

# Research Project: Brainstorm

PHIL 29S

*due Sunday, July 16*

The major assignment for this course is a research project. This is an opportunity for you to think about an emerging technology of your choosing and the philosophical questions it raises. The technology should be one of personal interest to you, and one which you will enjoy thinking about more deeply. Ultimately, you will present your thoughts in the form of a final paper and an in-class presentation. But your first step is to complete this “brainstorm” assignment, which will help you come up with ideas for your research project and get some preliminary feedback on those ideas.

## *Guidelines*

Your brainstorm should present a **list of five emerging technologies, accompanied by a philosophical question about that technology.** (You may list more than five, but no less.) **You may not include any of the emerging technologies that we are discussing in class on your list.**

**List your five technologies and questions in your order of preference,** with the technology/question you’d most like to investigate for your research project listed first and the one you’d least like to investigate listed fifth. You should, however, be happy to investigate any of the technologies and questions you list.

If you need help coming up with examples of emerging technologies to research or philosophical questions to ask, refer to the resources listed below.

**Guidelines for your emerging technologies:** Choose specific, well-defined technologies. (For example, “driverless cars” rather than “robots”; “chatbots” rather

than “artificial intelligence”.) As far as possible, choose technologies that are currently in development or already being implemented, rather than mere hypothetical technological possibilities. If the technology goes by multiple names, include them all, but try to list its most common or standard name first. (A good indication of a technology’s standard name is whatever it’s listed as on Wikipedia.)

**Guidelines for your accompanying philosophical questions:** Raise a specific, well-defined question about each of your chosen technologies. Your questions should be “philosophical” in the sense of asking about the ethical or theoretical implications of the given technology. In coming up with your questions, ask yourself: How does this technology change our conception of its associated subject matter? Does the implementation of this technology raise any ethical questions or problems? Is this technology making any assumptions about what’s socially valuable or desirable? Then use these questions to come up with a specific question about the given technology which you’d personally be interested in thinking about more deeply for your research project. (Pro tip: Your philosophical questions should be similar to the ones we are discussing in class; for example, “In accident scenarios, whom should driverless cars be programmed to protect?”; “When, if ever, should parents be allowed to alter the genetic code of a future child?”; “How is an interactive film different aesthetically (i.e., as a work of art) from a traditional film?”.)

### *Formatting*

**Prepare your brainstorm for blind grading:** the only piece of identifying information on your submission should be **your student number**. Please do not include your name, email, or any other identifying information.

Other than this, your paper may be formatted however you wish.

### *Turning it in*

Please submit your brainstorm, in PDF format, via Canvas by end of day on Sunday, July 16 (or, for all your night owls, by 6 A.M. the following morning).

### *Grading*

The point of this brainstorm is to give you feedback on your initial ideas for your research project, to tell you what will work and what won't. For each technology and question you present, I will let you know if the technology is, for example, too broad, too hypothetical, or not well enough defined; and if your philosophical question is, for example, too vague, too big, or not philosophical enough. **You will not, however, be graded on the quality of the ideas**; full credit will be awarded simply for making a honest attempt to complete the assignment.

More specifically, your brainstorm will be graded out of a total of five points; you will receive one point for each emerging technology and philosophical question you present.

### *Resources*

If you're having trouble coming up with examples of emerging technologies on your own, here are a few suggestions. Remember, **you are not at all limited to these examples**; I list these here simply to give a sense of the range of possibilities open to you.

- 3D printing
- Algorithmic decision-making
- Augmented reality
- Blockchain / bitcoin
- Brain-to-brain interfaces
- Cryogenic freezing
- Cultured meat
- Eyetracking technology
- Information retrieval
- Internet of Things
- Lethal autonomous weapons / combat drones
- Mars colonization
- Nanotechnology
- Predictive policing

- Quantified self
- Quantum computing
- Virtual reality
- Wearable technology

If you're having trouble coming up with philosophical questions about emerging technologies, there are a number of websites, blogs, and podcasts dedicated to philosophical (or philosophical-ish) discussions of emerging technologies, and you may discover some ideas by surfing around these sites. Here are a few of my favorites:

- Future Tense: [slate.com/articles/technology/future\\_tense.html](http://slate.com/articles/technology/future_tense.html)
- NYT Room for Debate: [nytimes.com/roomfordebate/topics/technology](http://nytimes.com/roomfordebate/topics/technology)
- MIT Technology Review: [technologyreview.com/](http://technologyreview.com/)
- Equal Future: [equalfuture.us](http://equalfuture.us)
- Data & Society: [datasociety.net](http://datasociety.net)
- Future of Humanity Institute: [fhi.ox.ac.uk](http://fhi.ox.ac.uk)
- Note To Self: [wnyc.org/shows/notetoself](http://wnyc.org/shows/notetoself)
- Benjamen Walker's Theory of Everything (viz., the "still more adventures in surveillance" series): [soundcloud.com/bwalker](http://soundcloud.com/bwalker)

If you're having trouble coming up with philosophical questions in general, there are a number of good philosophical resources online. Here are some of the best:

- Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy** [plato.stanford.edu](http://plato.stanford.edu) state-of-the-art encyclopedia articles on pretty much every philosophical topic
- Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy** [iep.utm.edu](http://iep.utm.edu) not quite as good as the Stanford Encyclopedia, but a good second choice
- Wireless Philosophy** [wi-phi.com](http://wi-phi.com) introductory videos on a variety of philosophical topics
- 1000-Word Philosophy** [1000wordphilosophy.wordpress.com](http://1000wordphilosophy.wordpress.com) short introductory essays on a variety of philosophical topics
- Philosophy Talk** [philosophytalk.org](http://philosophytalk.org) the premier philosophy podcast, run by two Stanford philosophers
- Philosophy Bites** [philosophybites.com](http://philosophybites.com) a podcast of top philosophers being interviewed on bite-sized topics