Science Fiction and Philosophy (Fall 2022)

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| Instructor | Brendan Shea, Ph.D. | Course number | PHIL 2001 |
| Contact Info | [Brendan.Shea@rctc.edu](mailto:Brendan.Shea@rctc.edu)  507-722-1146 | Prerequisites | None (However, this is a college-level class, so you should be comfortable with reading college-level texts and writing responses to these. See below for more details.) |
| Office | M2403Q | Class location | Online |
| Zoom Office Hours | Fri 10-12 (Open)  Also by appointment | Class time | Asynchronous |
| **Class Zoom Link** | <https://minnstate.zoom.us/j/99874991922> Passcode: 312566 | | |

**Revised 10/15/2022 – Missing a week in the calendar. Due dates are adjusted.**

**Revised 10/25/2022 – Adjustments to reading schedule**

Welcome to PHIL 2001: Science Fiction and Philosophy! I'm your instructor, Brendan Shea (I prefer "Brendan.” "Dr. Shea" or "Prof. Shea" work if you are feeling formal). If you have short questions (not answered here), email is generally the best way to get ahold of me. For more detailed questions about the class, I'd encourage you to talk to me during office hours (either in person or over the phone), or to set up an appointment.

**Course Description.** This course will explore philosophical themes in the context of science fiction (and fantasy) literature and film. Major topics include the relationship between mind and body, the nature of scientific inquiry, and issues concerning social and political philosophy and the philosophy of race and gender. Students will learn to apply basic methods of philosophical inquiry, and will engage with work from a culturally diverse selection of authors and filmmakers. The material will be selected with a goal of expanding the students knowledge of the human condition and human cultures, especially as this relates to ideas, values, and institutions. Particular attention will be given to the cultivation of critical reading and writing. College-level reading and writing is recommended. (Prerequisites: None).

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# Course Content and Learning Outcomes

**OUTLINE OF MAJOR CONTENT AREAS.** A selection from the following content areas will be explored in the context of science fiction film and literature:

1. Philosophical Methodology
2. Justice and Equality
3. War and Terrorism
4. Philosophy of Sex, Gender, and Race
5. Philosophy of Science and Mind
6. Knowledge and Skepticism
7. Free Will and Personal Identity
8. God and Religion
9. Existentialism and/or the Meaning of Life
10. Theoretical and Applied Ethics
11. Philosophy of Film and Literature

**LEARNING OUTCOMES (General).** The student will be able to:

1. Identify the major areas of philosophical inquiry.
2. Analyze abstract philosophical concepts relevant to understanding science fiction film and literature.
3. Read and respond critically to philosophical issues raised in science fiction film and literature.
4. Formulate extended verbal and written arguments in response to these issues.
5. Appreciate multiculturalism and understand other world views.
6. Formulate their own philosophical positions and justify them according to the course material.

**LEARNING OUTCOMES (MnTC).**

Goal 6/The Humanities and Fine Arts: The student will be able to:

1. Respond critically to works in the arts and humanities.
2. Understand those works as expressions of individual and human values within a historical and social context.
3. Articulate an informed personal reaction to works in the arts and humanities.

Goal 7: Human Diversity. The student will be able to:

1. Demonstrate an awareness of the individual and institutional dynamics of unequal power relations between groups in contemporary society.
2. Analyze their own attitudes, behaviors, concepts and beliefs regarding diversity, racism, and bigotry.
3. Demonstrate communication skills necessary for living and working effectively in a society with great population diversity.

**RCTC CORE OUTCOME(S).** This course contributes to meeting the following RCTC Core Outcome(s): Global Awareness and Diversity. Students will demonstrate an understanding of and respect for human diversity through their words and actions.

# Required and Recommended Course Materials

* I've put together a free course textbook that lives on <http://wws.persuall.com> . You'll be able to access it directly via D2L.
* I’ll also occasionally assign movies, but will always ensure there is at least one “free” option (available on a service such as Tubi).
* This course will require that you have reliable, regular internet access.

# Grading and Course Policies

**Grading Scale:**: >=90.0 (A), 80.0-89.9 (B), 70.0 -79.9 (C), 60.0-69.9 (D), <60 (F).

Your final grade is a weighted average of the following:

* **Perusall Reading Assignments (30% total).** You'll receive credit for taking the time to read and comment on the course textbook on [www.perusall.com](http://www.perusall.com). You'll receive full credit if you take the time to read each page thoroughly, leave a good comment every few pages, and interact with other students' comments. See below for details on grading. These will generally be on SUNDAY night.
* **Sci-Fi Projects (3 x 20% each = 60% total).** These projects will give you a chance to apply what you’ve learned in a variety of ways (such as writing an essay, a short story, etc.). There will be multiple options for each project.
* **Short Movie Reviews (4 x 2.5% each = 10% total).** Over the course of the semester, you should watch FOUR movies from a list I’ll provide and submit a short (250-300 word) reflection on them. These will be graded as “full credit,” “half credit” or “no credit."
* **Extra Credit.** There may be occasional opportunities for extra credit. For reasons of fairness, I can't offer extra credit opportunities to individual students, so please don't ask.

**Plagiarism and Academic Integrity.** Your work should be your own—please don't use your classmates, friends, parents, internet sites, etc., to help you write your papers or answer test questions. And when you do use outside sources, make sure to give appropriate citation and acknowledgment for any words, ideas, or arguments. If the preponderance of the evidence suggests cheating has occurred (that is, if the evidence indicates that this is *more likely than not)*, you will receive a failing grade on the assignment. A second violation will lead to a failing grade for the course. Please also see the RCTC statement on academic integrity later in the syllabus.

**Attendance.** Students in face-to-face classes should attend class regularly, while online students are expected to participate in class discussions and activities. If you miss more than two weeks consecutively, or 1/3 of the total class sessions, you may receive a failing grade of FW. This may endanger your ability to receive financial aid. With this in mind, you are responsible for withdrawing from the class if you decide not to continue. I am willing to make exceptions if circumstances require, but you must let me know about these promptly.

# Policy on Late Work

**Please read the following *before* emailing me to request an extension on an assignment.** If you miss a quiz or activity due to a brief sickness, work conflict, class trip, computer malfunction, wedding, auto problem, court date, funeral, sporting event, etc., you do NOT need to email me (though it's okay if you want to give me a heads up). Here are my policies for making up missed or late work:

1. You can submit quizzes up to a week late with no penalty. There will be no further extensions without good reason.
2. Perusall reading assignments can be submitted up to two days late for reduced credit. Credit declines "linearly" (basically, if you submit it one minute late, you get 99.9% of the credit; if you submit it 1.5 days late, you'll get almost no credit).
3. Projects submitted up to 3 days late will have the score capped at 90%, and those submitted 3 to 7 days late will have their score capped at 80%.

**No late work will be accepted during the last week of class (again, absent exceptional circumstances).** I will make exceptions to these policies if you can demonstrate a genuine need. Please talk to me if anything comes up that is preventing you from succeeding in class.

# RCTC Common Policies

This course will be taught in accordance with the following policies, which apply to ALL RCTC courses. If you have any questions about these, please let me know!

**Academic Integrity Statement**. The primary academic mission of Rochester Community and Technical College (RCTC) is to provide quality learning opportunities for students. Acts of academic dishonesty undermine the educational process and the learning experience for the student and our college community. It is the responsibility of the student to complete their academic requirements with integrity and not engage in acts of cheating, plagiarism, or collusion. The College expects that students are submitting work and materials that reflects their individual learning and efforts within their course, program, and college academic requirements. It is expected that RCTC students will understand and adhere to the concept of academic integrity and to the standards of conduct outlined within this policy. Students who are found to have engaged in an act of academic dishonesty may face academic sanctions through the Academic Integrity Procedure and non-academic misconduct sanctions through the Code of Student Conduct.

**Americans with Disabilities Act.** Rochester Community and Technical College is committed to ensuring its programs, services and activities are accessible to individuals with disabilities, through its compliance with state and federal laws, and System Policy. Appropriate accommodations are provided to those qualified students with disabilities. If you believe you qualify for an academic accommodation, please contact the Director of Disability Support Services, Travis Kromminga at 507-280-2968 or through the Minnesota relay TTY 1-800-627-3529. The office can also be reached via email at [travis.kromminga@rctc.edu](mailto:travis.kromminga@rctc.edu).

**Military Friendly Statement.** Rochester Community and Technical College (RCTC) is a military friendly campus, pledging to do all we can to help military veterans transition into college to complete their educational goals. RCTC is proud to be a Beyond the Yellow Ribbon campus, serving and honoring our veterans, military service members and their families. Through the Veterans Resource Center, RCTC offers student veterans an on-campus point of contact with other veterans, and program information to assist them in making a successful transition into college. For assistance, students are encouraged to contact the Veterans Assistant Coordinator, Mark Larsen, at 507-779-9375 or email at mark.larsen@state.mn.us, or Othelmo da Silva, RCTC's VA certifying official at 507-285-7566 or email at [VeteranServices@rctc.edu](mailto:VeteranServices@rctc.edu).

**Title IX Statement.** Sexual violence and other forms of sexual misconduct is prohibited at Minnesota State colleges and universities (Minnesota State). Any individual who has been, or is being, subjected to conduct prohibited by the Sexual Violence Policy is encouraged to report the incident. Individuals may choose to file a complaint anonymously using the online reporting tool  https://www.rctc.edu/[services](https://nam02.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.rctc.edu%2Fservices%2Fstudent-affairs%2Ftitle-ix%2F%3Fdoing_wp_cron%3D1660068286.6463758945465087890625&data=05%7C01%7Cbrendan.shea%40rctc.edu%7C0adb38c76b734cc0362508da81ef6185%7C5011c7c60ab446ab9ef4fae74a921a7f%7C0%7C0%7C637965167519995936%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C3000%7C%7C%7C&sdata=CH2AJkL6j4mqWJ32%2FGX2G6aLfZ%2BLKT%2BAaStzdZcUMyY%3D&reserved=0)/student-affairs/title-ix/). Individuals who choose to file anonymous reports are advised that it may be difficult for the college to follow up or take specific action, where information is limited. For additional information please see the RCTC Sexual Violence Policy, [http://www.rctc.edu/policies/system/sexual-violence](https://nam02.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.rctc.edu%2Fpolicies%2Fsystem%2Fsexual-violence&data=05%7C01%7Cbrendan.shea%40rctc.edu%7C0adb38c76b734cc0362508da81ef6185%7C5011c7c60ab446ab9ef4fae74a921a7f%7C0%7C0%7C637965167519995936%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C3000%7C%7C%7C&sdata=EBuvGQFN%2FZho376QgWdbND1TcL40rIYlGvXDeOaBskg%3D&reserved=0) or contact Teresa Brown, Title IX Coordinator, at 507-285- 7108 or email at [TitleIX@rctc.edu](mailto:TitleIX@rctc.edu).

# Guidelines for Perusall Reading Assignments

I've developed a free textbook for this class, which combines my lecture notes with selected readings. It lives on [www.perusall.com](http://www.perusall.com), and links to it will be provided through D2L. So, what is perusall.com? Basically, it is "social reading" site, where you can "comment" on texts, and read and respond to the comments left by other students (as well as by me).

Here are some details from their website:

*Perusall helps you* ***learn faster*** *by collaboratively annotating the readings and communicating with your classmates. Collaboration gets you help whenever you need it, makes learning more fun, enables you to help others (which research shows is also a great way for you to learn), and helps the instructor make class better by emphasizing information that you need.*

*If you have a question or information to share about a passage in the readings, highlight the text and type in a comment as an annotation. You can also respond to a classmate's annotation in threads (Facebook style) in real time or upvote questions you find helpful. Good annotations contribute to the class by stimulating discussion, explaining your thought processes, helping others, and drawing attention to good points. If a particular classmate's point is relevant, you can explicitly "mention" them and they will be immediately notified, even if not presently signed on.*

*Research shows that the following behaviors on Perusall predict higher end-of-semester grades and long term mastery of the subject. Your instructor may use some or all to determine your formal score.*

1. *Contributing thoughtful questions and comments to the class discussion, spread throughout the entire reading (*[*see some examples*](https://perusall.com/downloads/scoring-examples.pdf)*)*
2. *Starting the reading early*
3. *Breaking the reading into chunks (instead of trying to do it all at once)*
4. *Reading all the way to the end of the assigned reading*
5. *Posing thoughtful questions and comments that elicit responses from classmates*
6. *Answering questions from others*
7. *Upvoting thoughtful questions and helpful answers*

In this class, Perusall assignments will be graded between 0 and 3 points. Perusall will occasionally try to give you "advice" on how to increase your score. You should listen to it!

# Getting in Touch with Me (and What to Include in an Email)

The best way to get ahold of me is by email, which I will aim to respond to within ONE working day (for simple questions) or TWO working days (for more complex ones). I don't generally check email on the weekends or holidays. If you don't hear from me by then, please try emailing me again. To help me provide you with quick, effective feedback, here's a general template for what I expect in an email.

*Dear Brendan (or Professor Shea):*

*My name is [full name], and I’m a student in [this section] of [this class]. I had a question regarding [identify quiz, textbook chapter, etc. Be specific, and include a copy of anything I might need to answer your question, including the full problem text, if applicable]. Here's everything I've tried so far to figure out the answer for myself [looked at the syllabus, notes, textbook, etc.], and here's my best guess as to the answer. Could you help me by doing the following? [Be specific in what you are asking me to do.] [Feel free to include anything else you'd like here. I'm always happy when students send along ideas/links/whatever vaguely relating to ethics and philosophy 😊]/*

As I rule, I will not respond to requests that you be exempted from class policies without very good reason (e.g., for late-work extensions outside the conditions outlined above), or to emails that lack basic identifying information (your full name, class, etc.). For long or complex questions, I highly encourage you to schedule an appointment so that we can talk (either in person or by phone). Oh, and please don't call me Mr. Shea (That's my dad!).

## Tips on Writing Philosophy

Philosophy essays can be a bit different from other sorts of writing. However, past students have told me they're not that bad once you start writing them! Here are some general tips:

1. You should have an **introduction** that concisely introduces the topic, and a **thesis sentence** that clearly states your position. Philosophy papers often begin with theses of the form "I will argue X because of Y."
2. When discussing tough ethical or philosophical issues, **avoid phrases like "I feel," "I think," or "I believe."** Part of taking these issues seriously involves granting that one's actions and beliefs have consequences for other people, and that (for this reason) they need to be defended with the sorts of ***arguments*** and ***reasons*** that these other people could actually accept. For this reason, appeals to your *own* emotions, religious beliefs, etc. are generally (though not always) inappropriate.
3. Pretend you are writing to **an intelligent and interested (but relatively ignorant) 12-year-old** who doesn't know anything about the subject. You'll need to write clearly, explain new concepts, and offer interesting, memorable examples. A significant portion of your grade will be based on your ability to explain the arguments/concepts we've been studying using your own words and examples.
4. Your essay should have multiple paragraphs, each of which has a clear **topic sentence** that clearly relates back to your thesis. When writing philosophy, it's easy to get "off topic." So, always ask yourself: is this paragraph helping me provide evidence for my thesis? If the answer is "no," it should be cut or revised.
5. You should always consider possible **objections** to your thesis. Ask yourself: "How would a smart, well-educated opponent respond to my argument?" In some cases, this might be a real author who you can cite; in other cases, you'll have to play your own "devil's advocate."
6. The conclusion should help the reader appreciate how your argument fits into the "big picture." For example, what exactly do you take yourself to have shown? How does this relate to similar cases? What might the "next step" of this argument be if you had more time and space?

# Resources for Student Success

Some helpful resources at RCTC (all of which are included with your course tuition) include the following:

* **Student Support Services/TRIO (SS 159)** provides academic support for first-generation and low-income college students, as well as those with documented disabilities.
* **Drop-in Tutoring (AT 306)** is available free of charge to *all* RCTC students. Please take advantage of it!
* **Online Tutoring** is available at [www.tutor.com](http://www.tutor.com), accessible via D2L (so, don't go directly to the website—instead, log on to the main RCTC D2L page, and look for the link). This online tutoring option also includes a form where you can submit a paper for review (there is something like a 12-hour turnaround).

# Tentative Course Calendar

Here is the course calendar. I'll update you via D2L if anything changes. The chapter numbers refer to the online textbook. The topics covered each may change.

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Week | Week Starting | Topics | Notes |
| 1 | 8/21 | Syllabus and Chapter 0: Thought Experiments |  |
| 2 | 8/28 | Chapter 1: Escaping the Cave | Movie Review 1 Due 9/5 |
| 3 | 9/4 | Chapter 2: Are We Living in the Matrix? |  |
| 4 | 9/11 | Chapter 3: Culture Wars |  |
| 5 | 9/18 | Project 1 Work Week | Project 1 Due 9/26 |
| 6 | 9/25 | Chapter 4: Animal Farm, Pt. 1 |  |
| 7 | 10/2 | Chapter 5: Animal Farm, Pt. 2 | Movie Review 2 Due 10/10 |
| 8 | 10/9 | Chapter 6: The Ones Who Walk Away… |  |
| 9 | 10/16 | Chapter 7: The Ethics of Star Wars |  |
| 10 | 10/23 | Project 2 Work Week | Project 2 Due 10/31 |
| 11 | 10/30 | Chapter 8: Moral Luck |  |
| 12 | 11/6 | Chapter 9: Epic Fantasy |  |
| 13 | 11/13 | Chapter 10: Vampires and the Undead | Movie Review 3 Due 11/21 |
| 14 | 11/20 | Chapter 11: Superheroes and Disney Princesses |  |
| 15 | 11/27 | Chapter 12: Frankenstein, Pt .1 | Movie Review 4 Due 12/5 |
| 16 | 12/4 | Project 3 Work Week (and Frankenstein Pt. 2). |  |
| 17 | 12/11 | Project 3 Due 12/11. End of Class 12/16 |  |