 'AI Armageddon?'

Unit 5: Ethical and Political Concerns

March 17th: Human-machine cyborgs, cognitive offloading, and the meaning of work

Andy Clark and David Chalmers: 'The Extended Mind'; Richard Heersmink: 'Extended Mind and Cognitive Enhancement: Moral Aspects of Cognitive Artifacts'

March 24th: Artificial moral agents and biomedical AI: Machines as moral decision-makers, human-AI interfacing, and deep learning as a diagnostic tool

Reading: *Eva Schmidt, Paul Martin Putora, and Rianne Fijten: 'The Epistemic Cost of Opacity'*

March 31st: Big Data, Big Compute, and Surveillance Capitalism: Moloch's 'race to the bottom'

*Readings/Media : Podcast: Liv Boiree and Daniel Schmachtenberger on AI, Moloch & Capitalism ([Win-Win with Liv Boiree](#)); Thom Waite: *How to Kill Moloch, the Demon Driving Humanity to the Brink of Extinction**

April 7th: Digital utopianism? Or digital authoritarianism?

Readings: B.F. Skinner: Beyond Freedom and Dignity: Chapter 1: A Technology of Human Behaviour; Excerpts from Shoshanna Zuboff, Surveillance Capitalism: Chapter 18: A Coup from Above

Academic Integrity, Remote Proctoring

Scholastic offences are taken seriously. The definition of a Scholastic Offence can be found at: http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/scholastic_discipline_undergrad.

.pdf

Policy on generative AI:

Within this course, generative AI tools such as ChatGPT are permitted exclusively for information-gathering and preliminary research purposes, such as development of an essay outline or suggesting secondary sources pulled from online. Please be aware that these tools tend to 'hallucinate' (i.e., make things up!), and be sure to vet any suggestions for content made by GPT and other AI text-generators. If AI tools are used, students must acknowledge use and state how the tool was used. Unauthorized use of AI will be subject to academic discipline.

Notice of Turnitin Analysis:

All required papers may 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>).

KING'S UNIVERSITY COLLEGE
GENERAL COURSE POLICIES
2025-2026

1. Academic Accommodations, Consideration for Absences

Academic Accommodation (Accessibility)

Accessibility Services works to ensure that academic programs are accessible to all students, and supports students who may have a condition related to, but not limited to, vision, hearing, mobility, different ways of learning, mental health, chronic illnesses, chronic pain, autism spectrum disorder, ADD/ADHD, and temporary conditions (beyond short-term academic consideration). Accessibility Services provides recommendations for accommodation based on medical documentation or psychological and cognitive assessment. The accommodation policy can be found here [Academic Accommodation for Students with Disabilities](#). Information on Accessibility Services at King's can be found [here](#).

Academic Consideration for Student Absence

If a student is unable to meet a course requirement due to substantial but temporary extenuating circumstances (medical or compassionate), they should follow the procedures below.

In some cases, where instructors have built flexibility into their assessments, this flexibility will already address consideration needs.

Requests for academic consideration should be directed to the Academic Advising Office of your faculty/college of registration. Requests must be made as soon as possible and no later than 48 hours after the missed assessment.

Friday Make-Up Exams may only be written with the instructor's consent.

As a rule, documentation is required for academic consideration. For academic consideration requests on medical grounds, the Student Medical Certificate is available at https://www.kings.uwo.ca/kings/assets/File/currentStudents/courses_enrollment/exams_and_tests/SMC-Feb-2025.pdf.

Students are permitted one academic consideration request without supporting documentation per term per course.

Instructors may designate one assessment per half-course weight as requiring formal supporting documentation. Please refer to the course outline for each course.

For further information, please see:

https://uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/academic_consideration_Sep24.pdf

Absences from Final Examinations

If you miss the Final Exam, contact the Academic Advising Office of your faculty/college of registration as soon as you are able to do so. They will assess your eligibility to write the Special Examination (the name given by the University to a makeup Final Exam).

You may also be eligible to write the Special Exam if you are in a “Multiple Exam Situation” (e.g., more than 2 exams in 23-hour period, or more than 3 exams in a 47-hour period).

If a student fails to write a scheduled Special Examination, the date of the next Special Examination (if granted) normally will be the scheduled date for the final exam the next time this course is offered. The maximum course load for that term will be reduced by the credit of the course(s) for which the final examination has been deferred. See the Academic Calendar for details (under Special Examinations).

Religious Accommodation

Students should consult the University's list of recognized religious holidays, and should give notice in writing to the instructor and Academic Advising Office if a course requirement will be affected by a religious holiday/observance. Notice must be given as early as possible, and no later than two weeks prior to an examination, and one week prior to a midterm test date. It is the responsibility of such students to inform themselves concerning the work done in classes from which they are absent and to take appropriate action.

2. Support Services

Accessibility, Counselling and Student Development at King's University College:

<https://www.kings.uwo.ca/current-students/student-services/>

Students experiencing emotional or mental health distress can access services at King's University

College: <http://www.kings.uwo.ca/current-students/campus-services/student-supportservices/personal-counselling/>

Good2talk is a good online and phone 24/7 resource for students and is available in English, Mandarin, and French: <https://good2talk.ca>, 1-866-925-5454

MentalHealth@Western provides a complete list of options about how to obtain help:

https://www.uwo.ca/health/mental_wellbeing/

Academic Support Services at King's University College:

<https://www.kings.uwo.ca/current-students/academic-resources/>

GBSV Support:

King's is committed to reducing incidents of gender-based and sexual violence and providing compassionate support to anyone who has gone through these traumatic events. If you have experienced sexual or gender-based violence (either recently or in the past), you will find information about support services for survivors, including emergency contacts at:

<https://www.kings.uwo.ca/about-kings/safe-campus/gender-and-sexual-violence/>

You can reach someone supports at Kings by emailing Care@kings.uwo.ca or calling 519-930-4640 to reach a social worker who can offer help.

You can also reach Western's Gender-Based Violence & Survivor Support Case Manager by email or by calling 519-661-3568.

Further supports can be found on this website: <https://www.kings.uwo.ca/about-kings/safecampus/gender-and-sexual-violence/>

See also https://www.uwo.ca/health/student_support/survivor_support/get-help.html

University Students' Council offers many valuable support services for students, including the health insurance plan: <http://westernusc.ca/services/>

3. Statement on Use of Electronic Devices

Use of Electronic Devices: Unless explicitly stated otherwise, you are not allowed to have a cell phone, or any other electronic device, with you during tests or examinations. Unauthorized possession of such a device during a test or examination constitutes an academic offence.

Use of Laptops, Tablets, and Smartphones in the Classroom: King's University College at Western University acknowledges the integration of new technologies and learning methods into the curriculum. The use of electronic devices such as laptop computers, tablets, or smartphones can contribute to student engagement and effective learning. At the same time, King's recognizes that instructors and students share jointly the responsibility to establish and maintain a respectful classroom environment conducive to learning.

The use of electronic devices by students during lectures, seminars, labs, etc., shall be for matters related to the course at hand only. Students found to be using electronic devices for purposes not directly related to the class may be subject to sanctions under the Student Code of Conduct; see <https://www.kings.uwo.ca/current-students/student-affairs/code-of-student-conduct1/>

Inappropriate use of electronics (e.g., laptops, tablets, smartphones) during lectures, seminars, labs, etc., creates a significant disruption. As a consequence, instructors may choose to limit the use of electronic devices in these settings. In addition, in order to provide a safe classroom environment, students attending in-person class sessions are strongly advised to operate laptops with batteries rather than power cords.

4. Statement on Academic Offences

King's is committed to academic integrity. Scholastic offences are taken seriously and students are directed to read the appropriate policy, specifically, the definition of what constitutes a Scholastic Offence, is posted at

http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/scholastic_discipline_undergrad.pdf

It is expected that students will submit work that is truly their own, completed without external assistance (human or artificial) except as explicitly permitted by the course instructor. Check with you instructor on what tools, including generative AI (ChatGPT, translation tools, grammarchecking tools) are permitted in the course. Because a tool is permitted in one course, that does not mean it is permitted in other courses.

All required papers may 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; see <https://elearningtoolkit.uwo.ca/tools/Originality Reports - TurnItIn.html>.

Computer-marked multiple-choice tests and/or exams may be subject to submission for similarity review by software that will check for unusual coincidences in answer patterns that may indicate cheating.

5. Copyright of Course Material

Lectures and course materials, including PowerPoint presentations, tests, outlines, and similar materials are protected by copyright. Faculty members are the exclusive owner of copyright in those materials they create. Students may take notes and make copies for their own use. Students may not allow others to reproduce or distribute lecture notes and course materials publicly (whether or not a fee is charged) without the express written consent of a faculty member. Unauthorized sharing of class content is subject to academic discipline.

Similarly, students own copyright in their own original papers and exam essays. If a faculty member wishes to post a student's answers or papers on the course website, they should ask for the student's written permission.

6. Use of Recordings

Participants in this course are not permitted to record the sessions, except where recording is an approved accommodation and/or the participant has the prior written permission of the instructor. Unauthorized recording and/or sharing of class content is subject to academic discipline.

7. Policy on Attendance

Any student who, in the opinion of the instructor, is absent too frequently from class or laboratory periods in any course, will be reported to the Dean of the Faculty offering the course, after due warning has been given. On the recommendation of the department concerned, and with the permission of the Dean of that Faculty, the student will be debarred from taking the regular examination in the course.