

Philosophical Conversations (Phil 1112): The Philosopher's Guide to the Galaxy

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Course Description

Is time travel possible? Are we stuck inside a computer simulation? Should we try to live forever? In this course we will grapple with philosophical questions of metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics alongside works of science fiction by authors such as N. K. Jemisin, Robert Heinlein, and Ursula Le Guin. Readings and assignments will tie abstract philosophical theories to the real world, creating an opportunity for accessible dialogue between science and philosophy. Through this dialogue students will learn to craft philosophical arguments in clear, well-styled writing.

Rationale

This is a course in how to write philosophy. Throughout the course you will complete assignments, both in class and at home, that develop philosophical writing skills. Learning to write philosophy requires reading and understanding philosophy. Conversely, reading and understanding philosophy requires learning to reproduce arguments and theories in writing. You will develop these interdependent skills through group work, short in-class assignments, and essays completed in stages.

Writing instruction will be broken into two categories. Some assignments will improve your grammar and style. Others will focus on developing content. To develop the content of your essays, you will learn to identify, reproduce, and analyze the structures of arguments.

Learning Outcomes

1. Produce philosophical writing that meets the field of philosophy's expectations regarding structure, argumentation, and evidence.
2. Produce writing that is based on a careful analysis of the text, implementing logical tools presented early in the semester.
3. Handle secondary sources appropriately, properly citing in MLA format.
4. Develop effective preparatory writing strategies such as flow charts, outlining, drafting, and collaboration.

Evaluation

- *Writing Assignments:* 80%
You will complete **four major writing assignments** for this course, often in stages. The first assignment (after the trial essay) will be short (2–3 pages), and worth 10% of your

grade. The second assignment will be a bit longer (3–4 pages), worth 15% of your grade. The final two papers will be 5-6 pages in length, and will be worth 25% each.

- **Participation: 20%**

Your participation grade will be determined by the extent to which you are actively engaged in the course. Brief written assignments between essays will count towards your participation grade, as will your contributions to class discussion.

Grading Policies

1. Extensions can be granted on papers, but you need to talk to me a few days in advance. If you do not make arrangements beforehand, late papers will be downgraded by 1/3 letter grade per day.
2. To pass this class, **you must complete all four major writing assignments.**
3. Missing class without an excuse will lower your participation grade.

Notes on Academic Integrity

1. Each student in this course is required to adhere to Cornell's Academic Integrity Code: <http://cuinfo.cornell.edu/aic.cfm>. It is your responsibility to familiarize yourself with the Code, and what constitutes a violation of it. All work submitted must be the student's own, and all sources must be properly cited.
2. Each of the five major assignments will be submitted to Turnitin.com for the detection of plagiarism. Further, all papers will be included as source documents in the Turnitin.com reference database solely for the purpose of detecting plagiarism of such papers. Use of Turnitin.com service is subject to the usage policy posted on the Turnitin.com site.
3. Students are not permitted to buy or sell any course materials, online or otherwise. This includes handouts, paper topics, homework questions, etc. Such behavior constitutes academic misconduct.

Course Materials

Science Fiction and Philosophy. Ed. Susan Schneider. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2009. (henceforth "Schneider") *AVAILABLE ONLINE THROUGH THE CORNELL LIBRARY*

The remaining readings will be provided on Canvas

Tentative Schedule of Readings

Week 1 Sept 3

Wednesday

The Adventure Begins

Week 2 Sept 7

Monday: Time

Ray Bradbury, "The Sound of Thunder" (Schneider)

Ted Sider, "Time" (Schneider)

Recommended: Vonnegut, Slaughterhouse Five

Trial Essay Due Tuesday at 5pm

Wednesday: Time Travel

Robert Heinlein, "All You Zombies"

David Lewis, "The Paradoxes of Time Travel" (Schneider)

Week 3 Sept 14

Monday: Time Travel

David Lewis, "The Paradoxes of Time Travel" (Schneider) (cont.)

Graff and Birkenstein, *They Say, I Say*, Part 1

Wednesday: Time Travel

Kadri Vivhelin, "What Time Travelers Cannot Do"

Summary of Lewis due

Week 4 Sept 21

Monday: Writing Day

Joseph Williams, "Concision"

Optional: Samuel R. Delany, "About 5,750 Words"

Wednesday: Knowledge and The Matrix

René Descartes, Excerpt from *The Meditations* (Schneider)

John Pollock, "Brain in a Vat" (Schneider)

Film: *The Matrix*

Week 5 Sept 28

Monday: Writing Day

Graff and Birkenstein, *They Say, I Say*, Part 2

Wednesday: Knowledge and The Matrix

Susanna Rinard, "Reasoning One's Way Out of Skepticism"

Week 6 Oct 5

Monday: Knowledge and The Matrix

David Chalmers, "The Matrix as Metaphysics" (Schneider)

Wednesday: Consciousness and Computation

Alan Turing, "Computing Machinery and Intelligence"

Optional: *The Imitation Game* (Film)

Week 7 Oct 12

Monday: Consciousness and Computation

N. K. Jemisin, "The Trojan Girl," in *How Long 'til Black Future Month?*
Searle, "Minds, Brains, and Programs"

Optional: Boden, "Is Computational Psychology Possible?"

No class Wednesday, Oct 14

Week 8 Oct 19

Monday: Writing Day

Joseph Williams, "Actions" and "Characters"

Wednesday: Consciousness and Computation

David Chalmers, "Facing Up to the Problem of Consciousness"

Week 9 Oct 26

Monday: Consciousness and Computation

Karen Bennett, "Why I am not a Dualist"

Wednesday: Personal Identity

Daniel Dennett, "Where am I?" (Schneider)

Williams, "Cohesion and Coherence"

Week 10 Nov 2

Monday: Personal Identity

Derek Parfit, "Personal Identity"

Wednesday: Emotional Enhancement

Elliott, "The Tyranny of Happiness: Ethics and Cosmetic Psychopharmacology"

Film: *Brave New World* (1980)

OR

Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (We will discuss a scene in Chapter 15)

Week 11 Nov 9

Monday: Emotional Enhancement

Degrazia, "Prozac, Enhancement, and Self-Creation"

Wednesday: Writing Day

Please plan to bring a draft of your paper to class.

Week 12-13 Nov 16-29

Semi-Finals and Break

Week 14 Nov 30

Monday: Human Enhancement

Sandel, "The Case Against Perfection"

Huxley, *Brave New World*, Chapter 1 and 2

Wednesday: Human Enhancement

Brock, "Is Selection of Children Wrong?"

N. K. Jemisin, "Valedictorian," in *How Long 'til Black Future Month?*

Week 15 Dec 7

Monday: Do you really want to live forever?

Epicurus, "Letter to Menoeceus"

Lucretius, selection from Book 3 of *On the Nature of Things*

Wednesday: Forever, and Ever

Borges, "The Immortal"

Nagel, "Death"

Week 16 Dec 14

Monday: Forever Young

Williams, "The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality"

Russell, "The Value of Philosophy"

Wednesday: Final Class

Discussion of final paper

Final essay due during finals week