

It is always hard to face up to a complex world, try to figure out what makes it tick, try to cope with it, survive and triumph over it. But this is precisely what science fiction strives toward . . . Through science fiction the human race can try experiments in imagination too critically dangerous to try in fact. – Robert Heinlein

The future. Space travel, or cosmology. Alternate universes. Time travel. Robots. Marvelous inventions. Immortality. Catastrophes. Aliens. Superman. Other dimensions. Inner space, or the psyche. These are the ideas that are essential to science fiction. The phenomena change, the basic ideas do not. These ideas are the same philosophical concepts that have intrigued mankind throughout history. – Kate Wilhelm

Philosophy Through Science Fiction

Philosophy 188
Spring 2011
Professor Amy Kind
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Spacetime Coordinates

Class meeting: T Th 1.15 – 2.30, RS 102

Office hours: T Th 9.00 – 10.30, RN 213

Course Description

In their essay on “The Philosophical Appeal of Science Fiction,” philosophers Fred Miller and Nicholas Smith note that science fiction and philosophy share a fundamental goal: “the discovery of what is essential and valuable in reality.” It is thus no surprise that philosophers have long turned to the science fiction literature to help us bring into focus the abstract ideas with which we deal. In this class, we will use the works of such noted science fiction authors as Asimov, Bradbury, Dick, Heinlein, Le Guin and Zelazny (among others) to explore some of the most fundamental philosophical problems facing humankind. Our inquiry will be in large part *metaphysical*, that is, we will be addressing issues about the nature of the world in which we live. And for this in particular, it is especially fitting that we turn to science fiction. As author Kate Wilhelm has noted, “Metaphysics attempts to discover the ultimate nature of reality, and in this sense, the innerspace of science fiction is metaphysical fiction.”

Course Materials

Many of the readings for the course are available on our course Sakai site. In addition, there are three required texts available for purchase at Huntley Bookstore:

- 🌀 Edwin Abbott, *Flatland* (Dover)
- 🌀 Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World and Brave New World Revisited* (Harper)
- 🌀 Michael Philips, *Philosophy and Science Fiction* (Prometheus)

Also available at Huntley Bookstore is a text recommended for all students in the class, but particularly for non-philosophy majors:

- 🌀 Ryan Nichols et al, eds., *Philosophy Through Science Fiction* (Routledge)

Students in the class will also be required to watch approximately one film per week (see course schedule below). We will not be viewing these films as a class; rather, I will be asking you to make arrangements to watch them on your own [*even if you've seen them before*]. I thus strongly urge you to get a membership to Netflix or some other video rental service. If you go the Netflix route, please note that many of the assigned films are unfortunately not available on the "Watch Instantly" option. You should thus purchase a plan that enables you to have at least one DVD out by mail at a time; the cheapest such plan is \$9.99/month.

Course Requirements

Two Papers (35% each)

You will have to write two philosophical papers, each approximately 8-10 pages in length. These papers will be on assigned topics distributed in class. Any papers suspected of violating the College's policy on academic integrity will be forwarded to the Academic Standards Committee for review. Should you have any questions about how the policy applies to philosophical writing, please come talk to me. The expected due dates for the papers are as follows:

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|----------|-----------------------------|
| Paper #1 | Friday, March 11 at 12 noon |
| Paper #2 | Wednesday, May 11 at 5 p.m. |

Note: Graduating seniors must submit Paper #2 by Thursday, May 5 at 5 p.m.

Short Writing Assignments (30% total)

Throughout the semester, you will have to submit six short essays (approximately 600 words each) analyzing the philosophical issues raised by an assigned SF reading/film in advance of our

in-class discussion of it. There will be seven of these assignments, so you can miss one without penalty. (If you submit all seven, I will drop your lowest one.) All essays must be submitted on Sakai by 2 a.m. on the day they are due. See Course Schedule below for due dates.

Class Participation

Attendance in class is required. We will be starting promptly at 1:15 p.m., and I expect you to be punctual. Barring exceptional circumstances, you should not be absent from class more than three times over the course of the semester. However, it is not enough merely to attend; you must also come to class having read and thought carefully about the assigned readings so that you are prepared to take an active part in our discussions. In general, you should be consistently and thoughtfully participating in our class discussions. By “thoughtful” I mean to remind you that it is *quality*, and not mere quantity, that matters when it comes to class participation. Although class participation does not account for a pre-set percentage of your course grade, I reserve the right either to lower your course grade for inadequate participation or to raise your course grade for exceptional participation.

Cell phones/Laptop policy

Please silence your cell phone during class and keep it stored away. If you are texting during class, I will ask you to leave. You are permitted to use your laptops in class *to access course readings and/or for note-taking purposes*. If I find that students are using laptops for other purposes, I reserve the right to alter my policy of allowing them in class.

Extra Credit Opportunity

During the semester, you can take advantage of an opportunity to earn extra credit by writing an analysis (approximately 1200 words) of a piece of SF fiction or film (not on the syllabus) that takes up an issue related to our course of study. Your choice of fiction/film must be approved by me in advance. The extra credit assignment may sub in for one missed short assignment. Alternatively, a satisfactory analysis can be used to raise the grade on your first paper by 1/3 of a grade (e.g., from a B- to a B). In *extremely rare cases*, if your analysis is truly exceptional, I will raise your first paper grade by 2/3 of a grade (e.g., from a B- to a B+). If you wish to take advantage of the extra credit opportunity, come talk to me during office hours to make the arrangements. Extra credit analyses may be submitted at any time during the semester, but no later than the last day of class. *No student may do more than one extra credit analysis without special permission.*

Course Schedule

All readings should be completed by the date listed on the syllabus. Readings marked (S) are available on Sakai and those marked (P&SF) are available in the Philips' anthology, *Philosophy and Science Fiction*. Movies to be viewed are marked by 🎬. Those available to watch instantly on Netflix are marked by (WI).

Unit One: Minds and Machines

Tues., Jan. 18	**Recommended background reading (especially for non-majors): Nichols, Chs. 1- 2	
Thurs., Jan. 20	Turing, "Computing Machinery and Intelligence" (S)	Asimov, "Evidence" (S)
Tues., Jan. 25	Picard, "Does HAL cry digital tears?" (S)	🎬 <i>2001: A Space Odyssey</i> , dir. by Stanley Kubrick, 1968 (WI) Zelazny, "For a Breath I Tarry" (S) **Also recommended: Vonnegut, "Epicac" (S)
Tues., Jan. 25	WRITING ASSIGNMENT #1 DUE, 2 A.M.	
Thurs., Jan. 27	Torrance, "Ethics and Consciousness in Artificial Agents" (S)	Asimov, "Bicentennial Man" (P&SF) **Also recommended: Aldiss, "Who Can Replace a Man?" (P&SF)
Tues., Feb. 1	Clark & Chalmers, "The Extended Mind" (S) **Also recommended: Clark, "Cyborgs Unplugged" (S)	Gibson, "Johnny Mnemonic" (S) Sutton, "Soul Mate" (P&SF)
Thurs., Feb. 3	Adams & Aizawa, "The Bounds of Cognition" (S) Clark, "Memento's Revenge" (S)	🎬 <i>Memento</i> , dir. by Christopher Nolan, 2000
Thurs., Feb. 3	WRITING ASSIGNMENT #2 DUE, 2 A.M.	
Tues., Feb. 8	Chalmers, "The Singularity Hypothesis"	Campbell, "The Last Evolution" (S)

Unit Two: Mortality and Meaning

Thurs., Feb. 10	Excerpts from Epicurus (S) Nagel, "Death" (S) Nozick, "The Experience Machine" (S)	🎬 <i>The Matrix</i> , dir. by Larry and Andy Wachowski, 1999
Tues., Feb 15	Lepore, "The Iceman" (S) Shaw, "Cryoethics" (S)	Jones, "The Jameson Satellite" (S)
Thurs., Feb. 17	Williams, "The Makropulous Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality" (S) Fischer, "Why Immortality is Not So Bad" (S)	Borges, "The Immortal" (S) 🎬 <i>City of Angels</i> , dir. by Brad Silberling, 1998 (WI)
Thurs., Feb. 17	WRITING ASSIGNMENT #3 DUE, 2 A.M.	

Unit Two: Mortality and Meaning, continued

Tues., Feb. 22	Metz, "The Immortality Argument for Life's Meaning" (S) Craig, "The Absurdity of Life without God" (S)	
Thurs., Feb. 24	Metz, "Could God's Purpose be the Source of Life's Meaning?" (S)	Clarke, "The Nine Billion Names of God" (S)
Tues., March 1	Nagel, "The Absurd" (S)	👁️ <i>Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy</i> , dir. by Garth Jennings, 2005
Tues., March 1	WRITING ASSIGNMENT #4 DUE, 2 A.M.	

Unit Three: The Posthuman Condition

Thurs., March 3	Sandel, "The Case Against Perfection" (S)	<i>Brave New World</i> **Also recommended: Vonnegut, "Harrison Bergeron" (S)
Tues., March 8	Brock, "Cloning Human Beings" (S) Kass, "The Wisdom of Repugnance" (S)	Le Guin, "Nine Lives" (S) Brin, "What Continues, What Fails" (S)
Thurs., March 10	Davis, "What's Wrong with Cloning?" (S) Kind, "Is Ignorance Bliss?"	👁️ <i>Star Trek: Nemesis</i> , dir. by Stuart Baird, 2002
Friday, March 11	PAPER #1 DUE, 12 noon	

Unit Four: Spacetime

Tues., March 22	Le Poidevin, <i>Travels in Four Dimensions</i> , Chs. 3-4 (S)	<i>Flatland</i>
Thurs., March 24	Augustine, <i>Confessions</i> excerpt (S) McTaggart, "The Unreality of Time" **Also recommended: Nichols, Ch. 4	Spinrad, "The Weed of Time" (P&SF) Wells, "The Time Traveler's Speech" (S)
Tues., March 29	Carroll & Markosian, "Time" Kind, "Time: The Final Frontier" (S)	👁️ <i>Star Trek: Generations</i> , dir. by David Carson, 1994
Tues., March 29	WRITING ASSIGNMENT #5 DUE, 2 A.M.	
Thurs., March 31	Lewis, "The Paradoxes of Time Travel" (S)	Heinlein, "All You Zombies—" (P&SF) Bradbury, "A Sound of Thunder" (S)
Tues., April 5	Deutsch & Lockwood, "The Quantum Physics of Time Travel" (S) Effington, "An Unwelcome Consequence of the Multiverse Theory" (S)	👁️ <i>Twelve Monkeys</i> , dir. Terry Gilliam, 1995 Egan, "The Infinite Assassin" (S)
Tues., April 5	WRITING ASSIGNMENT #6 DUE, 2 A.M.	
Thurs., April 7	Guest lecture – Readings TBA	

Unit Five: Skepticism

Tues., April 12	Descartes, "Meditation One" (S) Stroud, "The Significance of Philosophical Skepticism" (S) **Also recommended: Nichols, Ch. 3	🕒 <i>Inception</i> , dir. by Christopher Nolan, 2010 Heinlein, "They" (P&SF)
Tues., April 12	WRITING ASSIGNMENT #7 DUE, 2 A.M.	
Thurs., April 14	Chalmers, "The Matrix as Metaphysics" (S)	
Tues., April 19	Bostrom, "The Simulation Argument" (S) Bostrom, "Why Make a Matrix?" (S)	🕒 <i>The Thirteenth Floor</i> , dir. Josef Rusnak, 1999
Thurs., April 21	<i>No Class – Professor Kind at American Philosophical Association Meeting</i>	

Unit Six: Gender and Race in Space

Tues., April 26	Ferguson, "Androgyny as an Ideal for Human Development" (S)	Gould, "X: A Fabulous Child's Story" (S) 🕒 "The Outcast," <i>Star Trek TNG</i> , Season 5, Ep. 17
Thurs., April 28	TBA	TBA
Tues., May 3	TBA	🕒 <i>District 9</i> , dir. Neill Blomkamp, 2009
Thurs., May 5	FINAL PAPER DUE FOR GRADUATING SENIORS, 5 P.M.	
Wed., May 11	FINAL PAPER DUE FOR EVERYONE ELSE, 5 P.M.	