Course Syllabus

HPS 0640: Science Fiction and Philosophy

Fall 2022

Instructor: Dr. Siddharth Muthukrishnan (call me 'Sid' or 'Siddharth')

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Time: Tue & Thu 1 pm -2.15 pm

Location: A214 Langley Hall

Office hours: Wed 3.30 pm - 4.30 pm and Thu 2.15 pm – 3.15 pm (Cathy 10th floor, Grunbaum library). I very much welcome dropping into my office hours whenever you'd like, even if you don't have any specific questions, or you have questions that are only tangentially related to the course material, or you would like to simply chat. If you cannot make the regularly scheduled times, email me and we can work out a separate meeting time.

Course Description:

Consider classic philosophical questions concerning knowledge of the external world, free will, time, ethics, language, and many more. The philosophical tradition has written many enlightening things on these topics. However, these are all questions that have also been examined by another rich tradition: science-fiction. While philosophy proceeds by careful argumentation and theory-building, science-fiction proceeds by imagining worlds very different from ours that are governed by their own internal logic and sees how stories play out in these worlds. In this way the two disciplines---science fiction and philosophy---are complementary.

The goal of this course is to study both these traditions together so as to illuminate these classic philosophical questions. We will see how philosophical arguments become sharper when considered in the context of stories. We will investigate how our intuitions about philosophical problems change when confronted with stories. Hopefully, we will have a gained a clearer understanding of philosophical questions and gained a more critical eye for viewing or reading science fiction. Most importantly, we will have developed the ability to write out our thoughts clearly and develop and defend philosophical arguments.

Learning objectives:

- Gain knowledge of a range of important arguments and ideas of philosophy.

- Learn to extract arguments and articulate concepts embedded in works of science fiction.

- Develop skills of conceptual and philosophical analysis to evaluate these ideas and test the plausibility of fictional scenarios.

- Increase your understanding of philosophical skepticism, free will, personal identity, ethics of technology, philosophy of language, and several other important ideas in science and philosophy.

Expectations

You are expected to make the most of this opportunity by coming to class ready to engage with each other in an informed discussion of the material assigned. This means you should have read the assigned material at least once in advance of each class meeting.

Please be courteous, cooperative, and supportive of each other at all times. You may disagree with someone's ideas, but please be mindful and respectful of each other's differences. Please approach other perspectives with a principle of generosity that makes our collective learning the goal of this class.

Some of our conversations may raise difficult topics for you. Even if a topic is challenging, please try to remain engaged in the conversation. All opinions are welcome.

Evaluation:

Participation and Contribution to class discussion (20%)

As a member of this course, you are expected to attend class and actively engage in discussion. You should also have read and/or viewed the assigned course material. I will be calling on people at random (indeed, I'll try to use a computer to avoid biases); that might be a bit stressful to some of you, but I assure you that my interest in doing so is only to have you articulate and contribute your thoughts, and not to judge you.

Online discussion participation (15%)

Roughly every other week, you will be asked to provide a response (about 200 words) to a reading question on the Canvas discussion pages for your section. You are also required to comment (about 100 words) on at least one other person's answer either critiquing or elaborating on one of their points.

Online quizzes (10%)

Roughly every week you will be given a short quiz (it should only take a few minutes to complete if you have done the reading) on the readings of that week.

Two papers (25% + 30% each = 55% total).

You will be asked to write two papers. Each paper will be roughly 1500 words. The first paper will be due in the middle of semester (say around Week 8), and second at the end of the semester.

The first paper should be written as follows. Take one of the fictional works in our readings/viewings, extract some philosophical argument embedded in it, and examine the plausibility of the argument by using the philosophical literature that we have read.

The second paper should be written as follows. Take one of the philosophical works in our readings, extract an argument from it, and then examine its plausibility by using your attitude towards one or more of the fictional works that we have engaged with.

Writing philosophy papers is hard! We will spend time in class going through how this should be done and I'm always here to help. But please start working early: It always takes more time that you think.

Texts:

Susan Schneider, *Science Fiction and Philosophy*, 2nd Ed. (Wiley-Blackwell, 2016).

Ted Chiang, *Exhalation*. (Knopf, 2019).

It might be useful to purchase these books but not required. I'll try to make sure that all the readings are available for you to download from Canvas. If I forget to do so, please feel free to email me and remind me.

Additional articles, book chapters, and movies.

Some of the course requires you to watch some movies. We're unable to provide access to these movies due to copyright issues. So you will have to watch the movie using your own resources. However, if you do not want to spend the money to buy or rent the movie, then I'll try to provide links to summaries of the movie on YouTube, which should be enough for the purposes of the class.

Schedule

The list of readings and questions is somewhat tentative. Also I'm always open to suggestions, so if you have any topics or works that you would particularly like to see covered, please let me know and I'll see if I can include them.

Week 1 Introduction

Readings:

De Smedt, J., & De Cruz, H. (2015). *The Epistemic Value of Speculative Fiction. Midwest Studies In Philosophy, 39(1), 58–77.* doi:10.1111/misp.12035 [Philosophy]

Chap 1., Daniel Dennett, What is an Intuition Pump? *Intuition Pumps And Other Tools for Thinking.* W.W. Norton (2013). [Philosophy]

Discussion Post Assignment: What is your favorite piece of science fiction? Can you pull out one philosophical idea from that movie or book or short story?

Week 2 Skepticism I

Viewing:

- *The Matrix* (1999). [Science-Fiction]

Reading:

- David Chalmers, The Matrix as Metaphysics. (Available in Ch 5. of Schneider). [Philosophy]

Week 3 Simulated Minds Skepticism II

Readings

- Greg Egan, *Dust* (short story) (1992) [Science Fiction]

- Robin Hanson, Introduction and Overview from *The Age of Em* (2018) [Philosophy/Social Science]

- ~~Daniel Galouye, *Simulacron-3* (1969) [Science-Fiction]~~

- ~~Plato's Cave, *Excerpt from The Republic* (Available in Ch 3. Of Schneider). [Philosophy]~~

Discussion Post Assignment: If you are a simulated being, and you are currently unaware of it, how might you become aware of it in the future?

Week 4 Personal Identity and Bodies

Readings:

- Daniel C. Dennett, Where am I? (Available as Ch 6. Of Schneider). [Science Fiction]

- Excerpt from Sydney Shoemaker, Embodiment and Behavior (In *The Identities of Persons*, ed. Amelie Rorty) [Philosophy]

- ~~Secs. 1-4 of Olson, Eric T., "Personal Identity", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2019 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2019/entries/identity-personal/>. [Philosophy]~~

Week 5 Personal Identity II

Readings:

- Arkady Martine, *A Memory called Empire,* selected excerpts. (Tor Books, 2019) [Science Fiction]

- Derek Parfit, Divided Minds and the Nature of Persons. (Available as Ch 8. Of Schneider). [Philosophy]

Optional Viewing: *Moon* (2009).

Discussion Post Assignment: Would you be willing to merge your memories with someone else's if it meant gaining some important and valuable set of skills? Why or why not?

Week 6 Free Will I

Readings:

- Ted Chiang, The Story of Life (short story). Available in *Stories of Your Life and Others* (2016). [Science Fiction]

- Secs. 1,2,4 and 7 of Rice, Hugh, "Fatalism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2018 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2018/entries/fatalism/>. [Philosophy]

Week 7 Free Will II

Viewing:

- *Minority Report* (2002) [Science Fiction]

Readings:

- Michael Huemer, Free Will and Determinism in the World of *Minority Report* (Available as Ch. 10 in Schneider).

Discussion Post Assignment: Do you think you should be held responsible for your actions even if someone could have predicted your actions beforehand? Why or why not?

Week 8 Time Travel

Readings:

- Ted Chiang, The Merchant and the Alchemist's Gate in *Exhalation* (2019) [Science Fiction]

- David K. Lewis, Paradoxes of Time Travel (Available as Ch. 26 of Schneider) [Philosophy]

First Paper Due.

Week 9 Parallel Worlds

Viewing:

- S1E1 of *Counterpart* (2017). [Science Fiction]

Readings:

- Ted Chiang, Anxiety is the Dizziness of Freedom, in *Exhalation* (2019) [Science Fiction].

- David K. Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds* (1986) (selected excerpts) [Philosophy]

Discussion Post Assignment: If there are parallel worlds, should we be interested in what our counterparts are doing? Why or why not?

Week 10 Population Ethics

Viewing:

- *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018). [Science-Fiction]

Reading:

- Derek Parfit (2004), Overpopulation and the Quality of Life in: Tännsjö T., Ryberg J. (eds) The Repugnant Conclusion. Library of Ethics And Applied Philosophy, vol 15. Springer, Dordrecht [Philosophy]

Week 11 Death and Immortality

Viewing:

- *The Man from Earth* (2007)

Readings:

- Nick Bostrom, Fable of the Dragon Tyrant, *Journal of Medical Ethics*, 2005, Vol. 31, No. 5, pp 273-277.

- Iddo Landau, Chs. 5 & 6 Death and Annihilation, *Finding Meaning in an Imperfect World* (Oxford University Press, 2017)

Discussion Post Assignment: Can you think of a policy proposal that trades-off between having fewer people with a higher quality of life against having more people with a lower quality of life? Do you think this policy is good? Why or why not?

Week 12 Artificial Intelligence

Viewing:

- *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) [Science Fiction]

Reading:

- Nick Bostrom, Ch.7, The Superintelligent Will, *Superintelligence: Paths, Dangers, and Strategies*. (Oxford University Press, 2014). [Philosophy]

Week 13 Alien Languages

Viewing:

- *Arrival* (2016) [Science Fiction]

Readings:

- Carl Sagan, *Contact* (1985), selected excerpts. [Science Fiction]

- W.V.O Quine, Ch 2. Translation and Meaning, *Word and Object* (MIT Press, 1960/2013-New Edition).

Discussion Post Assignment: Have you ever communicated with someone who didn't speak your language? Reflect on the similarities between that experience and what it might be like to communicate with an alien species?

Week 14 Nostalgia

<u>Readings:</u>

- Ted Chiang, The Truth of the Fact and the Truth of the Feeling, in *Exhalation*.

- Felipe De Brigard, Nostalgia Reimagined, *Aeon Magazine* (2020).

Final Paper Due.

POLICIES:

Disability resources and services:

If you have a disability for which you are or may be requesting an accommodation, you are encouraged to contact both your instructor and Disability Resources and Services, 140 William Pitt Union, 412-648-7890 as early as possible in the term. Disability Resources and Services will verify your disability and determine reasonable accommodations for this course. For more information, visit https://www.studentaffairs.pitt.edu/drs/Links to an external site. .

Academic integrity and plagiarism:

Cheating/plagiarism will not be tolerated. Students suspected of violating the University of Pittsburgh Policy on Academic Integrity will be required to participate in the outlined procedural process as initiated by the instructor. A minimum sanction of a zero score for the quiz, exam or paper will be imposed. For the full Academic Integrity policy, go to: www.as.pitt.edu/faculty/policy/integrity.htmlLinks to an external site..

Violation of the Academic Integrity Code requires the instructor to submit an Academic Integrity Violation Report to the Dean's Office.

Classroom recording policy:

To ensure the free and open discussion of ideas, students may not record classroom lectures, discussion and/or activities without the advance written permission of the instructor, and any such recording properly approved in advance can be used solely for the student's own private use.

Copyright Notice

Course materials may be protected by copyright. United States copyright law, 17 USC section 101, et seq., in addition to University policy and procedures, prohibit unauthorized duplication or retransmission of course materials. See [Library of Congress Copyright Office (Links to an external site.)](#) and the [University Copyright PolicyLinks to an external site.](#).

E-mail policy:

Each student is issued a University e-mail address (username@pitt.edu) upon admittance. This e-mail address may be used by the University for official communication with students. Students are expected to read e-mail sent to this account on a regular basis. Failure to read and react to University communications in a timely manner does not absolve the student from knowing and complying with the content of the communications. The University provides an e-mail forwarding service that allows students to read their e-mail via other service providers (e.g., Hotmail, AOL, Yahoo). Students that choose to forward their e-mail from their pitt.edu address to another address do so at their own risk. If e-mail is lost as a result of forwarding, it does not absolve the student from responding to official communications sent to their University e-mail address.

Cell phone and laptop policy:

All cell phones and other electronic communication devices are to be turned to the off setting during class. Laptops are to be used for note-taking only.

Non-discrimination policy:

As an educational institution and as an employer, Pitt values equality of opportunity, human dignity, and racial/ethnic and cultural diversity. Accordingly, the University prohibits and will not engage in discrimination or harassment on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin, ancestry, sex, age, marital status, familial status, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, genetic information, disability, or status as a veteran. For more information, visit [http://cfo.pitt.edu/policies/documents/policy07-01-03web.pdfLinks to an external site.](http://cfo.pitt.edu/policies/documents/policy07-01-03web.pdf)

Gender-Inclusive language guidelines:

Aspiring to create a learning environment in which people of all identities are encouraged to contribute their perspectives to academic discourse, the University of Pittsburgh Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies Program provides guidelines and resources regarding gender-inclusive/non-sexist language (gsws.pitt.edu/node/1432). Following these guidelines fosters an inclusive and welcoming environment, strengthens academic writing, enriches discussion, and reflects best professional practices.

Language is gender-inclusive and non-sexist when we use words that affirm and respect how people describe, express, and experience their gender. Gender-inclusive/non-sexist language acknowledges people of any gender (e.g. first-year student versus freshman, chair versus chairman, humankind versus

mankind). It also affirms non-binary gender identifications, and recognizes the difference between biological sex and gender expression. Students may share their preferred pronouns and names, and these gender identities and gender expressions should be honored.

These guidelines fulfill the best intentions of the University of Pittsburgh's Non-Discrimination Policy: https://www.cfo.pitt.edu/policies/policy/07/07-01-03.htmlLinks to an external site..

Sexual misconduct, required reporting, and Title IX:

The University is committed to combatting sexual misconduct. As a result, you should know that University faculty and staff members are required to report any instances of sexual misconduct, including harassment and sexual violence, to the University's Title IX office so that the victim may be provided appropriate resources and support options. What this means is that as your professor, I am required to report any incidents of sexual misconduct that are directly reported to me, or of which I am somehow made aware.

There are two important exceptions to this requirement about which you should be aware:

A list of the designated University employees who, as counselors and medical professionals, do not have this reporting responsibility and can maintain confidentiality, can be found here: http://www.titleix.pitt.edu/report/confidentialityLinks to an external site.

An important exception to the reporting requirement exists for academic work. Disclosures about sexual misconduct that are shared as part of an academic project, classroom discussion, or course assignment, are not required to be disclosed to the University's Title IX office.

If you are the victim of sexual misconduct, Pitt encourages you to reach out to these resources:

* Title IX Office: 412-648-7860

* SHARE @ the University Counseling Center: 412-648-7930 (8:30 A.M. TO 5 P.M. M-F) and 412-648-7856 (AFTER BUSINESS HOURS)

If you have a safety concern, please contact the University of Pittsburgh Police, 412-624-2121. Other reporting information is available here: http://www.titleix.pitt.edu/report-0Links to an external site.