

Philosophy and Science Fiction

Class One Handout

September 28, 2022

1 Far-Out Fiction in Philosophy

- **Philosophical Thought Experiments:** Creative fictional scenarios designed to get us to think about certain philosophical questions in new ways, often constructed with the aim of the reader having a certain intuition about the right thing to say in the scenario, leading to a certain philosophical conclusion.
- **Some famous thought experiments:**
 - Plato's Cave.
 - Avicenna's Floating Man.
 - The Ship of Theseus.
 - Laplace's Demon.
 - Nozick's Experience Machine and Utility Monster.
 - Searle's Chinese Room.
 - Rawls's Veil of Ignorance.
 - Davidson's Swampman.
 - Putnam's Twin Earth.
 - Thompson's Violinist.
 - Jackson's Mary's Room.
 - Chalmers' Philosophical Zombies.

You can Google these at home. We'll discuss several of them in class.

- **From Fictional Scenarios to Fiction:** In philosophical writing, these thought experiments—far-out fictions designed to trigger certain philosophical intuitions—usually take up a few paragraphs. However, in order to really test our intuitions, it can be helpful to really dive into these scenarios through extended fiction.

2 Fantasy vs. Science Fiction vs. Realistic Fiction

- **Three Kinds of Possibility:**
 - **Metaphysical Possibility:** Nothing logically or otherwise contradictory. So, nothing that's both the case and not the case, no circles that are also squares, and so on.
 - **Nomological Possibility:** No violations of our laws of nature. So, no magic, unless this "magic" is scientifically explicable (and so not really magic), no superpowers (once again, unless they're scientifically explicable), and so on.
 - **Nearby Nomological Possibility:** Nomologically possible ways for things to be that are quite like how they actually currently are (or actually were in the past). So no radically new technologies, no aliens or meteors coming to Earth, and so on.
- **A Rough and Not Quite Adequate Categorization:**
 - **Fantasy:** Metaphysically possible, but not nomologically possible.

- **Science Fiction:** Nomologically possible, but not nearby.
- **Realistic Fiction:** Nearby nomological possibilities.
- **Some Borderline Cases and Counterexamples:**
 - **Star Wars:** Science Fiction or Fantasy? How seriously do we take the talk of “miticlorians” as providing an explanation for the force?
 - **Magical Realism:** Not nomologically possible, but still nearby.
 - **Graham Priest’s “Sylvan’s Box”:** Realistic fiction that’s not even metaphysically possible.

For our purposes, however, this rough distinction is basically good enough, and all the sci-fi we’ll consider fits this basic categorization.

- **The Philosophical Appeal of Sci-Fi in Particular:** Gives us possibilities we *could* in principle confront in our universe, but sufficiently far out from the possibilities we *actually do* confront in our everyday life to get us to think about issues in new ways and get a new perspective on them.
- **Daniel Dennett on his Sci-Fi Story “Where Am I?” (which we’ll read for Class 8):**

“The technological feats described are impossible now, and some may remain forever outside our ability, but that’s not what matters to us. What matters to us is whether there is something in principle impossible—something incoherent—about the whole tale. When philosophical fantasies become too outlandish—involving time machines, or duplicate universes, or infinitely powerful deceiving demons—we may wisely decline to conclude *anything* from them. Our conviction that we understand the issues involved may be unreliable, an illusion produced by the vividness of the fantasy.”

3 Four Big Philosophical Topics

- **Reality and Skepticism**
 - What is the nature of reality?
 - Could the nature of reality be radically different than what we take it to be?
 - Could all or mostly all of our beliefs about the world around us be false?
- **Identity and Individuality**
 - What makes you *you*?
 - Could you exist in a different body? Without any body?
 - Could there be multiple people with one body? One person with multiple bodies?
- **Consciousness and (Artificial) Intelligence**
 - What determines whether someone or something is conscious—whether there’s something that it’s like “from the inside” to be that person or thing?
 - How do we know whether or not someone or something is conscious?
 - Could someone behave exactly like we conscious beings do and yet lack consciousness?
- **Language, Thought, and Experience**
 - Does the language you speak shape the way that you think or experience the world?
 - Could there be languages so radically different than the ones that we speak that there’d be no way if translating between them and ours, such that speakers of those languages are *saying things* in using sentences of them, but there’s no way we could possibly say, in English, *what* they’re saying?
 - Could aspects of what we usually regard as the fundamental structure of reality really be products of the language we happen to speak?