

PHIL 238

Philosophy and Literature: Utopias/Dystopias

Spring 2026
Class Time: TWF 12:30-1:20
Location: DSB C108
CRN: 22518 [1.5 Units]

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Office Hours: Mon and Wed 2:00-3:00
or by appointment

I acknowledge with respect the Ləkʷəŋən (Songhees and Esquimalt) Peoples on whose territory the University of Victoria stands, and the Ləkʷəŋən and WSÁNEĆ Peoples (including the Tsartlip, Pauquachin, Tsawout, Tseycum and Malahat nations) in whose territories and waters the university operates and whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day.

Course Description:

What is the relation of philosophy to literature – of *logos* to *mythos*? Is there a wisdom that is unavailable to logic and reason? Is there a clarity of thought not possible in fiction? Can we understand philosophy, too, as “literature”?

These are just some of the questions we will be asking while we explore a topic much visited in the history of both philosophy and literature in western culture: What is the best kind of human community and why? What is the worst? What are the assumptions underlying these claims? What are these authors trying to tell us about what it means to be human?

We will read portraits of utopias and dystopias from Plato and More to Marx, Huxley, Golding and Leguin and more. Throughout these adventures, we will consider how the very mode of our expression governs our understanding and even perhaps determines what can be thought.

Class format will be lecture/discussion. Yes, you will be expected to read quite a bit.

Learning Outcomes:

This course will provide you with:

- an introduction to selected examples from the philosophy and literature that explore human community in its best (utopian) and worst (dystopian) forms;
- a familiarity with key ideas and assumptions that govern this exploration;
- an opportunity to improve your ability to read, analyze and critique difficult texts;
- a chance to hone your skills at expressing your ideas more effectively in written and spoken form – indispensable assets for all walks of life, from the living room to the boardroom; and
- a forum and the freedom to dream of a better world!

Texts:

In the Bookstore:

Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*
Sir Thomas More, *Utopia*
Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Herland*
Plato, *The Republic*, Lee trans (Penguin)

In the Library or on the Brightspace course site:

Murray Bookchin, *Post-scarcity Anarchism* (excerpts)
E.M. Forster, “The Machine Stops”
Hobbes, *Leviathan* (excerpts)
Ursula LeGuin, “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas”
No Gods, No Masters, Daniel Guerin, ed. (excerpts)
Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto* (excerpts)
J-J Rousseau, *The Social Contract* (excerpts)
Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., “Harrison Bergeron”

Course Format and Expectations

This course is in-person only and will not be recorded. Students are expected to come to class having read the assigned readings with care, and ready to discuss (and occasionally write on) the material. Students who miss a class are responsible for any material covered therein, as well as for finding out what announcements, if any, were made. By definition, this course is reading- and writing-intensive. Skimming AI summaries will not suffice; in-depth familiarity with the texts will be expected.

Assignments:

Five Short Essays worth 12% each equal:	60%
Five In-class Journaling Exercises worth:	15%
Other Places Participation worth:	10%
Final Utopian Project worth:	<u>15%</u>
	100%

Assessment:

The standard [University grading scheme](#) will be used. Please consult the University’s “Description” of what the grading scale means. It is also printed in a link on the “General Information” module of the Brightspace course site.

Minimum Conditions for Passing This Course

In order to be eligible to pass this course, you must complete at least three of the In-Class Journaling Exercises, together with three of the five Short Essays and the Final Project to attain a final grade point average of 50% or greater. ***Failure to complete three of the In-Class Journaling Exercises, three Short Essays and the Final Project will result in a grade of “N” in the course.***

Description of Assignments:

• **Five Short Essays (12% each):** Every two to three weeks, I will provide at least three questions or ideas from which you will choose one topic and write a short essay (750-100 Words). These will be evaluated on your engagement with the material, and the clarity and presentation of your discussion.

• **Five In-class Journaling assignments (3% each):** In order to help you begin thinking about your short essays, you will be asked to write your thoughts on a prompt taken from class discussion and distributed in the previous class. These exercises will last only 20-minutes, need not be more than one page and will be graded on a fail/pass/pass-plus basis. This is your chance to think things through in writing and my chance to hear your voice. These exercises must be done in person and cannot be delayed or made up except in cases of illness or emergency. All make up writing exercises will be done in person in my office at a mutually designated time.

• **“Other Places” Participation (10%):** Some Fridays will be devoted to in-class discussions on either:

- 1) a utopian/dystopian text not covered in the course; or
- 2) an actual (existing or historical) utopian or intentional community.

Depending on class numbers, I will provide two to four topics for each day. A Brightspace-generated select group of students will be responsible for researching and briefly presenting those utopian/dystopian community to the class. A list of possible topics will be distributed at the beginning of the course, and you may make requests.

• **Final Project (15%):** Your final project will be a detailed (1200-1500 words) philosophical or fictional depiction of your own utopia. You can imagine anything and the format is open: a story, a “memoir”, a treatise, a play. There is only one rule: your utopia must be a good place for everyone. *Each and every one.* These projects will be evaluated on the basis of clarity, economy of form, level of engagement with central ideas from the course, and above all imagination.

Policy on Late Assignments

Limited, short-term extensions on the Short Essays may be granted on a case-by-case basis, as long as the request is made before the day the assignment is due. Late assignments unaccompanied by a legitimate excuse will be penalized at the rate of 5% per day or portion thereof, to a maximum of 30%. Exceptions to this penalty will only be considered in cases where an alternate deadline was arranged ahead of time or lateness was caused by an unexpected or unavoidable circumstance, as described in the University’s [policies regarding academic concessions](#). If you are unable to meet a deadline because of conflicting responsibilities or unexpected or unavoidable circumstances *you must contact me as soon as you are aware of the circumstances or conflict*.

Additional Course Policies

Academic Integrity and Professional Conduct

Chat GPT and similar technologies are not permitted for this course. Plagiarism and other forms of cheating will not be tolerated. It is each student's responsibility to know the University's regulations in this regard. The Policy on Academic Integrity is published in [the University Calendar](#). You can also consult the [Libraries' plagiarism guide](#) or the [Tri-Faculty Standards for Professional Behavior for Students](#), which draws together a number of existing UVic policies in one place for ease of reference. Professionalism is expected from all students enrolled in courses in the Faculty of Humanities. As part of professionalism, students, faculty and staff are expected to be familiar with University policies, including the Tri-Faculty Standards.

Intellectual Property & Materials on the LMS Website

All assignments for this course and all materials posted to the LMS website are the intellectual property of the instructor and the University of Victoria. Do not circulate this material or post it to note-sharing sites without the instructor's permission. Posting course materials to note-sharing sites or otherwise circulating course materials without the permission of the instructor violates the Policy on Academic Integrity (link above). Any evidence that you are circulating materials without permission will be referred to the Chair of the Philosophy Department for investigation.

Academic Supports

The University has a number of academic support services that may help you in this course, including the [Centre for Academic Communication](#), the [Library's Research Support page](#), and the [Library's "Ask Us" service](#). Information about academic supports can also be found through the [University's Learn Anywhere site](#).

Academic Accommodations

The University of Victoria is committed to creating a learning experience that is as accessible as possible. If you anticipate or experience any barriers to learning in this course, please feel welcome to discuss your concerns with me. If you believe you will require academic accommodations to address barriers to your education in this course and you have not already registered with the [Centre for Accessible Learning](#), please [do so](#). The Centre for Accessible Learning is the office designated to make arrangements for accommodations. You can find information about academic accommodations through the Centre for Accessible Learning's website.

Some Important Administrative Dates

- Sun. Jan 18th: last day for 100% reduction of fees.
- Wed. Jan 21st: last day to for adding first-term courses.
- Sun. Feb. 8th: last day for 50% reduction of tuition fees. 100% of tuition fees will be assessed for courses dropped after this date.
- Sat. Feb 28th: last day for withdrawing from second-term courses without penalty of failure.

Other Resources

Student Resources

- a. [UVic Learn Anywhere](#). UVic Learn Anywhere is the primary learning resource for students. It offers many learning workshops and resources to help students with academics and learning strategies.
- b. [Library resources](#). Information for students wishing to use the UVic library.
- c. Indigenous [student services](#)
- d. [Centre for Academic Communication](#)
- e. [Learning Strategist Program](#)
- f. [Academic Concession Regulations](#)
- g. [Academic Concessions and Accommodations](#)
- h. Academic accommodation & access for students with disabilities – [Policy AC1205](#)
- i. [Student wellness](#) resources.
- j. [Ombudsperson](#). A resource to help resolve disputes or complaints.
- k. Other [student groups and resources](#).

University Statements and Policies

- a. University Calendar – [“Information for all students”](#)
- b. [Creating a respectful, inclusive and productive learning environment](#)
- c. [Accommodation of Religious Observance](#)
- d. [Student Conduct and Non-Academic Student Misconduct](#)
- e. [Accessibility](#)
- f. [Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion](#)
- g. [Equity and Human Rights](#)
- h. [Sexualized Violence Prevention and Response](#)
- i. Discrimination and Harassment [Policy](#)

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Schedule of Classes

Week One: Beginnings

- Jan.** 6 **Logos/Mythos**
 7 **Philosophy as Literature – In the Beginning**
 Read: Plato, *Republic*, Bk I, 327a-331d and Bk II 357a-367e
 9 **Plato's City in Thought.**
 Read: Plato, *Republic*, Bk II 368a-376c and Bk III 412b-Bk IV 421a

Week Two: Plato: Right Rule

- 13 **Ideal City-Ideal Education**
 Read: Plato, *Republic*, Bk II 376d – Bk III 412a
 14 **City/Soul**
 Read: Plato, *Republic*, Bk IV 427d-445e
 16 **Discussion and In-class Journaling**

Week Three: Huxley or Plato's Evil Twin

- 20 **DNA is Destiny**
 Read: Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*
 (at least) Ch. 1-5
 21 **Land without Shakespeare**
 Read: *Brave New World*, Ch. 6-10
 23 **The Value of Suffering?**
 Read: *Brave New World*, Ch. 11- end (esp. Ch 16&17)

Week Four: Heading to Utopia

- 27** **Other Places**
 ****1st Short Essay Due ****
 28 **The Good Place/No Place**
 Read: Sir Thomas Moore, *Utopia*, Bk. II, pp. 38-57
 30 **Do's and Don'ts**
 Read: *Utopia*, Bk. II, pp 57-67 and 84-97

Week Five: States of Nature

- Feb.** 3 **Born Free**
 Read: J-J Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, Bk. I (On Brightspace)
 4 **Solitary, Poor, Nasty, Brutish and Short**
 Read: Hobbes, *Leviathan* (excerpts on Brightspace)
 6 **Discussion and In-class Journaling**

Week Six: Natural State

Feb.	10	Paradise Lost In class film: "Lord of the Flies" (Brook, 1963)
	11	Boys Will Be Boys In class film: "Lord of the Flies" (Brook, 1963) (Cont.)
	13**	Other Places **2 nd <i>Short Essay Due</i> **

Week Seven: A Good Rest

16-20 *Reading Break*

Week Eight: All for One and One for All

	24	The Spectre Read: Marx, <i>Communist Manifesto</i> , Intro; Part I
	25	Losing the Chains Read: <i>Communist Manifesto</i> , Part II & IV
	27	Discussion and In-class Journaling

Week Nine: All Are Ones

March	3	Anarchism Read: Bakunin/ Kropotkin (Selections)
	4	Who's Utopia? Read: LeGuin, "Those Who Walk Away from Omelas" and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., "Harrison Bergeron"
	6**	Other Places ** 3 rd <i>Short Essay Due</i> **

Week Ten: Gendered Utopia

	10	Land of "hers" Read: Charlotte Perkins Gilman, <i>Herland</i>
	11	The Price of Utopia? Read: <i>Herland</i> (continued)
	13	Discussion and In-class Journaling

Week Eleven: Ecotopia

	17	Future Visions Read: TBA
	18	Eco-choices Read: Arne Naess, "Ecosophia"
	20 **	Other Places **4 th <i>Short Essay Due</i> **

Week Twelve: Techno-(dys)-topia

- 24 **Humanizing Technology**
 Read: Bookchin, “Towards a Liberatory Technology”
- 25 **The Future Human**
 Read: E.M. Forster, “The Machine Stops”
- 27 **Discussion and In-class Journaling**

Week Thirteen: The Place of the Good Place

- 31 **Imagining Place**
 Architecture/Design and Utopia
- April 1** **Imagining Place: Discussion**
 Last Day of Class
 5th Short Essay Due