

A Philosopher's Guide to the Galaxy

Philosophy and Science Fiction

Instructors: A. Faller and F. Mobus

Course Description

In this course students will grapple with age-old questions in the context of great works of science fiction. Readings and assignments will tie pressing philosophical issues to the real world, creating a unique opportunity for critical discussion and writing assignments. The course will have four major units: the metaphysics of time travel, epistemology, philosophy of mind, and ethics.

Course Objectives

The major objective of the course is to give students the chance to explore a wide range of philosophical issues in the contexts of literature and real world applications. Students who complete the readings and participate in class will develop a basic competence in each of the areas covered by the course. They will also be exposed to basic logical notions including the definition of an argument, deductive vs. inductive arguments, validity, and soundness. They will learn argumentation strategies, and will have an opportunity to greatly improve their writing and debating abilities.

Course Materials

Schneider. S. 2009: *Science Fiction and Philosophy*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

The remaining readings will be provided in a course reader.

Evaluation of Student Performance and Grading

Papers: 55 %

One very short paper (2 pages), worth 10%

One short paper (4-5 pages), worth 20%

One longer paper (7-8 pages), worth 25%

Written Exam: 25%

Class Participation: 20%

Course Content and Schedule

First Topic: Metaphysics of Time Travel

Week 1 The Adventure Begins

Introduction to course

Week 2 On Time

Sider: *Time* (in: Schneider).

Williams: *The Myth of Passage*.

Movie: “Earth Angel” scene from *Back to the Future*

Literature: Selections from Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse Five*

Abbott *Flatland* Section 1-3

Week 3 Time Travel

Lewis: *The Paradoxes of Time Travel*

Literature: Bradbury: “A Sound of Thunder”

Heinlein: “All You Zombies”

1st Paper due

Week 4 Free Will and Moral Responsibility

Darrow: selections from the Leopold and Loeb trial

van Inwagen: *The Powers of Rational Beings*.

Frankfurt: *Freedom of the Will and the Concept of the Person*.

Huemer: *Free Will and Determinism in the World of Minority Report*.

Literature: Philip K. Dick “Minority Report”

Second Topic: Epistemology and *The Matrix*

Week 5 Knowledge and the External World

Descartes: Excerpt from *The Meditations on First Philosophy*.

Cohen: *Contextualism and Skepticism*.

Literature: Pollock, J. “Brain in a Vat”.

Week 6 Bostrom: *Are You in a Computer Simulation?*

Chalmers: *The Matrix as Metaphysics*.

Movie: Scenes from *The Matrix*

Third Topic: Philosophy of Mind

Week 7 Consciousness and Computation

Chalmers: *The Character of Consciousness* (Chapter 1)

Turing: *Computing Machinery and Intelligence*.

Literature: Asimov, “Robot Dreams”.

2nd Paper Draft due

Week 8 Artificial Intelligence

Dennett: *Consciousness in Human and Robot Minds*.

Block: *The Mind as the Software of the Brain*.

Movie: Scene from *2001: A Space Odyssey*

Literature: “Non Serviam” by Stanislaw Lem.

Week 9 Robots and Emotions

Adolphs: *Could a Robot have Emotions?*

Breazeal: *Robot Emotion: a functional perspective*.

Movie: Scenes from *Blade Runner* or *Ex Machina*

2nd Paper due

Week 10 Personal Identity

Schneider: *Mindscan: Transcending and Enhancing the Human Brain*.

Parfit: *Personal Identity*.

Literature: Dennett, “Where am I?”.

Fourth Topic: Ethics

Week 11 Introduction to Human Enhancement

Sandel: *The Case against Perfection*.

Brock: *Is Selection of Children Wrong?*

TV Show: *Black Mirror* episode “The Entire History of You”

Week 12 Eugenics

Savulescu: *Procreative beneficence: Why we should select the best Embryos*.

Shimazono: *Reasons against the Selection of Life: From Japan’s Experience of Prenatal Genetic Diagnosis*.

Movie: Sequence from *Gattaca*.

Literature: Huxley *Brave New World*.

3rd Paper Draft due

Week 13 Emotional Enhancement

Elliott: *The Tyranny of Happiness: Ethics and Cosmetic Psychopharmacology*.
Degrazia: *Prozac, Enhancement, and Self-Creation*.

Week 14 Death and Immortality; Review

Williams: *The Makropulos Case. Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality*.
Fischer: *Why Immortality is not so bad*.

Week 15 Exam

3rd Paper due