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Hamilton

Ethics Meets the Digital Age

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Visiting Assistant Professor of Philosophy Manuel Barrantes talks to students in his Ethical and Social Issues in the Digital Age class. Photo: Nancy L. Ford

Visiting Assistant Professor of Philosophy Manuel Barrantes brings a new course to the Hill and examines the morality of technology. Communications Office student writer Fredrick (Drew) Anderson '21 was a student in the course during the fall semester. He recently sat down with Barrantes to discuss the class and why ethics in the digital age are important.

I've always been a sucker for captivating course descriptions. They are one of the few things in life that give you an accurate description of your future. They offer a glimpse into the next five months of your college career: what you will be reading, writing and thinking about.

While selecting my courses last fall, I came across Philosophy 206: Ethical and Social Issues in the Digital Age, which stood out to me. I could name ethical issues of technology: government surveillance, data privacy, political misinformation on social media. But this was a philosophy class. Technology and philosophy? The course sounded fun, so I registered for it.

“I saw a great opportunity to break the idea that there are no ethical issues at stake,” said Visiting Assistant Professor of Philosophy Manuel Barrantes, who brought the course to the Hill this year.

He adopted it from curriculum he taught in the Computer Science department at James Madison University.

Barrantes explained how the course came to be. “When I was interviewing here at Hamilton, something fantastic happened. In my on-campus interview, [Associate Professor and Chair of Philosophy] Katheryn Doran asked me, ‘Manuel, give me your dream lineup of classes.’” While describing his dream lineup, Professor Barrantes mentioned an ethics and technology class which he developed. “They were excited about it,” said Barrantes. The search committee asked if he would like to teach his ethics and technology class on the Hill, and of course he replied yes.

“This class works as a topic-based introduction to philosophy,” said Barrantes, “and I just love to introduce students to these ideas.” Throughout the semester, the class discussed a range of ethical issues of technology, including the moral ambiguities surrounding artificial intelligence, the Edward Snowden leak, and the introduction of self-driving cars to our roads despite the potential dangers.

“ We are dealing with things that we haven’t dealt with before. Technology is opening so many new doors that if you are not used to being flexible in your thinking, you’re not going to know what to do. ”

Barrantes said this class is for “every citizen that uses technology and has to form opinions about the use of technologies.” In other words, it is a class for everyone.

Far from being a survey of philosophical reading, the class is rooted in examining Digital Age technologies and practices, “asking questions about ethical issues... and [reflecting] on the ethical implications of what [we] do,” Barrantes said.

From that foundation of framing ethical questions, Barrantes talks about how to move beyond ethical relativism. “I really want to fight this natural tendency... to assume that everything that you do is right,” he said. “One key for opening the door to reflection is to accept the possibility that there might be some objectivity.”

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The final goal is to teach students about the practicality of philosophical reflection. “It actually pays off in terms of the clarity you gain for these difficult issues,” said Barrantes.

He went on to explain, “We are dealing with things that we haven’t dealt with before. Technology is opening so many new doors that if you are not used to being flexible in your thinking, you’re not going to know what to do.”

Ethical and Social Issues in the Digital Age is the epitome of the liberal arts experience at Hamilton. Professor Barrantes blends together computer science, philosophy and current affairs with a concise approach to writing and thinking about ethics.

The lessons learned in his class reach far out from the classroom to the frontlines of ethical dilemmas in the 21st century and beyond.

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