Philosophical Ideas in Science Fiction 261—Syllabus

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Rutgers The State University of New Jersey, Fall 2018, Tue & Thurs 2:50-4:10

Office Hours: By Appointment

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, in a manner analogous to mathematics, it 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*
- Brian Gerstein
  *Troud’s Plan*

Weeks 4, 5, 6  Artificial Intelligence

- Isaac Asimov
  *I, Robot* (‘Reason’, ‘Runaround’)
- 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*
- Adam Smith
  *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Part I Section 1 Chapters 1-4)
- Edward Bellamy
  *To Whom This May Come*
- Ludwig Wittgenstein
  *Philosophical Investigations* (sections 239-436)
- Hilary Putnam
  *Minds and Machines*

Weeks 8, 9  Probability and Confirmation

- Robert M. Coates
  *The Law*
- Antony Ferry, R.C. Dennis
  *The Mail Order Prophet* (episode of the television program Alfred Hitchcock Presents)
- J.L. Borges
  *The Library of Babel*
- H.G. Wells
  *The Country of the Blind*
- W.W. Jacobs
  *The Monkey’s Paw*
- Bertrand Russell
  *The Metaphysician’s Nightmare*
Philosophical Ideas in Science Fiction

Weeks 9, 10, 11, 12, 13  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
George Berkeley  A Treatise Concerning The Principles of Human Knowledge
                    (section Of The Principles Of Human Knowledge, paragraphs 1-33)
J.L. Borges  Tlön Uqbar, Orbis Tertius
P.F. Strawson  Individuals (ch.2 ‘Sounds’)
Henri Poincaré  Space and Geometry (in Science and Hypothesis)
Robert A. Heinlein  They
Gene Roddenberry  The Cage (First Star Trek 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)
H.P. Lovecraft  The Shadow Out of Time
Hilary Putnam  Brains in a Vat

Weeks 13, 14  Space, Time, and Mind

Arthur C. Clarke  The Wall of Darkness
Olaf Stapledon  Star Maker (chs. XIV and XV)
G.W. Leibniz  Monadology
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

There will be a take-home exam, to be submitted either in class or (if e-mailed) either in PDF or plain text format. 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.