

Philosophy and Literature (Phil 221S)

Instructors: Benjamin Eva and Ben Sarbey

Email: benjamin.eva@duke.edu; ben.sarbey@duke.edu

Spring 2023

Meeting Time: Wednesdays 1:45-4:15 West Duke 204

This course will explore philosophical issues as they are presented in literature, in particular science-fiction. Generally we will read a fictional source paired with a non-fiction philosophical analysis of the issue presented in the story. We will explore several perennial questions in philosophy, such as the existence of free will and god, the nature of personal identity and time travel, and ethical questions concerning death and artificial intelligence. This seminar course will emphasize discussion and respectful argumentation. Assessment will consist of participation, a two-person presentation, and a final paper. There will be no exams.

Office Hours: After class or by appointment.

Meetings: Students will be expected to have carefully read the assigned readings **prior** to class time. As a seminar course, discussion is vital for successful learning and students will be expected to participate. We may also call on students to answer specific questions.

Readings:

1) *Stories of Your Life and Others* (Ted Chiang) ISBN: 978-1101972120

All other readings will be available on Sakai.

Assessment

Participation (25% of grade): As a seminar, this course will be a mix of lecture and discussion. Students must participate in classroom discussions but need not participate each day. Grading will not be based on the number of times a student speaks but instead on general willingness to be involved in the conversations that take place. Attendance is required as a part of your participation grade. Students should be on time and bring the readings being discussed that day.

Presentation (25% of grade): All students will be responsible for presenting once during the semester. This will involve giving background information for the readings as well as brief summaries of the readings themselves and prepare questions for the class to discuss. Presenters are also required to read the recommended reading for that week so as to provide context and additional information for the classroom discussion. Students presenting must also submit a 750-word minimum reflection on the readings they present on, which 1) summarizes and 2)

criticizes or defends the main argument. These will be due on Sakai, in Word doc format, before the class in which they present.

Final Paper (50% of grade): Students will have an option between two types of final papers for the course. *Option 1:* 7-12 page analysis of a philosophical issue as it is presented in a fiction reading, along with discussion of at least one philosophical source on that topic. Students may argue for or against a specific position on that topic or discuss aspects of the issue that were not touched on in class. *Option 2:* 7-12 page (total) paper consisting of a short story written by the student which explores a philosophical issue, with at least one page of analysis of their own story. Papers should be double spaced, with Times New Roman 12pt font and 1-inch margins, and are due April 30th by 11:59pm.

Policies

Electronics policy: As a seminar, active participation is vital and electronic devices will in general not be allowed. However, students may use electronic devices in class to view digital copies of the readings. This will be the only allowable use and should not involve typing. Students needing an accommodation should reach out to us at the beginning of the semester, in accordance with the accommodations policy.

Accommodations: Any student with a disability or special learning requirement impacting their participation in the course should discuss this with us in the first week of class so that reasonable accommodations can be made.

Schedule

Jan. 18: Introduction to Philosophy and Literature

Reading: James Tiptree Jr. "And So On and So On" + Martha Nussbaum "Form and Content, Philosophy and Literature" (excerpts)

Recommended: Rick Roderick's video lectures on the history of philosophy (YouTube)

Jan. 25: Does Free Will Exist?

Readings: Ted Chiang "Anxiety is the Dizziness of Freedom" (sakai) + Robert Kane "A Contemporary Introduction to Free Will" (excerpts) + Galen Strawson "Luck Swallows Everything"

Recommended: Galen Strawson, "The Impossibility of Moral Responsibility" + *The Minority Report* (movie).

Feb. 1: The Mind/Body Problem

Reading: Rene Descartes “Meditations on First Philosophy” (excerpts) + Gilbert Ryle “Descartes’ Myth” + Hilary Putnam “The Nature of Mental States” + *Bladerunner* (movie)

Recommended: Raymond Smullyan “An Unfortunate Dualist” + Alec Hyslop “Other Minds” (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy) + *San Junipero* (Black Mirror episode)

Feb. 8: The Nature of Language

Readings: Ted Chiang, “Story of Your Life” + Peter Hacker “Wittgenstein” (*The Great Philosophers* series) + *Arrival* (movie).

Recommended: Donald Davidson “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme” + Bruce Aune “Conceptual Relativism”

Feb. 15: Who Are We? The Problem of Personal Identity

Readings (in order): Derek Parfit “Reasons and Persons” (excerpts) + Greg Egan, “Learning to Be Me”

Recommended: Jose Luis Borges “The Other” + *Coherence* (movie) + Shoemaker and Swinburne “Personal Identity” (excerpts)

Feb 22: Time Travel

Readings: Ray Bradbury “A Sound of Thunder” + Nicholas JJ Smith, *Time Travel* (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy).

Recommended: *Primer* movie + David Lewis “The Paradoxes of Time Travel”.

Mar. 1: Beauty and Sexual Attraction

Readings: Ted Chiang “Liking What You See: A Documentary” + Heather Widdows “Perfect Me: Beauty as an Ethical Ideal” (introduction)

Recommended: Alexander Nehamas “Only a Promise of Happiness” (excerpts)

Mar. 8: Does God Exist?

Readings: Fyodor Dostoevsky “Rebellion” (from *The Brothers Karamazov*) + J.L. Mackie, “The Miracle of Theism” (excerpts)

Recommended: John Hick “An Irenaean Theodicy”

Mar 22: Transhumanism and the Ethics of Human Enhancement

Readings: Nick Bostrom, “The Fable of the Dragon-Tyrant” + Bostrom and Savulescu, “Human Enhancement Ethics”

Recommended: Bostrom, “Why I Want to Be a Posthuman When I Grow Up”

-----3/5-3/13 Spring Break-----

Mar. 29: Regulating Robots

Reading: Isaac Asimov “Runaround” + Ted Chiang “The Evolution of Human Science” + *Ex Machina* (movie) + Eric Schwitzgebel and Mara Garza “A Defense of the Rights of Artificial Intelligences”

Recommended: *Be Right Back* (Black Mirror episode) + Peter Singer “Speciesism and Moral Status”

Apr. 5: Neuroethics and Criminal Law

Readings: Lisa Schoenberg, “Adjoiners” + Owen Jones, “The Future of Law and Neuroscience”

Recommended: Maoz and Yaffe, “What Does Recent Neuroscience Tell Us About Criminal Responsibility?”

Apr. 12: Philosophy of Death

Reading: Leo Tolstoy, “The Death of Ivan Ilyich”
<https://open.lib.umn.edu/ivanilich/chapter/full-text-english/> + Jacques Choron “Modern Man and Mortality” (excerpts).

Recommended: Shelly Kagan “Death” (excerpt)

Apr. 19: The Meaning of Life

Reading: David Foster Wallace “Backbone” + Richard Taylor “The Meaning of Life”

Recommended: Albert Camus “The Myth of Sisyphus”

Apr. 26: The Meaning of Life

Reading: Jean-Paul Sartre, “Existentialism is a Humanism” + *Waking Life* (movie)

Recommended: William Barret “Irrational Man” (Excerpts)

****Final Paper due by 11:59pm 4/30****