

BOOK REVIEWS

Helen De Cruz, Johan De Smedt, and Eric Schwitzgebel, Philosophy Through Science Fiction: Exploring the Boundaries of the Possible

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Ross Cameron 

University of Virginia

e-mail: cameron@virginia.edu

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In the afterword to his story in this volume, David Baker says ‘I write a story when I feel like all I have is a question. When I have an answer to a question, I write a philosophy essay.’ For me, philosophy is more about the questions than the answers, and philosophy and science fiction have always seemed to me like natural partners, exploring similar questions in different ways. This book is subtitled *Exploring the Boundaries of the Possible*, and one of the things science fiction can do is invite us to consider near and outlandish possible circumstances that prompt new philosophical questions, test our extant theories, etc. (I’d add that plenty of science fiction also explores the boundaries of the impossible, and that this is philosophically interesting as well!)

My rigorously researched anecdotal data suggests that it’s becoming more common for philosophy and science fiction courses to be offered. Again anecdotally, my SF & Philosophy class is one of the most popular courses I offer. This book – consisting of philosophically minded science fiction short stories, some written by professional authors, other by professional philosophers – is a very useful book to have available to those who teach such courses. It is also simply an enjoyable read for a philosophically inclined science fiction fan.

The book is split into three sections, each containing a number of stories (most of which are previously unpublished) on that theme, each with a brief afterword by the author along with suggestions for further reading.

Some of the stories worked better for me than others, as works of fiction and/or as works of philosophy. That seems inevitable. One or two of the stories by philosophers made vivid the writing skills of the professional authors, and one or two of the stories by the authors made clear why we need philosophers to bring us sophisticated reflections. And to be frank, the most philosophically interesting science fiction stories still seem to me to be ones not in this volume. But on the whole, I found the collection enjoyable, and a worthwhile addition.

I’ll say something very brief about each story.

Part I: Expanding the Human

‘Excerpt from Theuth’ by Ken Liu is bound to be particularly terrifying to academics. I’m sure I’m not alone in the nervous horror I feel when I see news about drugs designed to make you smarter, help you remember, make you concentrate better, and I worry about

how far or near the future is where the un-augmented can't keep up. Liu paints us a world in which the dreaded language of capitalist middle management is used to cajole employees into 'leveraging' their brainpower via cognitive enhancements in order to 'increase productivity' and 'extract value'. But just as I cannot find my way anywhere without my trusted google maps, these employees quickly learn they don't know what they think they know once they don't have their cognitive boosters on hand. It's a great and unsettling story, and would be great for teaching not only the ethics of artificial cognitive enhancement, but also the metaphysics of the extended mind.

In 'Adjoiners', Lisa Schoenberg explores the question of whether you can commit a crime against yourself, if technology allows you to be both the victim and the perpetrator. It's a good story and prompts us to think about what we can meaningfully consent to, and how much our mental states can be influenced before a decision that is made is no longer our own. It would be useful when teaching moral and legal issues surrounding consent and causing harm, and touches (albeit very subtly) on the idea of transformative experience.

Is there a special someone out there, waiting for you to find them – someone designed to make you happy, just as you are designed to make them happy? Probably not. But what if we could engineer such pairs? That's the idea explored by David John Baker's excellent story *The Intended*, which imagines a society where each individual's life is designed to follow The Plan. The plan results in happiness. But does it result in meaning? This disquieting and memorable story would be good for teaching utilitarianism, meaning in life, and free will.

'The New Book of the Dead' by Sofia Samatar explores immortality via artificial intelligence, and raises some ethical issues along the way. This story could be used in a discussion of immortality, persistence, and the self, especially alongside another story that discussed related issues.

Part 2: What We Owe to Ourselves and Others

'Out of the Dragon's Womb' by Alette de Bodard describes a conflict between the personal and the political as we see a woman choosing between a life centred on family and community, or a life serving an empire. It's a nice story, and could be used as a springboard to teaching issues in virtue ethics and political philosophy, especially from Eastern traditions, as well as some Machiavelli.

'Whale Fall' by Wendy Nikel would pair quite well with the previous story, as it too involves the conflict between the micro affairs of a person, the macro affairs of a state, and the global affairs of the environment. The themes here are very suggestive rather than explicit, but could be used to spark discussion of a number of issues from political and environmental philosophy.

It's wrong to not want, for example, Asians to come to your country because their skin looks different from yours. What about tentacled squid monsters? 'Monsters and Soldiers' by Mark Silcox explores tolerance and the open society in a science fiction, with some *Foundation*-esque stochastic modelling thrown in for good measure. It could be used to spark discussion on the open society, open borders, political tolerance, etc.

Part 3: Gods and Families

In 'I, Player in a Demon Tale' Hud Hudson invites us to think about whether if there is a *sensus divinitatis* by which we are able to sense the divine, might there also be a *sensus daemioniaci* by which we are able to sense the demonic. What would be the consequences of the presence of such senses for the rationality of belief in the supernatural? As well as

raising some interesting epistemological questions, this story is a wonderfully chilling study in virtue and vice, great and small.

'The Eye of the Needle' by Frances Howard-Snyder is a story about empathy and the demands of morality. What would happen to us if we could alter ourselves to be more empathetic to others? Would we be more moral? What would the cost be? This story could be used to start discussion on the nature of empathy, what morality demands of us, and transformative experience.

'God on a Bad Night' by Christopher Mark Rose explores creation and the obligations of the creator to the created, whether that be God to Her universe or a parent to his child. This story leaves the philosophical issues less explicit than some of the others, but could be used to spark discussion on a number of themes concerning religion, parenthood, and morality.

The final story is 'Hell Is the Absence of God' by Ted Chiang. If you're reading a review of a book called *Philosophy Through Science Fiction Stories* then you are probably familiar with this story. It's Ted Chiang: he's amazing.

Overall, I enjoyed this book, and will contemplate using it when teaching my science fiction and philosophy class, although if I am being honest I am not sure many of the stories here will replace any of the ones I have been using for years. But this book should provide good supplementary material, at least. I especially liked the inclusion of the second section, on stories concerning political issues. You can't open a science-fiction anthology without finding a story about the nature of the self, and it's pretty easy to find good stories concerning religion, faith and belief, the meaning of life, etc. But while there are some famous (series of) science fiction novels that deal with politics and the state, I at least have found it harder to find good short stories that raise those issues, so this is a welcome addition.

The book is quite short, and one possible criticism is that it neglects some topics you might have expected to be covered (such as time travel, external world scepticism, artificial life, or personal identity). There are eleven stories in this volume. When I run my class, I assign about twenty-five. The book will almost certainly need to be supplemented by other material for anyone using it. But maybe this is actually a good thing. In the past when I have taught Science Fiction and Philosophy I have assigned two large anthologies of short stories, and assign less than a quarter of each one (many of the stories in these volumes, of course, are not very philosophically interesting even if they are great stories). Perhaps it's better to err on the side of fewer stories, each of which is, by design, philosophically interesting, and let the teacher supplement them as they see fit: either with further stories drawn from elsewhere, or with philosophy papers that address topics raised by the stories. In any case, I enjoyed this book as a philosopher and fan of science fiction, and will benefit from it as a teacher. I recommend it.

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