# Philosophy of Biology

## Course Information

Phil\*6740

Department of Philosophy, COA. University of Guelph

Tuesday (in person) 2:30-5:20 pm

Please consult Courselink for the classroom location.

## Instructor

Please see Web Advisor for instructor information.

Office hours : Tuesdays 10:30 - 11:20, or by appointment.

Office location: Please see Web Advisor for instructor information.

Email: [linquist@uoguelph.ca](mailto:linquist@uoguelph.ca)

## Calendar Description

A general introduction to the history and philosophy of biology.

## Course Description

This course is designed with two types of student in mind: philosophy grad-students interested in how biology might inform their understanding of the world, and biology grad-students interested in questioning the foundational assumptions of their discipline. We have therefore tailored this course to be accessible to both groups even if they have little or no expertise in one or the other discipline.

Each year the course focuses on a different theme. This year, we focus on relationships between humans and animals, especially our relationships with the domesticated animals relied on for food, companionship, research, entertainment, medical advancement, education, and other purposes. The first part of the course is an introduction to  basic ideas about the moral standing of nonhuman animals. Do they matter morally? What is significant about their pleasure or suffering?  Are their mental lives a mystery and, if so, what does this entail about the ways that we should treat them?  The second half of the course focuses on specific issues in animal ethics including the moral relevance of death, the treatment of animals in agriculture and aquaculture, the possibility of genetically modifying animals to reduce suffering, the ethics of animals used for research, and the justification for keeping animals in zoos and aquariums.

## Learning outcomes

Upon completing this course, students will

1. Understand the basic ethical theories as they apply to nonhuman animals.
2. Develop a philosophical position on key issues such as the use of animals in agriculture, medical research, and zoos.
3. Be able to write a critical/philosophical essay on these topics.

## Grading

Participation (Outcomes 1 & 2) - by making substantive contributions to seminar discussion (40%)

Writing (Outcomes 1,2,3) -one short analytical paper (20%) due in Week 6 and one final research paper (40%) due December 7. Late papers receive 2% per day penalty.

## **Readings**

Seminars will typically draw on select chapters from Bob Fischer's recent introductory book Animal Ethics. In addition, we will often supplement these chapters with focal articles. All readings are available on Courselink under content.

## Schedule

### Week 1 Introduction to Course Themes

The first part of our meeting this week will be an introduction to course themes and to each other. The second part of our meeting will view the documentary Angry Inuk. We will then discuss the question of whether it is morally justified for Inuit to hunt seals and trade in their pelts.

### Week 2 The Moral Community

What sorts of beings deserve moral consideration and why?  Most of us treat fellow humans as deserving of moral consideration. This means that we take people's interests into account when making decisions that impact them. But why do we do this for humans? And are humans different from other entities in the morally relevant respects? Should moral considerations be extended to plants? What about to non-living entities?  The first part of our meeting this week will discuss Ch.’s 1 & 2 of *Animal Ethics*, focusing in particular in CH 2: The Moral Community.

### Week 3 Animal Sentience

A popular contemporary view holds that if a being is sentient (i.e. capable of experiencing pleasant or painful experiences), then it deserves moral consideration.  But would a  a life devoid of pain really be morally superior to one that contains some suffering?  A closely related question concerns the identification if sentience in non-linguistic or distantly related organisms. Students are responsible for background reading: Chapter 3 of Animal Ethics. We will then discuss the focal paper by Mason and Lavery on the issue of fish sentience.

### Week 4 Animal Rationality

Western philosophers have traditionally held that a being matters morally only if it is capable of reasoning. In addition, it is sometimes argued that rationality is exclusive to humans.  The reading by George Graham summarizes some of the arguments for why animals might lack beliefs (and therefore arguably incapable of reasoning). The more argumentative paper by Peter Carruthers defends the argument mentioned above.  Students are expected to read the background paper. In class, we will divide into two groups and debate the question of whether non-rational animals deserve moral standing.

### Week 5 Fall Break

October 10 class rescheduled for Dec 5.

### Week 6 Moral Theory

So far in this course we have considered two of the most prominent accounts of animal ethics: the view that rationality is necessary for moral standing, and the view that sentience is the special property that bestows moral standing. This week we consider some alternative approaches. Chapter 5 of Animal Ethics reviews some alternative philosophical accounts, mostly from the Western tradition.

### Week 7 Welfare and Death

Many of us think that killing an animal, especially unnecessarily, is immoral. But is death in itself bad, for instance if it involves no suffering? Students are responsible for Chapter 4 of Animal Ethics as background, which explores the moral significance of death and ideas about what it means for an animal have a life that is worth living. In seminar, we will discuss the article by Nadasy which explores a First Nations' perspective  on animal sacrifice.

### Week 8 Agriculture and Aquaculture

How are animals treated within the industrial food production system? Would people adopt different consumption habits if they were more aware of these conditions? Chapter 6 of Animal Ethics reviews the technologies used to house and process animals for human consumption. The focal paper by Bolton and Von Keyserlink discusses on the dairy industry and the production of surplus calves.

Week 9 Gene Editing for Animal Welfare

The advent of CRISPR and other gene editing technologies has made it possible to genetically modify domesticated animals in ways that might improve their welfare. Are such modifications acceptable, or perhaps even morally required?  In seminar we will debate this issue, drawing on arguments developed by Schriver and Mconnachie.

### Week 10 Animal Research

Animals are standardly used in research that aims to benefit humans. It is debatable whether this practice be justified on utilitarian grounds? A rights-based view almost certainly cannot justify animal testing. Students are responsible for reading Chapter 10 of Animal ethics, a review of these topics. In seminar, we will focus on the paper by Botero and Desforges, an investigation of the roles played by moral arguments in animal care review committees.

### Week 11 Zoos and Aquariums

Zoos and aquariums justify the captivity of wild animals, often maintaining them in extremely poor conditions, in the name of conservation.  The idea is that people will become more attuned to the natural environment if they encounter, for example, a captive orangutan or dolphin. This argument raises two important questions: if the conservation benefits were true, would they justify the practice of animal captivity? Secondly, is there any reason to think that the conservation benefits are true? Students will read Chapter 11 of Animal Ethics on zoos for background. In seminar we will discuss that chapter in conjunction with the "Plexiglas Dinosaurs" article paper by Linquist (2018).

### Week 12 Trade offs

This week we take a step back to reflect on the big question of how to relate ethically and practically to domesticated animals. Students will take a few minutes to each defend an argument on some topic relating to the theme of the course. These mini (10 mins max) defenses provide an opportunity to test out ideas for your final paper.

### Week 13 Meet Bob Fisher

The author of our textbook will be available for a general discussion of course themes.

## College or Arts statements

Please follow [this link](https://www.uoguelph.ca/arts/system/files/CO%20Standard%20Statements.pdf) for information about plagiarism, course drop deadlines, and other important administrative matters.