

Philosophical Ideas in Science Fiction

Instructor

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Course description

In this course, science fiction film and literature will serve as our launching pad into some of the most longstanding, intriguing, influential, and difficult questions in philosophy. We will view film classics in the genre such as *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *Gattaca*, *Her*, *Interstellar*, and *The Matrix*, as well as classic short stories by authors such as Isaac Asimov and Ray Bradbury, connecting the ideas they explore to philosophical work on personal identity, skepticism, artificial intelligence, space and time, free will and determinism, social inequality, and the future of humanity.

Course learning goals

- To develop an in-depth understanding of some of the main philosophical questions, positions, and concepts explored in science fiction
- To reconstruct and evaluate important and influential arguments for/against these positions
- To hone your critical reading skills, and practice how to present and critique your opinions and those of others clearly, crisply, fairly, and cogently in writing
- To enhance your philosophical creativity

Course prerequisites

There are no formal requirements for this course.

Course assessments

Your final grade in the course will be based off three components.

One component of your grade will be based on **your engagement with the assigned readings through [Perusall](#)**, which you can launch from the Canvas course website. Each week, we'll use

Perusall to collectively ‘tear the texts apart’ in real time by annotating them with questions and comments, which will then start discussion threads that can be up-voted based on how useful others find them to be. Think of it like a mix between Facebook, a Slack channel, and a run-of-the-mill PDF annotator. It will not be the same as face-to-face discussion, sadly, but it should be both useful and a lot of fun once it gets started. I will soon upload a video with more detailed instructions about how this will work, but for now I recommend you take a look at [this video](#) on the pedagogical concepts behind Perusall, and [this video](#) for a basic idea of what to expect. This component will be worth **30 points of your final grade**.

Another component of your grade will be **eight writing assignments** worth **8 points each**. To encourage you to start early and to reap the benefits of peer review on both sides, I may offer bonus points to those willing to upload their drafts to Perusall, and those who make annotations, if there is enough interest.

I will also offer **1 bonus point** for each twice-a-week online discussion section you meaningfully participate in. These will count **up to 30 points towards the total allotted for the Perusall assignments**; and if that total is exhausted, these will count **up to 5 points towards the total allotted for your four essays**. (For instance, suppose that you earn 20 total points on the Perusall assignments, 60 total points for your four essays, and attend 15 discussion sections. Then 10 of these bonus points would bring your final Perusall grade to 30 points, and the remaining 5 bonus points would bring your final essay grade up to 65 points, thus totaling 95 final points.)

Course texts and website

All course correspondence will be carried out on the Canvas course website. Course readings will also be distributed on Canvas, the vast majority of which can be found in the textbook *Science Fiction and Philosophy: From Time Travel to Superintelligence* (2nd edition), edited by Susan Schneider, 2016, Wiley Blackwell.

Tentative order of course readings (dates TBD)

The course readings will be organized around eight films, with the corresponding readings exploring ideas raised in each film, although the conceptual overlap between the readings will become greater and greater as we progress through the course.

The Matrix

- 1 Plato, selections from *Republic*
- 2 Descartes, selections from *Meditations on First Philosophy*
- 3 Bostrom, “Are you in A Computer Simulation?”
- 4 Chalmers, “*The Matrix* as Metaphysics”, sections 1-4
- 5 Chalmers, “*The Matrix* as Metaphysics”, sections 5-7

Moon

- 6 Kurzweil, “Who Am I? What Am I?”
- 7 Dennett, “Where Am I?”
- 8 Olson, “Personal Identity”
- 9 Parfit, “Divided Minds and the Nature of Persons”

Minority Report

- 10 Huemer, “Free Will and Determinism in the World of *Minority Report*”
- 11 Goldman, selections from “Actions, Predictions, and Books of Life”

2001: A Space Odyssey

- 12 Asimov, “Robot Dreams”
- 13 Clark, “A Brain Speaks”
Block, “The Mind as the Software of the Brain”
- 14 Schneider, “Alien Minds”
- 15 Anderson, “Asimov’s ‘Three Laws of Robotics’ and Machine Metaethics”

Her

- 16 Kurzweil, “Superintelligence and Singularity”
- 17 Chalmers, “The Singularity: A Philosophical Analysis”, sections 1-4
- 18 Chalmers, “The Singularity: A Philosophical Analysis”, sections 5-11
- 19 Bostrom, selections from *Superintelligence: Paths, Dangers, Strategies*

Gattaca

- 20 Annas, “The Man on the Moon”
- 21 Schneider, “*Mindscan*: Transcending and Enhancing the Human Brain”
- 22 Leslie, “The Doomsday Argument”
Asimov, “The Last Question”

Interstellar

- 23 Sider, selections from *Riddles of Existence: A Guided Tour of Metaphysics*
- 24 TBD

12 Monkeys

- 25 Lewis, “The Paradoxes of Time Travel”
- 26 Deutsch & Lockwood, “The Quantum Physics of Time Travel”
- 27 Hanley, “Miracles and Wonders: Science Fiction as Epistemology”

Academic integrity policy

Cheating, plagiarism, and other forms of academic malfeasance come in many forms—if you haven’t already, I would recommend familiarizing yourself with the Academic Integrity Policy (<http://academicintegrity.rutgers.edu/academic-integrity-policy/>) for a list of examples. Any suspected violation—and I am quite talented at detecting these—will be automatically referred to the Office of Judicial Affairs, and can carry penalties up to and including a failing grade in the course or expulsion from the university. Note: ignorance about what counts as academic malfeasance, or carelessness in acting in accordance with this policy, is *not* a defense. Thus, if you have any questions about whether you are toeing the line, please do not hesitate to consult with me *before* you submit your work.

University disability statement

Rutgers University welcomes students with disabilities into all of the University's educational programs. In order to receive consideration for reasonable accommodations, a student with a disability must contact the appropriate disability services office at the campus where you are officially enrolled, participate in an intake interview, and provide documentation. For more info, please visit <https://ods.rutgers.edu/students/documentation-guidelines>. If the documentation supports your request for reasonable accommodations, your campus's disability services office will provide you with a Letter of Accommodations. Share this letter with your instructors and discuss the accommodations with them as early in your courses as possible. To begin this process, please register by following this link: <https://webapps.rutgers.edu/student-ods/forms/registration>.