

Environmental Philosophy



Skidmore College
Spring Semester, 2010

Wednesday, Friday 10:10-11:30am

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Office Hours: Tues,
Thurs 9-11AM

Introduction and Overview

What ethical duties do we owe to the environment? Is it wrong to chop down forests or to order the sea bass at a restaurant? Do we do something good by recycling that soda can or by dredging the Hudson for PCB's? Forty years ago, almost nobody thought about such questions. However, after decades of Earth Day celebrations, community recycling initiatives and aggressive canvassing by less than hygienic Greenpeace representatives, most of us do reflect on such problems. What's more, many of us consider ourselves environmentalists of some sort. This is to say that we believe that the environment is worth having around and that our relationship to it must be considered--like those with other people--as having specifically ethical dimensions. For many though, this relationship is poorly considered. For instance, we assume that turning off the lights when we leave a room is an ethically good thing to do. But who or what is it good for? Is it good for you, for your neighbor, for future generations, for the environment as a whole? Further, what are the grounds for such a claim? Is it a universal good or one that is only considered good in a specific cultural context? Answering such questions takes a lot of effort. However, if we are to be sure of our decisions and actions in regard to the environment, it is with these types of questions that we need to begin. Because of this need, this course will at first concern itself more with fundamental ethical issues rather than with specific problems in environmental ethics such as animal rights or duties to future generations. Similarly, we will also focus on trying to understand what nature is and what our place in it is before

saying what the best way to act in nature is. Once we have gained an understanding of what an ethic is, what nature is, and what an environmental ethic might be, we will have the opportunity to apply this knowledge either by developing an environmental ethic of our own or through the critical analysis of the implicit environmental ethics embodied in the institutions and practices that surround us.

Objectives

Primarily, this course is intended to introduce issues relating to environmental philosophy, environmental ethics and to provide the conceptual tools necessary for the evaluation of environmental policy. In addition to providing this introduction, it is hoped that you will come away from the course with a better understanding of your own relationship to the environment and to ethics as a whole such that this understanding may be applied to your daily lives.

Assignments and Evaluation

a. class participation 10%

Philosophy and philosophical texts are very difficult and often hard to understand on our own. Because of this and because this class includes discussion and discussions need participants, attendance is mandatory and you are expected to take part in all class discussions. This aspect of your performance will be reflected in a portion of your grade that in no way reflects its overall importance to the class. However, it should also be easy given that this participation is basic to the class and demands no more of you than showing up ready to express an informed opinion after having read the texts or thought about the discussion questions assigned for the day. This grade is based upon the quality (not necessarily quantity) of your participation. However, it is very hard to participate well if you don't show up to class and if you seldom speak.

b. reading questions 15%

About once a week (and maybe more) I will assign a question that (a) has to do with the next reading, or (b) that is designed to spur discussion in a subsequent class, or (c) that starts you working on a philosophic or scholarly skill. On questions of the first two types, please take the time to write a paragraph or so in response and have it ready to turn in at the beginning of the next class. Those answers that demonstrate thought and engagement with the text through citation, exegesis, critical thought, and/or relation of the reading to other texts, experiences, or events will receive full credit and either a "√" or a "√+." Responses that evidence little effort or thought will receive no credit and a "-." Like the gold star in elementary school, the "+" is its own reward and indicates how well you are engaging with the class materials. The mark also remains in my grade book and, come May, will remind me of your excellence.

b. object analysis 10%

A short paper considering the ethical relationship between you, your property, time and the world.

c. 2 exams 40% (2 x 20%)

These exams are designed to gauge your comprehension of the reading material and class discussions. One part of each exam will consist of short answer questions. These questions will be somewhat "technical" and will require you to demonstrate your awareness of facts about the texts and your understanding of specific arguments. The other part of the exam will consist of a long essay that will evidence your ability to synthesize and evaluate philosophical arguments.

e. major paper and presentation 25%

The intent of this assignment is to give you the opportunity to define an environmental ethic. This can either be your own ethic in relation to a specific practice (such as vegetarianism or a minimal impact lifestyle) or it could be the definition and evaluation of an environmental policy specific to a larger institution or body of practices (such as the Dupont corporation or organic farming). In addition to authoring a page paper articulating this ethic and comparing it to the other environmental philosophies discussed in class, you will prepare and deliver a short report on your research to the class.

Policies

No late assignments will be accepted without express permission of the instructor obtained at least 24 hours before the assignment's due date. Violations of the Skidmore College Honor Code will result in an "F" for a class grade as well as all penalties imposed by the Honor Council.

Note

I encourage you to see me if, at any time, you are having problems with the readings, with understanding the class discussions or if you just wish to talk more about issues raised in the class. I am willing to spend time with you in person to help you get as much out of the course as you wish.

Required Texts

Course Packet of Readings (CP)

Leopold, Aldo. *A Sand County Almanac (Outdoor Essays & Reflections)*. New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 2001.

Schmidtz, David & Elizabeth Willott, editors. *Environmental Ethics: What Really Matters, What Really Works*. New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 2001.

Schedule

Week 1, January 24-30

Wednesday Introduction: Philosophy, Natural
Philosophy.

Ethics, Environmental Ethics

•••first assignment: object analysis•••

Friday Anthropocentric Ethics
Genesis/Aristotle (CP)

Week 2, January 1 - February 6

Wednesday Anthropocentric Ethics
Aquinas/Kant
+ Object Analysis Discussion

•••object analysis due•••

Friday Ethics by Extension: Utility
Mill, *Utilitarianism* (CP)
Singer, *Animal Liberation* (CP)

Week 3, February 7-13

Wednesday Ethics by Extension: Rights and Equality
Christopher Stone, "Should Trees Have Standing?"
Paul W. Taylor, "The Ethics of Respect for
Nature"

Friday Philosophy of Nature to Environmental
Philosophy
Thoreau, "Economy" from *Walden* (CP)

Week 4. February 14-20

Wednesday Philosophy of Nature to Environmental Philosophy
Thoreau, "Economy" from *Walden* (CP)
Thoreau, "Walking" (CP)

Friday Philosophy of Nature to Environmental Philosophy
Thoreau, "Walking" (CP)

Week 5, February 21-27

Wednesday Environmental Philosophy to Environmental Ethic
Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* parts 1 & 2
-especially pages: 3-6, 44-51, 66-78, 95-116,
129-133,

149-153.

Friday Environmental Philosophy to Environmental Ethic
Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, Part 3: "The Land Ethic"

Week 6, February 28 - March 6

Wednesday Environmental Philosophy to Environmental Ethic
Zeide, "Another Look at Leopold's Land Ethic."
(CP)
+ Exam Review

Friday Mid-Term Exam

Week 7, March 7-13

Wednesday Aboriginal Environmentalism
Chief Seattle's Speech and controversy (CP)
... project proposal assigned...
...report dates chosen...

Friday Aboriginal Environmentalism
Krech, *The Ecological Indian*. "Introduction,"
"Buffalo" (CP)

Week 8, March 14-20

...SPRING BREAK...

Week 9, March 21-27

Wednesday Environmental Holism
Varner, "Biocentric Individualism"
Devall and Sessions, "Deep Ecology"
---meet with me about ideas for project ---

Friday Environmental Holism
Sober, "Philosophical Problems for
Environmentalism"
---meet with me about ideas for project ---

Week 10, March 28 - April 3

Wednesday The Good Life and the Environment

Hill, Jr. "Ideals of Human Excellence and Preserving..."

...project proposals due...

Friday The Good Life and the Environment
Milbrath, "Redefining the Good Life in a Sustainable Society"

Week 11, April 4-10

Wednesday Economy/Psychology/Environment
Hardin, "Tragedy of the Commons"

Friday Individual Project Meetings (APF)

Week 12, April 11-17

Wednesday Economy/Psychology/Environment
Kelman, "Cost-Benefit Analysis, An Ethical Critique"
Leonard & Zeckhauser: "Cost Benefit Analysis Defended"

Friday Environmental Pragmatism
Light, "Contemporary Environmental Ethics..." (CP)

Week 13, April 18-24

Wednesday Review Day

Friday Exam #2

Week 14, April 25- May 1

Wednesday Project Report(s)

Friday Project Report(s)

Week 15, May 2-8

Monday Project Report(s)

Wrap-up Discussion

Tuesday Classes End

Week 16, May 9-14

Date TBA Project Due