

**Philosophy 225**  
**Environmental Ethics**  
**Fall 2011**

Time: TR 2:00-3:15, Location: OLDH 308

**David Henderson, 1015 Oldfather Hall**  
Office hours 9:50-10:50 TR

**Purpose:**

This course begins with a reflective overview of general approaches in philosophical ethics. The bulk of the class is a survey of approaches in environmental ethics.

We will consider the central matter of what persons, groups, things, and systems are properly taken to have fundamental “moral considerability.” This is to ask what things are properly the focus of one’s the fundamental—or nonderivative—moral engagement. If, for example, one thinks of moral engagement as a matter of fostering what is morally valuable, then for an entity to have fundamental “moral considerability” is for there to be states of that entity that are primary moral goods—that have a nonderivative moral value. (Crudely, a state with nonderivative value does not owe its value to its making some contribution to yet some other state that itself is more fundamentally of value. Contrast: going to the doctor may be valuable because it contributes to health.) Of course, all such talk raises the question of what makes a value a moral value?

Certainly the dominant tradition of western thought and philosophy has been that persons alone have moral considerability—and that human beings are the one clear case of persons. (They have been purported to be unique insofar as they use language, engage in abstract thought, can attain happiness, or perhaps were created in the image of God.) Thus, humans have traditionally been taken to be the originary locus of moral concern, with other things being morally relevant or valuable to the extent that these things benefit or harm humans, having consequences for their happiness. (Pollution is thought to be bad, and the thought is commonly that it is so because it affects human health adversely.)

Now, some have thought that this traditional (anthropocentric) approach constitutes too restrictive an understanding of what are the proper objects of moral concern. That is, some have thought that the objects with “moral considerability”—the originary sources of moral value—are wider than just humans or persons.

Classical utilitarians insisted that sentience (the capacity to feel) was enough to give something “moral considerability”—thinking of pleasure, generically, as the moral good, and of pain as the moral bad. For the utilitarian, sentient animals are included as objects of moral concern in their own right, and one has direct moral obligations to animals.

Recently, one finds writers advocating the view that we should recognize a yet wider class of objects as morally fundamental—things such as living things generally, or more abstract things such as species, or ecosystems. What kind of reasons can be given for such proposals, independent of the enrichment of human life or the enhancement of sentient well-being? Do such proposals make sense in terms of contemporary science: Darwinian biology? Ecology? What really are these “objects” that

are said to possess inherent moral value and standing? And exactly what is it to have moral value or standing?

In considering the various options above, we will want to clarify and compare the more concrete implications of the various positions.

The general plan of the course is as follows. First, we will take a few meetings to discuss the “big positions” in traditional philosophical ethics, in the bargain we may get a little clearer on the idea of what is of fundamental ethical concern. Second, we will consider a sample of writers advocating an expansion of ethical concern beyond humans. One traditional ethical position, utilitarianism, starts us out—as its classical form already implies such a concern for sentient animals. We will also consider the highly influential ethical position of Aldo Leopold whose career work ultimately touched upon almost all aspects of environmental thought. After this tour of some philosophical positions we take the time to think about what all this means, and what position ultimately makes the most sense, by reflecting on two issue areas.

After discussing these big ideas, we will look at two big issues that we face. Food: Pollan, in *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*, looks at food and the food chains confronting someone living in the United States. Energy: we will look at several discussions of energy and climate change.

#### **Texts:**

Most of the materials for this course are available on blackboard or online at links provided here.

Two exceptions to buy:

- Aldo Leopold, *The Sand County Almanac*, Oxford University Press, 1968
- Michael Pollen, *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*, Penguin, 2007

#### **Evaluation:**

There will be 3 papers, each on an assigned topic (in effect 3 takehomes). Each will be worth 28% of your grade. All papers will be submitted electronically, using Safeassignment in Blackboard—in a Word format, or as a PDF. They are due on the dates mentioned in the schedule below, and when that date is a class date, they are due prior to the beginning of class.

16% of your grade will be determined based on your performance on quizzes commonly given over the readings assigned a given day.

The final 16% of your grade will be a matter of performance on in-class quizzes treating assigned readings for the class period. There will commonly be quizzes, and they will be graded on a four-point scale: 0 (lacking), 1 (sketchy), 2 (decent), 3 (good/solid). A student’s scores for the set of exams will be summed, and the total will be transformed into a percentage of the possible points, then this number will be weighted as 16% of the grade. (I will do this, in a way that drops the student’s two lowest scores; in effect allowing for 2 absences during the semester.)

**Schedule:**

8-23 Background Ethical Philosophy	8-25 PPT Overview of Ethics “Consequentialism essay from the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy: <a href="http://www.iep.utm.edu/conseque/">http://www.iep.utm.edu/conseque/</a>
8-30 PPT overview and “Kant’s Moral Philosophy” from the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: <a href="http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant-moral/">http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant-moral/</a>	9-1 PPT Overview of Ethics and “Virtue Ethics” from the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy: <a href="http://www.iep.utm.edu/virtue/">http://www.iep.utm.edu/virtue/</a>
9-6 PPT Overview and “Hume’s Moral Philosophy” from the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: <a href="http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hume-moral/#namoj">http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hume-moral/#namoj</a>	9-8 in class, <i>Nova: World in Balance</i>
9-13 in class, <i>Nova: World in Balance</i> Paper 1 Assigned	9-15 Botkin and Keller, Chapter 5 (on Blackboard) and visit <a href="http://www.myfootprint.org/">http://www.myfootprint.org/</a>
9-20 Gould “The Golden Rule—A Proper Scale for Our Environmental Crisis” (on blackboard) Paper 1 Due (before class time, through SafeAssign)	9-22 Anielski and Soskolne, “Genuine Progress Indicator Accounting” (on blackboard)
9-27 Singer, “Equality for Animals?” (reading 36, A&B)	9-29 Singer, “Environmental Values” (reading 37, A&B)
10-4) Jamieson, “Animal Liberation is an Environmental Ethics” (reading 38, A&B)	10-6 Peter Kareiva and Michelle Marvier, “Conservation for the People,” <i>Scientific American</i> 2007 (on blackboard)
10-11 Sagoff, “At the Monument to General Meade” (reading 59, A&B)	10-12 Biocentrism (Taylor and Sterba selections) from David Keller, <i>Environmental Ethics</i>
10-18 Fall Break	10-20 Leopold, “The Land Ethic” from <i>Sand County Almanac</i>
10-25 Leopold, “The Land Ethic”	10-27 Steven Pinker, “The Moral Instinct” (on Blackboard) Paper 2 Assigned
11-1 Deep Ecology (Naess, McLaughlin selections) from David Keller, <i>Environmental Ethics</i> , selections under the heading: Environmental Psychologism	11-3 Deep Ecology continued Paper 2 Due (before class time, through SafeAssign).
11-8 Guha, Radical American Environmentalism and Wilderness Preservation: A Third World Critique.” (on blackboard)	11-10 Pollan, <i>The Omnivore’s Dilemma</i> , Part I, Industrial Corn In class: watch <i>Food Inc</i>
11-15 Pollan, <i>The Omnivore’s Dilemma</i> , Part II, Grass	11-17 Discussion
11-22 TBA	11-24 Thanksgiving Break
11-29 Energy’s Future and Beyond, <i>Scientific American</i> , 2006	12-1 Scale, Scope, and Speed, Brand (on blackboard). In class: a talk by Saul Griffith, Climate Change Recalculated <a href="http://fora.tv/2009/01/16/Saul_Griffith_Climate_Change_Recalculated">http://fora.tv/2009/01/16/Saul_Griffith_Climate_Change_Recalculated</a>
12-6 Discussion; Paper 3 Assigned	12-8 TBA
<p>Paper 3 is due at the beginning of the scheduled final exam period: 3:30 pm Wednesday, Dec. 14</p>	

## Official ACE language

Here (from the approved ACE submission) are the 2 ACE OBJECTIVES officially served by this course and the respects in which the course can be expected to serve these objectives:

### **SLO8: Explain ethical principles, civics, and stewardship, and their importance to society.**

The purpose of this class is to reflect on issues having to do with human **ethical responsibility** with respect to their environment. What kinds of use can they ethically make of that environment? What are the limits of their ethical use? Such questions will be pursued both abstractly (at the level of generalities) and concretely (with an eye to contemporary ideas in ecosystem theory, demographics, engineering, economics). Are the **ethical demands** on us (predominantly) a reflection of what is required for the **ethical treatment** of humans, or for the ethical treatment of ourselves and other sentient beings, or do the ethical principles here reflect obligations to things like ecosystems? Undoubtedly, there are demands that we be wise **stewards** of our environment—but who or what are we **stewarding** resources or systems for: for present humans, for present and future humans, for intelligent critters, for sentient critters, or for certain kinds of holistic entities such as the ecosystems themselves. To what extent do these ethical principles translate into demands on **civil society** and government? The class is organized around such issues. After an overview regarding value-concepts on which philosophers have focused (good/value, duty/ought) and their interrelationships (does duty derive from value, for example) we consider the philosophical plausibility of locating some of the ethical value (or some of the objects of obligation) at the level of humans, sentience, life, species, or ecosystems. **Stewardship**, for what and for what, is never far from the surface in this course. Students will work out their own answers to these questions—taking due account of the positions to which they are exposed—and are asked to come to sympathetic understandings of alternative positions. Writing assignments are directed to just these dual tasks.

Typically there will be 3 or 4 writing assignments. Examples of the common regimen of assignments: 1. After presentation traditional philosophical approaches, and of concrete specifics having to do with demographic trends, development, and ecological “footprints,” the student may be asked to select the most promising of the traditional approaches, to sympathetically and clearly expoit it, and its apparent applications to the concrete issues. 2. After comparing the traditional approaches (which are almost uniformly human centered—utilitarianism being an occasional exception) and the expansionist positions (such as Aldo Leopold’s ecocentrist approach), students may be asked to discuss how different are the practical applications of the approaches. 3. Students may be asked to set out their considered favorite position, the most challenging objection to that position, and how it can best be managed. Obviously, papers of the first sort call for the student to come to terms with “ethical principles” having to do with “stewardship,” and its importance to society.

The department commits to collecting and analyzing a reasonable sample of student work. The

material will be reviewed by the appropriate department subcommittee, which will assess student achievement, and when necessary, make recommendations for enhancing achievement. The department will archive the samples along with the results of the review and any recommendations.

**SLO9: Exhibit global awareness or knowledge of human diversity through analysis of an issue.**

The challenges facing humans in relating ethically to their environment are diverse. Still, many of these can be understood in terms of two trends: population dynamics and development. The human population reached one billion only around 1800. It was 2.5 billion in 1950, and is now 6.7 billion. It is projected to be well over 9 billion by mid century. Obviously human population is putting enormous pressure on natural environments. **However, there are important differences across the globe in these demographic trends. How these vary with development, education, the status of women, and culture will be discussed.** At the same time, much of the globe is experiencing rapid development. The demands for this development will be sympathetically examined. However, the common models of development provided by the developed regions, nations, and economies make for real environmental challenges. By one crude measure—the ecological footprint—if everyone on the current 6.7 billion people lived as do those in the United States, we would need the resources of 5.33 earths to sustain them. **A concern for sustainable development—and what that might mean for the diversity of people occupying the globe—will call for much thought in this course. By analyzing the ethical dimensions of this issue of sustainable development we should attain some appreciation for human diversity.** Readings include **representatives of environmentally engaged thinkers from the developing world**, and critical discussions of those concepts, such as that of "wilderness," in terms of which many western thinkers have addressed environmental issues. Issues of global resources, global development, and human diversity will be repeatedly in focus.

Typically there will be 3 or 4 writing assignments. Since philosophical writing is rather new and strange to many students, these may involve a first draft, feedback that may suggest significant revisions, and a second draft. Examples of the common regimen of assignments: 1. After presentation of traditional philosophical approaches, and of concrete specifics having to do with demographic trends, development, and ecological "footprints," the student may be asked to select the most promising of the traditional approaches, to sympathetically and clearly exposit it, and its apparent applications to the concrete issues. 2. After comparing the traditional approaches (which are almost uniformly human centered—utilitarianism being an occasional exception) and the expansionist positions (such as Aldo Leopold's ecocentrist approach), students may be asked to discuss how different are the practical applications of the approaches. 3. Students may be asked to set out their considered favorite position, the most challenging objection to that position, and how it can best be managed. **At least one written assignment will be directed to the issues of population, diversity, and sustainable development.** In the illustrative testing regimen set out above, the first assignment would deal with **global population trends**, with the **diversity of demographic structures** and **developmental situations** confronting peoples in our contemporary setting. The question will focus on the ethical response to the **different**

**demands to be expected in view of the diversity of situated peoples globally, and the limited global resources** on which responses to these demands can draw in a sustainable fashion.

The department commits to collecting and analyzing a reasonable sample of student work on the diversity/populations/development paper. The material will be review by the appropriate department subcommittee, which will assess student achievement, and when necessary, make recommendations for enhancing achievement. The department will archive the samples along with the results of the review and any recommendations.