

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 will 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 could think of was this: that it was so self-evident that there should be one, that no one had yet realized that there wasn't.

Well, so much for ontological proofs. It turns out that, no matter how obvious its existence, you still needed 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 be no 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 natural laws; 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 taking my time to distinguish Fantasy and SF has to do with a strong practical need to distinguish both kinds of narrative. This 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 reception 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 would not 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 in 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*. 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. Series like Blackwell’s, however, are aimed explicitly at getting philosophy “out of the ivory tower” (and [philosophy.com](#)), with readers in mind that are not necessarily philosophers (in the professional sense of the word). 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.

The potential of SF stories for *illustrating* particular philosophical points is probably clear enough to require no defense. 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.

2. New Sections: The Structure of the Journal

Our first Call for Papers invited authors to send papers either addressing the **Yearly Theme**, *The Notion of Personhood in SF*, or **General Articles** addressing any philosophical themes found in SF stories. At the time of closing the first volume, we have successfully added two new sections: **Book Reviews**, and **The Education Station**.

The **Yearly Theme** section contains peer-reviewed articles on subjects that match the Journal's Yearly Theme at the time of approval for publication. After launching a specific volume, we continue accepting articles addressing the yearly theme, until shortly before the next volume is prepared.

The **General Articles** section contains peer-reviewed articles on topics suitable to the Journal's Aim and Scope, but that do not quite fit the Yearly Theme. General articles

may address any philosophical themes found in SF stories, discussing them through an analysis of the corresponding story, and furthering the understanding of a philosophical topic in this manner. Alternatively, general articles may discuss in more depth the relationship between SF as a genre and Philosophy as a discipline.

The **Book Reviews** section contains exclusively reviews of books on science fiction *and* philosophy. JSFP **does not** review science fiction narratives (SF short stories, novels, etc.); only books that provide a philosophical analysis of a topic through the use of SF stories, or that examine SF as a genre (providing significant philosophical commentary), or of books that analyze the ideas and legacy of an SF author or movement. Book reviews are not peer reviewed, but must undergo editorial approval and revision/copyediting.

Some journals require that books reviewed be recently published. Acknowledging the fact that there is a lot of "catching up" to do in this area, we do not plan at present to limit how recent a publication should be. We hope this will help the Journal become a useful resource for readers and researchers looking for literature old and new.

The **Education Station** contains non-peer reviewed essays in a more conversational style, documenting ways in which SF has been and can be used in the philosophy classroom. It is intended as a resource section for philosophy teachers.

The **Response Essays** section was also planned and announced, but received no contributions. Still we record it here as part of our wishlist for future volumes. Response essays are short pieces of scholarly literature (1-4 pages) responding to philosophical issues in current or past journal articles (or to previous response essays). They are not peer-reviewed, but are subject to editorial approval. They may focus on very specific elements of a published article, providing the opportunity to clarify, criticize, support or debunk with technical expertise, but without the burden of writing a full-fledge article to that effect. Authors may use this feature too, to clarify or defend, or to acknowledge an accurate criticism and modify their views, as any good conversation is expected to do.

3. In this Volume: Contributions and Acknowledgments

It is fitting on many levels that our first article to be published—in a volume dedicated to the notion of personhood in SF—is Jerold J. Abrams's (Creighton University) "Aesthetics in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*." Some may recall that 2018 marks the 200th anniversary of the publication of Shelley's masterpiece, which is widely regarded as the beginning of modern SF (or perhaps just plainly SF). Shelley's work is among the very first to portray a modern scientist as its main character; it very explicitly asks the question of belonging to the human species. Surprisingly mature ("post-modern"?) in its approach, the story switches points of view midway, causing us to feel more pity and empathy for the murderous monster himself than for its mild-mannered creator. Abrams' detailed, classically-rich study examines the aesthetic backdrop of the novel, which frames the relationship between monster and creator. Applying theories from Aristotle, Longinus, Kant and Santayana, Abrams identifies as the thesis of the novel that it is not *reason*, as often claimed, that

grants acceptance into the human race, but rather *beauty*. Lacking this identifying mark, the highly intelligent but aesthetically horrific monster is condemned to perpetual loneliness and exile from humanity.

From the frigid Arctic Ocean, where Frankenstein recounts his tale of woe to a derelict crew, we travel to the warmer South Pacific islands, where we encounter a radically crueler Frankenstein in H. G. Wells's *The Island of Dr. Moreau*. Dan Paul Dal Monte's (Temple University) "Moreau's Law in *The Island of Doctor Moreau* in Light of Kant's Reciprocity Thesis" explores a philosophical conundrum posed by Moreau's "Law," a series of prohibitions given to his humanized beasts to prevent their falling back into their animal habits. Can a law be given, and adhered to, by creatures naturally devoid of free will? In applying Kant's reciprocity thesis to the analysis of Wells's novel, Dal Monte delves deeper into the necessary connection between free will and moral practical laws, while also showcasing H. G. Wells's keen philosophical sensibility.

Free will is, of course, a fundamental aspect of discussions about personhood, and we continue exploring its meaning in Taylor W. Cyr's (University of California, Riverside) "Carving a Life from Legacy: Frankfurt's Account of Free Will and Manipulation in Greg Egan's 'Reasons to Be Cheerful.'" Cyr's article addresses a specific objection to Frankfurt's "structuralist" notion of free will, according to which free will depends only on an agent's psychological structure at the time of action. What happens (states this objection) if the agent is being manipulated at the time, in such a way that still accommodates the conditions proposed by Frankfurt? Would this not mean that the agent is un-free, therefore contradicting Frankfurt's account? Not so, says Cyr, and brings up, to support his argument, Greg Egan's "Reasons to be Cheerful," one of those personal, close-to-the-heart stories that remind us that SF is not only about worlds needing saving and galactic-sized odds.

Our venture into the notion of personhood gets greatly enriched by Dennis M. Weiss's (York College of Pennsylvania) discussion of Marge Piercy's 1991 novel *He, She and It*, a lushly philosophical retelling of the legend of the Golem, that raises issues of artificial personhood, transhumanism, feminism and pacifism, to name a few. Weiss's analysis focuses on a discussion of the naturalist view of personhood as expounded by Annette Baier and Marjorie Grene, which emphasizes our embodied and cultural nature. Baier and Grene, Weiss explains, are dismissive of the potential use of SF in philosophical reflection. Weiss, however, argues that the analysis of a narrative such as Piercy's—featuring an artificially constructed cyborg with a *navel*—can actually challenge, and eventually support and enrich such a naturalist view, while forewarning us of possible "new styles of persons" to come.

The online format of the Journal will allow us to continue adding articles throughout the year. It is fitting, however—and more than fitting, almost poetic—that the launch of our first volume, which opened with a scientific expedition in the Arctic north, closes with another scientific expedition in the Antarctic south, facing this time a speechless monster. Bernabé S. Mendoza's (Rutgers University) "The Creolizing Genre of SF and the Nightmare of Whiteness in John W. Campbell's 'Who Goes There?'" examines a foundational SF story that is perhaps more widely remembered through John Carpenter's film version, *The Thing*. Mendoza's analysis explores the fear of contagion posed by a shapeshifting alien being—"a

new type of alien invasion”—as a powerfully influential race metaphor, an expression of the white man’s politics of purity, born of a fear of racial mixing. Mendoza then applies his analysis into an intriguing discussion of SF as a genre: whereas SF has been sometimes characterized as a predominantly “white” genre, and possibly used to forward racist ideologies, its “creolizing” hybridity and plasticity subverts such ideological constraints, turning them on their head. Furthermore, Mendoza proposes, it is possible that it is precisely its ungovernable cross-fertilization that has made the genre regarded as “suspect” to academia, and not worthy of the same level of study as the so called “high” literature.

Inaugurating the Education Station, James Rocha’s (Fresno State) “Teaching Firefly” demonstrates by doing it how SF is particularly suited for teaching philosophy (in this particular case, ethics, political philosophy and existentialism) in new and engaging ways. This is no news for anyone who has used even a single SF example in their classes; but it is possible that we have been awfully isolated in our ways of doing so. James Rocha’s article encourages us to collaborate and begin pooling resources.

Stefano Bigliardi (School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Al Akhawayn University in Ifrane, Morocco) responds to this call for collaboration with his thoughtful review of *Westworld and Philosophy: If You Go Looking For the Truth Get the Whole Thing*. There is some inevitable irony in a survey (and thus, a summary) of a book that tells you to “get the whole thing,” but time being a limited resource, every review that does its job well helps us save some of this precious resource, helping us decide what to read, what to skip and why, and occasionally pointing us in the direction of a hidden gem that we might otherwise have missed. Which is just a long way of saying: if you have found something worth reading, write a review and send it our way!

Naturally, this volume would not be possible without the help of our many contributors, and we must thank here also those whose submissions did not make it eventually into these pages. The rich dialogue that their manuscripts generated, trying to understand what worked and what didn’t, helped us develop a more clear vision for the Journal, and we are profoundly grateful for this.

And while our authors worked the hardest, cheerfully undertaking endless revisions, we must also acknowledge the incredibly dedicated and insightful work of our Reviewers: Stefano Bigliardi (SHSS, Morocco), Taylor W. Cyr (U. of California, Riverside), Alexandre Declos (U. of Ottawa/U. de Lorraine, France), Jason Eberl (Marian), Nathaniel Goldberg (Washington and Lee), Jessica Roisen (St. Ambrose), Kristina Grob (U. of South Carolina Sumter), Martín Pereira-Fariña (Santiago de Compostela & U. of Dundee), Jonathan Livingstone-Banks (U.K.), Angus McBlane (Indian Institute of Technology), Tanya Randle (St. Ambrose), Jeffrey Snapper (Notre Dame), Sergio Urueña-López (U. of the Basque Country, Spain) and Dennis Weiss (York College of Pennsylvania). That many of them are acknowledged in the articles (as “anonymous reviewers,” of course) shows how much thought they put in their reviews, and how helpful were their comments and feedback (sometimes writing numerous pages of commentary). As one body they set up delightfully high standards for the Journal, while providing contributors with the tools and guidance needed for reaching those standards. Collectively they articulated, more clearly than I could, what should be our vision for the Journal in years to come.

A word of thanks too to Eric Schwitzgebel, Jason Eberl and Stephen Clark, who did a magnificent job of getting the word out. Just a few days from our first Call for Papers, we were receiving notes and proposals from every (inhabited) continent!

Finally I must thank St. Ambrose University's Baecke Grants, which will help defray the costs of the Journal during the coming year; our Editorial Board, Tanya Randle, Jessica Roisen and Matt Butcher, who would encourage me and quickly come to my rescue; our Proofreader, Andrew Nessler, an undergraduate student at St. Ambrose who doesn't let a comma pass by unaccounted; and my wife Mercedes, for her patience while I stared at the screen for days without end.

We hope you enjoy the Journal, and thank you for reading!

Alfredo Mac Laughlin

Editor, JSFP

