PHIL 1485: The Quantified Self

Instructor: Julia Netter

Course summary and learning objectives

Self-quantification is ubiquitous. From smart watches that track biometrics and sleep quality to productivity trackers which tell us how we actually spend our time, modern digital technologies provide us with the tools to observe, measure and collect data about ourselves at great levels of detail. But does this data really help us understand ourselves better? Is the kind of knowledge those technologies offer worth having? Does a quantified self lead to a happier self? In this course, we will explore self-quantification through a range of philosophical perspectives and debates from ethics and political philosophy to epistemology.

Learning objectives

In this course, you will learn

- to use ideas and concepts from ethics, political philosophy and epistemology to understand and judge contemporary technological phenomena and developments;
- to engage with philosophical papers critically and closely scrutinize their arguments, both orally and in writing;
- to develop a philosophical research question of your own and write a thoroughly argued critique of self-quantification technology.

Developing those arguments requires you to think and write both creatively and precisely, and the course is structured to help you improve these skills: you will write regularly and on a wide array of topics, engage with and respond to your peers' critiques. By the end of the semester, you will have led the class discussion in one session, written two thoroughly-argued critiques of philosophical papers and one longer paper on a topic of your own choice.

Meetings	MWF, 10-10:50pm
Room	Sharpe House 125
Instructor	Julia Netter (julia_netter@brown.edu) Office hours: TBD (please check the course website)
Textbook and materials	None required. We will read a selection of academic papers, all of which will be made available in advance. There are no costs for materials.
Prerequisites	You must have taken at least one philosophy course prior to enrolling in this

	course.
Discussion leadership	You will be responsible for leading and engaging others in parts of the discussion in one course session during the semester. (Session assignments will take place at the end of the first week.)
Collaborative annotations	In preparation for each session, you will collaboratively annotate the paper assigned for the session and respond to your classmates' comments on the paper.
Paper critiques	You will write two short papers of around 1500 words in which you will critically discuss a philosophical paper.
Final Paper	You will write one longer paper of around 3500 words on a topic of your choice related to philosophical questions of self-quantification.
Colloquium	You will be asked to attend a brief oral exam in which you will be asked to discuss one of your papers at least once during the semester.
Late Policy	Three late days across all written assignments; beyond that, late submission of assignment will only be accepted for legitimate reasons. (Please email me in advance if possible).
Grading	Collaborative annotations: 10%; Participation: 10%; Discussion Leadership: 10%; Paper Critiques: 20%+20%; Final Paper: 30%
Course Time	Approx. 3 hours per week in class (40 hours total), and around 3-4 hours preparing readings, as well as writing reflections and responses (42-56 hours total). Paper critiques and the final paper will take around 98-126 hours in total throughout the semester. Total estimated course time: 196-224 hours

Course details

Course structure

We will look at one topic each week. While each of the sessions will mainly focus on the specific dimensions raised in the text or texts assigned to that session, they are often intertwined. You must have read all of the texts assigned for each session. All the assigned texts will be available on Canvas or, if they are available as an ebook, a link will be provided on the course schedule page.

Collaborative annotations (10%)

This course requires you to read, write, and comment on philosophical ideas. As such, each week you will:

- 1. read assigned readings; and
- 2. collaboratively annotate and comment on the text you have read (together with a group of your classmates, using the Hypothesis tool integrated with Canvas) and respond to the comments of others in your group.

Your annotations are due by **midnight** on the day before the session for which the text has been assigned (i.e., Sunday and Tuesday, but check the schedule and Canvas each week in case there are any changes).

Collaborative annotations are graded for completion: you will get full credit for them as long as they reflect a reasonable and good-faith attempt to engage with the assigned texts and your classmates' comments.

Two paper critiques (20%+20%)

You will write two short critiques of around 1,500 words in which you will closely scrutinize the ideas and arguments of a philosophical paper on self quantification. The first paper you will engage with will be a paper we will have discussed in class. For the second critique, I will choose a paper that's related to the themes we have covered already, but which we will not discuss extensively in class before you write your critique. We will take time in class to analyze and discuss your critiques after you have submitted them.

Final paper (30%)

You will write one long paper of around 3,500 words, on a question of your choice which relates to the topics we have covered throughout the semester. I will provide feedback on your question, make suggestions to refine it, and finally approve it. You should choose a question that lends itself to a substantive normative argument. It should relate to one or several topics we discussed in class, and I encourage you to look beyond the abstract, technical debates in the literature to search for interesting questions, puzzles, or problems in your everyday life. Questions of applied philosophy are driven by the clashes of ideas, ideals, and values that we encounter in society and the political sphere. In the final paper, I want you to show that you can relate the debates you encounter in this class to a new question, and that you can make a rigorous philosophical argument advocating a position on that question.

Early in the semester and throughout the course, we will talk about how to identify philosophical questions as you go through your everyday life and about what makes a good question for a seminar paper. Before you start writing your paper, I strongly encourage you to develop an outline of your key arguments and discuss them with me in office hours.

In the final week of class, you will pair up with another student in class to provide mutual feedback on your final paper. To this end, you will be required to submit a draft of your final paper before those sessions. This draft submission will be graded for completion, but it is a

required part of the final paper assignment. If you do not submit the draft on time, you will not receive credit for the final paper.

Colloquium

You will meet with me at least once during the semester for a short (~15 minute) colloquium in which you will explain and answer questions on the most recent paper you have submitted. Each colloquium is also designed to provide you with useful feedback on your work and help you succeed in the course. **Attending the colloquia is mandatory and will be graded as part of the assignment it refers to.**

Participation (10%)

This is a seminar course, so the discussion in class is an essential component. The participation grade is based on two components:

- 1) your presence in class: one unexcused absence is no problem, but beyond that, if you cannot attend class for legitimate personal reasons, or because you feel unwell, please email me in advance;
- 2) overall activity in class discussion: I think of class discussion primarily as a space for learning, which is why I will only assess your overall activity in class discussion, not the quality of your contributions.

One note on the culture of debate which I would like to foster in this course: discussions in philosophy are not about winning an intellectual battle, but about engaging with others' views on their merits. They are also about taking intellectual risks, putting forward a potentially controversial argument, as well as receiving and offering constructive criticism. This is only possible in a class environment in which we build trust. In class, I therefore expect us all to treat each other courteously, engage with each other's arguments constructively and in good faith no matter the topic.

Discussion leadership (10%)

Friday sessions usually don't have a paper assigned and are reserved for synthesizing and deepening the discussion of the papers discussed on Monday and Wednesday. Students will help structure and lead those sessions. Concretely, that means that you will co-lead one Friday session together with one or two other students. In order to prepare for leading the discussion, you will be tasked with reading and analyzing a number of reflections and responses your classmates submitted earlier in the week and collecting a set of ideas and questions you would like to see discussed in more detail in the Friday session. Together with your co-discussion leaders, you will take the lead in engaging your classmates in those discussions.

Time Commitment

You can expect to spend approximately 3 hours per week in class (40 hours total), and around 3-4 hours preparing readings, as well as writing reflections and responses (42-56 hours total). Paper critiques and the final paper will take around 98-126 hours in total throughout the semester.

Policies

Late Policy

You can use a budget of three late days in total for the two paper critiques and the final paper. The purpose of these late days is to provide you with some flexibility for unexpected situations in which you find yourself unable to complete an assignment on time (e.g., coinciding deadlines, extracurricular commitments, minor illness, etc.). For those situations, I normally expect you to use your late days, rather than asking for an extension, so make sure to use them judiciously.

I expect you to attend every session, but let me know if you have any special requirements. For sickness and other issues of wellbeing, please obtain a Dean's note and I will accommodate them.

The course will involve substantial *reading* for each meeting, and you will need to stay on top of the assigned readings to keep up, as we quickly move between topics. However, the topics we cover week-by-week are relatively standalone, so finding one paper difficult to read will not disadvantage you going forward.

Owing to the small amount of credit that your reflections and responses contribute individually, there will be no late submission. If you do encounter particular, unexpected hardships however, please send me an email.

Accommodations

Brown University is committed to full inclusion of all students. Please inform me if you have a disability or other condition that might require accommodations or modification of any of these course procedures. You may email me, come to office hours, or speak with me after class, and your confidentiality is respected. I will do whatever we can to support accommodations recommended by SAS. For more information contact Student Accessibility Services (SAS) at 401-863-9588 or SAS@brown.edu.

Mental Health

Being a student can be very stressful. If you feel you are under too much pressure or there are psychological issues that are keeping you from performing well at Brown, I encourage you to contact Brown's Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS). They provide confidential counseling and can provide notes supporting extensions on assignments for health reasons.

Use of generative AI tools

Learning how to construct and communicate thoughtful arguments requires both critical (grappling with the ideas presented by others), reflective (coming up and organizing ideas), and writing-related practice. You will only build those skills by spending time on developing, organizing and working through the writing process. You will benefit from this practice even if (and when) you use generative AI tools for other tasks in and beyond this course.

Therefore, the use of generative AI tools of any kind (including, but not limited to ChatGPT, Gemini, Claude, Grammarly, Bard, GPT-4, ...) is **only acceptable in assignments which explicitly permit or call for them to be used.** By default, you must assume that the use of these tools for any written work in the course (including collaborative annotations, the two paper critiques, and the final project) is **not** permitted. All the work you submit for those assignments must have been ideated, developed, organized, drafted, written and edited by you without the use of generative AI tools unless explicit permission for their use has been granted.

If generative AI tools are explicitly permitted to be used for an assignment, and you include material generated by an AI program, you must cite it like any other reference material (having checked its quality -- which may be poor -- just like you would for any other source). You may not submit any work generated by an AI program as your own.

If you have any questions about this policy, please talk to me before you start work on an assignment.

Academic Integrity

From the Brown academic code: “Academic achievement is ordinarily evaluated on the basis of work that a student produces independently. Students who submit academic work that uses others’ ideas, words, research, or images without proper attribution and documentation are in violation of the academic code. Infringement of the academic code entails penalties ranging from reprimand to suspension, dismissal, or expulsion from the University.

“Brown students are expected to tell the truth. Misrepresentations of facts, significant omissions, or falsifications in any connection with the academic process (including change of course permits, the academic transcript, or applications for graduate training or employment) violate the code, and students are penalized accordingly. This policy also applies to Brown alums, insofar as it relates to Brown transcripts and other records of work at Brown.

“Misunderstanding the code is not an excuse for dishonest work. Students who are unsure about any point of Brown’s academic code should consult their course instructors or an academic dean, who will be happy to explain the policy.”

Please review the Brown Academic Code here.