



Course Syllabus: Science Fiction & Philosophy (Special Topics)

College of Humanities and Social Sciences

PHIL-3533 Section 201

Spring 2026

Contact Information

Professor: Dr. Tyler M. Williams

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Class Information

Course title: Special Topics in Philosophy (PHIL-3533)

Classroom location: Prothro-Yeager Hall, PY-201

Class meeting times: Tues/Thurs 2:00-3:20 p.m.

Course Catalogue Description

Specialized study in philosophy. May be repeated when topics vary.

Special Topics Description

Isaac Asimov (sometimes attributed to Robert Heinlein) once remarked that science fiction writing can be divided into three general categories: speculative *what-if* stories, aspirational *if-only* stories, and cautionary dystopian *if-this-goes-on* stories. Although some aficionados of the genre might dispute these distinctions, the existence of such distinctions points to the congruence between science fiction writing and philosophical thought. This semester, we will study major philosophical ideas by focusing our attention primarily on sources from the science fiction genre. We will work together to experiment with the ideas brought forth via this genre, studying how a genre often maligned for being “escapist” is actually ripe with pointed engagement in some of philosophy’s major questions: What is real? What exactly is knowable? What makes a society good? What makes me “me”? What does it mean to be human? Is technological progress morally good? We will use works of science fiction (a) to see how popular culture already wrestles with major philosophical concerns, and (b) to build argumentative and analytical skills by learning to find and discuss in cultural artifacts underlying philosophical claims, consistencies, and perspectives.

Course Goals

Course objectives for PHIL-3533 are:

- Gain familiarity with the relationship between philosophical discourse and the speculative nature of science fiction.
- Hone skills in interpretation and critical analysis of texts.
- Develop skills in identifying and evaluating arguments, formulating arguments through the effective and responsible use of evidence.
- Engage creative and critically with peers toward common intellectual goals.

Curriculum Statement

As an upper-level course, students registered for PHIL-3533 will have their written work and their in-class discussion skills evaluated to a higher standard. They will also be expected to manage a relatively heavy and consistent reading load. For these reasons, the course catalogue states that students are required to have completed 3 credit hours in philosophy (or get the permission of the instructor) before enrolling in upper-level philosophy courses. Students concerned about these standards are encouraged to speak with the instructor during the first week of the course. This course will be run in a “seminar” format, which means that student input, participation, and preparedness are *essential* to the function of this course. This course does not advocate for any particular philosophical perspective; it teaches students how to investigate questions and topics for their philosophical worth. To participate in this class, students must be willing to discuss challenging ideas knowing fully that the value of philosophical thinking is in the process of inquiry rather than the arrival at a concretized conclusion or “right answer.”

Textbook & Instructional Materials:

Textbooks have all been ordered through the Follett Campus Bookstore. However, you are welcome to source your books wherever you choose. Please be sure to get these specific editions in hard copies (unless you need an e-text to accommodate a disability):

- Philip K. Dick. *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* Del Rey, 2017.
- Martin Heidegger. *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*. Harper Perennial, 2013.
- Aldous Huxley. *Brave New World and Brave New World Revisited*. Harper Perennial, 2005.
- Ursula Le Guin. *The Lathe of Heaven*. Scribner, 2023.

Student Handbook

Refer to: [Student Handbook](#)

Academic Misconduct Policy & Procedures

Students are expected to uphold the standards of “Academic Integrity” set forth by the [MSU Student Honor Creed](#). The instructor will notify the appropriate authority of any infringement of academic honesty.

“Cheating” includes the unauthorized use of certain information, materials, or devices in exams, papers, or assignments. “Plagiarism” includes but is not limited to using the published or unpublished works of another person without recognition. *This includes attempts to portray AI-generated

material as evidence of a student's personal knowledge of course content and/or academic skill. A student who makes use of plagiarized material, or anyone that profits from (or abets) cheating, will be dismissed from the course and referred to the Dean of Students.

Academic Dishonesty: Cheating, collusion, and plagiarism (the act of using source material of other persons, either published or unpublished, without following the accepted techniques of crediting, or the submission for credit of work, not the individual to whom credit is given). Additional guidelines on procedures in these matters may be found in the [Office of Student Conduct](#).

Grading

Table 1: Value of each assignment to overall course grade for PHIL-3533

Assignments	Percent value	Point value
Quiz total (10 quizzes, 10 points per quiz)	25%	100
Interpretative Commitment Log	25%	100
Final Project	25%	100
Engagement	25%	100
Total	100%	400

Table 2: Value of final letter grades

Letter grade	Percentage range	Point value range
A	90-100%	358-400
B	80-89%	318-357
C	70-79%	278-317
D	60-69%	238-277
F	0-59%	0-237

Homework

Homework assignments comprise daily reading assignments, which should be completed by the time class session starts. Class activities will be based on the readings and will work under the assumption that students have come to class with the reading prepared. Students are encouraged to meet with the professor for help on reading strategies or on the reading's content. All other homework assignments are listed below.

Reading Quizzes

Eleven quizzes will be administered throughout the semester, but total quiz grades will be calculated out of ten. Each student's lowest quiz grade will be dropped from consideration. Quizzes will be taken in class on the days outlined in the Course Schedule. Except in rare circumstances coordinated with the professor in advance, quizzes cannot be made up after the fact. Since reading preparation and a willingness to discuss ideas from an informed perspective are essential features of this course, the quizzes exist to ensure that students keep pace with the assigned readings. A student who fails (5/10 grade or lower) three quizzes will have their overall Engagement grade reduced by ten points. A student who fails six quizzes will be asked to withdraw from the course.

Interpretative Commitment Logs

Two “Interpretative Commitment Log” deadlines are listed on the Course Schedule. Students will pick *one of these two to complete by the deadline posted in the Course Schedule. The first is attached to the reading of Ursula Le Guin’s *The Lathe of Heaven*, and the second is attached to the reading of Philip K. Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* Logs should be between five and seven *full* pages, double-spaced, 1-inch margins, 12-point Times New Roman font.

These logs test student’s ability to view their philosophical reading as an adaptive process that involves deliberate interpretive choices. Each log will therefore require students to combine self-analysis with textual analysis to study the development of a philosophical idea in depth. Logs will be graded for intellectual honesty, specificity, and argumentative structure/coherence (see Writing Assignment Information Sheet for rubric) rather than for correctness. Each log will be organized into the following logical order:

- Choose one philosophical claim you initially thought the text was making.
 - Where in the text did you first form this view? Explain the justification.
 - What passage later complicated or undermined this initial reading, and how?
 - What interpretive choice did *you* make to resolve this tension, and why?

Engagement Reports

Students will submit two self-assessment “engagement reports” throughout the semester. These reports are not individually graded; they are taken as a “completion” grade. Failure to write a report will reduce the overall engagement grade by a full letter grade. Given the self-reflective nature of our course material and the very strong emphasis our course places on engagement, these reports provide students the opportunity (a) to pause and reflect thoughtfully and creatively on their own accountability with the course objectives, (b) to provide “real time” feedback about the course, and (c) receive “real time” feedback from the instructor.

By the deadlines provided on the Course Schedule, students will submit to the appropriate D2L dropbox a 1-page, single-spaced reflection on the following prompt:

Science fiction is a “speculative” genre that lends itself to philosophical experimentation and ripe opportunities for reflection. In what ways has your participation in this course fostered a collaborative relation to the course material and contributed to the open, discussion-oriented nature of our classroom environment? What aspects of your engagement do you plan to retain, and what aspects will you improve (or, for the second Engagement Report, have since improved)? Lastly, are there ways that the course itself helps foster your engagement, or are there changes that can be made to the course to help you engage better?

Final Project

Students will finish the semester by submitting a Final Project. The broadest objective of this project is to make a complicated philosophical topic clear to a defined audience—regardless of the medium used. Development of the final project works in stages. Students will initially submit a proposal for their idea to the instructor and consult with the instructor over the viability of the idea. Then, the student will submit an outline of the project (either a full-sentence outline or, if the project includes research, an annotated bibliography that explains how the research done thus far will factor into the

project). After feedback on these documents, the student will submit the final project, with opportunity for in-office consultation in between.

To complete these final projects, students can select from either of two broad categories:

1. A Traditional Academic Essay Project: Comparative Sci-Fi

Students have the option to write a 7-10 page (double-spaced) argumentative, analytical, or research essay on a topic of their choosing. The primary philosophical scaffold for the project must come from putting two science fiction writers, one from our course and one of your own choosing, into conversation regarding a shared issue. Students are encouraged to pursue a topic that interests them the most. Was there anything egregiously missing from our syllabus, in your opinion? Then add it to the course by writing a final project on it! Your comparative paper should hinge around a specific philosophical perspective or topic, demonstrating how this specific philosophical idea changes when read *between* these two science fiction writers. Those who feel “stuck” or unsure about what topic to choose are encouraged to meet with the instructor as soon as possible to brainstorm ideas. Stylistically, some essay projects might take the form of any of the following:

2. A “Public” Philosophy Project

Most students are well-acquainted with college assignments that have an audience of two: the person who created it and the person who grades it. Instead, students may elect to create a “public philosophy project,” which is a project that does philosophical work with a wider audience in mind. Students who elect to create a public philosophy project are encouraged to be creative with their ideas, so the exact design and nature of the project is left to the student (with input, approval, and some oversight by the professor, of course). All projects are required to focus on a topic, theme, figure, text, or movement covered in our course. Some ideas to consider for a public philosophy project include but definitely are not limited to:

- Create a video essay that analyzes a particular film by using detailed and substantive discussion from a particular philosopher from our course.
- Record a podcast episode or series of episodes that explores (a) a series of philosophical ideas within a single work of science fiction, or (b) a series of works of science fiction that coalesce around a shared philosophical question/topic.
- Plan, organize, advertise, and host a philosophy event on campus. (Will require coordination with the professor to ensure that all practicalities are met. Events cannot incur financial cost and must use resources already available at/owned by the university.)
- Conduct a philosophical interview with someone whose work/experience overlaps in some way with something from our course. Use that interview as the “source” for an essay on the subject.
- Write an op-ed that uses philosophical material to analyze your subject and prepare it for submission to *The Wichitan*. (Publication in the newspaper is not a grade requirement.)
- Create learning tutorials or other “learning objects” for future students to help them learn dense philosophical concepts, ideas, texts, etc. Can be done using video and/or slides.
- Create an “illustrated essay” that develops a key philosophical concept.

Any project conducted as a group *must specify in the proposal* the division of labor across the group. Any project that does not produce a written final product must be accompanied by a reflective, analytical essay that elaborates the ideas behind the project, the process that went into executing it, and the philosophical (analytical) relevance of the final product. It is normal for projects, even topics, to change over time. Any substantial changes to the topic after the proposal has been submitted should include a meeting with the professor to communicate the nature of these changes.

Please note that even though this assignment specifies that it is *public*, students are not required to make their work publicly available. The “public” in the assignment title describes the *intended* audience.

Extra Credit

There are no extra credit assignments in this course. Students are encouraged to meet with the professor to strategize study skills and to clarify course content before the need for extra credit would arise.

Late Work

Late submissions of written work must be arranged ahead of time with the instructor and include reasonable justification. Instances that warrant such rescheduling include documented illness, medical emergency, or official university activity. Otherwise, late submissions will be penalized one-third of a letter grade per day late. Missed quizzes will not be re-administered unless due to absences caused by official university activity.

Important Dates

Last day for term schedule changes: August 29, 2024

Last Day to drop with a grade of “W:” November 25, 2024

Refer to: [Drops, Withdrawals & Void](#)

Desire-to-Learn (D2L)

Extensive use of the MSU D2L program is a part of this course. Each student is expected to be familiar with this program as it provides a primary source of communication regarding assignments, examination materials, and general course information. You can log into [D2L](#) through the MSU Homepage. If you experience difficulties, please contact the technicians listed for the program or contact your instructor.

Attendance

Students are expected to attend all meetings of the classes in which they are enrolled. However, students in this course are graded on “Engagement,” which includes but is not limited to attendance. You must be in attendance to be engaged, but attendance alone does not constitute engagement. “Engagement” describes the *minimum* expectations for good standing in this course: participating in class discussion, active listening, bringing the text with you to class, having done the assigned reading before coming to class, refraining from disruptive and/or disrespectful behavior, etc.

If you come to class, plan to stay for the entire session. Early departures are disruptive and, therefore, will be recorded as an absence. Of course, if you know ahead of time that you will need to leave a class session early, please let the professor know at the start of class (or via email beforehand) and try your best to sit near the exit on that day.

Students do not get a formal attendance grade in this course, but a significant number of absences can affect a student's overall grade. Here is how this course treats absences:

- There is no distinction in this course between “excused” and “unexcused” absences (except for absences for official university business, like athletics). Any student can miss class for any reason without penalty to their grade; they do not need to give an “excuse” for their absence.
- Quizzes and other deadlines missed because of an absence will not be rescheduled. (This policy does not apply to absences caused by official university business, which will be brought to the professor's attention ahead of time.)
- Any student who misses 6 or more class sessions (i.e. three weeks of a Tues/Thurs schedule) will receive a zero for their overall Engagement grade.
- The professor will reach out via email to students who have accumulated a “dangerous” number of absences. Those students will be required to make an appointment with the professor during office hours to collaborate on an action plan to get back on track.
- Any student who misses 8 or more class sessions (i.e. four weeks of a Tues/Thurs schedule) will be dropped from the course.
- The professor will give the student a verbal and/or written warning before being dropped from the class.
- Instructor's records will stand as evidence of absences.

Online Computer Requirements

Portions of this course make use of online materials. It is your responsibility to have (or have access to) a working computer in this class. ****Assignments and tests are due by the due date, and personal computer technical difficulties will not be considered a reason for the instructor to allow students extra time to submit assignments, tests, or discussion postings.*** Computers are available on campus in various areas of the buildings as well as the Academic Success Center. ****Your computer being down is not an excuse for missing a deadline!!*** There are many places to access your class! Our online classes can be accessed from any computer in the world that is connected to the internet. Contact your instructor immediately upon having computer trouble. If you have technical difficulties in the course, there is also a student helpdesk available to you. The college cannot work directly on student computers due to both liability and resource limitations however they are able to help you get connected to our online services. For help, log into [D2L](#).

Instructor Class Policies

Help

Students should discuss any concerns with the instructor as soon as possible. Office hours are available throughout the week and appointments can also be made on a case-by-case basis.

Recordings

Lectures, lecture notes, assignments, etc. remain the intellectual property of the instructor. Students are not permitted to record class or disseminate the content of our class without the prior permission of the instructor. This policy does not apply to a student's own hand-written notes.

Conduct

It is inevitable, expected, and good that students in a discussion-based philosophy class will encounter ideas that challenge their current view of things. Neither the course nor the instructor will advocate any one philosophical viewpoint except insofar as it momentarily advances the teaching outcomes of the course. Ideas presented in class, whether via readings or via discussion, will be treated with respect because the ability to engage thoughtfully with challenging ideas is a hallmark of intellectual maturity. Disagreement is normal in classes of this nature; disagreement is conducive to positive learning outcomes, regardless of whether this disagreement happens between texts themselves, between texts and readers, or between students. Disagreement that turns negative, derogatory, hostile, or otherwise demeaning *in any way* will not be tolerated in class. Students who are unwilling to handle these responsibilities with the intellectual seriousness that this course requires should consider dropping the class.

Course Texts

Please bring readings to class on the day due, and please bring the hard copy (no e-text, unless it is needed to accommodate a disability registered with the Office of Disability Support Services).

Personal Technology

To enhance engagement by mitigating distraction, all personal electronic devices must remain completely stowed for the class session. Access to course texts will be via hard copies; in-class notes will be written on paper with pen/pencil. This policy does not apply to accommodate a disability officially recognized by and registered with the Office of Disability Support Services.

Email

Check your MSU Texas email inboxes regularly. This is the only way students will be informed about class cancellations or any changes to the course. All email related to this course must take place between official MSU Texas email addresses. Please allow 24 hours for a reply to all emails.

Use of AI-generated Content in Writing Assignments

Unless explicitly permitted in the individual assignment description, students are not allowed to produce written work that includes content and/or revisions that utilize AI-generated content. Please refer to the Academic Misconduct policy outlined above. Students suspected of using AI-generated content in their writing assignments will be notified by the professor and will be required to meet with the professor within five business days of notification. Failure to meet with the professor after notification will be treated as an admission of guilt.

Student Acknowledgement of Minimum Expectations

This syllabus has been distributed to all enrolled students and discussed in class on the first day of the semester. All students who remain enrolled in this course after the first session acknowledge the terms, requirements, content, and expectations outlined in this syllabus.

Change of Schedule

A student dropping a course (but not withdrawing from the University) within the first 12 class days of a regular semester or the first four class days of a summer semester is eligible for a 100% refund of applicable tuition and fees. Dates are published in the Schedule of Classes each semester.

Refund and Repayment Policy

A student who withdraws or is administratively withdrawn from Midwestern State University (MSU) may be eligible to receive a refund for all or a portion of the tuition, fees, and room/board charges that were paid to MSU for the semester. However, if the student received financial aid (federal/state/institutional grants, loans, and/or scholarships), all or a portion of the refund may be returned to the financial aid programs. As described below, two formulas (federal and state) exist in determining the amount of the refund. (Examples of each refund calculation will be made available upon request).

Moffett Library

Moffett Library provides resources and services to support student's studies and assignments, including books, peer-reviewed journals, databases, and multimedia materials accessible both on campus and remotely. The library offers media equipment checkout, reservable study rooms, and research assistance from librarians to help students effectively find, evaluate, and use information. Get started on this [Moffett Library webpage](#) to explore these resources and learn how to best utilize the library.

Services for Students with Disabilities

In accordance with Section 504 of the Federal Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, Midwestern State University endeavors to make reasonable accommodations to ensure equal opportunity for qualified persons with disabilities to participate in all educational, social, and recreational programs and activities. After notification of acceptance, students requiring accommodations should make an application for such assistance through Disability Support Services, located in the Clark Student Center, Room 168, (940) 397-4140. Current documentation of a disability will be required in order to provide appropriate services, and each request will be individually reviewed. For more details, please go to [Disability Support Services](#).

College Policies

Campus Carry Rules/Policies

Refer to: [Campus Carry Rules and Policies](#)

Smoking/Tobacco Policy

College policy strictly prohibits the use of tobacco products in any building owned or operated by WATC. Adult students may smoke only in the outside designated smoking areas at each location.

Alcohol and Drug Policy

To comply with the Drug-Free Schools and Communities Act of 1989 and subsequent amendments, students and employees of Midwestern State are informed that strictly enforced policies are in place which prohibit the unlawful possession, use, or distribution of any illicit drugs, including alcohol, on

university property or as part of any university-sponsored activity. Students and employees are also subject to all applicable legal sanctions under local, state, and federal law for any offenses involving illicit drugs on University property or at University-sponsored activities.

Campus Carry

Effective August 1, 2016, the Campus Carry law (Senate Bill 11) allows those licensed individuals to carry a concealed handgun in buildings on public university campuses, except in locations the University establishes as prohibited. The new Constitutional Carry law does not change this process. Concealed carry still requires a License-to-carry permit, and openly carrying handguns is not allowed on college campuses. For more information, visit [Campus Carry](#).

Active Shooter

The safety and security of our campus is the responsibility of everyone in our community. Each of us has an obligation to be prepared to appropriately respond to threats to our campus, such as an active aggressor. Please review the information provided by the MSU Police Department regarding the options and strategies we can all use to stay safe during difficult situations. For more information, visit [MSUReady – Active Shooter](#). Students are encouraged to watch the video entitled “Run. Hide. Fight.” which may be electronically accessed via the University police department’s webpage: [“Run. Hide. Fight.”](#)

Mandatory Reporting

Under Title IX, all MSU faculty are “mandatory reporters” of any disclosure from a student of sexual assault, abuse, harassment, dating violence, stalking, or other forms of sexual misconduct. It is the legal responsibility of a “mandatory reporter” to notify the Title IX coordinator if a student reports being the victim of any of the aforementioned abuses. For more information, please visit the [Sexual Misconduct Resource](#).

Grade Appeal Process

Update as needed. Students who wish to appeal a grade should consult the Midwestern State University [MSU Catalog](#)

***Notice:** Changes in the course syllabus, procedure, assignments, and schedule may be made at the discretion of the instructor.

Course Schedule

Readings are listed according to their due date. Unless indicated otherwise, all readings come from the required course textbook. Texts marked “(PDF)” can be for free on our D2L course page.

PART I: WHAT-IF...

WEEK ONE

- Tues. 1/20. Course introductions.
- Thurs. 1/22. Ursula Le Guin, “The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas” (PDF) (Quiz 1)

WEEK TWO

- Tues. 1/27. Plato, “Allegory of the Cave” *Republic VII* (PDF)
- Thurs. 1/29. René Descartes, “Meditation 1” *Meditations on First Philosophy* (PDF)

WEEK THREE

- Tues. 2/3. *The Matrix* (film, dir. Lana and Lilly Wachowski, 1999)
- Thurs. 2/5. In-class lecture on Jean Baudrillard and simulated worlds (no reading due)

WEEK FOUR

- Tues. 2/10. Ursula Le Guin, *The Lathe of Heaven* chs. 1-6 (Quiz 2)
- Thurs. 2/12. Ursula Le Guin, *The Lathe of Heaven* ch. 7

WEEK FIVE

- Tues. 2/17. Ursula Le Guin, *The Lathe of Heaven* chs. 8-11 (Quiz 3)
- Thurs. 2/19. Ursula Le Guin, *The Lathe of Heaven* continued
- Interpretive Commitment Log #1 due in D2L dropbox no later than 11:59 p.m. on 2/22

PART II: IF-ONLY...

WEEK SIX

- Tues. 2/24. Ted Chiang, "Liking What You See: A Documentary" (PDF) (Quiz 4)
- Thurs. 2/26. Ted Chiang, "Liking What You See: A Documentary" continued

WEEK SEVEN

- Tues. 3/3. In-class group exercise (no reading due)
- Thurs. 3/5. In-class group exercise (no reading due)

WEEK EIGHT

- Tues. 3/10. No class. Spring Break.
- Thurs. 3/12. No class. Spring Break.

PART III: WHAT-IF AND IF-ONLY MEETS IF-THIS-GOES-ON...

WEEK NINE

- Tues. 3/17. In-class screening/discussion: *Star Trek TNG* S2 E9, "The Measure of a Man"
- Thurs. 3/19. Philip K. Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* chs. 1-8 (Quiz 5)
- Engagement Report #1 due in D2L dropbox no later than 11:59 p.m. on 3/22

WEEK TEN

- Tues. 3/24. Philip K. Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* chs. 9-14 (Quiz 6)
- Thurs. 3/26. Philip K. Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* ch. 15

WEEK ELEVEN

- Tues. 3/31. Philip K. Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* chs. 16-22 (Quiz 7)
- Thurs. No class. Holiday break.

WEEK TWELVE

- Tues. 4/7. *2001: A Space Odyssey* (film, dir. Stanley Kubrick, 1968)
- Thurs. 4/9. In-class lecture on sentience, personhood, and moral rights
- Interpretative Commitment Log #2 due in D2L dropbox no later than 11:59 p.m. on 4/12

WEEK THIRTEEN

- Tues. 4/14. Octavia Butler, "Bloodchild" (PDF) (Quiz 8)
- Thurs. 4/16. Octavia Butler, "Bloodchild" continued

PART IV: IF-THIS-GOES-ON...

WEEK FOURTEEN

- Tues. 4/21. Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* chs. 1-7 (Quiz 9)
- Thurs. 4/23. Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* ch. 8

WEEK FIFTEEN

- Tues. 4/28. Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* chs. 9-16 (Quiz 10)
- Thurs. 4/30. Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* chs. 17-18 (Quiz 11)
- Last day to drop Spring 2026 courses with a “W” grade is 4/29.
- Engagement Report #2 due in D2L dropbox no later than 11:59 p.m. on 5/3

PART V: CONCLUSIONS

WEEK SIXTEEN

- Tues. 5/5. Discussion of student-choice film or short story
- Thurs. 5/7. In-class activity: Counterfactual philosophical world-intervention project

FINALS WEEK

- Due in D2L dropbox no later than 11:59 p.m. on Wednesday, May 13.