

PHIL 1180
ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

COURSE INFORMATION

Class Meetings: Monday, Wednesday, Thursday (4:35-5:40); 30 Behrakis Health Services Center

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Office Hours: TBA

COURSE DESCRIPTION

We spend much of our lives thinking about ourselves, our friends, our family, and our prospects for the future. Once in a while we step back and consider these matters in a larger frame: “what is going to happen in 15, 20, or 50 years?” When we entertain these thoughts, we inevitably think about the fate of future human beings, asking ourselves whether the earth will still exist for them to live in peace.

It is stressful to think about these topics. Still, the realities of climate change increasingly force us to concern ourselves with these seemingly remote matters. Given that fact, how should we proceed in our daily lives? What is the proper way to think about our responsibility for ensuring that we do not continue down our current path, so that subsequent generations are not worse off than ourselves?

To answer this question, we have to first consider the way that we think about our relationship with the environment. We have to ask ourselves: “Do we owe anything to the environment separate from our own interests? How about to non-human animals? How do we weigh our own interests against the interests of future generations? These are just a few questions that we will tackle in this course, on the way to gaining an appreciation of our place in the world and our duties to our fellow inhabitants.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

The primary objectives of the course are to

- Refine your ability to carefully read and analyze texts.
- Develop your skills as a writer – learning to produce clear, coherent prose and craft well-structured arguments.
- Develop your skills as a communicator – learning to receive feedback on your ideas and writing from your peers and to give helpful feedback to others.
- Spark your natural curiosity for philosophical ideas and questions.

REQUIRED TEXTS

- Paul Taylor, *Respect for Nature: A Theory of Environmental Ethics* (2011; 1986)
- **All other readings** are available through our **course website**.
- If you click on the “readings” folder in the “content” folder, you will notice 14 folders, each one of which corresponds to a week that our class is in session. Any other information pertaining to the readings or assignments for that week will also be posted there. You will be updated to about any changes to the content or schedule by me via email.

ASSIGNMENTS

1. 3 essays (see schedule below for due dates). – **60% of your final grade**.
 - These essays will be **argumentative**: you will receive a question related to the particular subtopic. Using what you’ve learned from the readings on this topic, our discussions, and your reflection assignments, you will develop and defend an argument.
 - For example, if we are discussing our duties to non-human animal species, you might argue that there are distinctly *moral* reasons to pursue the development of technologies which allow us to ensure that no *currently existing* non-human animal species goes extinct.
 - An example of how such an essay may be structured is as follows: introduction – where you make clear the topic of the essay, **your position, the reasons that you think justify your position, an objection that someone might make to your position, how you plan to respond, and the significance of your argument** (i.e., what follows if you’re right). The following paragraphs of the essay would then spell out each of these five elements of the essay – from your position to its significance).
 - We will discuss essay writing in more detail when the time comes to do so.
 - Each of these essays will be **1200 words**.
2. 3 reflections see schedule below for due dates). – **30% of your final grade**.
 - These reflections will be **interpretive**: you will receive a question related to a certain part of one reading (e.g. what does Singer mean by the claim, “all animals are equal?” What is his argument? According to Singer, what are the consequences of us accepting this argument?) Your aim here is to get the reader to understand **why** Singer holds the position he does in this instance. The question of whether Singer is justified holding this position is a different question altogether and belongs in your essays.
 - The aim of these reflections is to serve as **scaffolding** for your essays. Before we can construct well-informed arguments, it’s important to be acquainted with what others have said about the topic. By writing these reflections, you will develop the necessary skills to write essays that represent your considered thoughts on a topic.

- The structure of your reflections will differ based on the question that you receive. Due to the length of these reflections, most will have a 2-3 paragraph structure, though we will discuss the writing of reflections in more detail when the time comes to do so.
- Each of these reflections will be **500 words**.

3. Participation & Attendance – **10% of your final grade**

- **5%** of your grade will be based purely on attendance.
- You are free to miss one week of class without harm to your grade. If you miss a fourth time, you will lose 1% of your final grade; if you miss a fifth time, you will lose 2% of your grade; if you miss a sixth time, you will lose 3% of your grade, etc. The maximum you can lose on the basis of your attendance is 5%. That said, if you were to miss 8 days of class it would also have an impact on your participation grade.
- **5%** of your grade will be based purely on participation.
- How does one participate? There's the normal way of course – asking questions in class, engage with others productively when in groups, bring to class any requested materials (e.g. if we have a workshop day, you will be expected to bring a complete rough draft of your essay or reflection to class). Philosophy, unlike other disciplines like chemistry or biology, flourish with your participation. The aim is not for me to deliver content to you (though I will certainly assist you in helping to understand the readings) but to engage with you in conversation about the topics of the readings.
- Many of you may not feel comfortable participating. There will be other options for people to gain their participation grade. The chief one of which is sending me questions about the reading. If you feel like were unable to participate well a particular week, you can send me **2 questions & 2 comments** about the reading for that week. I will respond to every question, so you may also wish to use this medium to seek clarification on an issue or delve further into issues that we didn't get to cover in class.

4. **Grade Scale**

- A 93-100
- A- 90-92
- B+ 88-89
- B 83-87
- B- 80-82
- C+ 78-79
- C 73-77
- C- 70-72
- D+ 68-69
- D 63-67
- D- 60-62
- F 0-59

EXPECTATIONS

What you can expect from me:

- I will upload any course readings **at least a week** prior to when they will be covered in class – you can expect the same when it comes to the reflection and essay topics.
- I will grade any and all assignments **within 10 days** of them being turned in.
- I will respond to any and all emails **within 48 hours**.
- I will hold office hours **as scheduled**. If you are unable to attend office hours, you are more than welcome (even encouraged) to set up another time for us to meet.
- I will shift the class schedule as deemed necessary for *your learning*. If we need extra time on a topic or you're collectively interested in pursuing a topic further, I will make any necessary changes to the schedule. **These changes will be communicated via email.**
- I will begin each class by writing down 2-3 questions on the board to help frame our discussions. **These questions will be circulated in advance** (at the end of the prior class) so that you can keep them in mind when you're completing the reading.
- I will engage with you – in writing and in person – in a **thoughtful manner**. As I see it, this thoughtfulness has two components. I will be **respectful** of your ideas, and also dedicated to **your improvement** as a thinker and writer. At times, this dedication will require me to be critical in my feedback, which is I sign that I take you seriously.
- I will be **understanding and empathetic** regarding any challenges that you face, either in this class or in your personal lives (to the extent that they bear on your ability to turn work in on time, keep focus, maintain motivation, etc.).

What I can expect from you:

- You will **attend** each class, or notify me of your absence prior to class
- You will attend class having **read** and being prepared to **discuss** the material for that day. My advice is that you a) complete the reading twice and b) make a note of 2-3 questions and 2-3 comments you have. This exercise will cement your understanding of the material and give you a sense of which points you found interesting and/or confusing. Points of interest and/or confusion are the perfect material for discussion.
- You will **complete your work** on time or notify me of your inability to do so.
- You will engage with me and your classmates in a **thoughtful** manner. Show the same dedication to others (and to yourself) that I do to you. For this semester, for three hours a week, you and your classmates are on a bit of a journey. The journey will not always be easy, and we will all meet obstacles along the way. Lift each other up.
- You will **not give up on yourself**. At times, the readings and the assignments will be difficult. If you feel like you are slipping or things have stopped making sense, *reach out*.

There is nothing honorable about suffering in silence. I am here to help with anything you may require along your journey, but you must always keep pushing.

- You will **stay curious** and **work to improve**. We have a lot to learn from each other and from the material that we will be discussing throughout the class. If you work to maintain your sense of curiosity and desire to improve throughout the course, you will come out of this experience as a better writer and a clearer thinker.

CLASS SCHEDULE

Week 1: Duties to Nature – It is reasonable to ask what we owe to other people, and even to non-human animals. But what does it mean to owe something to “nature”?

9/9 – Introduction

9/10 – Mill, “Nature” (1874) (7pp)

Week 2: The Idea of Nature – We speak of the “natural environment,” which is contrasted with the environment as shaped by human beings. As humans have spread throughout the known world, the distinction between what is “natural” and what is human has started to lose its meaning. Given that fact, how are we to think about “nature” differently?

9/14 – Vogel, “Environmental Philosophy after the End of Nature” (2002) (10pp)

9/16 – Katz, “The Big Lie: The Human Restoration of Nature” (1992) (8pp)

Minteer & Collins, “Ecosystems Unbound” (2014) (10pp)

9/17 – Continued Discussion of the Concept of Nature

Week 3: Anthropocentrism & Biocentrism – We are capable of harming the ecosystem. There are two ways to think about the wrongness of this harm: first, the fact that human beings are harmed; second, the fact that *any life* is harmed. The difference between these views is found in where they place value: in humanity (anthropocentrism) or in life itself (biocentrism).

9/21 – Paul Taylor, *Respect for Nature* (2011), “Environmental Ethics and Human Ethics” (pp. 3-24; 21pp)

Immanuel Kant, “Duties to Animals (~1755-1780) (2pp)

Gifford Pinchot, “The Training of a Forester” (1914) (~3pp)
(up to “The Forester’s Point of View”)

<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/31367/31367-h/31367-h.htm>

9/23 – Taylor, *Respect for Nature*, “The Attitude of Respect for Nature” (pp, 71-98; 27pp)

9/24 – Continued Discussion of Anthropocentrism and Biocentrism

(Reflection Due: 9/26)

Week 4: Moral Standards – Regardless of where we place ultimate value, we can agree that certain actions that impact the ecosystem are morally wrong (e.g., dumping toxic waste into a neighboring town’s drinking water). But what standards can we use to guide our own behavior, and the behavior of others? Are there any standards upon which we can all agree?

9/28 – Taylor, *Respect for Nature*, “The Ethical System” (pp, 169-198; 29pp)

9/30 – Clare Palmer, “What (If Anything) Do we Owe Wild Animals?” (2013) (20pp)

10/1 – Continued Discussion of Moral Standards

Week 5: Weighing Considerations – When it comes to applying our moral standards, there will always be competing considerations. If we clear a patch of forest for housing, the local wildlife population will be adversely impacted, and future homeowners will be benefitted. Given this conflict, how do we arbitrate between these two (or more) sets of considerations?

10/5 – Taylor, *Respect for Nature*, “Competing Claims and Priority Principles” (pp, 256-264; 269-291; 30pp)

10/7 – Singer, “All Animals Are Equal” (1974) (7pp)

VanDeVeer, “Interspecific Justice” (1979) (14pp)

10/8 – Continued discussion of Weighing Considerations

(Paper Due: 10/11)

Week 6: Shifting Our Perspective – Up to this point, we have assumed that human interests can be weighed against the *distinct* interests of animals, plants, and the ecosystem as a whole. But are we not part of the ecosystem? And if so, is it our duty to care for the ecosystem as a whole – to ensure that it maintains its natural balance and does not fall into disrepair?

10/12 – **No Class**

10/14 – Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (1949), selections (pp 4-22; 18pp)

10/15 – Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, selections (pp 23-48; 25 pp)

Week 7: Intervening in Nature – The ecosystem can be harmed, and morality dictates that we constrain our actions on these grounds. But what if the source of nature’s value is its beauty, as opposed to its capacity to be harmed? The beauty of nature compels us to respect it – does this respect require that we intervene on nature’s behalf to maintain the *status quo*?

10/19 – Russow, “Why Do Species Matter?” (1981) (8pp)

Rollston III, “Duties to Endangered Species” (1995) (13pp)

10/21 – Various Authors, “How Far Should We Go to Bring Back Lost Species?”

<http://www.humansandnature.org/how-far-should-we-go-to-bring-back-lost-species>

Focus on pieces by Minteer (2014) & Greene (2014), though glance at the others

10/22 – Khan, “The Gene Drive Dilemma” (2020) (11pp)

Collins, Emerson, Heitman, and Oye, “Debating the Ethics of Gene Drives” (2018) (10pp)

(Reflection Due: 10/24)

Week 8: Food, Population, and Human Interest – What if producing affordable food for populations who are subject to poverty and starvation requires us to intervene in the ecosystem in a way that upsets the status quo? When we are met with a situation where the status quo is harmful to existing living beings, do we still have a duty to see that it is upheld?

10/26 – Rolston III, “Feeding People Versus Saving Nature” (1996) (20pp)

10/28 – Crist, “Abundant Earth and the Population Question” (2013) (1-9; 9pp)

Crips, “Climate Change, Population, and Justice: Hard Choices to Avoid Tragic Choices” (2015) (22pp)

10/29 – Continued Discussion of Conservation and Population

Week 9: Managing Unequal Burdens – Certain populations are disproportionately burdened by environmental strain. Most of this strain results from the action or inaction of governments and corporate entities. What do we owe to populations unduly impacted by environmental strain? And what are the correct procedures for discharging these duties?

11/2 – Shrader-Frechette, “Human Rights and the Duty to Alleviate Environmental Injustice: The Domestic Case” (2010) (2007) (25pp)

11/4 – Schlosberg & Carruthers: “Indigenous Struggles, Environmental Justice, and Community Capabilities” (2010) (25pp)

11/5 – Continued Discussion of Unequal Burdens

(Paper Due: 11/7)

Week 10: Collective Responsibility – We have discussed how certain populations are unduly impacted by the effects of environmental strain. Are there, in turn, certain populations who bear greater responsibility for the harm done to the ecosystem, and to those who bear the undue burdens of this harm? How can those responsible be made to see this fact?

11/9 – Caney, “Cosmopolitan Justice, Responsibility, and Global Climate Change” (2005) (28pp)

11/11 – **No Class**

11/12 – Hassoun, “The Anthropocentric Advantage? Environmental Ethics and Climate Change Policy” (2011) (26pp)

Week 11: Relating to Our Future – We possess many of the technologies required to slow the advance of climate change, and even, in time, to undo some of its detrimental effects. Yet, we do very little to reduce the harm we cause to the ecosystem, even though mitigating this harm would be ultimately be beneficial to us. Is there an explanation for this state of affairs?

11/16 – Barry, “Sustainability and Intergenerational Justice” (1997) (22pp)

Parfit, “Energy Policy and the Further Future” (1983) (9pp)

11/18 – Gardiner, “A Perfect Moral Storm” (2005) (18pp)

11/19 – Continued Discussion of Intergenerational Ethics

(Reflection Due: 11/21)

Week 12: Stepping Back – We have been treating nature as the object of our inquiry – asking what it is owed, considering the extent to which it can be harmed and who is responsible for any harm done, and mulling over the correct attitude to take regarding its value. This week, we take a step back and put ourselves in a position to observe nature, in all of its forms.

11/23 – Reggio, *Koyaanisqatsi* (1982)

(Film – to be watched outside of class)

11/25 – **No Class**

11/26 – **No Class**

Week 13: Individual Responsibility – At this point, you may think to yourself: “the ecosystem is immense – it has existed for long before I was born and will continue long after I am gone. Recognizing the immensity of nature gives me a sense of awe and I experience regret when I think of the harm done to the ecosystem. But is this burden on *my* shoulders?”

11/30 – Sinnott-Armstrong, “It’s Not *My* Fault: Global Warming and Individual Moral Obligations” (2005) (19pp)

12/2 – Hiller, “Climate Change and Individual Responsibility” (2011) (16pp)

12/3 – Continued Discussion of Individual Responsibility

Week 14: Lessons Learned – Now that the journey is coming to a close, what lessons have we learned? We began this time together by asking what our understanding of what human beings owe to one another can tell us about what we owe to nature. Now, at the end, it seems fit to ask: what has our newly acquired respect for nature taught us about being human?

12/7 – Hill, “Ideals of Excellence and Preserving Natural Environments” (1983) (30pp)

12/9 – Final Discussion

(Final Paper Due: 12/11)