Philosophical Ideas in Science Fiction—Syllabus

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Rutgers The State University of New Jersey, Fall 2014, Tue & Thurs 2:50-4:10

Generally speaking, science fiction, or, more broadly, speculative fiction of any kind, can be utilized as a vehicle of philosophical exploration in two distinct but interconnected ways. First, its natural accommodation of beings and circumstances of a hitherto unencountered kind permits the postulation of settings and events in which familiar ideas and attitudes can be tested and the limits of their applicability determined. Second, it, in a manner analogous to mathematics, can be used to explore what the bounds of coherent speculation are.

Weeks 1, 2, 3, 4 Time Travel

- H.G. Wells, *The Time Machine* (chapter 1)
- Robert A. Heinlein, *By His Bootstraps*
- Donald C. Williams, *The Myth of Passage*
- Michael Dummett, *Causal Loops*
- C.J.S. Clarke, *Time in General Relativity*

Weeks 4, 5, 6 Artificial Intelligence

- Olaf Stapledon, *Last And First Men* (ch.XI, sections 1 and 2)
- Alan Turing, *Computing Machinery and Intelligence*
- John Searle, *Minds, Brains and Programs*
- Samuel Butler, *Erewhon* (Darwin Among the Machines chs. 23-25)

Weeks 6, 7, 8 The Problem of Other Minds

- Lewis Padgett, *Private Eye*
- Edward Bellamy, *To Whom This May Come*

Weeks 8, 9 Probability and Confirmation

- Robert M. Coates, *The Law*
- Antony Ferry, R.C. Dennis, *The Mail Order Prophet*
- J.L. Borges, *The Library of Babel*
- W.W. Jacobs, *The Monkey’s Paw*
- Bertrand Russell, *The Metaphysician’s Nightmare*

Weeks 9, 10, 11 Personal Identity, Scepticism, and Solipsism

- H.G. Wells, *The Story of the Late Mr. Elvesham*
- John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (ch. XXVII Identity and Diversity)
- Bernard Williams, *The Self and the Future*
- P.F. Strawson, *Individuals* (ch.2 ‘Sounds’)
- Robert A. Heinlein, *They*
- J.L. Borges, *Tlön Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*
- Gene Roddenberry, *The Cage* (Star Trek first pilot 1965)
- O.K. Bouwsma, *Descartes’ Evil Genius*
- Ray Bradbury, *No Particular Night Or Morning*
- George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (excerpts (to be specified))
- Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (5.6-5.641)
- Bertrand Russell, *Our Knowledge of the External World* (chs. III and IV)
  - *The Analysis of Mind* (Memory)
Philosophical Ideas in Science Fiction

H.P. Lovecraft  The Shadow Out of Time
Hilary Putnam  Brains in a Vat

Weeks 11, 12, 13, 14  Space, Time, and Mind

Arthur C. Clarke  The Wall of Darkness
Olaf Stapledon  Star Maker (chs. XIV and XV)
C.S. Peirce  Abstracts of 8 Lectures (The Topological Basis of the Logic of Continuity)
G.W. Leibniz  Monadology
Immanuel Kant  Critique of Pure Reason (The Amphiboly of Concepts of Reflection)
Fred Hoyle  October The First Is Too Late (ch.7 ‘Adagio’)
Isaac Asimov  The Last Question
Kurt Gödel  A Remark about the Relationship between Relativity Theory and Idealistic Philosophy
Brian Gerstein  Troud’s Plan

There will be a take-home exam. Final grade will be determined by quality of both written work and class participation.

Note: The university has directed that all syllabi make note of the existence of The Rutgers Self-Reporting Absence Website (https://sims.rutgers.edu/ssra), as well as of the request that it be utilized by students to indicate the date(s) and reason for their absence from class.