

# Philosophy and Science Fiction

## I Instructor Information

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**Name:** Dr. Bradley Rettler

**Office:** Ross Hall 128

**Zoom Office:** <https://uwyo.zoom.us/j/7109295771>

**Office Hours:** On Zoom, Wednesday and Friday 2-3pm, On Zoom or phone by appointment

**Story and Philosophy Discussions:** On Zoom, Wednesday and Friday 3-4pm

**E-mail:** [brettler@uwyo.edu](mailto:brettler@uwyo.edu)

## II Welcome

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Welcome to Philosophy & Science Fiction! I'm teaching this course because I love science fiction; it comprises at least 50% of my GoodReads entries each year. Hopefully you're taking this course because you also love science fiction, and you want to talk about science fiction with others. I spent this past summer poring over stories that I remembered loving, and seeking out new stories with interesting philosophical implications. It was awesome. And I'm really excited re-read them this semester and talk about them with you. I think we can learn a lot of philosophy from seeing it illustrated in science fiction, and it's by far the most fun way to do so!

## III Course Description

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Science fiction is rich with stories that explore classic philosophical questions or puzzles like time travel, artificial intelligence, free will, gender, and personal identity. Often we are better able to understand these puzzles when presented to us in narrative form. And sometimes narratives in more fanciful settings help us understand the puzzles better.

In this course, we will discuss short stories, movies, and TV episodes whose central themes or plot elements make significant connections with these philosophical issues. We will also look at treatments of the puzzles by contemporary philosophers.

## IV Learning Outcomes

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By the end of this course, students will be able to:

1. Identify the philosophically interesting issues in a work of fiction.
2. Explain the philosophical issues discussed in the course – time travel, personal identity, artificial intelligence, gender, and various ethical issues.
3. Illustrate these philosophical issues with other scenarios from their own imagination.

4. Identify the standard views of these issues.
5. Compare and contrast the standard views of these issues.
6. Give the arguments for and against the standard views of these issues.
7. Invent stories that are philosophically interesting.

## V Required Readings

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You are not required to purchase any books. All readings will be available on WyoCourses. They can be found either through the “Modules” tab or in the “Files” section. The only required readings (and viewings) will be science fiction, except for two topics of your choosing, for which you’ll read some philosophy papers.

## VI Method

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This course will be organized into five topics – time travel, free will, gender, personal identity, and artificial intelligence. And so there will be five modules – one for each topic. Each module will contain the readings, both required and optional, and a discussion for each reading. It will also contain short video lectures identifying the philosophical content in the story, giving the various views of the philosophical issue, and arguments for and against those views. Discussion will be open on those videos.

## VII Evaluation

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**Discussions:** 50% of your grade. For each reading, you will post your thoughts in the Discussion whose title is the name of that reading. You can say things about the story that you’d say to a book club or in a review, but you should pay special attention to what you take to be philosophically interesting about the story. What is the philosophical issue? What view of the issue does the story seem to support? What are the alternative views? What are the reasons for and against that view? Each Discussion post should be 1-2 paragraphs.

**First Paper:** 20% of your grade. You will write a philosophy paper on the topic of one of the modules. This paper will introduce the philosophical issue through one (or more) of the SciFi stories we read. You’ll then say what at least two philosophers have said about the issue, and analyze the story using what those philosophers have said. Which view does the story accept? Is it consistent? The paper should be approximately 1200 words (5 pages). This is due December 11.

**Final Paper / Story:** 30% of your grade. For the final project, you have two options.

Option 1: You will write a paper much like the other paper, but on a different philosophical topic. (You can also do a topic we don’t cover, but you must clear it with me first.) You’ll introduce the topic through a short story or TV episode or movie – either one from the course or one you’ve found on your own. You’ll canvas what a few philosophers have said about the issue, paying

special attention to the arguments they give for various views. You'll critique the arguments with the goal of coming to have a view on the issue. You'll conclude by talking about how your view interacts with the story, and what would have to change (if anything). The paper should be approximately 2000 words (8 pages). This is due December 13.

Option 2: You will create a philosophically interesting science fiction story, either written or video or audio. It should be at least 1500 words, and no more than 8000 words. You will accompany it with a paper explaining the philosophical issue or issues the story deals with, your view, and how your view interacts with the story. The accompanying paper should be 1 to 2 pages. This is due December 20.

## VIII Grading Scale

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- A: 90-100
- B: 80-90
- C: 70-80
- D: 60-70
- F: Below 60

## IX Due Dates

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Given this course's focus on discussion, it is not entirely self-paced. You will be required to participate in the discussions in a timely manner. The dates are dates by which you must have posted a discussion comment. However, the papers need only be turned in by the end of the semester.

THIS IS FOR YOUR CONVENIENCE AND SUBJECT TO CHANGE. THE OFFICIAL SCHEDULE IS THE MODULES SECTION ON WYOCOURSES.

### Module: Time Travel

- August 30:       About Time  
                      Bradbury - A Sound of Thunder
  
- September 6:     Futurama - Roswell That Ends Well  
                      Asimov - The Red Queen's Race  
                      Heinlein - All You Zombies
  
- September 13:    Chiang - The Story of Your Life  
                      Exurb1a - The Lantern

### Module: Free Will

- September 20:    Chiang - What's Expected of Us

Egan - The Infinite Assassin

September 27: Chiang - Anxiety is the Dizziness of Freedom

### Module: Personal Identity

October 4: Exurb1a - For Every Dove a Bullet  
Egan - The Safe Deposit Box

October 11: Black Mirror - San Junipero  
Egan - Learning to Be Me

October 18: Asimov - Bicentennial Man  
Egan - Dust

### Module: Artificial Intelligence

October 25: Asimov - Reason  
Chiang - The Lifecycle of Software Objects

November 1: Egan - Bit Players  
Egan - 3-adica

### Module: Gender

November 8: Gilman - The Yellow Wallpaper  
Stone - The Conquest of Gola

November 15: Tiptree - The Girl Who Was Plugged in  
Moore - No Woman Born

November 22: Tiptree - Women Men Don't See  
Tiptree - Your Faces O My Sisters!

November 29: NO READING – THANKSGIVING

December 6: LeGuin - The Matter of Seggri  
Tiptree - And I Awoke and Found Me Here on the Cold Hill's Side  
LeGuin - Coming of Age in Karhide

### Module: Ethics

December 13: Exurb1a - The Want Machine  
Simak - The Shipshape Miracle

### Papers Due

December 13: First Paper (But seriously, do this as early as you can.)

December 20: Final Paper \ Story

## **X Honor Code**

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All students are expected to abide by the Academic Honor Code. Students are not allowed to write papers together, although verbal discussion of one's papers (with anyone) is not only permitted but encouraged. Any use of outside sources for specific ideas or arguments must be properly cited. Plagiarism is easily detectable and will absolutely not be tolerated. The University provides guidelines on what constitutes plagiarism here: [http://www.uwyo.edu/generalcounsel/\\_files/docs/uw-reg-6-802.pdf](http://www.uwyo.edu/generalcounsel/_files/docs/uw-reg-6-802.pdf). You are **strongly encouraged** to read that document. If you have any doubt about the appropriateness of any action, please check with me.

## **XI Students with Disabilities**

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I am happy to accommodate students with disabilities. Students desiring accommodations on the basis of physical, learning, or psychological disability for this class should view their options at <http://www.uwyo.edu/udss/> and contact Disability Support Services. They are located at 128 Knight Hall, and can be reached by email at [udss@uwyo.edu](mailto:udss@uwyo.edu) or by phone at 307.766.3073.

## **XII Title IX Office**

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If you or someone you know would like help related to an experience of sexual violence including sexual assault, harassment, domestic violence, dating violence, stalking or other type of non-consensual sexual conduct, please contact Jim Osborn by phone at 307.766.5200 or by email at [report-it@uwyo.edu](mailto:report-it@uwyo.edu). I am (along with nearly all faculty and staff members) a mandatory reporter; if I learn of any incident of sexual violence or misconduct, I am legally required to report it.

## **XIII Support**

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There are a variety of ways to get extra academic help at UW. You can drop-in to the STEP Tutoring Center at Coe Library, get e-tutoring on your writing, and visit the Writing Center in Coe Library.