

Philosophy in Science Fiction

PRELIMINARY SYLLABUS

Philosophy 361, Spring 2021
M & W 11:40-1:00, online in Zoom
profron.net/phi361

Prof. Ron McClamrock <rmclamrock@albany.edu>
Virtual Office: albany.zoom.us/my/rmclamrock (Hours TBA)
Materials on Blackboard page

This is a synchronous online course. All materials, lectures, and discussion for this course will be done online only. This syllabus is preliminary, and may change prior to the start of the semester.

Readings/Materials:

Readings: All readings are available on the ERreserves section of Blackboard, typically as PDF files. There is no textbook for the course.

Videos: There will be videos available via the course Blackboard page, and perhaps through other means.

Requirements:

Papers: Topics for quite short (1000 words) papers will be handed out three times during the semester, and will be due about a week after being assigned. You must do two of these, including the first one. (See the *Addenda* page for the rules on late papers.) Each short paper is worth 20% of the final course grade.

Exams: There will be three 1-hour online exams, given via Blackboard, spaced relatively equally throughout the semester. Tests will be a combination of short-answer and multiple-choice format, and will be non-comprehensive. (See the *Addenda* page for the rules on makeup exams.) Your two best exam scores are each worth 20% of the final course grade

Participation, etc.: Class participation, online discussion forums, and perhaps other assigned activities will total 20% of your course grade. This will include a variety of structured group and individual discussion-based activities. You'll be expected to come prepared to each class and to participate. There will also be an online discussion board for the course; students will occasionally be asked to contribute to the online discussion as part of the participation grade. I may occasionally assign other random bits of work that fall under this category (e.g. a short in-class "pop" quiz, a short online submission of a paragraph or so on some question, or whatever. Note that if you don't attend class, or don't submit the online bits, that's clearly non-participation, and will be graded accordingly.

Summary: Grades will be 20% for each of two short papers, 20% for each of your two best exam grades, and 20% for class participation/etc.

Course topic outline: (Loose, incomplete, and tentative; expect additions/changes)

Minds, bodies, machines, & selves

- Selves and transporter
- Minds, robots, and other machines

The real and the virtual:

- Memories, real and artificial
- Virtual realities and knowledge

Time travel and paradox:

- Paradox, inconsistency and time-lines
- Time travel and freedom

Freedom, determinism, and choice:

- Actions as caused & predictable
- Making room for freedom & responsibility?

Human flourishing:

- Drugs, VR, and other pleasures
- Artificially enhanced selves; transhumanism

Gods and other super-human beings:

- The singularity and super-human AI
- Meeting god(s); what does it take to be a god?

Contingency, chaos, and meaning:

- Fate, purpose, and (no) reasons for things

PHI 361 Syllabus Addenda (Spring 2021 – McClamrock)

Paper Submission Guidelines:

- All papers must be submitted electronically, transmitted as documents attached to a piece of e-mail addressed to me at rmclamrock@albany.edu.
- Electronic documents sent to me should be as “.docx” files if possible (the native format in recent Microsoft Word); if you don’t use .docx, please send the paper as RTF (“Rich Text Format”). You need to use one of those formats; please, no PDFs or other wordprocessor files.
- Name the file *Q1A1_Lastname_Firstname_PHI361.doc*, substituting your name in for *Lastname_Firstname*, and the assignment and question numbers in place of *A1* and *Q1*. So, e.g., assignment #2 written on question 3 from student Eric Cartman should be named *Q3A2_Cartman_Eric_PHI361.docx* (or .rtf, as the case may be). The subject line of the email should be the same; e.g., *Q3A2_Cartman_Eric_PHI361*. Include the line in the message body of the email: *Here is paper Q3A2_Cartman_Eric_PHI315 from Eric Cartman*, substituting your details as before.
- Format papers single-spaced, with your name, the assignment and question number, and any title you might give to the paper at the top of the first page (don’t use a separate title page). Set the text font to 12pt Times-Roman, and set the left margin to 1” and the right margin to 2.5”.
- When you send papers to me, please cc: yourself to make sure everything worked OK.

Missed Exams:

Makeup exams are given only when extreme circumstances make it *impossible* for you to take the test when given; e.g., when you are hospitalized on that day. If you miss an exam for some other kind of reason, just take the other two, and the missed exam will be dropped.

In these extreme circumstances, in order to be given a makeup exam, you must do all of the following.

1. You must obtain a letter of excuse from the Office of the Vice-Provost for Undergraduate Studies; all inquiries about such letters and the documentation required for them should be directed to the Dean's office (LC-30). This request (with documentation) is to be made to the Vice-Provost's office no more than two weekdays after the end of the period for which you are asking to be excused. (Graduate student should come to me directly concerning documentation.)
2. Give me a written (e-mail is best, paper is OK) request for a makeup exam. This request should be given to me no more than two weekdays after the end of the period for which your absence has been excused.
3. Talk to me in person at the end of the first class after your excused absence in order to schedule a makeup.

You must do all of these in order to be given a makeup. But even if you do, I reserve the right to judge that the excuse is inadequate, in which case I may decline to give the makeup.

Late papers:

Late papers are marked down by one grade notch (e.g. B to B- or B- to C+) for every hour or portion thereof I receive them after the due date and time. The only exception is the one noted under “Missed exams”: If there are such extreme circumstances, and a paper is due during an excused absence, you may get an extension until the first day not covered by the excused absence. In such a case, the paper is due on that day, at the same time of day it was originally due.

Grade Calculation Rules:

1. Every graded piece of work (exam, paper, whatever) is given a letter grade. These letter grades range from A+ (the best) to F (the worst).
2. Each of these letter grades has a numerical equivalent. Here are the possible letter grades and numerical equivalents:

A+ = 15	C- = 7
A = 14	D+ = 6
A- = 13	D = 5
B+ = 12	D- = 4
B = 11	E+ = 3
B- = 10	E = 2
C+ = 9	E- = 1
C = 8	F = 0

“Slash” grades like “A-/B+” are equivalent to the midpoint between the two grades; e.g., a grade of A-/B+ is calculated as a 12.5.

3. Once this assignment of letter grades is made for, say, a given exam, nothing else matters. In calculating your final grade, all that matters is (the numerical equivalents of) your various letter grades for the various graded pieces of work.
4. I use the numerical equivalents of the letter grades to calculate a composite numerical grade using whatever procedure I've specified for the particular class.
5. I round the composite numerical grade to the nearest integer (.5 and above go up, below go down).
6. I convert back to letter grades using the chart above. You get the letter grade determined by the chart, except if (i) you got an A+, in which case your official grade is an A (the University doesn't use A+), or (ii) you got lower than a D-, in which case your official grade is E.

On getting a grade of “I”:

The grade of “I” (Incomplete) will be given only if an excused absence of the sort described under “Missed Exams” prevents you from either taking the last of the exams or turning in the last of the papers. In addition to following the procedures describe under “Missed Exams”, you must also ask me in writing (email is best) to assign you an “I” for the course.

Cheating:

Cheating, including but not confined to plagiarizing (i.e. using the words or content of others as your own), will result in being failed for the course and reported to the Dean's office.