



The Philosophy of Science Fiction

SYEDA AFRIN TARANNUM

Imagine this: three people have spent their entire lives chained inside a cave, facing a blank wall, unable to turn their heads. Behind them, at the other end of the cave, is a fire that allows shadows to be cast on the wall that the prisoners are faced towards. The space between the prisoners and the fire is used by the rest of the society to pass through with different objects and maybe even their pet/ domesticated animals. The prisoners start to name and classify their perceptions of the shadows as actual entities. One day, one of the prisoners is set free so he finds his way out of the cave. Experiencing what objects really look like for the first time, the prisoner has a hard time believing that the illusions he believed to be true were actually mere reflections. Gradually, his eyes start to adjust and he can look at reflections in water, objects themselves and even the Sun. Next, he goes back to the cave to educate his partners about the discoveries he just made but finds himself unable to observe the shadows as clearly as he used to be able to. Upon listening to his stories, his partners start to believe that the journey has made him blind and ignorant; hence, they resist any attempts to be freed.

As great as it would be as a plot for a science fiction novel or movie, this is actually a passage written and represented by Plato, the famous Greek philosopher, in his work 'Republic'. While science fiction and philosophy might seem like two completely unrelated disciplines, they have a deep correlation. Philosophy is a discipline that enquires into the nature of reality, ethics and humanity at its core whereas the genre of science fiction is one that seems to explore questions about who we are and what governs the world and humanity. Thus, science fiction is an ideal form of literature for exploring ideas and arguments of philosophy.

Some of the earliest accounts of science fictions were initially noted to be philosophical treatise. A *True History* by Lucian of Samosata (a Syrian philosopher), was initially written in the 2nd Century in order to mock ideas of Sophist philosophers including ones

involving flights of fancy. However, it was the first to make the claim of one of the first pieces of science fiction with it travelling through concepts of journeys made to the moon and imaginary lunar societies and creatures. Other examples include Ibn al-Nafis's text called "*al-Risala al-Kamiliyya fil-Sira al-Nabawiyya*" or Theologus Autodidactus where he introduces ideas of restoring an entire body from a single part (much like the process of cloning) and the first fictional account of the apocalypse, and Thomas More's *Utopia*, which acquaints us to the concept of a utopia or an imaginative society where the citizens possess nearly perfect qualities.

While the accounts mentioned previously aren't ones we are well acquainted with, there are some that we have all read or heard of growing up. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* was written as a response to Descartes' writings about human nature and existence, and may even have been influenced by the writings of a French philosopher Julien Offray de La Mettrie, who believed the human body was a machine, with no soul and that a craftsman could create a mechanical man that could have human traits. Another story that most of us would recognise is Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travel* which satirically portrays human tendency to abuse political power and authority in the form of a bizarre dystopia.

Ideas such as the ones already expressed about the absence of souls in humans and the Cartesian skepti-



cism have evolved and become the basis of many more philosophical arguments. Some of them include arguments such as 'the Evil Demon' argument put forward by Descartes which says the world may be governed by an evil demon instead of an omnibenevolent God that provides us data from which we form our beliefs, and the 'Brains in a Vat' argument by Hilary Putnam, which expresses that the reality of the world could be that brains are placed in liquids in vats that are connected to a sophisticated computer program that can perfectly simulate experiences of the outside world. These concepts have since been the foundation of an era of science fiction movies, with the most significant one being 'The Matrix' trilogy. Other movies have toyed around with various other philosophical theories such as, the Cartesian dream argument in the movie 'Inception'.

Unlike most genres that use the familiar to build images of the world around us, science fiction makes use of bizarre creations and worlds to portray the insanity of the world around us. Philosophy therefore, gives science fiction the perfect genesis to give us an insight on the possibilities of reality.

Syeda Afrin Tarannum would choose 'The Script' over 'G-Eazy' any day. Continue ignoring her

taste in music on: afrintara@gmail.com