

Phil 268 – Environmental Ethics: What Do We Owe to The Earth and Its Denizens

Instructor: Joshua Kissel

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Office Hours: By Appointment

Class Meeting: M/Tu/W (June 21-July 14)

Class Location: Online (Unfortunately)

Course Description:

This is a course in environmental ethics. Together we will consider normative questions related to the environment; rather than asking how we *in fact* relate to the environment we will ask how we *ought* to interact with it. This exploration comes in two parts: The first focuses on *who* or *what* has moral status while the second explores the moral responsibilities that follow from our understanding of the status question.

We will analyze arguments that suggest those with moral standing include all (and only) human beings, sentient life generally, all living beings—including plants, natural collectives like the Chicago River Watershed or the Congo Rainforest, or even non-living natural objects such as the Himalayas or Amazon River. The next part of the course asks us what our conception of moral standing means for our individual and collective responsibilities. Is it ever permissible to eat other animals or might veganism be morally obligatory? What does the prospect of environmental degradation or climate change mean for our individual consumption choices or the politicians we support? Might developed countries owe climate reparations to developing ones? And does the prospect of a warming planet or animal exploitation legitimate acts of civil disobedience, ‘monkeywrenching’, or (possibly violent) protest?

Course Objectives: this course enables students to:

- (1) Evaluate the validity and soundness of arguments.
- (2) Contrast competing approaches to environmental ethics and the moral standing of animals, plants, and environmental collectives.
- (3) Interrogate and identify the core claims underlying one’s own orientation and that of your fellow students to environmental ethics.
- (4) Assess the justifiability of the positions in (2) and (3)

In addition, students will acquire a background in important areas of environmental ethics and philosophy more generally including; critical reasoning, moral standing as it related to humans, future generations, non-human animals, plants, and environmental collectives (e.g., ecosystems or natural places), moral theory (including utilitarianism, natural rights, and anthropocentric views), climate change and individual as well as collective responsibility, environmental reparations, and the arguments for the (il)legitimacy of acts of civil disobedience, ‘monkeywrenching’, and even possibly violent protest.

Office Hours:

Because we are not meeting in person, unfortunately, this summer my office hours will be by appointment. Please, send me an email letting me know you're interested in meeting and share your availability any day Monday-Thursday 9-5 (in US Central Time). Meeting outside this time frame is possible but will be more difficult, however, I *will* make it work, especially if you are abroad!

This time is *meant* for you to ask questions, discuss philosophy, or just hang out. It is *your* time, and you do not need an excuse or any clarity about what you want to do. If you know what you'd like to discuss, please include that in the original email requesting a time—this is *not* required, however.

Absences:

A core component of this class is great discussion. As such, it is important for your learning and the learning of your peers that you miss as little as possible. This is especially important because we only meet 11 times in our 4 weeks together (no class July 5th!).

However, I trust all of you to make rational decisions with respect to attendance in accord with your own best reasons. As such, you are each **permitted 1 (one) totally unexcused absence** without any requirement to email or in any other way alert me to your absences. You can use these absences to miss class for any reason (e.g., your being sick, tired, wanting to binge a new show or play your favorite video games, to attend some internship or work-related activity, or whatever else.) If you miss class, even using an excused absence you must watch the posted recording of the missed class meeting.

Absences beyond this number will amount to a 10% reduction in your participation grade.

Emergency Exemption Policy: Because I aim to be fair to all students and not let my subjective judgement of a 'good excuse' I do not to allow any extra excused absences beyond your freebies. However, I encourage all students to reach out if you run out of freebies but believe you have some special excuse (like a health issue) that might warrant extra accommodation or special exemption without requiring me to disadvantage your peers in this class. These *can and do* sometimes happen.

In the event of receiving this sort of exemption you will normally be required to write a 500-750 reflection on the readings for that date which should include some summary but mostly a critical engagement with some of the ideas of our authors. In addition, you should watch the recorded class session for that day of class.

Students with Disabilities:

Any student needing accommodations should speak directly to AccessibleNU ((847) 467-5530 or accessiblenu@northwestern.edu) and to me as early as possible in the quarter. Be aware that AccessibleNU will help arrange reasonable accommodations for both physical and mental health

concerns. Barring unforeseen circumstances, any necessary arrangements should be made within in the first week of class. All discussions will remain confidential.

General Grading Schema:

1. Participation and Discussion 10% of total. Pass/Fail
2. 10 Critical Responses: 10% of total. Check + (100)/Check (92)/Check - (85)
3. Three Scaffolding Paper Outlines: 40% of total. A-F
 - a. First 10%
 - b. Second 15%
 - c. Third 15%
4. Final Paper (1200-1500 words) 40% of total. 'A'-'F'

A 94-100	A- 90-93	B+ 87-89	B 84-86	B- 80-83	C+ 77-79	C 74-76	C- 70-73	D 60-69	F 60-0
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Assignment Due Dates [Details for Particular Assignments to Come]

Assignment	(Some) Details	Due Date
Critical Reading Responses:	Each response is due on Canvas 2 hours <i>before</i> the relevant class takes places. A response is required for every class but our first meeting. On July 12 you need to write a reading report on the Pasternak AND a separate report on the film 'If a Tree Falls.'	8am the day of every class (except June 21)
First Paper Outline	This outline must be on a topic from class 1-4* *You can write on readings from class 4. If you think you want to write on a later reading you need to read ahead and, I suggest, meeting with me to discuss briefly in office hours!	Thursday. June 24 at 11:59pm
Second Paper Outline	This outline must be on a topic from class 4*-6 *You cannot write on the same reading as you used for the first outline.	Wednesday June 30 at 11:59pm
Third Paper Outline	This outline must be on a topic from class 7-11 Note: We will only have discussed 7-8 at this point. If you think you want to write on a later reading—which I encourage—I suggest you read ahead and meet with me to discuss briefly in office hours!	Wednesday July 7, 11:59
Final Paper	Paper of 1200-1500 words on any topic in this course. You may choose to use any paper outline or to start from scratch	Friday July 16 at 11:59pm

Course Outline: 11 sessions MTW from June 21-July 14—excepting July 5th) of 140 minutes total.

Class	Topic	Readings	Assignments
1 – Week 1 June 21	Introduction to Course	Kwame Anthony Appiah – What Will Future Generations Condemn Us For? (3 Pages)	Icebreaker Discussion
	Oppression	Iris Marion Young – Five Faces of Oppression (20 pages)	Schedule a meeting with me for this week.
2 – Week 1: June 22	Anthropocentrism	William Baxter – People or Penguins (5 pages)	
Nonhuman Moral Subjects		Rolston III, Holmes – Feeding People vs Saving Nature (20 pages)	
3 – Week 1 June 23	Animal Ethics; Rights and Liberation	Peter Singer – All Animals are Equal (10 pages)	1 st Paper Outline Due (June 24) at 11:59pm
Nonhuman Moral Subjects		Tom Regan – The Case for Animal Rights (10 pages)	
4 – Week 2 June 28	Holist Environmental Ethics and A Critique	Aldo Leopold – <i>The Land Ethic</i> (excerpt 14 pages)	
Nonhuman Moral Subjects		Ramachandra Guha – Radical American Environmentalism and Wilderness Preservation (7 Pages)	
5 – Week 2: June 29	Causal Impotence and a Reply	Katie McShane – Anthropocentrism vs. Nonanthropocentrism: Why Should We Care? (17 pages, 11 w/o notes)	Midterm Teaching Evaluations Circulated
Individual Actions		Walter Sinnott-Armstrong – It’s Not My Fault: Global Warming and Individual Moral Obligations (15 pages, 13 w/o notes)	
6 – Week 2: June 30	Causal Impotence: Replies Continued	Marion Hourdequin – Climate, Collective Action and Individual Ethical Obligations (22 pages, 16 w/o notes)	2 nd Paper Outline Due at 11:59pm
Individual Actions		Alastair Norcross – Puppies, Pigs, and People: Eating Meat and Marginal Cases (17 pages)	
7 – Week 3: July 6	Radical Approaches to Ecology	Val Plumwood – Nature, Self, and Gender: Feminism, Environmental Philosophy, and the Critique of Rationalism (25 pages, 23 w/o notes)	Note: Heavy Reading
Getting Political		Murray Bookchin – Post Scarcity Anarchism (16 Pages)	
8 – Week 3:	Global Justice and Climate Change	Rebecca Buxton – Reparative Justice for Climate Refugees (27 Pages)	3 rd Paper Outline Due at 11:59pm

July 7 Getting Political			
9 – Week 4: July 12 Getting Political	Monkey Wrenching and Protest	Watch “ If a Tree Falls: A Story of the Earth Liberation Front ” (86 Minutes) Avia Pasternak – Political Rioting: A Moral Assessment (35 Pages)	Note: Heavy Reading AND a Documentary Film
10 – Week 4: July 13	Tensions in Environmental Ethics	Elizabeth Anderson – Animal Rights and the Values of Nonhuman Life (13 Pages) Mark Sagoff – Animal Liberation and Environmental Ethics: Bad Marriage, Quick Divorce (11 Pages)	
11- Week 4: July 14	Wrap Up and Make Up	Additional Class Selected Reading Prepare for Paper Presentations (second half of class)	Final Paper Due (July 16) at 11:59pm

Fostering an Online Learning Community

This course is designed to help each of you meet each of our learning goals. A large part of achieving these learning goals is actively engaging with our course materials. Active participation (in our case, informal Canvas participation tasks, discussion during synchronous Zoom class sessions, and engagement in office hours) is proven to boost retention, speed up the learning process, and facilitate creative thinking, among other things.

Most of all, the truths of the texts we are reading are not delivered from on high. We need to engage critically with our texts; in other words, *we need to practice doing philosophy*. I strongly encourage you *to talk to one another and not just to me*. Here are some suggestions and guidelines:

- Practice being patient with others.
- Listen carefully and respectfully.
- Leave others room to speak; don’t monopolize or dominate.
- When agreeing, explaining why you agree.
- Criticize ideas and arguments, not the people who offer them.

During our Zoom meetings, *please endeavor to stay on task and be present!* Do not spend our class time checking email or browsing other windows on your screen. I know this is difficult. For this reason, we will try to take breaks as needed. I will aim for *quality* of our meetings, not *quantity* of time. The more focused we can be, the more effectively we can learn.

Practice makes perfect. Many of us will be taking online classes in the academic year to come. Take this class as an opportunity to reflect on your own learning, to practice time management, and to see what works for you. Please also consult Northwestern’s [Student Resources for Remote Learning](#).