

# PHIL 23401: Philosophy and Science Fiction

**Time and Place:** Monday/Wednesday, 3:00-4:20, Cobb 319

**Instructor:** Ryan Simonelli

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**Office Hours:** Thursdays 3:00-5:00 or by appointment in Rosenwald 216.

## 1 Course Overview

How do we know whether our perceptual experiences really are of a real world outside of us? What determines the identity of a person over time? What does it take to be conscious, and how can we tell whether someone or something is? Could radically different languages lead to radically different forms of experience and thought? These are key questions in the philosophical fields of Epistemology, Metaphysics, Philosophy of Mind, and Philosophy of Language. In this course, we'll explore these questions (and more) as they arise in works of science fiction and consider the main philosophical proposals for tackling them with an eye to these works. The main works with which we'll engage will be the films "The Matrix," "Moon," "Ex Machina," and "Arrival," though there will be many supplementary works of science fiction. Philosophical readings will be drawn from both historical and contemporary sources.

## 2 Course Requirements and Expectations

**Paper(s):** The main medium in which philosophy is done is argumentative papers, and so the main assignments for the course are argumentative papers where you will be doing philosophy yourself. You have the choice of either writing four short papers (4-5 pages), each worth 20% of the total grade, two longer papers (8-10 pages), each worth 40% of the total grade, or two short papers and one longer paper. Each paper must engage with at least one of the works of science fiction—either one of the four main films or supplementary media related to the film—and one philosophical work. The first two short papers or first long paper is due by Friday, November 4 at 11:59pm. The second two short papers or second long paper is due by Friday, December 9 at 11:59pm. I will provide a list of possible essay topics for each of the essays, but you're also welcome to write on whatever topic you'd like to write on. Just make sure that you have a clear aim in your paper (something you're trying to show) and that you make this aim clear to your

reader (me). If you're unsure whether a potential topic is a good one, just send me an email or come to my office hours. We will spend some class-time before your first papers are due talking about how to write a philosophy paper, but a helpful guide can be found here: [www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html](http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html)

**Extensions and Late Work Policy:** I understand that things (both academic and non-academic) can come up that make it difficult to complete work by the designated due dates and that a few days of extra time can sometimes make the difference between a bad paper and a good one. So, if there's a legitimate reason you cannot turn in your paper on time, I'm generally willing to grant an extension. The amount of extra time granted will be decided on a case by case basis, based on needs. If you do need an extension, please do so as soon as you know you'll need it. Late work submitted without an extension having been granted will be penalized by 5 points for each day that it is late.

**Participation:** Participation is worth 20% of the total grade. This comes in two forms, each worth 10%. First is participation in class discussion. Second, for *one of the two classes* each week you are expected to submit a discussion question or a reply to a discussion thread before 8am the day of class. These can be very simple questions or replies, and you don't need to spend a lot of time constructing them. One sentence is totally fine, and, as a general rule, they shouldn't be more than three sentences long. The point of these discussions is just to get you thinking critically about the texts before class and to give us a jumping-off point in class discussion. Discussion questions and responses are to be submitted in the "Discussions" section of the Canvas page.

**Movies:** There will be movie showings for each of the movies outside of class, every other Thursday at 7pm in Cobb 107. There will be popcorn. These aren't mandatory class meetings, and are just to give you a time to watch the movies without having to rent them yourselves. If you can't make these movie showings, it's up to you to watch them before we meet for class. All the movies can be rented on YouTube or Amazon for \$3.99 (note: you don't need to buy any books for this class, so \$16 total on course materials for the class isn't so bad). Note, that all of these movies, with the exception of *Arrival*, are rated "R," and have explicit language, violence and, in some cases, sexual and graphic content. If you are uncomfortable viewing any of these movies, please let me know and we can discuss alternative sci-fi media for you to engage with in your papers.

**Other Sci-Fi Media:** The only sci-fi media that you are required to consume are the four main movies. However, for each of the movies, I have listed additional sci-fi media with related themes that you may want to look at and can discuss in your essays. You can pick which other sci-fi works you want to consume, but you should consume at least some other works, in addition to our four main movies. I'll sometimes talk about these additional sci-fi works in class, but I'll provide enough context so you won't have to have read or seen them to get what I'm saying. All the short stories are on the Canvas site in the "Files" section.

Additional films can all be rented on YouTube. Some episodes of shows require a Netflix subscription. I understand that not everyone has one. Once again, there's no requirement to watch any of these shows.

**Readings:** The main readings for the course are primary sources in philosophy. Most of the readings do not engage directly with the science fiction scenarios we're exploring (though some do). Rather, they're about the philosophical issues that are raised in these works of science fiction, and part of our job (both in class and for you in your papers) will be to make these connections. The only philosophical readings you are expected to do are the main readings. However, I have sometimes included optional secondary readings or background readings that may be helpful or interesting. All readings will be available on the Canvas site under the "Files" section.

### 3 Diversity and Accessibility

**Diversity:** As an instructor, I am actively committed to creating an inclusive classroom environment where diverse backgrounds and viewpoints are recognized, respected, and valued. If there is anything you believe I should be doing differently, I welcome any feedback both during and outside of class. I pledge to take any comments regarding my teaching or content seriously and without defensiveness.

**Accessibility:** The University of Chicago is committed to ensuring equitable access to our academic programs and services. Students with disabilities who have been approved for the use of academic accommodations by Student Disability Services (SDS) and need a reasonable accommodation(s) to participate fully in this course should follow the procedures established by SDS for using accommodations. Timely notifications are required in order to ensure that your accommodations can be implemented. Please meet with me to discuss your access needs in this class after you have completed the SDS procedures for requesting accommodations.

Phone: (773) 702-6000

Email: [disabilities@uchicago.edu](mailto:disabilities@uchicago.edu)

### 4 Class Schedule

**Class 1, Wednesday 9/28: Introduction**

*No Assigned Reading*

**Part One: Reality and Skepticism**

**First Movie Showing, Thursday 9/29: *The Matrix***

### **Additional Sci-Fi Media:**

- Phillip K. Dick – “We Can Remember It For You Wholesale” (the short story on which the 1990 *Total Recall* (a bit corny, but also worth a watch) is based, 18 pages)
- Short clip from “Rick and Morty” (3 mins):  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=szzVIQ653as&ab\\_channel=AdultSwim](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=szzVIQ653as&ab_channel=AdultSwim)
- *Love, Death, and Robots*, Season 1, Episode 7: “Beyond the Aquila Rift” (17 mins, Netflix)
- *Black Mirror*, Season 3, Episode 4: “San Junipero” (1 hour, Netflix) (also connects with the next part of the course).
- *The Truman Show* (full length movie)

### **Class 2, Monday 10/3: Classical Skepticism**

*In this class, we consider classical skepticism about the existence of the external world, most famously laid out in Descartes’s Meditations. We also consider classic replies to skepticism from Bertrand Russell and G.E. Moore.*

#### **Main Readings:**

Rene Descartes – *Meditations*, excerpt: Meditation 1 (2 is optional)

Bertrand Russell – *Problems of Philosophy*, excerpt

GE Moore – “Proof of an External World,” excerpt

#### **Secondary Readings:**

Christopher Grau – “Bad Dreams, Evil Demons, and the Experience Machine,” pp. 10-15

### **Class 3, Wednesday: 10/5: The Value of Reality**

*In this class, we look at the question of why it’d be bad if skeptical worries were true, and, in light of this, consider whether all the skeptical science fiction scenarios are problematic to the same degree.*

#### **Main Readings:**

Robert Nozick – *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* excerpt (“The Experience Machine”) and *The Examined Life* excerpt (“Happiness”)

#### **Secondary Readings:**

Christopher Grau – “Bad Dreams, Evil Demons, and the Experience Machine,” pp. 18-21

### **Class 4, Monday 10/10: Cartesian Skepticism in the Technological Age**

*In this class, we consider the specific possibility made vivid through The Matrix: that the world we experience could be a virtual reality—and the influential response by David Chalmers that this is not genuinely a skeptical, but only a metaphysical hypothesis.*

**Main Reading:**

David Chalmers – “The Matrix as Metaphysics”

**Optional Background Reading:**

Hilary Putnam – “Brains in a Vat”

**Class 5, Wednesday 10/12: The Real Possibility of a Virtual World**

*In this class, we consider an argument from Nick Bostrom that the Matrix scenario is not only possible but likely actual.*

**Main Reading:**

Nick Bostrom – “Are you Living in a Computer Simulation?”

**Part Two: Identity and Individuality**

**Second Movie Showing, Thursday 10/13: Moon**

**Additional Sci-Fi Media:**

- Existential Comics, “The Machine:” <https://existentialcomics.com/comic/1> (Short comic, 6 minute read)
- Ursula de la Guinn, “Nine Lives” (short story, 16 pages)
- *Star Trek, The Next Generation* Season 6, Episode 24: “Second Chances.” <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x7w22ue>
- *The Island* (full length movie)

**Class 6, Monday, 10/17: Classical Readings on Personal Identity**

*In this class, we look at the classical account of personal of identity proposed by John Locke, considering specifically how it might be applied to the many “Sam”s in Moon.*

**Main Reading:**

John Locke – “Of Identity and Diversity”

**Optional Secondary Reading:**

J.L. Mackie – *Problems from Locke* Chapter 6, “Personal Identity”

**Class 7, Wednesday 10/19: Personal Identity Problems of the Future**

*In this class, we consider the discussion of personal identity in the context of similar sci-fi scenario of teletransportation, famously discussed by Derek Parfit.*

**Main Reading:**

Derek Parfit – *Reasons and Persons*, Chapter 10

**Class 8, Monday 10/24: Selves and Stories**

*In this class, we discuss the theory of the the self proposed by Daniel Dennett, looking at how it can be applied to make sense of sci-fi scenarios of duplication and teleportation as well as the “remote embodiment” scenario Dennett describes in “Where am I?”*

**Main Reading:**

Daniel Dennett – “The Self As a Center of Narrative Gravity”

**Additional Sci-Fi Media:**

Daniel Dennett – Where am I?

**Class 9, Wednesday 10/26: Ethics of Cloning**

*In this class, we switch gears a bit and discuss the ethical implications of cloning. While the scenario in Moon is clearly unethical, might there be other scenarios involving clones that are ethical?*

**Main Reading:**

Hilary Putnam – “Cloning People”

Kerry Lynn Macintosh – *Illegal Beings*, excerpt

**Part Three: Consciousness and Artificial Intelligence**

**Third Movie Showing, Thursday 10/27: Ex Machina**

**Additional Sci-Fi Media:**

- Issaac Asimov, “Runaround” (short story/chapter, 16 pages)
- *Black Mirror*, “Be Right Back” (Netflix)
- *Her* (full length movie), and, relatedly Susan Schneider’s *NY Times* article, “The Philosophy of Her”:  
<https://archive.nytimes.com/opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/03/02/the-philosophy-of-her/>
- Ted Chiang, *The Lifecycle of Software Objects* (novella, 150 pages, but a quick read)

**Class 10, Monday 10/31: The Turing Test**

*In this class, we consider one of the important philosophical concepts explicitly at issue in Ex Machina, the Turing Test, discussing the piece by Alan Turing in which the test was originally proposed.*

**Main Reading:**

Alan Turing – “Computing Machinery and Intelligence”

**Optional Secondary Reading:**

Douglass Hofstadter – “The Turing Test: A Coffeehouse Conversation” with Daniel Dennett “Reflections”

**Class 11, Wednesday 11/2: From Classical AI to Connectionist AI**

*In this class, we look at John Searle’s famous “Chinese Room” argument against the claim that an artificial intelligence would be capable of understanding and we consider a response to Searle’s argument, based on a connectionist way of thinking about how AI would be implemented, which is more in line with what is suggested in the film.*

**Main Reading:**

John Searle – “Minds, Brains, and Programs”

Paul and Patricia Churchland – “Could a Machine Think?”

**Optional Supplementary Reading:**

Hubert Dreyfus – “A Critique of Artificial Reason”

**Class 12, Monday 11/7: Lingering Leftovers?**

*In this class, we will consider the question of whether something (so-called “phenomenal consciousness”) might be left out even if we were to create a robot that functioned just like a human, looking at discussions of so-called “philosophical zombies.”*

**Main Readings:**

Todd C. Moody – “Conversations with Zombies”

Dennett - *Consciousness Explained*, excerpt

Raymond Smullyan - “An Unfortunate Dualist”

**Class 13, Wednesday 11/9: Love with Robots?**

*In this class, we turn to the question of whether genuine romantic relationships with artificial intelligences would be possible, and, if possible, whether it would be ethical.*

**Main Reading:**

Sven Nyholm and Lily Eva Frank – “From Sex Robots to Love Robots: Is Mutual Love with a Robot Possible?”

**Part Four: Language and Understanding**

**Fourth Movie Showing, Thursday 11/10: *Arrival***

**Additional Sci-Fi Media:**

- Ted Chiang – “Story of Your Life” (the short story on which *Arrival* is based)
- Jorge Luis Borges – “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” (short story)
- *Star Trek, The Next Generation* Season 5, Episode 2: “Darmok.” (45 mins, needs Paramount Plus subscription, sadly; some clips available on YouTube)
- George Orwell – *1984*, Appendix, “The Principles of Newspeak”

**Class 14, Monday 11/14: The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis**

*In this class, we look the idea, famously associated with Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf, that the basic concepts with which we think about and experience the world may be shaped by the language that we’ve learned.*

**Main Readings:**

Benjamin Whorf – “Science and Linguistics”  
Guy Deutscher – “Does Language Shape How You Think?”:  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/29/magazine/29language-t.html>

**Optional Further Supplementary Article:**

Maria Francisca Reines – “Reviving Whorf”

**Optional Background Reading:**

Edward Sapir – “The Status of Linguistics as a Science”

**Class 15, Wednesday 11/16: The Possibility of (Super) Radical Translation**

*In this class, we consider the possibility of what W.V.O. Quine calls “radical translation” with respect to genuinely alien language.*

**Main Readings:**

Hans-Johann Glock – *Quine and Davidson on Language, Thought, and Reality*, excerpt

Charles F. Hockett – “How to Learn Martian”

**Optional Background Readings:**

W.V.O. Quine – *Word and Object*, Chapter 2

W.V.O. Quine – “Ontological Relativity”

## **Thanksgiving Break**

**Class 16, Monday, 11/28: Conceptual Relativism**

*In this class, we consider the idea of conceptual relativity as a consequence of the possibility of languages that cannot be translated into one another.*

**Main Reading:**

Dorit Bar On – “Conceptual Relativism”

**Optional Background Reading:**

Donald Davidson – “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme”

**Class 17, Wednesday 11/30: Time and Fate**

*In this class, we turn our attention to the theory of time that would make plausible the sort of temporal experience that is supposedly had by the heptapods, and we consider a consequence of experiencing moments in time all at once explored in the film and story on which it is based—that our future is fated.*

**Main Readings:**

J.J.C. Smart – “The Space-Time World”

Richard Taylor – *Metaphysics*, Chapter 6, “Fate”

**Class 18, Monday 12/5: Wrap Up, Open Discussion, Donuts**

*Reading Period: Attendance Optional!!*