CS384: Perspectives on Computing  
Calvin University  
Spring 2024

Instructor: Prof. Derek Schuurman

Textbook and supplementary readings:
- *CS384 Supplementary Perspectival Readings* (course pack) plus additional readings posted in Moodle.

Schedule: Tuesdays and Thursdays 10:20am-12:00pm (section A), 12:15pm-1:55pm (section B)

Course Description: This course addresses social, ethical, legal, and professional issues that arise in computer science from a Reformed Christian perspective. Social issues concerning the computerization of society include privacy, security, the digital divide, and changes in the way people receive information and relate with others. Ethical discussions include a survey of ethical theories and covers professional, ethical, and legal issues in areas including intellectual property, privacy, liability, and professional codes of conduct. In addition, some foundational issues are covered, including norms for design and what it means to be a person.

Prerequisite: Last year of a computing-related program.

This course satisfies the Calvin core requirement for *Contemporary Challenges and Enduring Questions*.

Motivating Question:
“Does the ancient Christian faith still have anything to say to a fast-paced modern world shaped by such technology? Tertullian, a father of early Christian literature, once posed the question, "What does Athens have to do with Jerusalem?" When it comes to computer technology, we might well ask, ‘What does Silicon Valley have to do with Jerusalem?’ In a nutshell: what do bytes have to do with Christian beliefs?” (*Shaping a Digital World*, p. 11)

Learning Outcomes:
Upon successful completion of this course, a student will be able to:
- articulate how a reformed Christian perspective informs the use, design, and norms for computer technology
- critically engage different perspectives on technology including instrumentalism, technological determinism, and technicism and explain why technology is not neutral
- discuss a variety of social, ethical, legal, theological, and philosophical issues related to computer technology
- demonstrate familiarity with professional codes of ethics
- express themselves clearly orally and succinctly in writing

Attendance/participation: Since this is a seminar-style course, you must be present to participate! Attendance in class is required and students are expected to be prepared and actively involved in discussions. Arrival to class more than 5 minutes late will be considered an absence. Students are required to follow regular weekly readings in preparation for participating in class discussions.

10-minutes with the Professor: At some point in the first month of classes, please make arrangements to meet with the professor for a short chat in which you introduce yourself and share (1) your hopes (or fears) for this course and (2) your thoughts about your future vocation after university. You will be responsible for arranging a time and setting up a calendar invite in Outlook. Ideally this will be done in person, but it may also happen over teams.

Quizzes: There will be regular, low-stakes quizzes on the weekly readings and recent course content. The purpose of these quizzes is strictly to check that you are completing the readings and following along in
class. These will be given at the beginning of class and scattered throughout the semester. The lowest quiz score will be dropped. Refer to Moodle for quiz dates.

**Reading Responses:** Outside of class, much of the work you will do for this course involves reading and hence reading responses are worth a significant portion of your grade. Students will be required to submit weekly reading responses on Moodle to help them prepare for fruitful discussions in class. The responses will be normally due by Tuesday morning. The reading responses will be at least 200 words in length but must not exceed 500 words. Unless otherwise specified, the responses must include the following elements under bold, clearly labeled headings for each section:

1. **Question:** what one question is uppermost in your mind arising from the readings?
2. **Summary:** summarize the main points for the week’s readings. The title of each reading should be clearly indicated in bold next to each summary. Bullet points are acceptable.
3. **Reflection:** reflect briefly on something from the reading(s) that connects with a personal experience or issue that resonated with you or with a current event in the news.

Reading responses will be marked out of three: one mark for each of the above elements. A full mark will be awarded for a satisfactory element, a half mark will be awarded for a less-than-satisfactory element, and a zero will be awarded for a missing or very poor element. Marks will be deducted for improper formatting of the response and a late reading response will receive a mark of zero. No late submissions will be accepted.

*For the first week only,* students will be required to post an introduction to themselves and reflect on whether they feel technology is neutral. For the final submission, students will be asked to reflect on the course and complete a senior survey.

**Leading a Class Discussion:** Pairs of students will be required to lead one class discussion based on one of the weekly readings. This will be done in pairs at the start of a class on a date students must sign up for. Each pair of students will give a 1-minute summary of one weekly reading (each group must pick a unique reading), pose an interesting question which arises from the reading, and lead the class in a discussion lasting no more than 10 minutes, and close with a brief summary of how this topic shows how technology is not neutral, how faith informs this topic, and a personal response. Presentations should be verbal without using slides. Grades will be out of a total of 5 points as follows: quality of the reading summary (1 point), quality and relevance of the question (1 point), engaging and leading the discussion (1 point), knowledge of subject matter (1 point), bringing faith to bear on the issue and illustrating how technology is value-laden (1 point). Students will be responsible for ensuring they sign up for a class discussion slot within the first two weeks of the course.

**Presentation:** In addition to the weekly required readings, each student must read one book chosen from a list of approved books (other books on technology issues may be considered with approval from the instructor). *Students must each choose a distinct book for their class section and it should be different from books required for other classes.* Each student will be responsible for a presentation on the book they have selected sometime during the last weeks of classes. This will involve preparing a one-page summary for the class which must include the following under appropriate headings: author background, abstract of the book, summary of the related design norms, and a personal response. This summary should be uploaded to a shared folder linked in Moodle before your presentation begins with a filename of the form: **student_name-book_title.pdf.** Students will be evaluated by the professor and answer questions raised by peers. Presentations should include appropriate slides or visual aids. The date for each student’s presentation will be posted on Moodle. Grading will be based on both content and delivery of the presentation. Feedback will be given which students can use to shape their final paper.

**Final Paper:** Each student must also write a paper in conversation with their chosen book dealing with a contemporary technology issue. The paper should provide a thoughtful perspective on the book and the issue by identify its main ideas and presuppositions. The report should articulate a reformed Christian perspective on the topic (drawing on themes presented in your textbook) and referring to the norms as
discussed in our text as well as in class. Each report should be written concisely with a suggested word count of at least 1100 words and not more than 1300 words. The report should include each of the following sections headings:

- **Title page**: include book author, book title, one key quote from the book, your name, and your final word count
- **Introduction**: introduce the author and subject matter
- **Summary**: overview of the book, including its main points, themes, and presuppositions on a particular technological issue. What enduring question(s) does it reflect?
- **Perspective**: a thoughtful perspective on the book that describes the worldview(s) evident in the book as well as a Reformed Christian perspective on the topic, identifying related design norms
- **Conclusion**: a concluding summary, including your own thoughts and opinions on the topic and concluding insights gleaned from the weekly reflections over the semester.

*Each of these sections should be clearly labeled in bold with left-justified headings.* Note that submitted material should be word-processed, single-sided printed pages using 12pt font, double-spaced, left-justified, and with 1-inch margins and submitted in Moodle as a PDF file. Your paper should include *at least two footnotes* citing quotes or ideas from the textbook or assigned readings using Chicago style.

Students are encouraged to make use of *Calvin’s Rhetoric Center* as they craft their final report. Reports will be due on the same day as your presentation.

**Laptop policy:** One of the concepts taught at the beginning of this course is that technology is not neutral – it embeds a bias and is value-laden. Consequently, technology in the classroom changes things. In order to minimize distractions, *the use of laptops and mobile devices will not be permitted during class presentations and discussions* (exceptions will be made for students who require them strictly for notetaking in class).

**Grading:** Grading queries need to be raised within one week of the grades being posted. No grading queries will be entertained and no further work accepted after the last day of classes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attendance and participation</th>
<th>9%</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10-minutes with the professor</td>
<td>1%</td>
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<td>Weekly reading responses (on Moodle)</td>
<td>40%</td>
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<td>Quizzes</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<td>Leading a class discussion</td>
<td>5%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Presentation</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<td>Final report</td>
<td>25%</td>
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Grading queries must be raised within one week of the grades being posted and no work will be accepted after the last day of classes.

**Course Outline:** A *tentative* schedule for the course is shown below. Tentative readings for each week are shown, but the *final list of readings will be posted weekly on Moodle*. It is the responsibility of each student to do the weekly readings *before* the first class of the week to enable meaningful discussions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Topics</th>
<th>Readings and Videos</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Week 1</td>
<td>Introduction to a philosophy of technology</td>
<td><em>Psalm 8</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>Jan. 16,18</td>
<td>• technological instrumentalism and determinism</td>
<td><em>Shaping a Digital World</em>, preface and chapter 1</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• technology <em>bias</em> and <em>value-ladenness</em></td>
<td><em>James Huggins, “The Assumptions of Computing</em></td>
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<td>• technological mediation (Don Ihde)</td>
<td><em>John Whittle, “Is Your Software Valueless?”</em>,</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• 4 laws of media (Marshall McLuhan)</td>
<td><em>Center for Humane Technology, &quot;The Myth of Neutrality&quot;</em></td>
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</tbody>
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| Week 2 | Jan. 23, 25 | Computer technology and the Biblical story
Technology and the unfolding of creation
- cultural mandate, *imago Dei*, sabbath, reductionism, creational laws and norms
- Doolyweerd’s modal aspects: an anti-reductionist view of reality |
|----------------|-------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                |             | • Genesis 1:28; Psalm 19
• *Shaping a Digital World*, chapter 2
• Schuurman, "*Technology and the Opening Chapters of Genesis*", CSR Blog, January 26, 2022.
• James Smith, “In the Beginning... was Technology”, *The Banner*, March 2016.
• Walt Whitman, “*When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer*”, |

| Week 3 | Jan. 30 Feb. 1 | Computer technology and the fall
- Is technology a result of the fall?
- Are software bugs a result of the fall?
- Discerning structure and direction
- how digital tech (mis)shapes us
- tech and idolatry: technicism, informationism, dataism, scientism
- anti-normative technology
- The “technological mindset” |
|----------------|-------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                |             | • Romans 8:22-30
• *Shaping a Digital World*, chapter 3
• Bob Goudzwaard, *Idols of our Time*, chapter 2 (course pack).
• Dickerson, “Wendell Berry, C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien and the Dangers of a Technological Mindset”
• L.M. Sacasas, “The Materiality of Digital Culture”, *Comment Magazine*

| Week 4 | Feb. 6, 8 | Redemption and Responsible Technology
- Structure and direction
- Normative design principles: cultural appropriateness, transparency, social norms, stewardship, aesthetics, justice, ethics, and trust |
|----------------|-------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                |             | • Col. 1:15-20; 2 Cor. 5:18-21
• *Shaping a Digital World*, chapter 4
• Wolters, “Discerning Structure and Direction” from *Creation Regained*, book pages 87-95. (course pack)
• L. M. Sacasas, “The Questions Concerning Technology” |

| Week 5 | Feb. 13, 15 | Technology and the Future:
- The notion of Progress
- optimism and pessimism
- science fiction and popular culture
- Transhumanism, posthumanism, and the singularity
- Notions of progress, Christian eschatology, and the new heavens and earth |
|----------------|-------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                |             | • 2 Peter 3:10; Rev. 21:22-27; Isaiah 60
• *Shaping a Digital World*, chapter 5
• Richard Mouw, *When the Kings Come Marching In*, chapter 3 (course pack).
• Nick Bostrom, "*Transhumanist Values*"
• Andy Crouch, “The Bionic Man and the Body of Christ”, *Christianity Today*
• PBS video, “*Inventor Ray Kurzweil sees immortality in our future*” |

| Week 6 | Feb. 20, 22 | Professional Ethics and Responsibilities
Approaches to Ethics:
- virtue ethics
- deontology
- consequentialism
- Virtue and Christian character
- The ACM Code of Ethics
Natural Law
Reliability and Safety issues; Case studies:
- the Therac-25 incident
- VW emissions scandal
- Boeing 737 Max 8 |
|----------------|-------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                |             | • Matthew 22:36-40; Deuteronomy 22:8
• N.T. Wright, "*Paul and Christian Character*" (video)
• The ACM Code of Ethics
• P. Patel, "*Engineers, Ethics, and the VW Scandal*", *IEEE Spectrum*.
• G. Travis, “How the Boeing 737 Max Disaster Looks to a Software Developer”, *IEEE Spectrum*. |
### Week 7
#### Feb. 27, 29
- **Students will participate in a 24 hour “technology fast” and write about it in their weekly reflection for this week.**
- Technology habits and rituals
- Social networking issues and the metaverse
  - Surveillance capitalism, the “magnificent bribe” (Lewis Mumford)
  - Digital authoritarianism, free speech
  - Truth, misinformation, fake news, and negative epistemology
  - Behavior modification, Virtual reality

### Spring Break – March 4 - March 8
### Week 8
#### Mar. 12, 14
- **Artificial Intelligence (AI), machine learning, and Big Data**
  - AI Ethics and responsible automation
  - ChatGPT, DALL-E and implications
  - Technology and bias
  - Big Data and the societal impact of algorithms
  - Malevolent machine learning
  - Implications for justice and democracy
  - Privacy and personal information
  - Social robots, robot automation, lethal autonomous robots

### Week 9
#### Mar. 19
- **Intellectual Property Issues**
  - copyrights, patents, trademarks
  - software copyright, software patents and software API’s
  - Open Source and free-software philosophy and licenses

#### Advising Mar. 21

#### Weeks 11-14
- **The Christian concept of Vocation**
  - “You Are What You Love”
    - Augustine, secular liturgies, and the heart
    - Technology and the heart
    - Virtual church? Technology, worship, and the church. Christian liturgy as resource for cultural innovation
  - Concluding thoughts

### April 25
- **Final day of class**

### Final exam
- There is no final exam, but field tests will be administered during the final exam period that all CS majors are expected to attend. These tests are required for departmental program assessment and are not part of your CS384 final grade.

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**Notes:**
- Psalm 121; Romans 12:2
- Zachery Loeb, “Syllabus for the Internet: The Magnificent Bribe”
- J. Haidt, “After Babel”, *The Atlantic*
- Sherry Turkle, “Connected, but alone?”, TED talk
- “My Dream, My Taste” (video clip)
- Psalm 139:13-18
- Schuurman, “ChatGPT and the Rise of AI”, CSR blog
- AI: An Evangelical Statement of Principles
- Marc Andreessen, “Why AI Will Save the World”
- Joanna Bryson, “Robots should be Slaves”
- Exodus 20:15
- *Shaping a Digital World*, chapter 6
- Intellectual Property Law: A Brief Introduction
- “The patent system is broken”, Electronic Frontier Foundation
- “What is Free software?”, Free Software Foundation
- Jeremiah 29:5-7
- Jamie Smith, *You Are What You Love*, chapters 1 & 7 (course pack).
- Wendell Berry, *Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front*
**Academic Honesty**
Students are expected to display honesty and responsibility in completing assignments. Students are responsible for understanding the information on plagiarism contained in the Student Conduct Code. For more information, refer to the Calvin plagiarism policy.

**Use of Generative AI Tools:** One of the topics we will cover is the normative uses of AI. Students must write their own reflections and reports and not rely on using generative AI tools.

**Communication outside of Class Times:**
Important announcements will be sent via Calvin email, so students should check their Calvin email on a regular basis. Generally, the instructor will be happy to help you and welcomes you to contact me using Teams, which is my preferred way of communication outside the classroom.

**Accommodations:**
Calvin University will make reasonable accommodations for persons with documented disabilities. Students should notify a disability coordinator in the Center for Student Success in order to arrange accommodations. Then, come and talk to me within the first two weeks of class so we can put your accommodations in place.

**Rhetoric Center:**
You will complete significant writing and/or speaking projects in this course, and the Rhetoric Center assists all students as they plan, compose, and revise writing, speaking, design, and research projects. You can work with a trained peer consultant to develop ideas, to work on organization, to receive feedback from an attentive audience, and to work on polishing final products. The Rhetoric Center is located in Hemenga Hall 317 and is open Monday–Friday during the day and Monday–Thursday evenings. You can schedule an appointment online, and drop-in appointments may be available.

**Civil Discourse and Hospitality:**
Join me in creating a class that creates a space where we can ask honest questions and explore important ideas related to various technology issues. It is OK to challenge and refute ideas or positions, but it is not acceptable to attack someone personally. If you or someone else is hurt by anything said or done in class, let me know so we can work toward a remedy.

**List of Approved Books for Final Paper**