

PHIL 525: Modern Moral Problems – Climate Change

Synopsis

Philosophy 525 is designed to introduce students to an ethical issue that is of contemporary significance, along the way developing a deeper understanding of applied ethics as a field and establishing expertise in a particular application of moral philosophy.

In terms of the moral problems we face today, few loom as large as does climate change: our consumptive practices, economic policies, and technological capacities have massive, predictable harmful effects on persons, animals, and ecosystems. Public discourse increasingly treats climate change as *a* problem, but it is not actually *one* problem that can be solved in some particular way. Rather, climate change is a nexus of problems—economic, ecological, and political—that raise a host of complicated questions for individuals and communities, states and societies. Despite the fact that public figures like Al Gore and the Dalai Lama have asserted the moral character of climate politics since at least the mid-1990s, scholarship on climate ethics remains an emerging field. Before a watershed essay in the journal *Ethics* in 2004, only a few dozen philosophers had written explicitly about climate ethics and much of that early work was drawn from parallel areas of philosophical inquiry with more established literatures (e.g. international ethics, intergenerational ethics, etc.). In this course, we will examine the recent contributions of philosophy to public discussions about climate and employ the tools of philosophical reason as useful instruments for wrestling with the moral dimensions of the problem.

The course is structured around four focused units. The first establishes a body of knowledge about climate change common to all students in the course, capturing the chief scientific issues, international political frameworks, and socio-cultural challenges. The second unit focuses on the various broad-scale ethical questions raised by climate change, including issues of international and intergenerational justice, tensions between collective and individual forms of moral responsibility, and the challenges of distributed and diffuse harms. The third unit will look at a series of more specific moral issues that have received less attention from social or political philosophers to date: geoengineering, the future status of sinking island nations, and climate-related national security issues. The fourth and final unit will examine a range of broad-scale theories of climate ethics (theological, human rights, and post-modern).

Objectives

1. Students in this course will help construct a comprehensive view of the various ethical issues involved with the complex problem of climate change;
2. Apply various ethical theories to different elements of the climate problem in order to assess their reasonability and efficacy;
3. Establish deep knowledge about one specific ethical dimension of climate change;
4. Make connections among philosophical analysis, policy advocacy, and political activism on climate issues.

Requirements:

Students in PHIL 525 have four central responsibilities throughout the course of the semester (parenthetical percentages indicate the relative grading weight of each assignment).

1. Participation: This includes attendance of each session of class, both physically and mentally; making tangible contributions to our discussions on a regular basis; and demonstrating your close reading of each week's materials (20%).
2. Term Paper: You will need to construct an original paper addressing some question, problem, or concept pertinent to climate ethics, and, in conversation with authors we will read, develop a careful exploration of the question you select. Before you write this paper, you will need to develop a paper proposal, outlining the topic, focus, resources your paper project will utilize (10%). Your proposal, which should include an abstract and a preliminary bibliography, will need to be approved before you begin drafting your 15-page paper (30%).
3. Activism Project: In this course, you will need to find a way to work to actively engage with the challenge of climate change in an "off the page" format. Your job will be to devise a thoughtful, provocative project that advances the conversation about climate ethics in some meaningful way (direct action, raising public awareness, etc.). After working with Dr. Berry to design an appropriate activist project, you will be graded in terms of your conception and execution (20%). A presentation during the final session of class will allow you to discuss and critique your project alongside your classmates (10%). Additional details about this assignment will be provided in the coming weeks.
4. Annotated Bibliography: Collectively, the students of PHIL 525 will develop a class project, assembling a semi-comprehensive annotated bibliography in climate ethics (10%). It is my intention that the bulk of student work on this project will be related to your research for your term paper, but that there will be additional coordination and organization as part of the regular class sessions. More details will follow.

Texts (for purchase or borrow)

- Anthony Giddens, *The Politics of Climate Change* (Polity 2011)
- Mike Hulme, *Why We Disagree About Climate Change: Understanding Controversy, Inaction, and Opportunity* (Cambridge 2009)
- Stephen Gardiner, *A Perfect Moral Storm* (Oxford 2011)
- *Climate Ethics: Essential Readings*, edited by Stephen Gardiner et al. (Oxford 2010)
- *Ethical Adaptation to Climate Change*, edited by Allen Thompson and Jeremy Bendik-Keymer (MIT 2012)
- *Love Your Monsters*, Michael Schellenberger and Ted Nordhaus, eds. (Breakthrough 2011)

Texts (free downloads)

- Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change Fifth Assessment Report Summary for Policymakers (2013)
- Earth Charter
- Malè Declaration
- *Human Rights and Climate Change*, Stephen Humphreys, ed. (Cambridge 2010)
- *Climate change and philosophy transformational possibilities*, Ruth Irwin, ed. (Continuum 2011)

Policies

1. Laptops and tablets are discouraged, but allowed, during seminar discussions. Cell phones are strictly prohibited. Please do not use your computer for recreational

- purposes. It is distracting to other students and negatively effects our shared learning environment.
2. In order to assure that you turn in work in a timely manner, late papers are heavily penalized. Ten percent of the paper grade will be deducted for each 24 hours the paper is late; there are no exceptions to this rule.
 3. Your email correspondence with faculty, staff and teaching assistants must be professional. This means it should include a salutation and should be written in clear, complete sentences.
 4. Please advise me in advance if you intend to submit (or are considering submitting) your final paper as a Qualifying Paper next semester.
 5. Please note that in this course an “A” grade reflects superior academic performance, in all aspects of classroom and extracurricular learning; a “B” grade represents an above average execution of course goals and requirements; a “C” grade designates satisfactory completion of academic expectations; a “D” grade indicates unsatisfactory fulfillment of the class requirements; and an “F” grade signals a failure to meet such requirements altogether.

Schedule:

1/14: Introduction

1/21: Understanding Climate Science and Economics

- IPCC 5th Assessment Report Summary for Policymakers
- Hulme, pp. 1-141
- *Climate Ethics*, Chapter 2

1/28: Understanding Climate Politics and Politics

- Guest Speaker Brandon Wu from ActionAid
- Hulme, pp. 142-365
- Giddens, pp. 1-72

2/4: Institutional Responsibility

- Giddens, pp. 73-226
- *Climate Ethics*, Chapters 1, 3, 7
- Gardiner, Introduction, Chapters 1, 3, 4

2/11: Personal Responsibility

- *Ethical Adaptation to Climate Change*, Chapters 1, 2, 3, 10, 11
- *Climate Ethics*, Chapters 4, 17, 18
- Gardiner, Chapter 2

2/18: Justice and Mitigation

- *Climate Ethics*, Chapters 12, 13, 14,
- Gardiner, Chapters 7, 8, 9

2/25: Justice and Adaptation

- *Climate Ethics*, Chapter 15
- *Ethical Adaptation to Climate Change*, Chapters 3, 4, 5
- *Human Rights and Climate Change*, Chapters 3, 9, 10

3/4: Human Rights and Climate Change;

- **Paper proposals due**
- Guest Speaker Alyssa Johl from the Center for International Environmental Law

- *Climate Ethics*, Chapters 9
 - *Ethical Adaptation to Climate Change*, Chapters 7 and 8
 - *Human Rights and Climate Change*, Introduction and Chapters 1, 5, 8, 11
- 3/18: Intergenerational Ethics
- *Climate Ethics*, Chapters 6, 8,
 - Gardiner, Part C
- 3/25: Islands, Animals, and other Dangers
- *Ethical Adaptation to Climate Change*, Chapters 6 and 13
- 4/1: Religious and Cultural Responses
- *Oxford Handbook of Climate Change and Society*, Chapters 25, 26, 28 (**PDF**)
 - Earth Charter
- 4/8: Geoengineering;
- Guest Speaker Simon Nicolson from SIS Global Environmental Politics
 - *Climate Ethics*, Chapter 16
 - *Ethical Adaptation to Climate Change*, Chapter 12
 - Gardiner, Chapter 10
 - Liao (**PDF**)
- 4/15: Legal and Political Responses
- **Term papers due**
 - Malè Declaration
 - *Ethical Adaptation to Climate Change*, Chapter 14
- 4/22: The Anthropocene
- Schellenberger and Nordhaus, all pages
 - *Ethical Adaptation to Climate Change*, Chapters 15 and 16
 - Stephan, Crutzen, and McNeill (**PDF**)
- 5/6: Final Session
- **Activism project presentations due**
 - **Annotated bibliography due**