

AS 150.130

DYSTOPIAN DREAMS – UTOPIAN IDEALS

Johns Hopkins University

Spring 2019

INSTRUCTOR

Alexander Englert

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Time: TTh 12:00-1:15

Location: Gilman 288

Office Hours: TBA

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Everywhere one looks – whether at movie theaters, bookshelves, or on television – dystopias reign supreme. We seem to be addicted to watching the world turned into a barren wasteland, or an animated graveyard in zombie apocalypses, etc. Philosophically, there is a rich tradition of the dystopian counterpart – namely, utopias based on ideals as big-picture concepts. While one emphasizes the bad and the other the good, both serve a similar function: namely, to present us with mirrors in which we can look and ponder some of the most fundamental questions about what it means to be human. By dealing in extremes, dystopias and utopias change reality in deliberate ways to create thought experiments; they deal in “what ifs”. *What* would be left of our humanity *if* society crumbled? *If* zombies roamed the world, *what* would happen to our nature in the fight to survive? And more questions come in tow: *What* happens to morality *if* we are forced to prioritize survival? Etc. Ultimately, we will ask a methodological question: namely, why communicate through dystopias or utopias at all? What is the nature and use of ideals? And, for dystopias, how are corrupted ideals employed to communicate ideas?

COURSE OBJECTIVES

First, by the end of the course, you should (i) possess a good grasp of foundational concepts and basic arguments seminal to philosophy, and learn to see relations with themes and works belonging to other fields; (ii) have improved in oral and written argumentation, which entails the ability to analyze positions and paraphrase them concisely while also providing one’s own views with support; (iii) arrive at a point where you second-guess many of your own assumptions about what might seem obvious, which requires appreciation of diverse perspectives taught in the course.

REQUIRED TEXTS

Please purchase, rent, or borrow the following texts at the university book store:

1. Atwood, Margaret. *Oryx and Crake*. Anchor Books.
2. Kant, Immanuel. *Toward Perpetual Peace, and Other Writings on Politics, Peace, and History*. Edited by Pauline Kleingeld. Translated by David L. Colclasure. Yale University Press.
3. Plato. *The Republic*. Translated by GMA Grube. Hackett Publishing.
4. Netflix Subscription (for the term of the course)

All other texts will be on Blackboard or distributed electronically.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

To successfully pass this course, you will need to complete all of the following requirements:

1. First Paper (4-5 pages)	20%
2. Second Paper (6-7 pages)	40%
3. Dystopia/Utopia Paper (open)	10%
4. Atwoodian Meditations	10%
5. Reading Questions	10%
6. Attendance/Participation	10%

All assignments must be turned in by their due dates. If they are turned in late, they will lose ½ letter grade for each day that they are tardy. In extenuating circumstances, I will grant extensions – but the reasons must be good and they must be discussed with me well in advance (or as soon as possible before the deadline).

PAPERS 1 AND 2: The first two papers are expected to be well-polished and reflective philosophy papers. In both you must reconstruct a complex argument in your own words to present your own views with support. I will explain what is expected more specifically as we progress. **Importantly!** I will only accept these papers as on time if I receive an email from the Writing Center confirming that you met to discuss a draft with them by the date specified in the prompt. This sounds harsh, perhaps, but it is meant actually to help you produce your best work in a timely fashion, not to mention improve in your writing. While I cannot check to see that you’ve actually worked in their comments, it would behoove you to do so, as your grades will always be better if you turned in revised paper as opposed to a “Oh-my-God-I’ve-got-to-finish-this-paper-now-before-the-deadline” draft.

DYSTOPIA/UTOPIA PAPER: This paper is not meant to test your analytic reasoning abilities or exegetical talents. Instead, this assignment invites you to be imaginative and try out first-hand the genres that we’ve been studying for the semester. You will be able to choose the option of writing your own utopian or dystopian short treatise or story. The format and length are left totally up to you. It can be a piece of short fiction, a dialogue, a snapshot of what you think a future day will look like. What is important is that you put some effort into it, have fun, and produce a piece that shows you’re reflecting on your surroundings. The prompt will go into more detail.

ATWOODIAN MEDITATIONS: Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* will be our dystopian companion piece in literature for the semester. Her novel brings to the fore many critiques on current societal practices. Moreover, it pairs well with many of the other primary texts we will be reading. To get full credit for this requirement you must volunteer for one of the dates when we’ll be discussing Atwood’s work and share a meditation, offer some questions for group work, etc. By a meditation, I mean a short (think ½ or full page) reflection that you work through while reading her novel. It can be about connections between the novel and your lived everyday, or between the novel and the readings we’re working through in the course. Contact me to sign up for one of the dates. There will be a maximum of two volunteers per day when we discuss her work.

READING QUESTIONS: Whenever I assign reading questions, I am not doing this for my own pleasure. They are meant to help you focus on key issues within the texts – they also, if you will, are free note-taking tools. Responding to what you read individually before discussing together in class

will add to your overall engagement with these materials. At the start of everyday when reading questions are assigned, I will roll a die. If I roll an even number, then you turn in your answers to the reading questions at the end of the course. If I roll an odd one, then you don't turn in your answers. I won't be grading these beyond a simple pass/fail. If you are seriously answering the questions and doing so in a manner that shows you're actually reading the passage in question, then you will get a "+". If you produce only one line answers, partially-finished sheets, no answers, identical or eerily similar answers, or answers that seem to be for a different class, then you get a "-". While this is meant as a partial check to ensure you're reading, it offers a win-win. Fifty-percent of the time, I get to see your insightful ideas at work; and you get notes that you can use on papers or can look back on later with fondness.

ATTENDANCE/PARTICIPATION: Everyday, I'll take attendance. Two absences will be allowed without need of asking for any excuse or permission. After that, however, each unexcused absence will take a point off your attendance grade (period).

SCHEDULE

O&C = *Oryx and Crake*

WEEK 1 – INTRODUCTION

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| Jan 29 | No reading assignment. |
| Jan 31 | Forster, "The Machine Stops" (Blackboard)
Black Mirror: "Hang the DJ" (Netflix – S4E4) |

WEEK 2 – PLATO AND THE IDEAL CITY

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| Feb 5 | Plato, <i>The Republic</i> , Bk. II (pp. 32-60)
Paper 1 Prompt distributed |
| Feb 7 | Plato, <i>The Republic</i> , Bk. III (pp. 90-93)
Black Mirror: "Nosedive" (Netflix – S3E1) |

WEEK 3 – EUGENICS AND CRISPR

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| Feb 12 | Hague, <i>The Eugenic Marriage</i> [1914]: "The Eugenic Idea" (Blackboard)
Atwood, <i>O&C</i> , Chapters 1-2 (pp. 1-33) |
| Feb 14 | Maxmen, "The Genesis Engine," <i>Wired</i> (Blackboard)
Sandel, "The Case Against Perfection," <i>The Atlantic</i> (Blackboard)
See Blackboard folder for other short articles and YouTube videos. |

WEEK 4 – PLATO AND PHILOSOPHER KINGS

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| Feb 19 | Plato, <i>The Republic</i> , Bk. IV (pp. 94-121)
Film: <i>Giorgio Moroder Presents: Metropolis</i> (Kanopy – access through library) |
| Feb 21 | Plato, <i>The Republic</i> , Bk. V (pp. 122-141) |

Paper 1 Due! (TurnItIn via Blackboard by Feb. 22)

WEEK 5 – PLATO’S CAVE AND THEORY OF FORMS

- Feb 26 Plato, *The Republic*, Bk. V (pp. 148-156)
Atwood, *O&C*, Chapters 3-5 (pp. 37-110)
- Feb 28 Plato, *The Republic*, Bk. VI (pp. 176-185)
Plato, *The Republic*, Bk. VII (pp. 186-193, 211-212)

WEEK 6 – HAPPINESS, SOMA, AND THE GOOD LIFE

- Mar 5 Huxley, *Brave New World*, selection (Blackboard)
Whippman, “Americans are spending a fortune on finding happiness” &
DeAngelis “Consumerism and Its Discontents” (Blackboard)
- Mar 7 Nozick, *The Experience Machine*, selection (Blackboard)
Black Mirror: “San Junipero” (Netflix – Season 3 Ep. 4)

WEEK 7 – IN THE STATE OF NATURE: ARE WE INHERENTLY BAD?

- Mar 12 Transition to Hobbes, no reading assignment.
- Mar 14 Hobbes, *Leviathan*, selections (Blackboard)
“Sing Me a Song,” *The Walking Dead* (Netflix, S7E7)

~ **SPRING BREAK** ~

WEEK 8 – BEYOND THE STATE OF NATURE: ARE WE INHERENTLY GOOD?

- Mar 26 King, “The Measure of Man,” and “I have a dream” speech (Blackboard)
Atwood, *O&C*, Chapters 6-8 (pp. 113-218)
Paper 2 Prompt distributed
- Mar 28 Kant, “The Character of the Species,” from *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, Part 2, Section E (pp. 164-176)

WEEK 9 – KANT, THE IDEA OF PROGRESS, AND THE FREE WILL

- Apr 2 Kant, “Idea of a Universal History with Cosmopolitan Aim” (full essay)
Star Trek: “Encounter at Farpoint: Parts I & II”
- Apr 4 Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, Those Who ‘Improve’ Humanity
(Blackboard, pp. 38-42), & *The Gay Science*, The Demon (Blackboard)
Black Mirror: “Bandersnatch” (Netflix)

WEEK 10 – KANT AND PERPETUAL PEACE

- Apr 9 Kant, *Towards Perpetual Peace*, Introduction, Section I, & Section II (pp. 67-85)
- Apr 11 Kant, *Towards Perpetual Peace*, 1st and 2nd Supplement + Appendix (pp. 86-109)
Film: *Children of Men* (2006, Netflix)
Atwood, *O&C*, Chapters 9-10 (pp. 221-261)

WEEK 11 – ANTI-UTOPIAS

- Apr 16 Barnes, “The Dream” (Blackboard)
- Apr 18 Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, Forward + Epigrams and Arrows (Blackboard, pp. 3-11)
Paper 2 Due! (TurnItIn via Blackboard by April 19)

WEEK 12 – PROBLEMS IN UTOPIA

- Apr 23 Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, The Problem of Socrates + ‘Reason’ in Philosophy (Blackboard, pp. 12-22)
- Apr 25 Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, How the True World Finally Became Fiction + Morality as Anti-Nature (Blackboard, pp. 23-29)

WEEK 13 – FINISHING UP

- Apr 30 Appiah, *As If: Idealization and Ideals* (access online through Catalyst and EBSCO host, pp. 112-137 & 153-172)
Atwood, *O&C*, Chapters 13-15 (pp. 333-374)
- May 2 Kaku, *Physics of the Future* (Blackboard)
Denning, “Why the world is getting better” (Blackboard)
Roser, “Proof that life is getting better for humanity, in 5 charts”

FINAL EXAMS No meeting.
Dystopian/Utopian Paper Due TBA

COURSE POLICIES

ELECTRONICS: No electronics may be used in class unless otherwise noted. This includes laptops, tablets, phones, etc.

OFFICE HOURS: I encourage you to come and meet with me during my office hour. Philosophy requires much reflection and dialogue. Should my office hour be inconvenient for you, please get in touch with me and we will be able to find a time that works for us both. Also, please come by and discuss your papers as you plan them.

CONDUCT: It is always important to show respect to your fellow human beings, especially those with whom you disagree. Do not interrupt each other; do not make others feel small; etc. Be a mensch!

ADVISORY WARNINGS: We will be watching films meant for adult audiences with adult themes. I will always try and give warnings ahead of time regarding the subject matter so that those with certain triggers can find alternative ways of accessing the material. Please speak to me outside of class if this affects you.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

Johns Hopkins University asks that the following be included in all undergraduate syllabi:

Cheating is wrong. Cheating hurts our community by undermining academic integrity, creating mistrust, and fostering unfair competition. The university will punish cheaters with failure on an assignment, failure in a course, permanent transcript notation, suspension, and/or expulsion. Offenses may be reported to medical, law or other professional or graduate schools when a cheater applies. Violations can include cheating on exams, plagiarism, reuse of assignments without permission, improper use of the Internet and electronic devices, unauthorized collaboration, alteration of graded assignments, forgery and falsification, lying, facilitating academic dishonesty, and unfair competition. Ignorance of these rules is not an excuse.

Please turn in your own work – everyone will be happier in the end. If you have questions or are concerned that something you are doing constitutes plagiarism, please contact me and we will work it out.

DISABILITY ACCOMMODATIONS

If you require special accommodations because of a disability, please get in touch with JHU's Student Disability Services: studentdisabilityservices@jhu.edu.

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