

Philosophy 020-12: Philosophy and science (and) fiction

Car Barn 315, Monday and Wednesday, 10:15 AM – 11:30 AM

Instructor:

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Tuesday 9:00-11:00 AM
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What is philosophy?

“The aim of philosophy, abstractly formulated, is to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term.” Or, so claimed the philosopher Wilfrid Sellars in his 1962 paper, “Philosophy and the scientific image of man”. Unfortunately, the goal of understanding how things hang together is not easily achieved (even worse, it is not immediately obvious what tools and techniques should be adopted in trying to answer such a question). This semester, we will approach three sorts of questions, using the resources embodied in science fiction. Building on a variety of approaches to the mental lives of humans, machines, non-human animals, and cyborgs, we will attempt to understand: 1) what it is to be a person; 2) what it is to have a mind; and 3) what we can hope to make of our world. In examining these different approaches to the study of minds (like our own)—both in class meetings and on the class blog—we will attempt to find answers to these questions that we can be happy with, and we will attempt to see how the world that we experience hangs together (even if we can't do so in the broadest possible sense of the term).

Required texts:

1. Susan Schneider (ed), *Science fiction and philosophy: From time travel to superintelligence*
2. Additional pdf files (marked with a *) posted on the course blog.

Course goals:

In this course, I hope to provide you with some of the tools and techniques that will allow you to learn how to *do philosophy well*. I will help you to develop *your own* strategies for answering difficult philosophical questions; and I will help you to learn how to respond to arguments that are offered by others. Over the course of the semester, your abilities to understand and to critically analyze difficult arguments will improve; and, I will help you to develop and defend your own positions on these difficult philosophical issues. Along the way, I hope to provide you with some resources that will allow you to address theoretical questions that arise across academic disciplines.

Assignments and Grades:

Your course grade will consist of one diagnostic exam, three short papers (3-5pp), and class participation:

1. **In-class exam (10%):** This exam is intended merely as a diagnostic to make sure that you are getting a sense of how to approach philosophical issues. You will be asked to briefly reconstruct 3-5 short arguments.

2. **Paper #1 (15%):** In this paper, you will develop a targeted discussion of the concerns about personal identity that arise in the film *Ghost in the shell*. Further details regarding the precise requirements for this paper will be distributed in mid-September, and you will be expected to watch the film prior to 4 October.
3. **Paper #2 (20%):** In this paper, you will discuss the ethical or scientific implications of extending our understanding of the mind to include non-human entities, focusing on such issues as they arise in the film *Bladerunner*. Further details regarding the precise requirements for this paper will be distributed in mid-October, and you will be expected to watch the film prior to 1 November.
4. **Paper #3 (30%):** In this paper, you will discuss the nature of the oppression that arises in the film *District 9*. Further details regarding the precise requirements for this paper will be distributed in mid-November, and you will be expected to watch the film prior to 1 December.
5. **Participation (25%):** The material that we will cover in this class may be difficult and unfamiliar. Thus, careful attention to each text will be expected and required. You should come to each class prepared to discuss the material that you have understood, and prepared to tell me what you have found unclear. In addition to in-class discussion, you will also be required to participate in discussions on the blog: <https://digitalcommons.georgetown.edu/blogs/phil-020-12-fall2010/>

Over the course of the semester, **every student will be required to post two new blog discussions**; these posts should offer a brief critical remark on one of the readings for the upcoming class (approximately 300 words), and each must be posted a minimum of **18 hours prior to the class meeting in which we will discuss that reading**. You will be randomly assigned two days on which to post a new discussion—if there are any readings for which you would prefer not to post a new discussion, please notify me that this is the case by **3 September**. Random assignments will be posted on **6 September**.

In addition to these new posts, **you must also comment on at least one posting prior to every class meeting**. You will not be graded on the content of your postings. However, if you fail to contribute to the blog in a way that demonstrates a genuine engagement with the philosophical issues, you will be penalized on the participation component of your grade.

Please note: I will not contribute to the blog. This is a space where you can discuss, and struggle with the issues together; however, I *will* read each of the posts and will use them to help structure the in-class discussions.

Anonymous Grading: Your papers will be submitted anonymously, with no identifying information other than your GUID#. If you include additional identifying information, your paper will not be graded. There is a wealth of psychological data suggesting that subtle, often implicit prejudices can influence the evaluation of a paper merely on the basis of a person's name. My hope, in adopting a blinded grading strategy, is to guarantee as far as possible that grading is carried out in a way that is fair and reasonable. Given that your name will never appear on your exams, this means that every exam will be graded on the basis of *the words that are on the page*, focusing on the clarity and accuracy of the presentation and the strength of the evidence that you present for the claims that you make.

Grading Criteria: The specific criteria for grading will be presented in detail when each assignment is distributed. However, *in general*, a paper that is 1) stylistically clear, 2) adequately articulates the claims that are being defended, and 3) provides adequate evidence and arguments in support of these claims—thereby presenting a clear and compelling argument—will receive a 'B' grade (a 'B-' will be weaker in one of these areas—but still satisfactory—and a 'B+' will excel in one of these areas). A 'C' grade will be awarded where a paper is weak in one or two of these categories; a 'D' grade will be awarded where a paper is weak in all 3 categories or omits one altogether (e.g., by lacking a thesis or lacking arguments for the truth of that thesis). An 'A' grade will be awarded only where a paper excels in each category, exhibiting a clear capacity for *doing philosophy*.

Appealing a grade: You are welcome to appeal any grade that you do not feel accurately represents the work that you have done. However, all appeals for re-evaluation must be made in writing, and must provide a compelling argument for raising the grade; and, all appeals must be made no more than two weeks after you get your paper back. We will do our best to return exams promptly; out of fairness, you will do your best to make any appeals for re-evaluation in a timely manner. Note, however, that the agreement to re-evaluate can result in three distinct outcomes: 1) raising the grade; 2) lowering the grade; or, 3) making no change to the grade. That is, a re-evaluation is no guarantee of a better grade and can even result in a lower grade if you do not offer a compelling case for raising your grade.

Turnitin.com: All papers in this course will be subject to submission to Turnitin.com for the detection of plagiarism. These papers will be added as source documents in the Turnitin.com reference database solely for the purpose of detecting plagiarism of such papers in the future.

Late paper and make-up policy: The deadlines for turning in your papers are firm. I will give extensions only where I am presented with evidence of illness or a family emergency *prior* to the due date. Papers will automatically be penalized 1/3 of a grade (A- to a B+, B+ to a B, etc.) for each day that they are late.

Writing and writing assistance

The writing center: The writing center provides one-on-one assistance at various stages of the writing process. All writers, even the most accomplished, can benefit from their assistance on issues as diverse as topic development, organization, and general strategies for revising. To make an appointment, see <http://writingcenter.georgetown.edu>.

Accommodations for students with differing abilities: If you are on record with the university as requiring special accommodations for the in-class exams, please stop by my office and let me know in confidence within the first two weeks of the semester. If you find, during the course of the semester, that special accommodations are required, please bring me the relevant documentation from the university as soon as you acquire it.

Use of external resources: To succeed in this course, you will need to learn how to read carefully and reason carefully, and you need to learn how to recover arguments from difficult texts. To do well in this course, you will not have to read anything beyond what is assigned. However, it is important to remember that the best way for developing many of these skills is through collaboration and discussion. Beyond trying to clarify your thoughts by thinking out-loud in class, and beyond the discussions that you will be having on the class blog, you may also want to get together in small groups to think through the issues that we have been discussing outside of class; alternatively, you might want to tweet about your philosophical thoughts or argue about the texts that you have been reading on Facebook. All of this is perfectly acceptable and likely to be helpful in understanding these difficult philosophical texts. People have very different styles of thinking and learning; and you should use whatever resources suit you best in order to develop the skills that you need for succeeding in this class.

Academic honesty: Keeping this in mind, when it comes time for you to write your papers, you must use the skills that you have developed by thinking through the relevant issues on your own. You have all signed the Georgetown University Honor pledge and have agreed to be honest in your academic endeavors and to hold yourself to the high ideals and rigorous standards of academic life. I expect you to be familiar with both the letter and the spirit of the pledge, and I will enforce the Honor Code by reporting any and all suspected cases of academic dishonesty. The Honor Code applies to all of the relevant aspects of this course and it is the responsibility of every student in this class to inform herself or himself of the relevant principles and to abide by them throughout the semester. Of course, the key to avoiding any dire consequences is to think for yourself, and do your own work on the in-class and take-home exams.

Cell Phones and Computers:

Be sure to turn off the ringers on your cell phones when you come to class; if you forget to do so, and your phone rings, turn it off immediately. You are welcome to use your computer for note taking and other purposes that are consistent with the tasks at hand in the course (e.g., looking up quotes from the reading); however, I would appreciate it if you would have the maturity to refrain from using your computer for non-academic purposes (e.g., playing games or checking your email) while in the class. Using your computer for non-academic purposes in the classroom can distract others and create an environment in which it is difficult for others to learn; so, please respect one another.

Mind your manners:

Philosophy is best done collectively and collaboratively; however, some of the questions that we will be discussing in this course may generate contentious claims, spirited discussions, vehement disagreements, and trenchant criticisms. This is at least part of what doing philosophy is all about. In discussing, disagreeing, criticizing, and arguing with one another, we must make an effort to remain courteous and respectful. I promise to do my best to raise philosophical issues and to start philosophical discussions in ways that are as sensitive as possible to the variety of viewpoints and opinions that we are sure to find among the members of this class. But, I will only be able to do this if each of you helps me to create an atmosphere where we can develop ideas in a friendly and welcoming environment where we all learn from one another. Perhaps more importantly, if you want to disagree with someone, or if you want to offer a criticism of their viewpoint, be sure to offer reasons for the approach that you are suggesting. If we reason through things together, we are sure to have a good semester!

Tentative course reading list:

- 9/1 Intro: What is philosophy?
9/8 *Heinlein, "They"
*Dick, "We can remember it for you wholesale"
Bostrom, "Are you in a computer simulation?"
9/13 Chalmers, "The matrix as metaphysics"

An in-class diagnostic exam will be given on 9/15

- 9/20 Olson, "Personal Identity"
9/22 Parfit, "Divided minds and the nature of persons"
9/27 *Egan, "Learning to be me"
Dennett, "Where am I"
9/29 Kurzweil, "Who am I, What am I"
10/4 **Class discussion: Oshii, *Ghost in the shell***
10/6 Clark, "A brain speaks"
Block, "The mind as the software of the brain"

Paper #1 must be submitted to Turnitin.com by 10:15 AM on 10/11

- 10/13 *Moore, "No woman born" or Dick "Impostor"
Dennett, "Consciousness in human and robot minds"
10/18 *Bisson, "They're made out of meat"
*Descartes (on animal minds)
10/20 *Hauser, "The mind"
10/25 *Doctrow, "Truncat"
Clark, "Cyborgs unplugged"
10/27 Kurzweil, "Superintelligence and singularity"
11/1 **Class discussion: Scott, *Bladerunner***
11/3 Schneider, "Mindscan: Transcending and enhancing the human brain"
11/8 *Asimov, "The bicentennial man"
Anderson, "Asimov's three laws of robotics"
11/10 Bostrom, "Ethical issues in advanced intelligence"

Paper #2 must be submitted to Turnitin.com by 10:15 AM on 11/12

- 11/15 *Butler, "Bloodchild"
*Frye, "Oppression"
11/17 *Bartky, "Psychological oppression"
11/22 *Elgin, "For the sake of grace"
*King, "Letter from Birmingham jail"
11/24 *Malcolm X, "The black revolution"
*Malcolm X, "The ballot or the bullet"
11/29 *Fanon, "National culture and the fight for freedom"
12/1 **Class discussion: District-9**
12/6 *Butler, "Speech sounds"
*Haslanger, "Gender and Race"
12/8 *Mieville, "'Tis the season"

Paper #3 must be submitted to Turnitin.com by 10:15 AM on 12/16