

# The Ethics of Attention and Distraction

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## Description

Many things demand our attention: social media posts, news updates, advertisements, protests, artworks, school and work assignments, hobby projects, and the needs of strangers, friends, family, and so on. But our capacity to attend is limited. So how should we manage it? Are we ethically obligated to attend or not attend to certain things? And do we have rights to not be distracted in certain ways? These are questions concerning the ethics of attention and distraction.

You may have been exposed to some of the endless stream of think pieces about ethical issues to do with attention and distraction in relation to phone and social media use, work-life balance, meditation, among other things. The claims and arguments made in these pieces often contradict those of others. So how are we supposed to decide which are right and which are mistaken? What should we think and do?

Philosophy provides tools for thinking rigorously and communicating clearly about these sorts of issues. This course aims to equip you with some of these tools, and to give you practice wielding them in thinking through a variety of questions about the ethics of attention and distraction. When relevant, we'll also draw on some interesting findings from psychology.

## Assignments

1. *Class participation*: Class and section meetings won't be primarily lecture-based. Instead, you'll spend much of class time talking, reading, or writing. Active participation, not just attendance, is required.
2. *Reflections*: you will keep a journal with short, informal reflections on the readings and on your habits of attention (this latter part may be kept private).
3. *Argument Evaluations*: you will submit three reports each analyzing an argument and evaluating it.
4. *Op-eds*: you will write two op-eds that argue for some position related to material from the course in a style accessible to public readership.
5. *Op-ed replies*: you will write brief replies to some of your classmates' op-eds.

## Grading

Participation:	25%
Reflections:	15%
Argument Evaluations:	25%
Op-eds:	25%
Op-ed replies:	10%

Participation grades will be the average of 3 participation grades given over the course of the semester (one for each 4-5 weeks).

Reflections will be graded weekly on a pass/fail basis.

## Schedule

The assigned readings are subject to change. I will notify you of any such changes at least one week in advance.

Week 1 M Introduction No reading assigned

### Advertising: harvesting attention for profit

W How ads work Wu: selections from *Attention Merchants*  
Simler: "Ads don't work that way"

Week 2 M Ethics of ad-blocking Statement from the Interactive Advertising Bureau  
TIM: "AdBlock is a bad thing and the people who use it are selfish."  
Douglas: "What's the moral difference between ad blocking and piracy"  
Williams: "Why it's OK to Block Ads"  
Meyer: "The Ethical Ad Blocker Magically Solves All Ethical Ad-Blocking Problems"

W Analyzing Arguments *Guide to Argument Analysis and Evaluation*  
F **Argument Evaluation assigned**

### What is attention?

Week 3 M Psychology Pashler: selections from *The Psychology of Attention*  
W Philosophy Watzl: "The Nature of Attention";  
Mole: "Attention", §3

Week 4	M	Cultivating attention	Esterman and Rothlein (2019) and Creswell (2017), selections
	W		Gunaratana: selections from <i>Mindfulness in Plain English</i>
	F	<b>Argument Evaluation due</b>	

### Attention and the Good Life

Week 5	M	What makes a life go well?	Kagan: <i>Normative Ethics</i> , 2.2
	W		Wolf: "Happiness and Meaning: Two Aspects of the Good Life"
	F	<b>Argument Evaluation assigned</b>	

Week 6	M	Does distraction make your life worse?	Csikszentmihalyi: selections from <i>Flow</i>
	W		Pascal: selection from <i>Pensées</i> ; Wilson et al. (2014)

Week 7	M	Is it good to get attention?	Halberstam: "Fame"; Wu: selection from <i>Attention Merchants</i>
	W		Ellison: selection from <i>Invisible Man</i> ; Darwall: selection from <i>The Second-Person Standpoint</i>
	F	<b>Argument Evaluation due, Op-ed assigned</b>	

### The Ethics of Directing the Attention of Others

Week 8	M	Noise	Schopenhauer: "On Noise"; Babbage: selection from "Street Nuisances"; Smith: selection from "Noise and aspects of attention"; Bosker: "Why Everything Is Getting Louder"
	W	Protests	Young: "Activist Challenges to Deliberative Democracy"
Week 9	M	Gossip and Shaming	Bok: <i>Secrets</i> , Ch. 7; Ronson: selection from <i>So You've Been Publicly Shamed</i>
	W	Disclosure and consent	Gostin: "Informed Consent, Cultural Sensitivity, and Respect for Persons";

			Dougherty: selection from "Sex, Lies, and Consent"
	F	<i>Op-ed due</i>	
Week 10	M	Nudging	Sunstein: selection from "The Ethics of Nudging"; Hausman and Welch: "To Nudge or Not to Nudge"
	W	Op-ed day	Your classmates' op-eds
	F	<i>Argument Evaluation assigned</i>	
<b>The Ethics of Directing Your Own Attention</b>			
Week 11	M	Attention & relationships	Murdoch: selection from <i>Sovereignty of Good</i>
	W		Smith: selection from "Responsibility for Attitudes"
Week 12	M		Aronson: "The Future of Robot Caregivers" Philosophy Bites: <a href="#">Kimberley Brownlee on social deprivation</a> Brake: "Fair Care: Elder Care and Distributive Justice"
	W	Inattention to suffering	Singer: selection from <i>The Life You Can Save</i>
	F	<i>Argument Evaluation due</i>	
Week 13	M	Privacy	Murdoch: selection from <i>The Sea, The Sea</i> ; Lessig: "Privacy and Attention Span"; Marwick: "Scandal or sex crime?"
	W	Profiling	Siegel: <i>The Rationality of Perception</i> , Ch. 9
	F	<i>Op-ed assigned</i>	Your classmates' op-eds
Week 14	M		Moss: selection from <i>Probabilistic Knowledge</i>
	W	Technology and Bias	Nguyen: " <a href="#">Escape the echo chamber</a> "; Simpson: "Evaluating Google as an Epistemic Tool"
Finals period		<i>Op-ed due</i> Op-ed day	