

# Second Essay: Assessing an Argument

## Option II: Science Fiction & Reality

*due Thursday, June 19 in lecture*

### *Background*

Science fiction generally describes hypothetical situations: alien invasion, nuclear apocalypse, or the invention of time travel, for example. Because of this, science fiction is often thought to be descriptive of the future, as in the following remark:

“Science fiction is often described, and even defined, as extrapolative. The science fiction writer is supposed to take a trend or phenomenon of the here-and-now, purify and intensify it for dramatic effect, and extend it into the future. ‘If this goes on, this is what will happen.’ A prediction is made.”<sup>1</sup>

However, this isn’t the only way of looking at it. Instead, the hypothetical situations of science fiction may be thought to tell us about our actual, present situation. Here is how Ursula K. Le Guin explains it:

“Fortunately, though extrapolation is an element in science fiction, it isn’t the name of the game by any means. You can read a lot of science fiction [instead] as a thought-experiment. Let’s say (says Mary Shelley) that a young doctor creates a human being in his laboratory; let’s say (say Philip K. Dick) that the Allies lost the Second World War; let’s say this or that is such and so, and see what happens... In a story so conceived, the moral complexity proper to the modern novel need not be sacrificed, nor is there any built-in dead end; thought and intuition can move freely within bounds set only by the terms of the experiment, which may be very

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<sup>1</sup>Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Ace Books, 1976, p. xi.

large indeed. The purpose of a thought-experiment, as the term was used by Schrödinger and other physicists, is not to predict the future, but to describe reality, the present world. Science fiction is not predictive; it is descriptive.”<sup>2</sup>

### *Assignment*

**Construct a plausible valid argument from the premiss that ‘science fiction describes hypothetical situations’ to the conclusion that ‘science fiction tells us about our actual, present situation’, and write an essay presenting and assessing the soundness of your argument, using Isaac Asimov’s short story “The Last Question” as evidence for and/or against your claims. Your essay should: explain why the stated conclusion does not necessarily follow from the stated premiss alone; present a clearly and precisely worded step-wise argument from the premiss to the conclusion; reference specific examples or points from “The Last Question” in assessing the argument’s soundness; and ultimately, explain specifically what the hypothetical situation of “The Last Question” tells (or does not tell) us about our actual, present situation. Your argument should be informed by the quotes from the preceding “Background” section, but it need not purport to represent them. **Word limit: 1200 words.****

### *Formatting*

**Prepare your essay for blind grading:** the only piece of identifying information should be **your student number**; please do *not* include your name. As for all other formatting guidelines: do whatever you want.

### *Turning it in*

**Your paper is to be printed out, stapled, and handed in to me, in person, at lecture on the due date.** Late papers will be docked 10% if handed in within the first 24 hours after the lecture at which they are due, and 5% for each subsequent 24 hour period after that (unless accompanied by valid documentation). Late papers should

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. xii.

be submitted, in PDF format, to willie.costello@mail.utoronto.ca. To repeat, **on-time assignments cannot be submitted by email**, and any assignment submitted on or before the due date by email will automatically be docked 10%.

*On citations, secondary sources, and plagiarism*

This assignment is asking *you* to write an *original* assessment of an argument. As such, you are not expected to do any research or use any ‘secondary sources’ (for example, books, journal articles, websites, or any other written work on the topic). Examples from “The Last Question” need not be cited, but any direct quotes from the story should appear in quotation marks.

However, if you *do* consult secondary sources – and remember, this includes websurfing on the topic and reading other students’ work – you *must*: (i) include a bibliography at the end of your paper listing all your sources; (ii) give a footnote reference *every time* you quote, paraphrase, or say something influenced by what you have read; and (iii) make sure that the bulk of your paper consists in your own original, independent thinking. **Any failure to follow rules (i), (ii), and (iii) counts as plagiarism** and will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law. The much better option is just not to look at any secondary sources at all.

In addition, no collaboration on this assignment is permitted. Any submission of work not entirely your own or of work already submitted in another course is a form of cheating, and will be dealt with accordingly.