

## Phil. 154 Science Fiction and Philosophy

---

*Instructor:* Charles Sebens

*Time:* Monday/Wednesday 4-5:30

*Location:* 1401 Mason Hall

*Office Hours:* Monday/Wednesday 5:30-6:30, 1156 Angell Hall

*Screenings:* Some Sundays at 8 pm (see schedule for dates), Shapiro Library, 2<sup>nd</sup> Floor, Room 2160

### Course description

This course will provide an introduction to a variety of philosophical topics, using science fiction to make these abstract philosophical problems vivid. We will explore the philosophical implications of science fiction staples such as: time travel, teleportation, virtual reality, super-intelligent robots, futuristic utopias, and parallel universes. With these stories in hand, we'll investigate philosophical questions about knowledge, reality, ethics, and the mind. This course is ideal for those who have taken zero to one philosophy courses in the past; no science background is required.

### Goals

- ❖ Understand how common themes in science fiction relate to core problems of philosophy.
- ❖ Learn to get past the initial puzzlement and head-scratching to start thinking like a philosopher. Offer and defend solutions to tough philosophical questions.
- ❖ Gain an appreciation of the variety of topics considered to be part of the field of philosophy.
- ❖ Develop the ability to read and understand difficult philosophical works before discussing them in class.
- ❖ Improve your ability to communicate complex ideas by discussing philosophy in class and writing philosophical essays.

### Textbooks

The main textbook for the course is:

***Philosophy Through Science Fiction*** (2009), by Ryan Nichols, Nicholas Smith, and Fred Miller

All of the other required readings are posted on CTools, as are most of the optional readings. Depending on your interests you may want to consider purchasing some or all of the books below:

*Science Fiction and Philosophy* (2009), edited by Susan Schneider

*Epistemology* (2003), by Richard Feldman

*Introducing Time* (2001), by Craig Callender

*Writing Philosophy* (2006), by Lewis Vaughn

**Schedule** (Note the page numbers! Often you do not need to read the whole text.)

**Wed. Introduction to the Course**

9/4

Optional Reading:

“The Pink Guide to Taking Philosophy Classes” (2005), by Helena de Bres [Phi]

---

Unit I: The Metaphysics of Time Travel and Teleportation

**Sun.** Screening:

9/8

*Doctor Who: Blink* (2007), series 3 episode 11 (44 min.) [Sci-Fi]

**Mon. Presentism and Four-Dimensionalism**

9/9

*Philosophy Through Science Fiction* (2009), Chapter 4: Spacetime and Time Travel (pg. 193-202) [Phi]

Optional:

*Introducing Time* (2001), by Craig Callender (pg. 3, 32-39, 42-51, 68-88) [Phi]

“The Weed of Time” (1970), by Norman Spinrad [Sci-Fi]

**Wed. Is Time Travel Possible?**

9/11

*Philosophy Through Science Fiction* (2009), Chapter 4: Spacetime and Time Travel (pg. 202-216, skip §4.7) [Phi]

Optional:

“-All You Zombies-” (1959), by Robert Heinlein, in *Philosophy Through Science Fiction* [Sci-Fi]

“The Paradoxes of Time Travel” (1976), by David Lewis [Phi]

---

**Mon. Presentism or Four-Dimensionalism?**

9/16

*Riddles of Existence* (2005), Chapter 3: Time, by Theodore Sider [Phi]

◆ Homework 1 due in class ◆

**Wed. How to Debate Like a Philosopher**

9/18

*Philosophy Through Science Fiction* (2009), Chapter 1: Philosophical Method and Philosophical Disagreement (pg. 12-22) [Phi]

Optional:

*Writing Philosophy: A Student's Guide to Writing Philosophical Essays* (2006), Chapter 2: How to Read an Argument, by Lewis Vaughn [Phi]

“Second Dawn” (1951), by Arthur C. Clarke [Sci-Fi]

---

**Sun.** Screening:

9/22

*The Outer Limits: Think Like a Dinosaur* (2001), season 7 episode 8 (44 min.) [Sci-Fi]

**Mon. Teleportation and Personal Identity**

9/23

*Reasons and Persons* (1984), Chapter 10: What We Believe Ourselves to Be, by Derek Parfit (pg. 199-209) [Phi]

Optional:

*Philosophy Through Science Fiction* (2009), Chapter 6: Personal Identity (pg. 301-313) [Phi]

“Learning to Be Me” (1990), by Greg Egan, in *Philosophy Through Science Fiction* [Sci-Fi]

◆ Homework 2 due in class ◆

**Wed. Personal Fission and Fusion**

**9/25** *Philosophy Through Science Fiction* (2009), §6.3 The Psychological Continuity Theory & Box 6.E (pg. 313-316) [Phi]

“Survival and Identity” (1976), by David Lewis (pg. 17-29) [Phi]

Optional:

*Star Trek: The Next Generation: Second Chances* (1993), season 6 ep. 24 [Sci-Fi]

*Star Trek: Deep Space Nine: Dax* (1993), season 1 ep. 8 [Sci-Fi]

---

## Unit II: Skepticism and Epistemology (Are we in the Matrix?)

**Sun.** Screening:

**9/29** *The Matrix* (1999), written and directed by The Wachowskis (136 min.) [Sci-Fi]

**Mon. Why Think You’re in the Matrix?**

**9/30** *Epistemology* (2003), by Richard Feldman (pg. 2-4, 114-119) [Phi]

Optional:

*Epistemology* (2003), by Richard Feldman (pg. 12-23) [Phi]

“Meditations on First Philosophy (I and II)” (1641), by René Descartes, in *Philosophy Through Science Fiction* [Phi]

“We Can Remember It for You Wholesale” (1966), by Phillip K. Dick, in *Philosophy Through Science Fiction* [Sci-Fi]

**Wed. The Fallibilist Response**

**10/2** *Epistemology* (2003), by Richard Feldman (pg. 119-128) [Phi]

---

**Sun.** Optional Screening:

**10/6** *Inception* (2010), directed by Christopher Nolan (148 min.) [Sci-Fi]

**Mon. Skepticism Reloaded**

**10/7** *Epistemology* (2003), by Richard Feldman (pg. 141-142, 148-151) [Phi]

Optional:

*The Problems of Philosophy* (1912), Chapter 2: The Existence of Matter, by Bertrand Russell [Phi]

◆ Homework 3 due in class ◆

**Wed. How Deceptive is the Matrix?**

**10/9** “[The Matrix as Metaphysics](#)” (2003), by David Chalmers (sec. 1-5) [Phi]

*Philosophy Through Science Fiction* (2009), Box 2.H Putnam on Resolving Brain-in-a-vat Skepticism (pg. 75-76) [Phi]

---

**Mon.** Fall Break (No Class)

**10/14**

**Wed. Writing a Philosophical Essay**

**10/16** *Writing Philosophy: A Student’s Guide to Writing Philosophical Essays* (2006), Chapter 3: Rules of Style and Content for Philosophical Writing, by Lewis Vaughn [Phi]

Optional:

“[Guidelines on Writing a Philosophy Paper](#)” (2012), by James Pryor [Phi]

---

---

 Unit III: Robot Minds
**Mon.** What is it like to be a bot?

**10/21** “For a Breath I Tarry” (1966), by Roger Zelazny [Sci-Fi]

◆ Draft of short paper due in class (two copies) ◆

**Wed.** Peer Review

**10/23** “Philosophy Essay” (2013), by UM Student [Phi] (your partner’s short essay)

◆ Comments on short paper due in class ◆

**Mon.** Dualism and Physicalism

**10/28** *Philosophy Through Science Fiction* (2009), Chapter 5: Mind (pg. 244-245, 249-250, 262-269) [Phi]

◆ Short paper due in class and online ◆

**Wed.** The Chinese Room Argument

**10/30** “Minds, Brains, and Programs” (1980), by John Searle, in *Philosophy Through Science Fiction* (pg. 293-296) [Phi]

“[The Mind as the Software of the Brain](#)” (1994), by Ned Block (only read sec. 4) [Phi]

Optional:

“Computation and Consciousness” (1989), by Tim Maudlin (pg. 413-415) [Phi]

**Mon.** Simulating the Human Brain

**11/4** “Could a Machine Think?” (1990), by Paul and Patricia Churchland [Phi]

◆ Homework 4 due in class ◆

**Wed.** Getting Lost in the Simulation

**11/6** “[The Simulation Argument: Why the Probability that You Are Living in a Matrix is Quite High](#)” (2003), by Nick Bostrom [Phi]

---

 Unit IV: Ethics in a World of Humans, Robots, Aliens, and Animals
**Sun.** Screening:

**11/10** *The Animatrix* (2003), *The Second Renaissance* (parts I and II; 23 min.) [Sci-Fi]

*Robot & Frank* (2012), directed by Jake Schreier (89 min.) [Sci-Fi]

**Mon.** Robot Oppression

**11/11** “Robot Dreams” (1986), by Isaac Asimov [Sci-Fi]

Optional:

“[Ethical Issues in Advanced Artificial Intelligence](#)” (2003), by Nick Bostrom [Phi]

◆ Homework 5 due in class ◆

**Wed.** Alien Arrangements

**11/13** “Bloodchild” (1984), by Octavia Butler [Sci-Fi]

**Mon.** The Moral Status of Animals

**11/18** “[Animal Liberation](#)” (1973), by Peter Singer [Phi]

**Wed.**     **Morality as a Science**  
**11/20**     *Utilitarianism* (1863), Chapters 1 & 2, by John Stuart Mill [Phi]

---

**Sun.**     Screening:  
**11/24**     *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine: In the Pale Moonlight* (1998), season 6 episode 19 (45 min.) [Sci-Fi]

**Mon.**     **Do the Ends Justify the Means?**  
**11/25**     “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” (1973), by Ursula K. Le Guin [Sci-Fi]  
            ♦ Long paper due in class and online ♦

**Wed.**     **Returning to the Matrix**  
**11/27**     “The Experience Machine” (1974), by Robert Nozick [Phi]  
            Optional:  
            “Truncat” (2003), by Cory Doctorow, in *Philosophy Through Science Fiction* [Sci-Fi]  
            “Marionettes, Inc.” (1951), by Ray Bradbury [Sci-Fi]  
            (class ends at 5:00 pm for Thanksgiving break; if you are unable to attend the class, I recommend studying the discussion questions on the reading which will be posted online to prepare for the final exam)

---

#### Unit V: More Worlds, Better Worlds

**Mon.**     **Beauty**  
**12/2**     “Liking What You See: A Documentary” (2002), by Ted Chiang [Sci-Fi]  
            Optional:  
            *The Beauty Bias: The Injustice of Appearance in Life and Law* (2010), Chapter 2: The Importance of Appearance and the Costs of Conformity, by Deborah Rhode [Law]

**Wed.**     **Gender and Androgyny**  
**12/4**     “X: A Fabulous Child’s Story” (1978), by Lois Gould [Sci-Fi]  
            Optional:  
            “Parents Keep Child’s Gender a Secret” (2011), by Jayme Poisson [News]  
            “Androgyny as an Ideal for Human Development” (1977), by Ann Ferguson [Phi]  
            “Options” (1979), by John Varley [Sci-Fi]

---

**Sun.**     Screening:  
**12/8**     *Futurama: The Farnsworth Parabox* (2003), season 4 episode 15 (30 min.) [Sci-Fi]  
            *Probability and Uncertainty – The Quantum Mechanical View of Nature* (1964), lecture by Richard Feynman (57 min.) [Sci] (note: a transcript of the lecture is available on CTools)

**Mon.**     **Quantum Parallel Universes**  
**12/9**     Optional:  
            *The Hidden Reality: Parallel Universes and the Deep Laws of the Cosmos* (2011), Chapter 8: The Many Worlds of Quantum Measurement (pg. 189-224), by Brian Greene [Sci]  
            ♦ Homework 6 due in class ♦

**Wed. 12/11**    **Immortality**  
*How to Live Forever: Science fiction and philosophy* (1995), Chapter 1: The End of Summer, by Stephen Clark [Phi]  
 Optional:  
 “Survival and Identity” (1976), by David Lewis (pg. 29-31) [Phi]  
 “Mortimer Gray’s *History of Death*” (1995), by Brian Stableford [Sci-Fi]

---

**Wed. 12/18**    **Review Session (optional)**  
 7:30 pm – 9 pm

**Fri. 12/20**    **◆ Final Exam (cumulative) ◆**  
 8 am – 10 am

## Grade

30% Six HW assignments (5% each)

4% Draft of short paper and peer review

18% Short paper

23% Long paper

25% Final exam

## Attendance and reading

Engaged participation and careful preparation are important to your success in this course. Participation is not formally included in the calculation of your grade for the course, but it will be extremely difficult to do well in the course if you do not read, attend, and participate.

Much of the time you spend learning philosophy will be spent reading and re-reading the texts. Reading philosophy is challenging. I recommend that you re-read confusing parts of the text and take notes, bringing prepared questions with you to class or office hours. Try to focus on understanding what main claims the author is arguing for and the structure of reasons that are offered to support the contentious claims.

The optional readings are truly optional; there is no expectation that you will do them. They are provided in case you find a certain topic especially interesting and would like to read more about it. The best way to do well in the course is to focus on understanding the required reading and the material covered in lecture.

## Video Material

Movies and television episodes will be screened on Sunday evenings as indicated on the schedule above. The screenings are optional; you are welcome to view the material in whatever manner is most convenient for you provided you view it before class on Monday. The two movies which are required viewing will be available for streaming on the CTools site for the course. The television episodes can be downloaded or streamed online (some free, others for about two dollars each from iTunes, Amazon, Hulu, etc.).

## Homework

The homework assignments will be due on Mondays and will typically cover the readings for the upcoming week. This requires you to do the readings in advance and to think through them carefully before coming to class which will help you become a more skilled, active, and critical reader.

HW 6 will ask you to analyze the philosophical aspects of a piece of sci-fi not on the syllabus. So, keep that in mind as you read/watch sci-fi for pleasure throughout the semester.

## Essays

The first essay will be 4-5 pages and the second 6-7. Details on formatting and submission will be provided later (10/16). For the first essay, a draft will be due on 10/21. We will then exchange drafts and you will provide comments on another student's essay. Participating seriously and constructively in this peer-review process is worth 4% of your grade and will help you develop your essay.

## Late Assignments

Homework assignments will be collected at the beginning of class and any late homework assignments will not be graded. Late essays will receive a one letter grade deduction for each day they are late. An extension may be granted if requested in advance of the due date for the assignment. In general, extensions will only be granted for reasons of religious observance, illness, or personal or family emergency.

## Office Hours

Office hours are a chance to discuss philosophy with a smaller group of students and a great way to gain knowledge and skills relevant to the course. You may want to stop by to (a) discuss questions about the material covered in the course, (b) talk about other philosophical questions, (c) figure out how to write a philosophical paper or to discuss your plans for a paper, (d) get clarification on the HW problems or their solutions once they're posted, or (e) talk about the comments you've received on an essay. I will not read paper drafts in office hours, but I'm happy to discuss your ideas.

## Email

You can reach me at: [csebens@gmail.com](mailto:csebens@gmail.com). Please only email me about logistical concerns (no philosophy questions!): requesting extensions, scheduling additional office hours, reporting a problem with the CTools site, etc. I am happy to meet with you in office hours to discuss your philosophical questions.

## Special Accommodations

If you require extra time on the final exam or any other special arrangements, please give me a copy of the accommodation forms provided by the Services for Students with Disabilities office.

## Plagiarism

You are encouraged to discuss your work with other students and even to share drafts with each other to get feedback. However, the work you submit should be your own. If you incorporate the ideas of others, cite those sources. Do not copy language too closely. Even when summarizing and paraphrasing cited sources, you must use your own language and present the ideas in an original way. We will discuss

plagiarism further when you are preparing to write your first paper (10/16). Please ask me if you have any questions about what counts as plagiarism. For more information on plagiarism, see [www.lsa.umich.edu/academicintegrity](http://www.lsa.umich.edu/academicintegrity).

If I have reason to believe that you have plagiarized, I will report the case to the Assistant Dean for Undergraduate Education who heads the LSA Academic Judiciary Committee. If they determine that it is indeed a case of plagiarism, you will receive a zero on the assignment and, depending on the decision of the committee, there may be further repercussions.