

FYS 031: Science Fiction and Philosophy
Fall 2019

Meeting time and location: MW 12:30—1:45, Medbury 221.

Professor: Martin Roth, Department of Philosophy and Religion.

Contact information: E-mail: martin.roth@drake.edu; phone: x3748. The best way to reach me is by e-mail. Office hours: MW 8-10:30; Medbury 208.

Peer Mentor and Academic Consultant (PMAC): Calvin Blume
(calvin.blume@drake.edu)

Required texts: *Science Fiction and Philosophy*, edited by Susan Schneider. All other course readings will be made available as .pdfs or links (through Blackboard).

Course description: “*You unlock this door with the key of imagination. Beyond it is another dimension—a dimension of sound, a dimension of sight, a dimension of mind. You’re moving into a land of both shadow and substance, of things and ideas. You’ve just crossed over into the Twilight Zone.*”

Science fiction and philosophy each has a venerable history of using the strange and fantastic to examine and challenge the familiar, and in this course, we will use works of philosophy and science fiction—short stories and films—to introduce and explore a number of long-standing philosophical issues. The topics to be considered in this class include knowledge and reality, personal identity, artificial intelligence, and free will.

Learning Objectives: The primary aim of this course is to help students become better critical thinkers, readers, and writers. As such, the course is concerned more with developing skills than it is mastering content. Specifically, this course should foster your ability to:

1. Clearly identify and state relevant problems, questions, or issues.
2. Develop and defend reasonable solutions, answers, or positions on a problem, question, or issue.
3. Provide careful and well supported interpretations of important claims.
4. Effectively communicate a position on an issue.
5. Identify assumptions that inform our reasoning about a problem, question, or issue and make those assumptions explicit.
6. Recognize the ways in which a position may be challenged and acknowledge that reasonable alternatives to a position may exist.
7. Discover and evaluate sources of information or evidence.

Evaluation: Your course grade will be determined by the following factors:

1. The quality of your papers (75% total):

- (a) Paper 1 (around 1200 words): 20%
- (b) Paper 2 (around 1600 words): 25%
- (c) Paper 3 (around 2000 words): 30%

Topics, requirements, and evaluation criteria will be distributed well in advance of each paper. The first paper will be assigned sometime in mid-to-late September. The second paper will be assigned sometime in mid-to-late October. The third paper will be assigned around the end of November.

Writing Workshop: Each student is required to attend a session with a Writing Workshop tutor. These sessions should be used to work on the *second* paper, and failing to attend a tutoring session will lower your grade on that paper. More details about this will be provided when the second paper is assigned. To schedule an appointment, visit this link:

<http://artsci.drake.edu/writersworkshop/wwshop.html>

2. The quality of your participation (25%):

While attendance (“showing up”) is necessary for participation, attendance is not equivalent to participation. Participation requires activity, including asking and answering questions, engaging others in conversation, articulating a position or an objection to a position, and sharing and responding to short writing assignments and other forms of in-class work.

Short writing assignments: In preparation for both class discussions and the longer papers, you will be asked to produce written work for many of the days we meet (about 1-2 pages, typed and double-spaced). Often these assignments will ask you to respond to course readings, but sometimes they will ask you to respond to in-class discussions. You will be expected to bring a hard copy of your work to class (and turn it in at the end of class), so make sure you have reliable and timely access to a working printer.

Because your participation is being evaluated, there is no additional penalty for missing class. As a corollary, there are no “excused” absences: you cannot participate if you are not here, regardless of the reason for the absence. In order to receive credit for a short writing assignment, you are required to attend class the day the assignment is due.

General Expectations:

1. What I will expect from you:
 - (a) You actually read the assigned material.
 - (b) You read it more than once, and read it with a careful, critical and questioning mind.
 - (c) You come to class prepared to ask questions about the readings and offer your evaluations of the readings.
 - (d) You treat the beliefs of others seriously and adopt the attitude that they may have something meaningful and important to offer, even if you ultimately disagree with it.
 - (e) You foster a spirit of collaboration and the sense that we are working towards the common goal of figuring out what it is best to believe about the course topics.
 - (f) You recognize that disagreement does not require being disagreeable. I encourage you to challenge each other (and me!), but please do so in a way that respects the person you are challenging.
 - (g) You give your best effort when completing assignments.

2. What you can expect from me:
 - (a) I will foster an atmosphere that is conducive to an intelligent, respectful, and fair exchange of views.
 - (b) I will equip you with the tools to engage critically with the content of the course.
 - (c) I will provide helpful feedback on the work you do for the course.
 - (d) I will help you satisfy the expectations I have of you.

Schedule of Topics and Readings:

Introduction: Tools for Doing Philosophy

Introduction to *Science Fiction and Philosophy*
“Arguments Primer” (Blackboard)

Knowledge and Reality

The Matrix
Excerpts from *The Republic*, by Plato
Excerpts from *The Meditations*, by Rene Descartes
“*The Matrix* as Metaphysics,” by David Chalmers

Personal Identity

“Personal Identity,” by Eric Olson
“Who Am I? What Am I?” by Ray Kurzweil

Blade Runner

Artificial Intelligence

“Robot Dreams,” by Issac Asimov

“Thinking Machines,” by Steven Pinker (Blackboard)

“A Coffeehouse Conversation on the Turing Test,” by Douglas Hofstadter (Blackboard)

Ex Machina

Free Will

The Adjustment Bureau

“Free Will,” by Simon Blackburn

Academic Honesty: One expectation I have of you deserves special attention: academic honesty. What does this mean? It means, first and foremost, that you do not plagiarize, which is what happens when you represent the ideas of others as your own. The most straightforward example of plagiarism is word-for-word copying, with proper citation not given. Subtler forms include slightly altering the language of others while conveying a point or argument that is not yours. Other examples of academic dishonesty include cheating on an exam and fabricating data/evidence. If you are determined to have been academically dishonest, you will automatically fail the assignment and quite possibly fail the course (and perhaps face even harsher punishment, e.g. probation or expulsion). Thus, I offer the following advice: if you are unsure whether you are violating Drake’s regulations governing academic honesty, ASK ME. Furthermore, I strongly encourage you to familiarize yourself with Drake’s regulations governing academic honesty:

<http://www.drake.edu/catalog/undergrad/14-15/collegeofartsandsciences/academicregulations/>

Content found on Internet sites (such as Wikipedia and other on-line encyclopedias) is not considered common knowledge; as such, using material from such sources without proper citation is an instance of academic dishonesty.

Disabilities: If you require academic accommodation because of a disability, please discuss this with me during the first week of the semester. Accommodations are handled through Student Disability Services (Old Main 107). You can contact Michelle Laughlin (the director of SDS) by phone (x 1835) or e-mail: michelle.laughlin@drake.edu.