GHENT UNIVERSITY

Course Specifications

Valid as from the academic year 2026-2027

Advanced Research Issues in Philosophical Anthropology (A001008)

Course size *(nominal values; actual values may depend on programme)*

Credits 5.0 **Study time 150 h**

Course offerings and teaching methods in academic year 2026-2027

A (semester 1)	Dutch	Gent	seminar
			lecture

Lecturers in academic year 2026-2027

De Vries, Bouke	LW01	lecturer-in-charge

Offered in the following programmes in 2026-2027	**crdts**	**offering**
Master of Science in Teaching in Arts and Humanities (main subject Philosophy)	5	A
Master of Arts in Philosophy	5	A
Research Master of Arts in Philosophy	5	A

Teaching languages

Dutch

Keywords

human nature, artificial intelligence, artificial general intelligence, digital minds, robots, cyborgs, transhumanism, automation, meaning and purpose, work, leisure, radical life extension, moral status, enhancement

Position of the course

This course aims to familiarize students with philosophical-anthropological questions raised by developments in artificial intelligence and to enable them to develop a well-reasoned position on these questions. Particular attention will be given to the ways in which AI is prompting many philosophers to reconsider what it means to be human, what constitutes a good or meaningful human life, and what normative implications may follow from the emergence of artificial agents and AI-enabled human enhancement. Significant emphasis will also be placed on the development of argumentative and analytical skills. The topics covered closely relate to other modules, including philosophy of biology, (bio)ethics, and political philosophy.

Contents

Artificial intelligence is already rapidly transforming the way we work, learn, and make decisions. Yet many researchers believe its most profound effects will emerge with the development of artificial general intelligence (AGI): systems capable of performing virtually all tasks at or above human level. In such a post-AGI world, human labour is likely to become largely, if not entirely, obsolete. Since humans would be substantially less efficient than advanced AI systems across most economically valuable tasks, employing humans is expected to become economically irrational in competitive markets, leading to widespread unemployment despite enormous increases in productivity and GDP.

Some thinkers have argued that humanity could adapt to these transformations by embracing a largely leisure-oriented society (see, for example, Danaher 2019). Others, however, including philosopher Nick Bostrom, have suggested that many non-work-related activities people currently find meaningful may likewise become obsolete — a phenomenon Bostrom refers to as ‘deep redundancy’.

For example, would shopping still be enjoyable if AI systems could predict our

preferences better than we can ourselves and buy everything for us? Would learning retain its value if knowledge could simply be uploaded directly into our minds? Would we still want sex with other humans if we could have much better intercourse with robots, or perhaps directly induce orgasm-like sensations through pharmacological or technological means? Would we still find meaning and joy in parenting if our children could receive a much better upbringing from artificial agents? Would we still want to exercise if medical nanobots allowed us to remain in perfect shape regardless of our lifestyle, while pharmacological interventions could artificially induce endorphin release? And would we still seek to cultivate friendships and romantic relationships with other humans if artificial friends or partners existed with whom we enjoyed interacting more?

Looking further ahead, AGI may not only reshape our understanding of ourselves and our lives through automating human activities, but also through radical life extension. If humans could live for centuries — or even for thousands of years — how would this alter our values, ambitions, and sense of meaning? Would extremely long lives inevitably become monotonous, or would new forms of purpose and fulfilment continue to emerge? Would people continue to view marriage as something reasonably expected to last a lifetime?

A post-AGI world also raises major ethical and political questions. One concerns how we should value the welfare of (a) possible digital minds and (b) enhanced humans whose capacities have been radically expanded through AI-driven genetic engineering or human–technology integration. (Although artificial consciousness may sound speculative, a 2025 survey of experts in AI, philosophy, forecasting, and digital-minds research found substantial support for the possibility of conscious artificial beings: respondents assigned a median probability of 90% that artificial minds are possible in principle, 65% that they could emerge by 2100, and even 20% that they could arise as early as 2030 (Caviola and Saad 2025).) Insofar as digital minds and/or substantially enhanced humans come to possess a higher moral status than ordinary humans, what normative implications might this have for political institutions and social organization? Does the fact that digital minds could be replicated with relative ease, which might allow them to vastly outnumber humans, provide a reason to deny them equal voting rights, even if their expected moral status is at least as high as that of humans? And in determining their moral and legal entitlements, how should we address uncertainty about whether digital minds are genuinely conscious rather than merely behaviourally sophisticated?

Another potentially pressing question in a post-AGI world concerns reproduction and population growth. If humans and digital beings could live for hundreds if not thousands of years — and digital minds could potentially be copied at low cost — would societies eventually need to regulate reproduction in order to avoid overpopulation and the return of Malthusian pressures?

In short, then, this course will explore two broad categories of questions, including but not limited to:

Existential Questions

1 Can meaningful human lives still exist in a post-AGI world? If so, what might those lives look like?
   - Would people still choose to work? If so, what kinds of work — whether existing or entirely new — would they do?
   - Would current forms of leisure and recreation continue to matter, or would entirely new forms of fulfilment emerge?
   - Would people continue to experience parenting as rewarding if it would be best for their children's development if it were outsourced to an AI?
   - Would people continue to experience parenting as rewarding if their children's development would be best served by outsourcing parenting to AI?
2 How might radical life extension transform our values, aspirations, and self-understanding?
3 How might AI-enabled forms of genetic and technological self-enhancement change our views of human nature?

Normative Questions

1 What moral status, if any, should be attributed to sophisticated digital beings, taking into account uncertainty about their consciousness and sentience?
2 What legal rights, if any, should be awarded to them, considering the risk that granting extensive sets of rights (especially political rights and property rights) might increase risks of AI-take over and AI-driven extinction?
3 What moral status should be attributed to radically enhanced humans?
4 Given the potential large-scale redundancy of human labour, what economic system would be most appropriate in a post-AGI society?
- A universal basic income?
- Some form of communism?
- A left-libertarian system combining equal claims to natural resources with market exchange?
- Some other system?

5 How, if at all, should ordinary humans coexist with artificial agents and radically enhanced humans? What forms of political and social organization would be most desirable if large inequalities emerge in e.g., lifespan, intelligence, and capacity for well-being?
6 Could radical life extension and the easy replication of digital minds justify restrictions on reproduction in order to avoid overpopulation?

Initial competences

Students fulfill the prerequisite of a basic introduction in philosophical anthropology and/or introduction to philosophy.

Final competences

1 Ability to formulate philosophically relevant research questions grounded in a well-informed understanding of the state of the art in the field.
2 Ability to develop original solutions to selected philosophical research problems and to present and defend them clearly.
3 Ability to independently deepen one's knowledge within the domain.

Conditions for credit contract

Access to this course unit via a credit contract is unrestricted: the student takes into consideration the conditions mentioned in 'Starting Competences'

Conditions for exam contract

Access to this course unit via an exam contract is unrestricted

Teaching methods

Seminar, Lecture, Independent work

Extra information on the teaching methods

The didactics of this course are based on the problem-based learning method, in which the independent formulation, discussion, and answering of research questions take centre stage. This process takes place in a group setting, with collaboration and collective knowledge construction playing a key role.
Lecture recordings are not available for this course.

Study material

Type: Reader

Name: Bostrom, Nick. 2024. Deep Utopia: Life and Meaning in a Solved World. Washington (D.C.): Ideapress Publishing.
Indicative price: € 25
Optional: no
Language : English
Online Available : Yes
Available in the Library : Yes

References

Danaher, John. 2019. *Automation and Utopia: Human Flourishing in a World without Work*. Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press.

Dung, Leonard. 2025. *Saving Artificial Minds: Understanding and Preventing AI Suffering*. doi:10.4324/9781003674573.

Course content-related study coaching

by the lecturer

Assessment moments

end-of-term and continuous assessment

Examination methods in case of periodic assessment during the first examination period

Assignment

Examination methods in case of periodic assessment during the second examination period

Examination methods in case of permanent assessment

Participation, Presentation, Peer and/or self assessment

Possibilities of retake in case of permanent assessment

not applicable

Extra information on the examination methods

Permanent evaluation: Participation in seminar discussions, completion of paper assignments, and oral presentation of research.
End-of-term assessment: Final research paper.

Calculation of the examination mark

Continuous assesment: 40%
End-of-term assessment: 60%

Facilities for Working Students

Facilities:
1 Possible exemption from educational activities requiring student attendance.
2 Possible examination on a different date.
3 Feedback can be given during an appointment during office hours.

Extra information:
For more information concerning flexible learning: contact the monitoring service of the faculty of Arts and philosophy