Helen De Cruz, Johan De Smedt, and **Eric Schwitzgebel, (eds.)** *Philosophy through Science Fiction Stories: Exploring the Boundaries of the Possible*. Bloomsbury 2021. 264 pp. $90 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781350081222); $29.95 USD (Paperback ISBN 9781350081215).

Visceral is not the usual reaction to course-assigned philosophy readings. Yet visceral was my reaction, as hopefully my students' will be, to the contents of this anthology, and that is the point. As Helen De Cruz, Johan De Smedt, and Eric Schwitzgebel, the anthology's editors, explain, science fiction can make vivid philosophical stakes in a way that traditional philosophy cannot.

The editors have collected eleven 'philosophical science fiction' short stories, each followed by brief 'story notes' by each author, in an anthology meant for philosophy and science fiction courses. The stories are bookended by the editors' introduction and conclusion, where De Cruz, De Smedt, and Schwitzgebel debate whether science fiction can count as philosophy and if so the appropriateness of assigning it in philosophy courses. The editors are not unanimous it is either. But that is (presumably) because they are making the meta-philosophical debate vivid for their readers to engage with.

Philosophy through Science Fiction Stories is divided into three parts, each preceded by a brief essay by one of the editors, mentioning general themes and providing a bibliography of relevant fiction and philosophy texts. Because this is an anthology of fiction, it would be inappropriate to provide summaries lest the endings be spoiled. Instead, I discuss the main ideas of each reading and return at the end to the suitability of the book as a course text.

The first four stories, constituting Part I: Expanding the Human, concern transhumanism. In 'Excerpt from *Theuth, an Oral History of Work in the Age of Machine-Assisted Cognition*,' Hugo, Nebula, and World Fantasy award winner Ken Liu depicts a near future where lawyers have cognitive implants helping them process complex legal instruments and helping others take advantage of those same lawyers' brains on their 'off time' to do the same. In 'Adjoiners,' winner of a short-story contest sponsored by the American Philosophical Association, Lisa Schoenberg imagines a mother who as part of an 'Animal Intra-Mental Manipulation Study' is, through the use of biomechanical and chemical-injection enhancement, cognitively 'adjoined' to a giant eagle. In 'The Intended,' philosophy professor and accomplished science fiction author David John Baker tells the space-operatic tale of two humans conditioned to be each other's mate and what happens when the conditioning goes awry. Finally, in 'The New Book of the Dead,' philosophy professor and Astounding Award, British Fantasy Award, and World Fantasy Award winning author Sofia Samatar provides a wildly imaginative story about the AI-assisted resurrection of humans, presented as a reimagining of *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*.

The middle three stories, constituting Part II: What We Owe to Ourselves and Others, concern political philosophy. In 'Out of the Dragon's Womb,' Nebula, Locus, and British Science Fiction Association award winner Aliette de Bodard offers a fantastical account of a woman born of a dragon caught up in court politics and having to decide whether it is better to be loved or to be feared. In 'Whale Fall,' accomplished science fiction author Wendy Nikel explores the plight of a post-apocalyptic (anti-)hero who finds herself inside a dying whale as it descends to the ocean's

bottom. Finally, in 'Monsters and Soldiers,' philosophy professor and accomplished science fiction author Mark Silcox portrays a holiday planet filled with previously at-war aliens and a group of humans committed to threatening the peace.

The final four stories, constituting Part III: Gods and Families, concern philosophy of family, philosophy of religion, or both. Out of order, in the second, 'The Eye of the Needle,' philosophy professor and accomplished science fiction author Frances Howard-Snyder details a mother with an empathy deficit who secretly undergoes a procedure to give her an empathy surplus. In the third, 'God on a Bad Night,' senior staff at Johns Hopkins Applied Physics Laboratory, electrical engineer at NASA, and accomplished science fiction author Christopher Mark Rose intertwines the story of a father losing custody of his daughter with the creation of a new universe. In the first, 'I, Player in a Demon Tale,' philosophy professor and accomplished science fiction author Hud Hudson describes a debate between a philosopher who happens to believe in demons and a person who happens to be a demon. Finally, in the fourth, 'Hell Is the Absence of God,' Hugo, Nebula, and Locus Award winning science fiction author Ted Chiang explores how three persons navigate a reality filled with unpredictable angelic visitations.

These stories stick in my mind more intensely than nearly any philosophy ever has. That does not itself show that they should be used as readings in a philosophy course. Philosophy is an intellectual discipline, so a work's eliciting an intense emotional reaction would arguably be irrelevant at best or counterproductive at worst. Yet De Cruz, De Smedt, and Schwitzgebel's bookended discussions persuade me that this is a false dichotomy. Philosophers routinely employ thought experiments, and science fiction stories can be read as particularly well-developed versions of those. Plus, all these stories were as visceral as thought-provoking.

I did however have a more significant worry. What traditional philosophical works would one pair with these to use them in a philosophy class? The editors' bookends are meta-philosophical rather than first-order philosophical, and the authors' post-story notes are reflections on narrative themes or inspirations more than on philosophical ones. Moreover, while the parts concern transhumanism, political philosophy, and philosophy of family and religion, respectively, more philosophical issues arise than just those. For what it is worth—by my quick count—issues of professional ethics, moral culpability, free will, and personal identity come up in each of the first four essays, respectively; of free will, environmental ethics, and utilitarianism, in each of the middle three, respectively; and of moral psychology, metaphysics, evidence, and moral worth in each of the final four, respectively. How are those best sorted out in class?

Not until I finished reading the editors' 'Concluding Ventilation' were those worries mollified. Plato's *Apology* raises issues in (at least) epistemology, ethics, and political philosophy, yet philosophers usually do not pair it with a 'traditional' philosophical work. The first of Descartes's *Meditations* has more easily formalized arguments than any of these stories—as well as Plato's *Apology*—but it also raises issues of metaphysics, skepticism, philosophy of religion, and, by some accounts, even ethics. Finally, while the editors do not press this point, Confucius's *Analects* and Laozi's *Dao De Jing* are in some ways narratively closer to the *Apology* than to any allegedly 'traditional' philosophy, and they are extremely worthwhile for students to learn. The same is so of

other works from Asian, African, and indigenous American traditions. The idea of 'traditional' philosophy wobbles.

I am not convinced that De Cruz, De Smedt, and Schwitzgebel's book needs paired texts at all. I am convinced that it is worth my trying to teach it without one. Let me see how it goes.

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