

Editor's Notes

1. The *What* and *Why* of this Journal

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The *Aim* of the Journal. Why a Journal of Science Fiction and Philosophy?

It is quite likely that my own philosophical career owes more to Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* than to any particular book on philosophy. In the pages of this book I experienced, with burning delight, the contrast between a life open to questioning and wonder, and one in which every ounce of humanity has been smothered by the stultifying power of dull entertainment. The book revealed, in vertiginous narrative, the dangers of conformity, of a deep ignorance concealed by an overabundance of facts, of highly manipulated media, of a purely technical education, of a purely permissive education, of forgetting about history, instant gratification, and replacing buttons with zippers. It also anticipated the now ubiquitous headphones, megascreens and camera drones.

Everyone who shares a conscious interest in philosophy and a liking for science fiction stories may have had a similar experience. The fact is that science fiction (we'll start calling it SF soon) is interspersed through and through with philosophy; more, I would contend, than any other genre. Often quite intentionally. It is actually difficult to find examples of science fiction stories that do *not* contain some experimentation with philosophical ideas. More often than not, the fictional technologies or scientific fictions only set the stage for what will be primarily a conflict of ideas. Thus my own surprise—more than a year after the fact, I still expect to be proved wrong—when, preparing for a course on philosophy and science fiction, I was unable to find any English-speaking publication that would explicitly connect both. The only explanation I can think of is this: that it was so *obvious* that there should be one, that no one had realized yet that there wasn't.

Well, so much for ontological proofs. It turns out that, no matter how obvious its existence, you still need someone to make it happen. Thus this *Journal of Science Fiction and Philosophy*, so long overdue. Even before having published a single word, the response has been overwhelming. As both publisher and editor, I am enormously thankful for every word of encouragement I have received from contributors and future readers.

Of course, there are among philosophers some who would reject such an endeavor, and to some extent the Journal may need to justify its own existence (I look forward to some of our contributors taking up the gauntlet). Some long-standing resistance to a serious study of science fiction and philosophy may be expected as an effect of the overriding judgment (inherited from the quarters of literary criticism) that science fiction is not "serious" literature; and thus even philosophers that concern themselves with

literature often exclude science fiction from their “more serious” work. It is surprising that this attitude has endured this long, particularly given the enormous maturing of the genre since the 50’s, and perhaps there is a bit of unexamined snobbery involved. Some of the rejection, though, comes from the more problematic philosophical status of *narrative*, and how to use as evidence for our arguments “something that doesn’t exist.” (The attempt to defend the use of SF in philosophy by framing its stories in terms of “mental experiments” is, in the view of this Journal, very limiting; and thus we speak in our *Scope & Aim* of the “narrative modeling of philosophical ideas.”)

To some extent, though, it is possible that the very inexistence of this Journal gave credit to the rejection: if there is no publication connecting science fiction and philosophy, then there must not be such connection; for if there were, then there *would be* a publication!

And thus this Journal, justified by its own existence. *Solvitur ambulando*.

The *Scope* of the Journal: A Short Definition of Science Fiction (or SF)

“The wise do not quarrel over names,” Thomas Aquinas has been often quoted (although the closest I’ve found to this phrase is, “When the realities are clear, it is vain to argue over words” [In Sent. I, 2 a.2]). And more recently Neil Gaiman has said (in his Introduction to *Fahrenheit 451, 50th Anniversary Edition*): “You can call it science fiction or speculative fiction; you can call it anything you wish.”

The Journal follows that spirit. Those who have been following the literature will be mindful of discussions regarding what should be the proper name for the genre, often citing difficulties with the expression “science fiction,” and proposing alternatives that can be correlated with the shorthand “SF” (“speculative fiction” being the most common). The general practice is now to talk about “SF,” which is both inclusive and vague enough to avoid alienating any particular views on the subject. Since both “science fiction” and “SF” are popular and understood well enough, it is our editorial practice to accept both happily. Authors wanting to use an alternative denomination will probably need to spend some time explaining their choice (which, one should be aware, usually involves a technically elaborate reflection on what the SF genre really is, or should be).

But names aside, what is SF? Naturally, this could be a discussion extending over many volumes. From an editorial point of view, though, there is the practical need to circumscribe the genre in a way that is meaningful and not overly complicated. Thus we propose (as a “working definition”) that science fiction, or SF, is *a narrative genre characterized by the presence of scientific and technological developments to which we do not generally have current access, but that are imagined in continuity with our current understanding of the natural world. Those scientific and technological developments, furthermore, play an essential part in the development of the narrative conflict.*

Briefly explained: there is a difference between the world in which the writer lives and the world imagined, and this difference is due mostly to the presence of imagined (and in some cases, anticipated) scientific principles and available technologies; yet no matter

how vast the difference between the imagined world and the writer's, there is an attempt (or at least the pretense) to develop the imagined world in a way that is compatible with the scientific understanding that is current at the time of writing. Whether the writer lived in a world where electricity was only beginning to be experimented upon, and space was believed to be filled with aether, the definition still applies.

The coda of our definition is perhaps useful in order to judge what is more "properly" SF (if we admit of degrees), and what is simply an SF "dressing." "Proper" SF, in this understanding, are stories in which the imagined science or technologies *generate* to some extent the conflict. Giving a couple of detectives laser pistols and rocket boots is just dressing: it only makes for a detective story with flashier firefights; but provide them with, say, a machine that can read the last thoughts of a victim, and you have a wholly different kind of detective story, with very different possibilities for plot development, complications, and philosophical conundrums.

We speak of a *continuity* with our understanding of the "natural" world: here "natural" must be understood, not in contraposition with "artificial," but with the *supernatural*, that is, a world in which the imagined differences are of a kind that permit the author to completely ignore, or at least partially bypass, our current understanding of the natural way; in which case we are in the presence of *Fantasy* (though, admittedly, both can coexist in a story). The way in which the extraordinary occurrences are explained (or *not* explained) makes most of the difference: whether a corpse is reanimated by a poorly contained bioengineered microorganism or by ancient magical words of power. But beyond the explanation, Fantasy involves as a premise a universe conceived in such a way that is *not* in complete alignment with what we can conceive as "scientifically possible"—the wonder this causes gives Fantasy its particular appeal.

The reason I am take my time to distinguish Fantasy and SF has to do with a strong practical need to distinguish both kinds of narrative, which is important to our vision for the Journal, which explicitly excludes fantasy stories from its scope and aim. This decision is not based on a negative judgment about Fantasy, either as a genre or as philosophically rich, but mainly on the fact that Fantasy (mostly thanks to the great popularity and acceptance of J. R. R. Tolkien's work) has already begotten a significant number of academic publications, whereas SF has none (or none that specifically address it in connection with philosophy).

Secondly, however, it is our impression that SF and Fantasy do philosophy differently. Fantasy narratives, while often presenting philosophical themes and conflicts, tend to do this in the context of unadulterated wonder, requiring only to "deal" with the conflict rather than to think carefully about it. SF narratives, no matter how distant or "cognitively dissonant" the situation may be, almost always make an effort to bridge this gap for the reader, "thinking their way" through the millennia or the deep light years separating the reader from the story. When a chimney fire speaks to you in a fantasy story (I'm thinking of *Howl's Moving Castle*), it may be a good fire or it may be an evil fire; you only need to figure out its intentions and how to negotiate with it; but when the sentient computer running a spaceship speaks, the author has to carefully guide you through its capacities, its processes, and its conflicting directives, so that you can understand why such

a carefully programmed device is actively trying to murder its crew. To say that “it is an evil AI” won’t do (unless, of course, the writer is just making fun of poorly written, evil AIs).

Naturally, we expect every element of such a definition to be challenged; we wouldn’t expect less of our fellow philosophers. (One of my students has already challenged even the idea that SF is its own “genre,” given that you can find it stories of all sorts: comedy, adventure, tragedy...) But it is useful, and in this case practically necessary to set up some standards. In the meantime, we hope that this definition may help potential contributors—and even the occasional teacher needing a definition to begin their class discussions.

The Philosophical Focus of the Journal: Some Words on Topics and Style

If you are looking for a brief explanation of [what is a philosophical theme](#), we have included one among the Journal’s *Author Guidelines*. Just follow the [link](#). I want to talk here about what makes this Journal slightly different from others, in ways that may profit our contributors to know.

That there are no other academic journals dedicated exclusively to SF and philosophy does not mean that there are no publications dedicated to SF at all. There is in fact a number of long-running journals dedicated to the study of SF, but they do so from the point of view of literary studies. In the U.S. at least, this type of analysis does not stop at discussing literary techniques or the roots and legacy of a literary work; they also address issues that range from the sociological to the philosophical, typically reflecting on how a work may be affected by, and have an effect on, views on gender, race, cultural dominance, inclusiveness and so forth. These are important issues, but when regarded from the point of view of advancing philosophical thought through SF, they represent only a fraction of the subjects that philosophers typically discuss. This is why we have been very explicit in including “Philosophy” in the name of the Journal. (For contributors trained in literary studies: this means that we will probably reject submissions dealing only with the way texts are generated—historically or sociologically; e.g. studies on the role of fan conventions in the development of a series, unless there is a *philosophical* point to be made, and thoroughly developed. We will of course consider for publication papers on gender and race, but again, the focus of the paper must be philosophical, not merely sociological, and it must be thoroughly developed, as explained below.)

There have been, of course, many worthy academic forays into science fiction and philosophy such as are intended in our Journal. Some edited collections of essays (which we would like to see reviewed), and occasional special issues from general philosophical journals, call attention to the potential richness of this field of studies; but their appearance has been irregular. The well-known (and quite overwhelming) *Philosophy and Pop Culture* (“X and Philosophy”) collection from Blackwell, on the other hand, has produced a steady stream of edited books addressing a specific series in each volume, a great number of which deal with SF popular franchises. The Blackwell series, however, is aimed explicitly at getting philosophy “out of the ivory tower” (and [philosophy.com](#)), with readers in mind that are not necessarily philosophers. It has done a magnificent job, really; but it seems to have had the downside of generating an impression among philosophers that writing about SF

and philosophy is *only* about finding good, colorful examples to illustrate philosophical ideas. This we have seen often at the Editor's desk (along with a tendency to privilege trivia over technical accuracy), and for this reason it may be useful to clarify here the particular approach of the Journal.

It is perhaps sufficiently clear the potential that SF stories have to *illustrate* particular philosophical points. What we hope to see our contributors do is to use these stories as a platform to *push philosophy further*, that is, to develop new ideas, or further elaborate (and/or criticize) old ones. In other words, an article that simply says: "Hey, look! Idea A is present in Story X!" (i.e., *identifying* the presence of a philosophical theme in an SF work) would be falling very short of what we look for in an article. An article that says: "Hey, look! Story X is particularly suited to illustrate how idea A plays out!" (i.e., *illustrating* a philosophical concept with the help of an SF story, e.g. for educational purposes) would be more along the lines of what we seek, but would still not be going far enough. Rather we are looking for an article that says: "Hey, look! So far, so and so has supported Idea A. But examining how Idea A plays out in Story X gives me grounds to propose Idea B instead. Or that at least we have to rephrase Idea A..." (i.e., the article will go beyond identification, illustration and exposition of an idea, and into *criticism* and *development* of something philosophically original).

This is very important. It is, naturally, one of the main standards over which *any* academic journal judges the merits of its submissions, i.e., originality, and it is the failure to accomplish this (stopping at identification and illustration, even though this may be done quite originally) that has sent a great many submissions back to the drawing board.

This requires also that the *style* be somewhat different from the more informal, often trivia-heavy style that is the norm for works that aim at popularizing philosophy. (This was, admittedly, not fully clear at the launch of our first Call for Papers, but it is part of what we have learned since then.) Again, it is not our intention to promote a stultifying solemnity or dryness of speech for their own sake, and it is possible that academia may have handicapped itself by so restricting the style in which ideas may be put forward; but we have found out that, in practice, it often works better to err on the side of formality, to write seriously if you want to be taken seriously.

