

# SDA/PHIL 270 Data, Ethics, Society

updated: 2026

## Instructor Information

### Instructor

Kino Zhao (she/her)

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### Class time & location

### Office hours & location

## General Information

### Course Description

This class introduces students to philosophical issues surrounding using social data (data about people) to understand society's problems, formulate responses, and assess the efficacy of those responses. Topics include: what kind of evidence do we need in order to claim that a social practice is discriminatory? What kind of study can tell us if a proposed social reform is going to be effective? Is it possible to measure social facts objectively, and what to do if the answer is "no"?

### Reading

All text are available online.

### Assessment

Weekly Perusall (30%)

In-class writing (10%)

Midterm exam (30%)

Take home final exam (30%)

### Schedule

Week 1: The case of COMPAS

- Machine Bias, ProPublica, <https://www.propublica.org/article/machine-bias-risk-assessments-in-criminal-sentencing>

Week 2: A criticism

- Flores, A. W., Bechtel, K., & Lowenkamp, C. T. (2016). False Positives, False Negatives, and False Analyses: A Rejoinder to "Machine Bias: There's Software Used Across the Country to Predict Future Criminals. And It's Biased Against Blacks." *Federal Probation*, 80(2).

Week 3: What counts as evidence for discrimination? Causal analysis

- Bertrand, M., & Mullainathan, S. (2004). Are Emily and Greg More Employable Than Lakisha and Jamal? A Field Experiment on Labor Market Discrimination. *American Economic Review*, 94(4), 991–1013. <https://doi.org/10.1257/0002828042002561>

Week 4: What counts as evidence for discrimination? Against the causal analysis

- Pages 1163-1194 (sections 0,1,2) of Kohler-Hausmann, I. (2019). Eddie Murphy and the Dangers of Counterfactual Causal Thinking About Detecting Racial Discrimination. *Northwestern University Law Review*, 113(5), 1163–1227.

Week 5: Merely statistical evidence? No.

- Colyvan, M., Regan, H. M., & Ferson, S. (2001). Is it a Crime to Belong to a Reference Class. *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 9(2), 168–181. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9760.00123>

Week 6: Merely statistical evidence? Sometimes.

- Silva, P. (2023). Merely statistical evidence: When and why it justifies belief. *Philosophical Studies*, 180(9), 2639–2664. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-023-01983-x>

Week 7: midterm – on Canvas. Timed. Open book. Open notes. No AI allowed.

Week 8: Measuring people

- Porter, T. M. (2012). Funny Numbers. *Culture Unbound*, 585–598.

Week 9: Value capture

- Nguyen, C. (2024). Value Capture. *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy*, 27(3), 469–504. <https://doi.org/10.26556/jesp.v27i3.3048>

Week 10: Should science pay attention to social values? Yes.

- Douglas, H. (2000). Inductive Risk and Values in Science. *Philosophy of Science*, 67(4), 559–579.

Week 11: Should science pay attention to social values? No.

- Koertge, N. (2000). Science, Values, and the Value of Science. *Philosophy of Science*, 67(S3), S45–S57. <https://doi.org/10.1086/392808>

Week 12: Should science pay attention to social values? Yes.

- Cairns, M. (2026). Expertise-Objections to the Argument from Inductive Risk. *Philosophy of Science*, 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1017/psa.2026.10223>

Week 13: Standpoint epistemology

- Wylie, A. (2012). Feminist Philosophy of Science: Standpoint Matters. *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, 86(2), 47–76.

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