

**Natural Resources 332**  
**Introduction to Ethics and the Environment**

Fall Semester 2004 (4 credit hours)  
Tues. and Thurs., 10:10-11:00  
14 Fernow  
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**A. OVERVIEW OF THE COURSE**

This course is an introduction to ethics, epistemology, aesthetics, and political philosophy as these subjects relate to the environment. The first half of the course will cover *normative ethics* and theoretical approaches to ethics such as consequentialism and deontology. We will examine in some detail the arguments for “right” and “wrong” in a variety of moral contexts, including the types of moral thought experiments for which philosophers are famous—or infamous, depending on your point of view. (Would it be ethical to throw a person off a lifeboat to save five others? Or is this an absurd question given the low probability of ever being in such a situation?)

While formal ethical theorizing is undoubtedly important for thinking clearly about ethical issues, some philosophers have argued that modern moral theory is limited in its usefulness or applicability to real-life moral contexts. Michael Stocker refers to the “schizophrenia” of modern moral theories, and we will try to understand his complaint about academic ethics as it is ordinarily practiced in the analytic, Anglo-American philosophical tradition. This is our focus in the first half of the semester.

After fall break we will then consider virtue ethics as an alternative to modern moral theorizing and investigate the implications of virtue ethics and human happiness for our treatment of the environment. Should we all live like Thoreau? Or is Michael Pollan’s garden ethic a better example of environmentally sound living?

Furthermore, as Pollan suggests, normative ethics also carries with it political significance. Joseph Sax for example says that our government-run National Parks should make us “better people” and argues that non-motorized recreation is environmentally virtuous. We will consider Mill’s argument in “On Liberty” that the only justification for interfering with peoples’ freedom is to prevent harm, and we will evaluate Sax’s thesis in light of Mill’s “harm principle.” What is the appropriate role of government in affecting and/or changing people’s environmental attitudes and behaviors?

Finally, the course concludes with an example of applied ethics in the form of Elizabeth Telfer’s book on food and philosophy. Telfer questions whether we have any obligations to feed the hungry, if we have obligations to animals not to eat them, and whether we are justified at all in devoting so much of our human energy to the enjoyment of food and to other aesthetic pleasures. What are humans here on this planet to do? What does it all mean? What is a good life? These are some of the questions that will occupy us this semester.

One of the course objectives is to foster in students what Bertrand Russell once referred to as

“articulate hesitation.” In *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth*, Russell wrote:

Here, as usually in philosophy, the first difficulty is to see that the problem is difficult. If you say to a person untrained in philosophy, “How do you know I have two eyes?” he or she will reply, “What a silly question! I can see you have.” It is not to be supposed that, when our inquiry is finished, we shall have arrived at anything radically different from this un-philosophical position. What will have happened will be that we shall have come to see a complicated structure where we thought everything was simple, that we shall have become aware of the penumbra of uncertainty surrounding the situations which inspire no doubt, that we shall find doubt more frequently justified than we supposed, and that even the most plausible premises will have shown themselves capable of yielding implausible conclusions. The net result is to substitute articulate hesitation for inarticulate certainty.

## **B. EXAMS, PAPERS, AND PARTICIPATION**

- (1) Exams. We will have an in-class mid-term exam on Thursday October 14. This will be an open notebook exam: you are allowed to have with you your reading outlines from the Kagan and Nagel books, as well as any lecture notes you might have taken. A final exam will be given during the regular exam period, although I have not decided if it will also be open notebook. Both exams will consist of essay-type questions.
- (2) Short Papers. Students will write three short papers (approx. 1200-1500 words each) on topics assigned by the instructor and/or determined in consultation with the instructor and/or teaching assistants. These will be graded by the teaching assistants, and students are encouraged to resubmit revisions when appropriate. There will be grade penalties for late papers: 1/3 letter grade off per each day late, no paper accepted after six days late.
- (3) Weekly outlines. Students are required to submit typed outlines with notes of selected readings each week, for example on each chapter of Kagan’s *Normative Ethics* as assigned. These outlines will be collected in discussion sections and returned to you the following week with the T.A.’s comments, and they will contribute to your overall discussion participation grade. These outlines will also be your resource for the open-notebook exams, so work diligently on them!
- (4) Discussion participation. Weekly discussion sections are required. Please bring the appropriate week’s reading to section each week.
- (5) Short in-class writing exercises may be assigned as well. These are designed to help you develop the writing skills you will need to do well on the essay exams.
- (6) Class email list: participation on the class email list is not required but certainly encouraged. Active participation on the email list will be noted and will contribute to your final class participation grade.

## **C. GRADING**

- (1) Mid-term exam: 25%
- (2) Final exam: 25%
- (3) Short papers: 25%
- (4) Section discussion participation and reading outlines: 25%

This is a four credit course and may be taken on an S/U basis.

## **D. COURSE MATERIALS**

### **Required Books to Buy:**

Kagan, Shelly. *Normative Ethics*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998.

Mill, John Stuart. *On Liberty and Other Essays*. Ed. John Gray. NY: Oxford University Press, 1991.

Nagel, Thomas. *What Does It All Mean? A Very Short Introduction to Philosophy*. NY: Oxford University Press, 1987.

Pollan, Michael. *Second Nature: A Gardener's Education*. NY: Dell, 1991.

Sax, Joseph. *Mountains Without Handrails: Reflections on Our National Parks*. Ann Arbor: Univ. Michigan Press, 1980.

Telfer, Elizabeth. *Food for Thought: Philosophy and Food*. NY: Routledge, 1996.

Thoreau, Henry D. *Walden and Civil Disobedience*. Ed. Michael Meyer. NY: Penguin Classics, 1985.

### **Suggested, optional books to buy:**

Seech, Zachary. *Writing Philosophy Papers*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. Wadsworth. A copy of this book will be on course reserve.

### **Electronic course reserve:**

In addition, there will be a number of readings on electronic reserve in the Cornell Library system. You are expected to print a copy of each required reading and bring it to discussion section as assigned.

## E. SCHEDULE OF READINGS

### Introduction: What Is Philosophy?

#### Week One: Introduction

First day of classes, Thursday 8/26

Reading: Sober, "Philosophical Problems for Environmentalism" (handout)

In lieu of Week One discussion period, required showing of the film *The Truman Show*, Friday afternoon 8/27 at 2:30 pm, Fernow 14

#### Week Two: Preliminaries

August 30-Sept. 3

Readings: Nagel, *What Does It All Mean?*

Kagan, *Normative Ethics*, chap. 1, "Introduction"

### Part One: Normative Ethics

#### Week Three: The Good / Consequentialism / Hedonism

Sept. 6-10

Readings: Kagan, *Normative Ethics*, chap. 2, "The Good"

Murdoch, "The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts" (e-reserve)

Suggested: Griffin, *Well-Being*

Mill, *Utilitarianism*

#### Week Four: Doing Harm / Deontology

Sept. 13-17

Readings: Kagan, *Normative Ethics*, chap. 3 "Doing Harm"

Thomson, "Killing, Letting Die, and the Trolley Problem" (e-reserve)

Suggested: Foot, "The Problem of Abortion and the Doctrine of Double Effect" (e-reserve)

Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*

Feinberg, *Harm: The Moral Limits of the Criminal Law*

Paper assignment #1: Question to be assigned on "harm," due Tuesday September 28

#### Week Five: Other Constraints : Lying

Sept. 20-24

Readings: Kagan, *Normative Ethics*, chap. 4 "Other Constraints"

Wood, "Relativism" (e-reserve)

Harry Frankfurt, "On Bullshit" (e-reserve)

#### Week Six: Further Factors: Charity, Rights

Sept. 27-Oct. 1

Readings: Kagan, *Normative Ethics*, chap. 5 "Further Factors"

Susan Wolf, "Moral Saints," Stable URL: <http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0022-362X%28198208%2979%3A8%3C419%3AMS%3E2.0.CO%3B2-0>

#### Week Seven: Foundations

Oct. 4-8

Readings: Kagan, *Normative Ethics*, chap. 6-7, “Teleological Foundations” and “Deontological Foundations”

Nagel, “Fragmentation of Value” (e-reserve)

Michael Stocker, “The Schizophrenia of Modern Moral Theories,” Stable URL:

[http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0022-](http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0022-362X%2819760812%2973%3A14%3C453%3ATSOMET%3E2.0.CO%3B2-G)

[362X%2819760812%2973%3A14%3C453%3ATSOMET%3E2.0.CO%3B2-G](http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0022-362X%2819760812%2973%3A14%3C453%3ATSOMET%3E2.0.CO%3B2-G)

Suggested: Stanley Rosen, *The Limits of Analysis*

Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*

## **Fall Break Oct 11-12**

## **Mid-term exam in class, Thursday October 14 (open notebook)**

### **Part Two: The Virtues**

#### **Week Eight: Visions of Virtue**

Oct. 13-15 (shortened week—one class: mid-term exam)

In lieu of discussion section this week: required film showing, 2:30 pm Friday October 15, *Groundhog Day*, location TBA

Readings: Kupfer, Joseph H. “Virtue and Happiness in *Groundhog Day*,” pp. 35-60 in *Visions of Virtue in Popular Film* (e-reserve)

Cavell, “The Thought of Movies” (e-reserve)

Cunningham, “Reading for Life,” chap. 3 of *The Heart of What Matters: The Role for Literature in Moral Philosophy* (e-reserve)

Suggested: Jewett, Robert. “The Deadly Deception of the Flesh in *Groundhog Day*.” Chapter 6 in *Saint Paul Returns to the Movies: Triumph over Shame*, pp. 88-103. Grand Rapids, MI: Erdmans, 1999. (e-reserve)

Paper assignment #2: Discuss *Groundhog Day* in light of your reading of Kupfer’s essay, due Tuesday October 26

#### **Week Nine: How Should I Live? Thoreau and Perfectionism**

Oct. 18-22

Readings: Thoreau, *Walden*, editor’s introduction, chaps. 1-2, also “Higher Laws,” “Reading,” “Solitude,” “The Beanfield,” “Spring,” and “Conclusion.” (We strongly encourage you to read all of *Walden* if you have time.)

Philippa Foot, “Virtues and Vices” (e-reserve)

Suggested: Kekes, *Moral Wisdom and Good Lives*

Iris Murdoch, “The Idea of Perfection” (e-reserve)

#### **Week Ten Michael Pollan, *Second Nature***

Oct. 25-29

Michael Pollan, *Second Nature: A Gardener’s Education*

## Part Three: Environment: Ethics and Tensions

### Week Eleven: John Stuart Mill, Individualism and Liberty

Nov. 1-5

Readings: John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*

Himmelfarb, "Editor's Introduction" to *On Liberty*, Penguin edition (e-reserve)

Coglianesse, "Implications of Liberal Neutrality for Environmental Policy" (e-reserve)

Sagoff, "Can Environmentalists be Liberals?" (e-reserve)

Suggested: Cahn, *Environmental Deceptions*

Sher, *Beyond Neutrality: Perfectionism and Politics*

### Week Twelve: Joseph Sax, Mountains Without Handrails

Nov. 8-12

Reading: Joseph Sax, *Mountains Without Handrails*

Paper assignment #3: Contrast and compare Mill's *On Liberty* and Sax's *Mountains Without Handrails*, due Tuesday November 23.

### Week Thirteen: Elizabeth Telfer, Philosophy, Aesthetics, Animals, and Food

Nov. 15-19

Reading: Telfer, *Food for Thought: Philosophy and Food*

### Week Fourteen: Thanksgiving Week

Nov. 22-24 (shortened) one class

Reading: TBA

In lieu of lecture, required film showing 9am Tuesday November 23: *Tortilla Soup*, location TBA

### Thanksgiving Break Nov. 24-28

## Part Four: Conclusion

### Week Fifteen: Conclusion

Nov. 29-Dec. 3

Readings: Watson, "The Identity Crisis in Environmental Philosophy" (e-reserve)

Reread: Sober, "Philosophical Problems for Environmentalism" (handout)

Suggested: Weston, *Toward Better Problems*

Kirkman, *Skeptical Environmentalism*

Last day of exams: Dec. 17