PHL 242: Science Fiction and Philosophy

Live meetings: Mon 6-8pm EST (online, Bb Collaborate)

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Course Description

Many famous philosophical thought experiments involve imagined scenarios that seem straight out of science fiction, such as brains in vats, teleportation devices, and strange medical procedures. At the same time, many works of science fiction resemble philosophical thought experiments, using these kinds of scenarios to touch on philosophical questions about the nature of reality, the nature of knowledge, and how we should live our lives. In this course, we'll examine how science fictional thought experiments can help us answer such philosophical questions.

In the first half of the course, we'll begin by considering some famous thought experiments that involve science fictional scenarios, as a means of familiarizing ourselves with the way such thought experiments are used by philosophers. We'll finish this first half with some critical, meta-philosophical reflections on the role of thought experiments in philosophical methodology.

In the second half of the course, we'll undertake a more in-depth philosophical interrogation of a work of science fiction, the film *The Matrix*. We'll treat this film as an extended philosophical thought experiment, examining its implications for some fundamental questions in metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics.

Course Delivery

By Monday of each week, I will post a few hours worth of videos and recorded lectures related to the week's readings. You should try to watch each week's content by Friday of that week. So, for example, videos posted on Monday, July 6th will pertain to course readings for Week 1 of the course, July 6th-10th. In order to keep up with the pace of the course, you should plan to watch those videos by sometime on or around Friday, July 10th.

All course readings, videos, and assignments will be posted on Quercus in weekly modules (called "Week 1," "Week 2," etc.). Remember that, because of their compressed timeline, summer courses move at a fast pace; to keep up with everything you need to know for the course week-to-week, **make sure to check the appropriate module at the beginning of each week**.

Each Monday (beginning in Week 2), there will be a live class session on Bb Collaborate from 6pm-8pm EST. This session will be based on questions about course content which students are required to submit by the end of each week (see Course Evaluation section below for more detail). These live sessions will be run in a "gameshow" format that gives you a chance to earn bonus marks for the course by answering your

classmates' questions (again, see Course Evaluation for more detail). While I won't be taking attendance at these live class sessions, it's highly recommended that you attend as a chance to have course content clarified, earn bonus marks, and build up a sense of community with fellow course participants.

Course Evaluation

<u>Weekly questions</u>
Worth 12% of course grade. By the end of each week, submit a substantive question you have about something from the week's lecture material. **Due on Quercus by 11:59pm EST each Saturday of the class period** (via an assignment link in each weekly module, where you'll find more detailed instructions and grading criteria). There will be six of these in total, worth 2% of your course grade each.

BONUS MARK OPPOURTNITY: Gameshow Mondays
Live Bb Collaborate class sessions (Mondays 6pm-8pm EST) will be an opportunity to earn bonus marks by demonstrating your knowledge of course material. During these sessions, I'll raise some of the best and most common weekly questions submitted by students the previous Saturday. The first student to correctly answer each question will receive a point. Points will accumulate over the term, with a top 5 "leader board" updated each week. Students who make a substantive effort to participate in this activity throughout the term will receive a 1% bump to their final course grade. Students appearing on the leader board at the end of the term will receive an additional 1% bump (i.e., 2% total).

<u>Short papers</u>
Short paper #1: 350 words, worth 18% of course grade. Will ask you to explain a thought experiment-based argument from a course reading (more detailed instructions posted on Quercus at least one week before due date). To be submitted in Quercus. **Due July 20ᵗʰ.**

Short paper #2: 700 words, worth 30% of course grade. Will ask you to explain a thought experiment-based argument from a course reading then raise an original objection to that argument (more detailed instructions posted on Quercus at least two weeks before due date). To be submitted in Quercus. **Due Aug 3ʳᵈ.**

<u>Term paper or project</u>
The final assignment for the course will be worth 40%. You can choose one of two options for this assignment. **Due Aug 17ᵗʰ.**

Option 1: term paper.
Complete a term paper of 1300 words. Will ask you to come up with your own thought experiment-based argument that addresses some philosophical debate we've considered in the course (more detailed instructions posted on Quercus at least two weeks before due date). To be submitted in Quercus.

Option 2: public philosophy project
The majority of assignments you complete in university courses will be seen by you plus a TA or instructor, after which no one will ever look at them again. This option will instead allow you to prepare a piece of "public philosophy," philosophical work that is instead intended for consumption by a wider audience, thereby broadening the potential impact of your work in the course. The exact design of this project is relatively open-ended: I encourage to exercise your creativity in coming up with an idea that personally excites you. The main criteria are that the project a) directly relates to (some aspect of) this course's

philosophical content and b) demonstrates your understanding of that content. Here are some examples of how this could look, though you are by no means limited to these ideas:

- Create a Youtube video or podcast related to some philosophical topic (e.g., explaining an argument and some objections to it, connecting some philosophical topic to some artwork or current event)
- Propose a substantive edit to a Wikipedia article or propose an entirely new Wikipedia article (on, e.g., a thought experiment or argument we've covered, philosophical aspects of *The Matrix*)
- Write a philosophical op-ed (e.g., connect a philosophical argument or thought experiment to some current event).
- Conduct a philosophically substantive interview with a philosopher we've read or with someone else (philosopher, academic, artist, journalist, etc.) whose work connects to course content.
- Utilize another online medium or social media platform (blog, Reddit, Twitter, Facebook, etc.), perhaps by designing some way to engage non-course participants in philosophical activity.

If you'd like to take advantage of this option, you should **email me by July 27th with a short description of your project idea**. As needed, I'll work with you to make sure the project is substantive enough to satisfy the assignment criteria while feasible to complete without taking up significantly more time and effort than a term paper would (but note that the open-endedness of this project may nevertheless result in slightly more work than a term paper). Once project details are figured out, I'll also make it clear exactly how your project will be submitted and evaluated (since this may vary a bit by student).

Reading Schedule

All readings will be posted on Quercus in the appropriate weekly module. Where there is more than one assigned reading for the same date, it's recommended that you read them in the order they appear below. Some students find it more effective to do course readings prior to watching lectures while some prefer to do readings after. Lecture content will not assume prior familiarity with course readings, so you can choose which option is most effective for your learning.

Most of the readings for Part 2 of the course appear in the 2005 volume *Philosophers Explore The Matrix*. I'll be sharing versions of them that have been made available online by the publisher and/or authors; if you prefer a hard copy, you're welcome to purchase the book yourself (through, e.g., Amazon). A note about language in this volume: at the time *The Matrix* was released, its directors, sisters Lana and Lily Wachowski, publicly identified as men. Both have since come out as trans women. As a result, older publications like this refer to them with descriptions like "The Wachowski brothers" and with their birth names (Larry and Andy). I'll use currently preferred names and gendered descriptions in all my teaching material.

Reading list subject to slight modifications, with advanced notice, throughout the term.

Part 1: Philosophy through Science Fictional Thought Experiments

Week 1 (July 6th-10th): Famous thought experiments I

- Jennifer Nagel, "The Problem of Skepticism" (*Wireless Philosophy* YouTube video)
- Ben Bramble, "The Experience Machine"
- Bernard Williams, "The Self and the Future"

Week 2 (July 13th-17th): Famous thought experiments II

- Judith Jarvis Thomson, "A Defense of Abortion"
- John Searle, "Minds, Brains and Programs"
- Frank Jackson, "Epiphenomenal Qualia"

Week 3 (July 20th-24th): Analyzing thought experimental methodology

- Daniel Dennett, selections from *Consciousness Explained*
- Edouard Machery, "Thought Experiments and Philosophical Knowledge"
- David E. Ward, "Imaginary Scenarios, Black Boxes, and Philosophical Method"

Part 2: Philosophy through *The Matrix*

Week 4 (July 27th-31st): Metaphysics and epistemology through *The Matrix* I

- Lana and Lily Wachowski (directors), *The Matrix*
- Michael McKenna, "Neo's Freedom… Whoa!"
- Frances Flannery-Dailey and Rachel Wagner, "Gnosticism and Buddhism in *The Matrix*" (sec. 1 optional)

Week 5 (Aug 3rd-7th): Metaphysics and epistemology through *The Matrix* II

- Tim Mawson, "Morpheus and Berkeley on Reality"
- David Chalmers, "The Matrix as Metaphysics" (sec. 9 optional)
- Hilary Putnam, "Brains in a Vat"

Week 6 (Aug 10th-14th): Ethics through *The Matrix*

- Christopher Grau, "The Value of Reality: Cypher and the Experience Machine"
- Iakovos Vasilou, "Reality, What Matters, and *The Matrix*"
- Julia Driver, "Artificial Ethics"

Other Course Business

Course-related communications
All emails to Daniel or Felix should include "PHL 242" in the subject line and be sent from a UofT email address. Emails which do not conform to below guidelines for course-related communications may not receive a response. You should expect to receive a reply to all other emails within 48 hours (so try not to send questions about assignments less than 48 hours before due dates). If you don't hear back by then, send a follow up.

When to email Felix:

- Prior to assignment due dates with **brief** clarificatory questions that can be answered in a few sentences and which are not already answered on assignment sheets or in the syllabus.

- After a graded assignment is returned to you with **brief** questions about grading that can be answered in a few sentences (e.g., asking for brief clarification about 1 or 2 comments you received).

When to email Daniel:

- With questions regarding non-philosophical course business which are not already answered on assignment sheets or in the syllabus.
- To request extensions on assignments (see "late and missed work" below for guidelines).
- With more substantive questions or requests about assignments that have already been graded, including more detailed concerns about comments you've received on a paper and requests to have assignments re-graded. Re-grade requests must be accompanied by a valid explanation of why you think a re-grade is warranted. (Note: 'I need a better grade in this course to [bring up my average/get into this program/apply to grad school]' is not an example of a valid explanation).

When to visit Daniel's office hours instead of emailing (Wednesdays 6pm-8pm on Bb Collaborate):

- To ask any questions you prefer not to ask over email.
- To discuss philosophical issues and questions arising from course material.
- Prior to due dates to ask more substantive questions about assignments.

Late and missed work
Late papers and final projects will be assessed a penalty of 1/3 letter grade per day**.** If extenuating circumstances (e.g., illness) prevent you from completing a paper or project on time, please get in touch with me by email as far in advance as possible to explain the circumstances and request an extension.

Missed weekly question submissions will receive a 0 unless you email me in advance to explain extenuating circumstances; in that case, your submitted questions from the rest of the term will be weighted to offset the missed one.

Turnitin
Normally, students will be required to submit their course essays to Turnitin.com for a review of textual similarity and detection of possible plagiarism. In doing so, students will allow their essays to be included as source documents in the Turnitin.com reference database, where they will be used solely for the purpose of detecting plagiarism. The terms that apply to the University's use of the Turnitin.com service are described on the [Turnitin.com web site](). Use of Turnitin.com is optional; please email me well before the due date of an assignment if you would like to make alternative submission arrangements.

Accessibility and accommodations
If you have any disability or health related concerns that require accommodation, please get in touch as soon as possible to figure out how we can best make this course a fruitful learning experience for you. Please also get in touch with [UTM Accessibility Services]().

If you require accommodation for course conflicts with religious holidays, please also get in touch as soon as possible to make arrangements.

You may also be interested in UTM resources for [mental health support]() as well as the [Academic Skills Centre]() for support with writing, English language learning, and other academic skills.

Academic integrity

It's your responsibility to familiarize yourself with the behaviours that constitute academic dishonesty. If you're feeling overwhelmed with coursework, worried about meeting a deadline, or having trouble understanding what's expected of you on an assignment, please get in touch with me instead of resorting to academic dishonesty. For information, visit UTM's academic integrity for students page.