

# PHIL 3293: ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

Fall, 2017: Environmental Ethics in the Anthropocene

## Syllabus

### 1. General Information

Instructor: Dr. Zev Trachtenberg

Office: 627 Dale Hall Tower

Phone: 325-6324

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Off. Hrs: M: 3:00-4:00;T: 3:30-4:30; and by appointment

Meeting Times: MWF: 1:30 – 2:20 PM

Meeting Place: 3020 Price Hall

### 2. Course website

The course Canvas site will have the day-to-day schedule, additional course materials, dropboxes for assignments, and grades. You should check the course Canvas site regularly, and set it so that you receive notifications of information I'll post using the Announcements feature. (See "Communication," in section 7 below.)

### 3. Goals

The primary goal of this course is to help you critically evaluate, from an ethical point of view, human beings' interactions with the natural environment.

We will focus on two elements that go into such evaluations. On the one hand they involve moral judgments – judgments that, for example, a certain public policy is right or wrong due to its environmental impact. You will learn about ideas from two influential moral theories within (western) Philosophy that have been used to assess the human relationship with nature. And you will practice applying those ideas to particular cases, in order to learn how they work in arguments about how people ought to interact with the environment. This should:

- improve your skill at analyzing moral arguments, and
- contribute to your abilities
  - to evaluate positions on the environment you encounter in our society, and
  - to articulate your own views as clearly as you can.

On the other hand, moral judgments about the human relationship with the environment must be based on a clear understanding of how the interactions between people and nature actually work. This in turn requires a broad familiarity with some key ideas from the natural and social sciences. You will learn about the complex relationship between nature and society by studying the proposal that the Earth has entered into the “Anthropocene:” a new geological era in which the main driver of the planet’s natural systems is human activity. Your guide here will be the textbook *Environmental Transformations*, by Mark Whitehead. But in addition to becoming familiar with scientific (and other) claims, you will also focus on assessing the *reliability* of those claims, in particular by considering their sources. This will contribute to your abilities:

- to critically evaluate the factual basis of arguments regarding environmental issues, and
- to make sure your own positions are factually sound.

#### 4. Readings

*Environmental Transformations* (“ET”), by Mark Whitehead (1st ed., Routledge, 2014), ISBN 978-0-415-80984-9.

Paperback copies should be available at the OU Bookstore. You can also obtain much less expensive e-book versions. Check Amazon to rent a Kindle edition (readable on many devices).

A copy of is also available on Textbook Reserve at Bizzell.

#### 5. Course Work

1. Source evaluation 10%

##### Term project

2. Proposal/Introduction	5%
3. Presentation of two sides	30%
4. Presentation of research	30%
5. Statement of own position	15%
6. Overall assessment of project	10%

**Source evaluation.** During the second to fourth weeks of the semester we will work through ET. At the start of the second week I will assign you a due date for a short assignment on a chapter in the book (you may consult with me to switch due dates with another student).

For your assignment you will choose an important factual claim made in the assigned chapter of ET, and you will evaluate Whitehead’s use of a source to support that claim. You will identify and obtain the source he relies on, explain

what makes the source reliable (or questionable), and discuss whether he uses it accurately.

Your evaluation should be around 250 words, and will be submitted on a form I give you. You will submit your assignment on Canvas, so that it runs through TurnItIn. Your assignment is due by 1:15 PM the day we discuss your assigned chapter; if it is late I will lower the grade you receive by one full letter.

On the day we discuss your assigned chapter you should be prepared to give a very short presentation in class based on your work. If you are not present from the beginning of class you will receive ½ credit for this assignment.

**Term project.** In the fifth week of the semester you will begin work on a term project in which you analyze and evaluate an environmental policy from a moral point of view. You will work on elements of the project for the remainder of the semester, and will present them on a website you will develop on OU Create (though you will also submit them to Canvas so they can go through TurnItIn for plagiarism detection). You will receive training on how to use Create and how to make a website using WordPress.

I will form groups of students working on similar topics – I will assign you to a group on the basis of your proposal (see below). I expect students in each group to assist each other with their research efforts, and to help each other deepen their understanding of the issues, as well as assist each other with their writing.

I will grade (and comment on) the elements of the term project as you turn them in; together they are worth 80% of your final grade. At the end of the semester you will have the opportunity to revise each of the elements. At that time I will grade them again, and you will get credit for improvements. In addition, I will evaluate your project overall, taking into consideration its coherence and your use of the website medium; the overall evaluation is worth 10% of your final grade.

**Proposal/Introduction.** During the fifth and sixth weeks of the semester you will develop a project proposal (~1 p.). Making use of the orientation to environmental issues provided by ET, you will choose a controversial environmental policy to work on, i.e. one about which there is substantial disagreement. I will make comments and approve or disapprove of your proposal (if the latter you will need to resubmit a revised version). Your proposal will serve as the introduction for your completed project.

**Presentation of two sides.** During the seventh through ninth weeks of the term you will develop two statements (~2-3 pp. each), one in favor of the policy you are working on and one against it. In your statements you will make use of ideas from the moral theories we will cover to offer

justifications of the two positions. You will research statements made by proponents and opponents of the policy, and draw on them to frame moral arguments on both sides of the question.

**Presentation of research.** During the tenth through twelfth weeks of the term you will do research into the factual bases for the arguments you presented in the previous element. You will identify the key claims made in the statements you found in your research, analyze their moral significance, and then investigate and evaluate the sources for these claims. You will summarize your findings in two research briefs (~2-3 pp. each), one for each side in the dispute.

**Statement of own position.** During the thirteenth week of the term you will work on a statement of your own position on the policy you are working on (~ 2pp.). You might favor one of the two sides you have presented in the previous elements, or you might have a distinct point of view. But in your statement you will use moral ideas you have studied and the factual research you conducted to justify the position on the policy you think is right.

**Overall assessment of project.** In the final week and a half of classes you will work on revising the elements of your project, and ensuring that it forms a coherent whole. You will also work on the way you display it on your website. In addition to my evaluation of the separate elements, I will take those factors into consideration in evaluating the project overall.

Your term project is due Wed., Dec. 6 (see “Final Exam Preparation Period,” in section 7 below). During the last two classes of the term you will work with your group on an ungraded presentation to the entire class of the broad area your group has examined.

**Note: there is no final exam in this class.**

## 6. Classroom environment

In this class we are likely to bring up some very contentious issues. Our primary goal here is to *learn* – and disagreement *can* be an essential part of learning. Thus discussion of serious questions – on which people might have serious disagreements – will be a key part of this course. You will participate in discussions in small groups, and among the class as a whole. I want to make clear my expectations for how these discussions should go.

By emphasizing discussion I am affirming that you are responsible for contributing to your own learning experience, and to the learning experience of all the other students in the class. The value of open, free discussion is that *any*

student's contribution can play a vital a role in *everyone's* learning: you never know if your comment will unlock an idea for another student, and likewise you never know which other student's comment will provide the key to your own understanding of the material. For this reason I will strive to make *all* students feel welcome and empowered to contribute ideas that advance everyone's education.

In that spirit I will not tolerate any behavior that compromises any student's learning environment. This includes (but is not limited to) interrupting others, carrying on conversations separate from the class discussion, responding to others in a snide or dismissive way, and making comments that could reasonably be perceived as expressing disrespect based on others' race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, ethnicity, disability status, or other characteristic. This means that I will intervene, and take further action as is appropriate, if I observe or learn that anyone in a discussion acts or speaks in ways that imply that another student's opinions are not worthy of being considered on their merits.

My purpose with this policy is not to enforce a false politeness that suppresses sincere, vigorous, critical debate about the issues that come up in the course. Rather, it is to ensure no one is kept from joining into that kind of debate by the feeling that others regard them as not fully entitled to participate, or capable of making a valuable contribution.

**Cell phones and computers.** You may bring a laptop, tablet, or smart phone to class, to look at electronic versions of the readings or other web based sources we might discuss. And you are permitted (but not encouraged – see the following paragraph) to use your device to take notes.

Note that research indicates that *handwriting* notes is in fact superior to typing them. And, electronic devices increase the temptation to try to multi-task during class – in particular on unrelated activities. There is excellent evidence that this typically results in poor work on all the tasks involved, so is self-defeating. More importantly, it is distracting to other students, and disrespectful to whoever is speaking (me, or another student).

Therefore, if I notice you using your devices in an inappropriate way (i.e. for purposes not related to the class) I will call you out, and if you do this repeatedly I will take it into account when considering whether or not to round up your final grade.

I understand that it might be important to keep your phone with you. But during class please set it to ring silently. If you must take a call, you may excuse yourself to the hallway.

## 7. Various Policies

**Communication.** In addition to using the Announcements feature on Canvas I will also send messages regarding the class to your OU e-mail address. You should check this account regularly, or else have mail sent to your OU address forwarded to an account that you use. Your performance in the class will suffer if you miss messages regarding work for the course because you do not check your OU e-mail.

**Office hours.** If you would like individual help with anything in the course (e.g. making sense of readings, or how to approach the writing assignments) please come to my regularly scheduled office hours: you do not need to make an appointment. If the times listed are not convenient for you, I am very happy to set up special appointments. I am also happy to discuss any other matters you think I can help you with.

- Please note that I am a LGBTQ Ally: a resource and support person for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning members of the OU community. You are welcome to approach me with any needs or concerns, and to refer your friends to me. All discussions are completely confidential.

**Lateness.** Please inform me if you must arrive to class late, e.g. if your previous class is a long distance away. Otherwise, I expect you to be present by the beginning of classtime.

**Attendance.** I will take attendance at every class, though except as specified above attendance does not factor directly into your grade. I have designed the course so that class activities contribute directly to the work you submit for grading; in general you will be unable to do well without attending class. *Attendance* here includes paying full *attention*. Your mere physical presence is not enough – to benefit you must engage seriously in the activities of the class. My evaluation of your attendance will factor into my decision whether or not to round up your final grade if your average is on a borderline.

**Rounding up final grade.** I will use the conventional system of converting 90% and above to an A, 80% to a B and so on. If your point total is close to a borderline I will consider the seriousness of your engagement in the class, including your attendance, your participation in group and class discussions (including inappropriate device use), and notable improvement over the semester, to decide whether or not to round up your final grade. Round-ups will be determined on a case-by-case basis, and are not guaranteed, no matter how close the point total is to the grade divider.

**Late work.** I will accept late written work only at my discretion, and with the option of imposing a substantial grade penalty. Exceptions to this policy will be granted only if arranged in advance (except in case of emergency) on the basis of

a substantial and verified hardship (e.g. conflict due to a medical, family, or job-related problem).

**Re-writes.** As explained above, you will have the opportunity to revise the elements of your term project at the end of the semester. I will not accept re-writes before then, and I will not accept re-writes of the source evaluation assignment.

**Religious observances.** It is the policy of the University to excuse the absences of students that result from religious observances and to provide without penalty for the rescheduling of examinations and additional required classwork that may fall on religious holidays. If any assignment in this class conflicts with your religious observance, or if you have any questions on this matter, please contact me.

**Reasonable accommodation.** Any student who has a disability that may prevent him or her from fully demonstrating his or her understanding of the material in this course should contact me personally as soon as possible so we can discuss accommodations necessary to ensure your full participation and to facilitate your educational opportunities. If you have not already, you should contact the Disability Resource Center, [www.ou.edu/drc](http://www.ou.edu/drc), (405) 325-3552, (405) 325-4173 (TDD), [drc@ou.edu](mailto:drc@ou.edu).

**Final Exam Preparation Period.** Pre-finals week will be defined as the seven calendar days before the first day of finals. Although I am permitted to, I will not cover new course material throughout this week. As provided above, you may submit your revised portfolio on the Wednesday of this week. For specific provisions of the policy please refer to OU's Final Exam Preparation Period policy:

(<https://apps.hr.ou.edu/FacultyHandbook#4.10>).

## 8. Academic honesty

I will rigorously enforce the University's policies on academic honesty. In written work *you must cite all the sources you consult*. To help me identify cases where papers use uncredited sources, all written work will be submitted to TurnItIn for plagiarism detection. I will report *all* cases of academic dishonesty to the Provost's Office.

But academic honesty does *not* mean you should not make use of ideas you learn from other students – in or out of class. Indeed I urge you to discuss the issues of the course outside of class – but you must do your written work on your own, and must cite any assistance you receive from others (other than routine writing advice). Please ask me if you have any questions about academic honesty in general, or about specific situations that might arise during this course.

## 9. Note to Philosophy majors

In order to aid in the assessment of its program, the Philosophy Department has a specific requirement for majors in Philosophy and in Ethics and Religion. Majors are required to help the Department assemble a portfolio of their written philosophical work--typically papers or exams written for philosophy classes--produced over several semesters. Majors will NOT be graded on their portfolios. Instead, portfolios will be sent, anonymously, to outside readers, to help them evaluate the quality of the Philosophy Department's teaching. Majors will discuss the progress of their portfolios with their advisors.

Your term project for this course will go into your departmental portfolio. I will make use of the files you submit to Canvas for this purpose—you do not have to submit a separate copy of your project. However, you must also submit a title page that lists: the paper title; the course name and number; this semester and year; and the date the project is turned in—and the project must not show your name anywhere except on the title page (that is, please do not include your name in a header or footer).

## 10. Schedule

The course schedule, including due dates for written work, will appear in Canvas.