

Philosophy 225
Environmental Ethics
Spring 2009

Time: TR 11:00-12:15, Location: NH W183

David Henderson, 1015 Oldfather Hall
Office hours 10:00-11:00 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—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. Compare: 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, 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.

Texts:

Main Text:

- *Environmental Ethics: Divergence and Convergence*. 3rd ed., S. Armstrong and R Botzler (eds.) McGraw-Hill (2003)

On Blackboard:

- “The Human Population as an Environmental Problem,” Chapter 5 from *Environmental Science: Earth as a Living Planet*, Botkin and Keller.
- Rachachandra Guha, “Radical American Environmentalism and Wilderness Preservation: A Third World Critique.”
- Pinker, Steven, “The Moral Instinct,” *New York Times, Sunday Magazine*, 13, January 2008. Also at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/13/magazine/13Psychology-t.html?ref=science&pagewanted=all>
- Michael Pollan, *The Omnivores Dilemma* (selection).
- Joseph DesJardins, *Environmental Ethics*, Chpt. 8.

Evaluation:

There will be 3 papers, each on an assigned topic (in effect 3 takehomes). Each will be worth 30% of your grade. For the first two papers, there will be a first draft due date and a second draft due date (this second due date will be one week after you receive comments back on the first draft). If I see the paper by the first-draft due date, you will get written comments on the substance of the paper and an indication of what grade might be expected.

The final 10% of your grade will be a matter of attendance and participation. Percentage points will be assessed against your grade after the second absence—one point for each absence.

Schedule:

January 13 th Background Ethical Philosophy	15 th Rachels, (reading 6-7, A&B) and PPT Overview of Ethics
20 th Rachels, (reading 6-7, A&B) and PPT overview	22 nd Pinker, The Moral Instinct (blackboard)
26 th	28 th

Holmes Rolston (reading 8, A&B)	Nelson (reading 63, A&B)
3 rd Nova: World in Balance	5 th Nova: World in Balance
10 th Botkin and Keller, Chapter 5 (on Blackboard) and visit http://www.myfootprint.org/	12 th Pollan, selection on Blackboard
17 th Murdy (reading 32, A&B)	19 th Gould (reading 33, A&B) 1 st Draft Paper 1
24 th Regan (reading 35, A&B)	26 th Singer (reading 36, A&B)
March 3rd Singer (reading 37, A&B)	5 th Jamieson (reading 38, A&B)
10 th Varner (reading 40, A&B)	12 th Stone (reading 62, A&B)
17 th Spring Break	19 th Spring Break
24 th Leopold (reading 41, A&B)	26 th Leopold (reading 41, A&B)
31st Callicott (readings 42-43, A&B)	April 2nd Holmes Rolston (reading 44, A&B) Devall (reading 45, A&B)
7 th Peterson (reading 9, A&B)	9 th DesJardins Chapter 8 (on Blackboard) 1 st Draft Paper 2 due
14 th Guha (Blackboard)	16 th Anderson and Leal (reading 58, A&B)
21 st Sagoff (reading 59, A&B)	23 th Anielski and Soskolne (reading 60, A&B)
28 th James, Gaston, Balmford (reading 61, A&B)	30th TBA
<p>Paper 3 is due at the beginning of the scheduled final exam period: 3:30 PM, Thursday, May 7</p>	