INSTITUTO DE FILOSOFÍA udp

Doctorado en Filosofía

The impending self-destruction of human civilization

Periodo Académico	: First semester of 2025
Créditos	: 6
Requisito	: –
Horario	: To be determined
Fechas	: To be determined
Horario Atención Estudiantes	: Thursday, 15:00–17:00
Profesor	: Wolfhart Totschnig <wolfhart.totschnig@mail.udp.cl>

I. DESCRIPTION

The progress of science and technology is a progress of our control over nature, of our ability to harness natural forces. This ability is generally used for constructive ends, but it can also be employed for destruction. Thus, along with helpful tools and machines, the progress of science and technology brings into existence ever more powerful weapons. Moreover, this same progress makes the manufacture of the existing types of weapons ever easier and cheaper. In this way, it puts ever more destructive power into the hands of ever smaller groups of people.

This basic feature of technological progress poses an existential problem for humanity. It suggests that our civilization will eventually destroy itself with the ever more powerful devices and methods that are being developed. There is not just one, but three distinct ways in which human civilization may perish through its own technology: 1) A lunatic might destroy the world intentionally, in a terrorist attack. 2) A scientist might destroy the world unintentionally, through a laboratory accident. 3) Two or more states might destroy the world as they fight each other, in a global war.

The problem is that, as long as technological progress continues, and unless drastic changes are made in how human society is organized, each of these three modes of doom becomes ever more probable.

In this seminar, we will analyze this problem in its various aspects and discuss possible ways of solving—or at least mitigating—it. Our discussion will be based on the contributions of several authors who have raised the problem since the invention of nuclear weapons in the middle of the 20th century (Orwell, Jaspers, Hoerner, Dummett, Bostrom, Rees, Ord, etc.).

In order to offer the students an opportunity to practice and improve their (academic) English, the course will be entirely in this language: The readings are in English, the discussions in the classroom will be in English, and the assignments, too, are to be written in English.

II. OBJECTIVES

The main objectives of this course are

- to familiarize the students with a philosophical topic of great importance, namely the risk that human civilization will destroy itself through the technologies that it develops;
- to foster a constructive discussion about how to address this risk;
- and to help the students improve their (academic) English in reading, writing, and speaking.

III. METHODOLOGY

The sessions of the course will begin with a brief introductory presentation by the professor in which the historical and philosophical context of the text to be discussed in the session will be laid out. This introductory presentation will then give way to a joint discussion, animated and led by the professor, of the principal ideas and arguments of the text.

Throughout the course, the students will practice academic writing in English. They will write five short "think pieces" (one every two sessions) and a longer final essay (see section "Assignments" below for details).

The professor will be available two hours per week, on Thursday from 15:00 to 17:00, for individual consultations.

IV. CONTENTS

See section "Description" above.

V. ASSIGNMENTS

The students will be expected to complete the following assignments:

- Five short "think pieces" (one page or 400 words *maximum*), one every two sessions, on some aspect of the readings that the student finds particularly interesting or questionable.
- A final essay of 8 pages or 3000 words *maximum* on a topic chosen by the student. The students are invited to consult with the professor about their topic before writing the essay.

VI. SCHEDULE

1. To be determined	Topic: Introduction to the topic and organization of the course Reading: –
2. To be determined	Topic: The general situation Reading: Bostrom, "Existential risks"
3. To be determined	Topic: The threat of a nuclear holocaust, part 1 Reading: Orwell, "You and the atom bomb"; Jaspers, *The atom bomb and the future of man*, selections **Submission of the first think piece**
4. To be determined	Topic: The threat of a nuclear holocaust, part 2 Reading: Wiesner & York, "National security and the nuclear-test ban"

5. To be determined	Topic: Civilizational self-destruction as solution to the Fermi paradox, part 1 Reading: Hoerner, “Population explosion and interstellar expansion” **Submission of the second think piece**
6. To be determined	Topic: Civilizational self-destruction as solution to the Fermi paradox, part 2 Reading: Cooper, “Bioterrorism and the Fermi Paradox”; Sotos, “Biotechnology and the lifetime of technical civilizations”
7. To be determined	Topic: On how to take notes (methodological session) Reading: – **Submission of the third think piece**
8. To be determined	Topic: Possible solutions to the situation, part 1 Reading: Dummett, “Ought research to be unrestricted?”; Joy, “Why the future doesn’t need us”
9. To be determined	Topic: Possible solutions to the situation, part 2 Reading: Bostrom, “The vulnerable world hypothesis” **Submission of the fourth think piece**
10. To be determined	Topic: Possible solutions to the situation, part 3 Reading: Rees, *Our final century*, selections
11. To be determined	Topic: Possible solutions to the situation, part 4 Reading: Ord, *The precipice*, selections **Submission of the fifth think piece**
12. To be determined	Topic: Review and conclusion Reading: –
To be determined	**Submission of the final essay**

VII. BIBLIOGRAPHY

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