Philosophy 3530: Environmental Ethics

301 Family Life Bldg. | MWF 9:30 – 10:20

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Office Hours: Thursday 9:00 – 11:00, or by appointment

Course Website: phil3530.posthaven.com

I. Course Description: As the human population grows, transforming ecosystems and consuming the Earth’s resources at increasing rates, various conflicts arise over our use of the environment and our relationship with nature and nonhuman species. Such conflicts stem from divergent understandings of values and responsibilities—i.e. conflicting views about what is good and right, and how we should live. In this course, we will examine a wide range of arguments and positions concerning the ethical dimensions of our relationship to the natural world, and to future generations of human beings, etc. Students will be introduced to some major perspectives in normative ethics (i.e. utilitarianism, deontology, and virtue ethics). These perspectives will provide insight as we explore philosophical debates over land and wilderness ethics, pollution, over-population, animal rights, biodiversity preservation, climate change, and so on.

There are two main objectives for the course. First, students should leave the course with a deeper understanding of the ethical issues surrounding our use of non-human contents in the natural world, and with a deeper understanding of the ethical theories that attempt to explain our relationship to nature. Students should leave knowing what philosophers have said, and why they have said it. Second, the course should develop each student’s ability to make informed decisions, and to contribute to ongoing moral discussions. In other words, the course should enhance your ability to reason— to think, discuss, and write more clearly about moral issues (i.e. critical thinking skills, and communication skills). This involves understand difficult readings, reflecting on their truth and significance, and evaluating arguments on both sides of an environmental issue.

II. Required Texts:


- Several additional readings will be posted on the course website phil3530.posthaven.com

III. Requirements:

(1) Attendance and Participation—10% of course grade.

(2) Quiz One—15% of course grade.

(3) Quiz Two—15% of course grade.

(4) Three Response Papers (1-page reflection papers discussing an assigned reading; must be turned in during lecture the day the reading is discussed)—30% of course grade (10% each).

(5) Final Paper (3-4 pages)—30% of course grade.
Evaluation of papers and written exams will be based on three criteria: (a) the clarity and organization of your written work, (b) the degree of understanding demonstrated, and (c) the depth of personal engagement and argumentation.

The purpose of a response paper is two-fold—(i) response papers are assigned to get you to engage individual readings at a deeper level, and (ii) response papers are assigned in order to enhance discussion in the classroom. For this reason, response papers must be turned in during class, and only by students who attended the lecture(s) in which that particular reading was discussed. That said, you get to decide for yourself which assigned readings you will write responses to.

Late work will not be accepted. Do not use the work of another student, and do not use anything from the web when writing your papers. If you must use the web (although I urge you not to), quote and cite everything you have used. If you do not quote and cite material that you have used, it is plagiarism. Any student caught plagiarizing will certainly fail the class, and will potentially be expelled from the university.

Handouts will be made available on all topics; they will not be posted on the website or emailed to you. Handouts are to be treated as lecture notes. They can be acquired by attending class or office hours.

IV. Tentative Schedule:

Topic 1: Introduction to Ethics and Logic


Topic 2: Anthropocentrism, God, and Nature


Topic 3: Toward a Non-Anthropocentric Ethic


Topic 4: Utilitarian and Economic Valuation


* Quiz 1: Friday, September 23rd (in class)
Topic 5: Environmental Goods, Population, and Cooperation


Topic 6: Duty, Value, and Respect for Nature


Topic 7: The Status of Non-Human Animals


Topic 6: Environmental Virtue Ethics


*Quiz Two (Monday, October 31st)

Topic 8: Science, Technology, and the Land Ethic


Topic 9: A Deeper Ecology


*Final Paper (Due Monday, December 12th)