**730:261**

**Philosophical Ideas in Science Fiction**

**Spring 2023**

Instructor: David Sorensen

Email: dss170@english.rutgers.edu  
Dates: 1/17-5/1

Meeting time: Wednesday 10:20-11:40 am, Friday 3:50-5:10pm  
Meeting place: Frelinghuysen Hall, Room A1 (College Ave. Campus)

Thought experiments are important tools for exploring philosophical concepts and theories. In this course, we will treat science fiction stories, novels, and films as extended thought experiments to explore some of the metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical questions surrounding virtual worlds (e.g. the Matrix), parallel universes, time travel, free will, and utopian societies. We will read short stories and novel excerpts from sci-authors like Ted Chiang, Arthur C. Clarke, Ursula K. Le Guin, Robert A. Heinlein, and Aldous Huxley. We will discuss the following questions:

What is reality?

Are virtual worlds part of reality?

Can we know whether we are in the Matrix?

Is free will an illusion?

Should we plug into an experience machine?

Is time travel metaphysically possible?

What is the ideal kind of society?

Course readings:

**(a)** Required Textbook: *Reality +* by David Chalmers

**(b)** Supplementary readings available on Canvas (go to “pages” and then “readings and homework”, or visit the “Files” section)

Course requirements and grading:

Midterm: 20%

Post-Midterm Quizzes: 40% (10% each)

Homework: 15%

Essay-based Final Exam (take-home): 25%

**Detailed schedule of topics/readings (tentative)**

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| **Date** | **Topic** | **Reading(s)** |
| W, 1/18 | Course Introduction | Syllabus |
| F, 1/20 | Philosophical Methodology and Argumentation 101 |  |
| W, 1/25 | Real life vs. Simulation | Film: **The Thirteenth Floor**  Chapter 1 Is this the real life? |
| F, 1/27 | The Simulation Hypothesis | Chapter 2 What is the simulation hypothesis? |
| W, 2/1 | Knowledge | Chapter 3 Do we know things?  Recommended Film: The Matrix |
| F, 2/3 | Knowledge con’t | Chapter 4 Can we prove there is an external world? |
| W, 2/8 | Knowledge con’t | Chapter 5 Is it likely that we’re in a simulation? |
| F, 2/10 | Virtual Realism con’t | Chapter 6 What is reality? |
| W, 2/15 | Virtual Realism | Chapter 10 Do virtual reality headsets create reality?  Chapter 11 Are virtual reality devices illusion machines? |
| F, 2/17 | Augmented Reality and Deep Fakes | Chapters 12 and 13 |
| W, 2/22 | Virtual Realism and Meaning | Chapter 17 Can you lead a good life in a virtual world? |
| F, 2/24 | Virtual Reality and Moral Status | Chapter 18 Do Simulated Lives Matter |
| W, 3/1 | Midterm on Reality + |  |
| F, 3/3 | Free Will | **Film: The Adjustment Bureau** |
| W, 3/8 | Free Will | What’s Expected of Us, Ted Chiang |
| F, 3/10 | Free Will | Fatalism, Taylor |
| W, 3/22 | Free Will | TBA |
| F, 3/24 | Parallel Universes | **Film**: Everything, Everywhere, All at Once |
| W, 3/29 | Parallel Universes con’t | Anxiety is the Dizziness of Freedom |
| F, 3/31 | Time Travel | Film: **Twelve Monkeys** |
| W, 4/5 | Time Travel con’t | All you Zombies, Heinlein  *The Paradoxes of Time Travel*, Lewis |
| F, 4/7 | Time Travel con’t | *Time Travel is Ridiculously Impossible,* Huemer  *A Sound of Thunder*, Bradbury |
| W, 4/12 | Time Travel con’t | *The Metaphysical Possibility of Time Travel Fictions*, Effingham |
| F, 4/14 | Time Travel con’t | **Film**: Tenet |
| W, 4/19 | Utopia con’t | *Utopias as Practical Political Philosophy*, Stillman  *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas*, Le Guin |
| F, 4/21 | Utopia con’t | Excerpt from *Republic*, Plato |
| W, 4/26 | Utopia con’t | Excerpt from *Brave New World*, Huxley  Excerpt from *Island*, Huxley |
| F, 4/28 | Utopia con’t | Childhood’s End |

**COVID-related policies:**

In the event that the college closes temporarily or permanently due to COVID or some other emergency, we will shift to a remote synchronous format. The lectures will take place during the same time as the in-person sessions. Additionally, exams will be taken remotely rather than in person.

**Rutgers Academic Integrity Policy**: *Principles of academic integrity require that every Rutgers University student:*

* *properly acknowledge and cite all use of the ideas, results, or words of others*
* *properly acknowledge all contributors to a given piece of work*
* *make sure that all work submitted as his or her own in a course or other academic activity is produced without the aid of unsanctioned materials or unsanctioned collaboration*
* *obtain all data or results by ethical means and report them accurately without suppressing any results inconsistent with his or her interpretation or conclusions*
* *treat all other students in an ethical manner, respecting their integrity and right to pursue their educational goals without interference. This requires that a student neither facilitate academic dishonesty by others nor obstruct their academic progress*
* *uphold the canons of the ethical or professional code of the profession for which he or she is preparing.*

*Adherence to these principles is necessary in order to insure that:*

* *everyone is given proper credit for his or her ideas, words, results, and other scholarly accomplishments*
* *all student work is fairly evaluated and no student has an inappropriate advantage over others*
* *the academic and ethical development of all students is fostered*
* *the reputation of the University for integrity in its teaching, research, and scholarship is maintained and enhanced.*

*Failure to uphold these principles of academic integrity threatens both the reputation of the University and the value of the degrees awarded to its students. Every member of the University community therefore bears a responsibility for ensuring that the highest standards of academic integrity are upheld.*

**Disability services:** The Office of Disability Services works with students with a documented disability to determine the eligibility of reasonable accommodations, facilitates and coordinates those accommodations when applicable, and lastly engages with the Rutgers community at large to provide and connect students to appropriate resources (e-mail: https://ods.rutgers.edu/, phone: (848) 445-6800). Students with disabilities requesting accommodations must follow the procedures outlined at https://ods.rutgers.edu/students/applying-for-services. Please give your letter of accommodation to me as soon as possible, and we will coordinate the accommodations privately.