

Environmental Philosophy asks questions such as: How has 'nature' been conceptualized in the Western philosophical tradition, in aesthetics, science, and ethics? What arguments have been offered for the view that humans are superior among creatures? What connections might there be between the ways that nature, humankind, and animals have been conceptualized and the ways that humans have tended to act toward the non-human natural environment? This course may cover such topics as: climate change, resource extraction and justice, biotechnology, obligations to future generations, risk assessment and discount rates, species lost, conservation vs. preservation. (Also offered through Distance Education format.) 2.00 credits or (1 of PHIL*1000, PHIL*1010, PHIL*1050)

This course is an examination of ethical arguments regarding the environment from a number of different perspectives. The course is designed to enable students to:

- a. identify and understand philosophical arguments concerning our moral obligations to the environment and the extent of those obligations, and
- b. critically evaluate those arguments while developing their own moral stance on current environmental issues and the proper relationship between humans and nature.

Upon successful completion of the course students will have:

1. An understanding of the main ethical theories and how they apply to environmental issues.
2. Examined some of the main positions on moral standing and who or what is deserving of moral consideration.
3. Explored and evaluated the main philosophical arguments and theories put forth by modern environmental philosophers.
4. Demonstrated critical thinking by applying theory to current environmental issues while taking into account possible objections and strengths of each theory.
5. Constructed their own view on the moral status of the environment, while remaining flexible to new ideas and arguments.
6. Developed the ability to isolate and identify the underlying arguments within current media and popular discourse surrounding environmental issues.

For this course, you will need to the following resources:

Textbooks

Williston, Byron. (Ed). 2012. *Environmental Ethics for Canadians*. Don Mills: Oxford University Press.

These Texts can be purchased at either of these locations:

- [University of Guelph Bookstore](#)
- [Co-op Bookstore](#)

During each unit in this course, you will read the required readings from the required textbook, and participate in related online discussions. Each unit will cover the following topics:

Unit 01: Introduction to Ethics and Environmental Philosophy

- An introduction to the area of environmental ethics, and the reasons why and how philosophy can contribute to the study of the environment. Questions will be explored concerning whether or not the environment can obligate us to act morally on its behalf, the kinds of value that exist and if they are intrinsic or extrinsic to the environment, and whether or not traditional moral theories can be applied to environmental issues.
- Students will gain an understanding of the traditional moral theories found in philosophy, and how moral arguments work. This will allow the student to understand where moral claims come from, and the reasons why many people debate the proper role humans should play in conserving, protecting, or regulating aspects of the environment. Students will also learn that ethics is not just relative or about 'anything goes', but rather a structured way of reasoning about moral standards and guidelines. Students will identify their own moral standards and will see that everyone has them, even if we have not evaluated them carefully.

Unit 02: Moral Standing

- This module examines the concept of moral standing, and the question of to whom we owe moral consideration. Any creature with moral standing is deserving of moral consideration and is someone towards whom we have moral obligations. Moral standing can exist in degrees, where, for example, both plants and animals may have moral standing but the latter to a greater degree. Moral standing is generally based on certain traits or characteristics, and in this module we consider various criteria as possible candidates for the granting of moral standing to animals, plants, ecosystems and all living beings.
- This section also provides the student with the main animal rights philosophers and their views, with a specific focus on how traditional moral theories have failed to consider the moral value of animals. This section provides both a critique of traditional moral theories while also positing various positions on how we should treat animals given their intelligence and ability to suffer.
- Ecocentrism focuses on the importance and value of the ecosystem, or ecosphere. Value is found in the whole of nature, and this leads to what is often called the 'expanding circle' argument. What is the proper place of humans within the ecosphere? How do species interact in ways that promote the overall health of the environment? When should humans interfere with issues of species control for the overall health of the environment. These questions reflect the ecocentric position.
- Biocentrism focuses on the value of individuals, both human and non-human. Equality among all natural entities is the main moral claim here. If all species play a role in the health of the environment, how can we properly distinguish which species is more valuable than another? How can humans claim they are more important and valuable than any other living entity? These questions reflect the biocentric position.
- This section also provides the student with the main animal rights philosophers and their views, with a specific focus on how traditional moral theories have failed to consider the moral value of animals. This section provides both a critique of traditional moral theories while also positing various positions on how we should treat animals given their intelligence and ability to suffer.
- How does economics play a role in determining our moral obligations to the environment? Should economic concerns and methods be applied to environmental issues? We will be analyzing the problems that arise when we try to weigh economic concerns with moral concerns.

Unit 03: Challenges and New Directions

- In this section we will explore some less popular environmental philosophies, or ones that are sometimes called ‘alternative’. These movements challenge both traditional moral theories and the traditional three positions held in environmental philosophy.
- Ecofeminism reflects a feminist critique of traditional moral and environmental philosophies that posit a connection between the domination of women and the domination of nature. This view provides an historical and philosophical understanding of our environmental crisis, with a focus on the role that patriarchal society has played in our treatment of women and nature.
- Environmental aesthetics takes theories found within the field of aesthetics that provide different perspectives on the nature of the beautiful and the importance of aesthetic appreciation and apply them to the environment. Is there a connection between the aesthetic appreciation of nature and morality, or how we ought to treat nature? Can environmental conservation practices be informed by the aesthetics of nature?
- How does economics play a role in determining our moral obligations to the environment? Should economic concerns and methods be applied to environmental issues? We will be analyzing the problems that arise when we try to weigh economic concerns with moral concerns.

Unit 04: Environmental Issues

- Global warming is a major issue for Canadian society and countries around the globe. What exactly is global warming? What role have humans played in this? Who should we listen to when trying to determine the truth about global warming and how we ought to act? Should Canada endorse the Kyoto Protocol? These questions will be addressed and analyzed in this section.
- The issue of overpopulation directly relates to the concern about the overconsumption of natural resources in order to sustain the growing population. Is there a limit to the size of population that can be sustained on our earth? Will we run out of resources required for the survival of the human race, or will we find technological solutions to our problems? Should we be more concerned with conservation of resources or finding new ones? To what extent should we conserve or protect natural resources for future generations?
- We are currently facing a decrease in biodiversity around the world, with more and more species of plants and animals becoming extinct—some before we even know about their existence. What is the value of biodiversity in nature? To what extent should we alter human actions and behaviours in order to protect or promote biodiversity?
- The concept of sustainability has been incorporated into many environmental policies and laws. Unfortunately, there remains disagreement concerning the proper definition of sustainability and whether or not sustainability is a useful concept that can be employed to constrain damaging human actions towards nature. Students will examine this concept from a moral perspective, as well as from a practical perspective in terms of its usefulness and applicability to environmental issues.

• Assignment	Grade
Unit Discussion (5 @ 5% each)	25%
Assignment 1	15%
Assignment 2	20%
Final Exam (Cumulative)	40%
Total	100%

Please check the [Assignments link](#) for specific assignment guidelines, detailed information on the expectations for discussion participation and policies related to assignment submission.

For specific Assignment due dates see the [Schedule link](#).

The final exam is to be schedule within the final exam period. When the University determines the date of the exam it will be posted in the News section of this course.