# PHIL 3301: Environmental Ethics

Summer 2026 | Mon.-Fri. 9:05-11:35 am | Remote



Photo by Beth Moon

## Instructors:

Dr. Philip Bold
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Office: Remote
Office hours: By appointment

**Course Description:** This course will survey major themes in environmental ethics, with emphasis on the following questions: (1) How should we understand the relationship between **nature** and **humanity**? (2) How should we understand the **value** of nature and our **obligations** to it? Specific topics covered along the way include: anthropocentrism vs. biocentrism, animal ethics, humanistic approaches to environmental value, eco-feminism, Buddhist ecology, and indigenous care ethics.

**STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES**:

Students in the course **can identify, define, and solve problems**.

**Addressing the outcome**
In this course, students will grapple with major problems in environmental philosophy. By studying a wide variety of perspectives on our ethical relation to nature, students will be given an opportunity to investigate these problems and offer solutions.

**Assessment of learning related to the outcome**
The learning related to this outcome will be evaluated through participation in class activities and a series of critical papers in which students will be required to clearly formulate their own reasoning on a particular theme.

**Required Texts:** There are no required textbooks for this course. All readings will be provided on Canvas.

**Required Streaming Services:** Students will require access to Netflix, Amazon, and or YouTube streaming.

## Course Requirements:

1. Discussion Posts (9 total) 20%
2. Multiple Choice Quizzes (8 total) 20%
3. Three Critical Papers
    a. First Paper (2-3 pages) 15%
    b. Second Paper (2-3 pages) 20%
    c. Third Paper (2-3 pages) 25%

**Major Deadlines:**

| | |
|---|---|
| Discussion Posts | See class schedule |
| Quizzes | See class schedule |
| Paper 1 | Sat June 20 by midnight |
| Paper 2 | Sat June 27 by midnight |
| Paper 3 | Friday July 3 by midnight |

# Description of Requirements

**1. Discussion Posts:** Students will be required to write discussion posts (on Canvas, a minimum of 1 paragraph, roughly at least 5 *thoughtful* sentences) that respond to a question posed by the instructor. The question will be relevant to the readings assigned during that day of class and students must make sure to relate their answer to those readings.

***Discussion posts are due by midnight on the day that they are assigned.***

Students can optionally *write a response* – clearly, thoughtfully, and *respectfully* – to a discussion post written by one of their peers. It is not sufficient to write something like, "I agree with so-and-so, thanks for writing a great post!"; rather, a response must make a *substantive* contribution to the discussion (and as with an original post be at least 1 paragraph, roughly at least 5 *thoughtful* sentences). Options include: citing a detail from the assigned reading to defend the author or answer a question posed by one's peer, offering an example that illustrates the idea expressed in the original post, an objection (either one's own or "playing devil's advocate") to the original post,

a comparison of the original post with the ideas of some author studied in the course, a further question that the original post brought to mind for you. Be creative!

Discussion posts are simply graded for completion *of a substantial thoughtful post*. If one's submission is insufficient, the instructor will contact the student and give them one opportunity for a rewrite.

**2. Multiple Choice Quizzes:** Quizzes (administered on Canvas) are designed to ensure that students stay on top of the assigned readings and lecture material. They consist of 5-10 multiple choice questions with 20 minutes to complete. Students will be allowed two attempts on the quiz – with the highest score recorded.

***Quizzes are due by midnight on the day that they are assigned.***

**3. Three Paper Assignments (double-spaced, 12-point font, Times New Roman, 1-inch Margins):** Three total writing assignments (2-3 pages) are required for this class (to be submitted via Canvas). More detailed instructions for each assignment will be posted online in closer proximity to the deadline.

## Course Schedule

* Schedule is subject to change. * Complete readings prior to class.
* Some required (and optional) audio/video content will require access to Netflix, Amazon, or YouTube streaming.

**Week 1: Environmental Ethics – The Big Picture**
**Mon June 8: Introduction**
*Reading Assignment:* Syllabus
*Quiz 1* (on Syllabus & Course Requirements)

*NOTE: Quizzes are due by midnight on the day that they are assigned.*

**Tues June 9: Anthropocentrism**
*Reading Assignment:* Selections from *Genesis*, Aristotle, Locke, Darwin, and Muir
*Discussion post:* In what ways has your personal history or cultural background influenced your understanding of nature and its value?

*NOTE: Discussion posts are due by midnight on the day that they are assigned.*

**Wed June 10: Conservationism and Preservationism**
*Reading Assignment:* Pitcher & Welchman, "Can an Environmental Paradise be Regained?"; Gifford Pinchot, "Principles of Conservation"; John Muir, "The Hetch Hetchy Valley"
*Quiz 2*

**Thurs June 11: Leopold's Land Ethic**
*Reading Assignment:* Aldo Leopold, "The Land Ethic"
*Discussion post:* Can/should we change our culture to include soils, waters, plants, etc., as members of the moral community? If so: how? If not: why not?

**Fri June 12: *Kiss the Ground* (or, The Moral Significance of Soil?)**
*Film Assignment: Kiss the Ground* (rent on Amazon or free with Prime)
*Discussion post:* Does the film *Kiss the Ground* support Leopold's suggestion that we should treat soil as part of the moral community? Why or why not?

**Week 2: Animal Ethics**
**Mon June 15: Consider the Lobster**
*Reading Assignment:* David Foster Wallace, "Consider the Lobster"
*Discussion post:* Can we justify boiling an animal alive merely for our gustatory enjoyment? Why or why not?

**Tues June 16: Animal Liberationism**
*Reading Assignment:* Peter Singer, "All Animals are Equal"
*Quiz 3*

**Wed June 17: Rights and Relations to Animals**
*Reading Assignment:* Elizabeth Anderson, "Animal Rights and the Values of Non-human Life"
*Discussion post:* Do you prefer Singer's view? Anderson's view? Or neither? Explain.

**Thurs June 18: *Cowspiracy* (or, The Environmental Damage of Omnivorism?)**
*Film Assignment: Cowspiracy* (on Netflix, available for rental on Amazon and YouTube)
*Quiz 4*

**Fri June 19: Juneteenth! (No Class)**
Juneteenth marks the day in 1865 when Union troops arrived in Galveston, Texas, and announced the end of the Civil War and slavery—over two years after the Emancipation Proclamation. Juneteenth is a celebration of freedom, Black resilience, and the ongoing struggle for justice.

**First Paper Assignment**
*Prompt:* Is it morally wrong to consume animals? Why or why not? (Your essay must relate to at least one of the reading or film assignments this week.)

First Paper Assignment (2-3 pages) due Saturday June 20 by midnight

**Week 3: Extending the Scope of Consideration**
**Mon June 22: Moral Consideration and Biocentrism**
*Reading Assignment:* Kenneth Goodpaster, "On Being Morally Considerable"
*Quiz 5*

**Tues June 23: *Fantastic Fungi***
*Film Assignment: Fantastic Fungi* (free with ads on Plex, rental available on Amazon, YouTube)
*Discussion post:* Goodpaster argues that all forms of life (including non-sentient life) have interests that deserve moral consideration. This would include mycelia. Does the film *Fantastic Fungi* support Goodpaster's argument (say, for the moral value of mycelia)? Why or why not?

**Wed June 24: Skepticism about Biocentrism & Environmental Humanism**
*Reading Assignment:* Bernard Williams, "Must a Concern for the Environment be Centered on Human Beings?"
*Quiz 6*

**Thurs June 25: Vulnerability and Respect for Nature**
*Reading Assignment:* Val Plumwood, "Being Prey"
*Discussion post*: What does Val Plumwood's story (or stories like her's) reveal about the relationship between nature and humanity? Connect with your own experience if possible.

**Fri June 26: Second Paper Assignment**
*Prompt:* Do *all* forms of life (sentient and non-sentient) have interests that deserve moral consideration? Why or why not? (Your essay must relate to at least one of the reading or film assignments this week.)

Second Paper Assignment (2-3 pages) due Saturday June 27 by midnight

**Week 4: Feminist, Buddhist, and Decolonial Perspectives**
**Mon June 29: Ecofeminism**
*Reading Assignment:* Val Plumwood, "Nature, Self, and Gender"
*Discussion post*: Women have historically been oppressed. Nature (in some sense) has also been oppressed. Are these forms of oppression related to one another (as Plumwood argues). Why or why not?

**Tues June 30: Intro to Buddhism and Emptiness (*sunyata)***
*Film Assignment: The Buddha* (PBS Documentary, free on YouTube)
*Reading Assignment:* Thich Nhat Hanh, "Emptiness: The Wonder of Interbeing"
*Quiz 7*

**Wed July 1: A Buddhist Environmental Ethic**
*Reading Assignment:* Stephanie Kaza, "Buddhist Environmental Ethics"
*Discussion post*: What would it mean to live more harmoniously with nature? Would such a life be happier or more fulfilling? Why or why not?

**Thurs July 2: Indigenous Kinship Ethics (LDOC)**
*Reading Assignment:* Kyle Whyte, "Kinship Through Action: Indigenous Environmental Justice"
*Quiz 8*

**Final Paper Assignment**

*Prompt:* Choose one of the following:

(a) In what ways are gender oppression and the oppression of nature interrelated according to Plumwood? Do you agree with her? Why or why not?

(b) How does our sense of self affect the way we treat nature, according to Buddhism? Do you agree? Why or why not?

(c) Would it help for us to think of natural entities (trees, lakes, rivers, etc.) as our 'friends', as suggested by Indigenous Kinship Ethics? Why or why not?

(Your essay must relate to at least one of the reading assignments this week.)

Final Paper Assignment (2-3 pages) due Friday July 3 by midnight

## Course Policies

1. **Late Work:** Unless special permission is obtained in advance, late papers will not be accepted without grade penalty. The penalty for late papers is 5% for every day the paper is submitted past the official deadline. Discussion posts cannot be made up and must be completed on time for credit. Extended deadlines *on paper assignments* are granted liberally within several days of the deadline, but you must receive permission from your instructor. Further extensions on papers will require a formal excuse with evidence, such as a medical note or a note from a parent in the case of a family emergency. *Please note that late papers will experience a delay in receiving feedback – and so might impact performance on future writing assignments*.

2. **Grading:**

Letter Grades are translated to the following numerical scores.

| | |
|---|---|
| **A+** = 100 | **C+** = 78 |
| **A** = 95 | **C** = 75 |
| **A-** = 92 | **C-** = 72 |
| **B+** = 88 | **D+** = 68 |
| **B** = 85 | **D** = 65 |
| **B-** = 82 | **F** = 50 |

Final letter grades will be calculated using the following scale.

| | |
|---|---|
| 97-100 = **A+** | 77-79 = **C+** |
| 93-96 = **A** | 73-76 = **C** |
| 90-92 = **A-** | 70-72 = **C-** |
| 87-89 = **B+** | 67-69 = **D+** |
| 83-86 = **B** | 60-66 = **D** |
| 80-82 = **B-** | 50 = **F** |

Below is a list of criteria that will be used to evaluate your papers. Note that the %'s only give a *rough* indication of how important these aspects are, and that not all of the criteria will apply equally to each of the different assignments; this is not a mathematical scale. There will be slightly different standards for each of the individual assignments, which I will state when those assignments are announced.

- Quality of ideas (50%)
  - *Range and depth of argument; fair representation of philosopher's position; logic of argument; quality and/or originality of thought; appropriate sense of the complexity of the topic; appropriate awareness of opposing views.*

- Organization and Argumentation (40%)
  - *Clarity of thesis statement in the introduction; logical and clear arrangement of ideas; effective use of transitions; unity and coherence of paragraphs; good development of arguments through supporting details and evidence.*

- Clarity, style, and grammar (10%)
  - *Ease of readability; appropriate voice, tone, and style for the assignment; clarity of sentence structure; grammatically correct sentences; accurate spelling; careful proofreading.*

3. **Plagiarism:** Plagiarism will result in a final grade of F for the course. If you have any questions about plagiarism or how to properly cite sources, do not hesitate to ask me. According to the UMN Student Conduct Code: "Plagiarism shall mean representing the words, creative work, or ideas of another person as one's own without providing proper documentation of source".

4. **ChatGPT:** (TLDR: You are ***not*** allowed to use ChatGPT for any assignment in this course. Your papers will be checked against an AI Detector to ensure authenticity.) The Board of Regents Student Conduct Code states the following in Section IV, Subd.1: Scholastic Dishonesty:

   "Scholastic dishonesty means plagiarism; cheating on assignments or examinations, including the unauthorized use of online learning support and testing platforms; engaging in unauthorized collaboration on academic work, including the posting of student-generated coursework on **online learning support and testing platforms** not approved for the specific course in question; taking, acquiring, or using course materials without faculty permission, including the posting of faculty-provided course materials on online learning and testing platforms; ..."

   Artificial intelligence (AI) language models, such as ChatGPT, and online assignment help tools, such as Chegg®, are examples of **online learning support platforms**: they can not be used for course assignments except as explicitly authorized by the instructor. The following actions are prohibited in this course:

- Submitting all or any part of an assignment statement to an online learning support platform;
- Incorporating any part of an AI generated response in an assignment;
- Using AI to summarize or contextualize source materials.

If you are in doubt as to whether you are using an online learning support platform appropriately in this course, I encourage you to discuss your situation with the instructor.

5. **Disability Accommodations:** If you have, or think you have, a disability in any area such as mental health, attention, learning, chronic health, sensory, or physical, please contact the Disability Resource Center (DRC) https://ars.unc.edu/ to arrange confidential discussion regarding equitable access and reasonable accommodations. If you are registered with the DRC and have a disability accommodation letter dated for this semester or this year, please contact your TA early in the semester to review how the accommodations will be applied in this course.

6. **Sexual Misconduct.** Sexual misconduct (sexual harassment, sexual assault, stalking, and relationship violence) includes unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and/or other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature. Such behavior is prohibited in the University setting.

   Per the U of M policy on sexual harassment, *I am required to share information that I learn about possible sexual misconduct* with the campus Title IX office. Within the requirements of my job, I will be as responsive as possible to your requests for confidentiality and support. You can also, or alternately, choose to talk with a confidential resource that will not share information that they learn about sexual misconduct. Confidential resources include:

   - The Aurora Center 24hr Helpline (612-626-9111)
   - Boynton Mental Health (612-624-1444)
   - Student Counseling Services (612-624-3323)

7. **Other Useful Resources:**
   - Technology resources for remote learning: https://it.umn.edu/working-learning-campus/get-internet-access-campus
   - University Policies: https://policy.umn.edu/
   - Student Writing Support: http://writing.umn.edu/sws/
   - Disability Resource Center: https://disability.umn.edu/
   - Student Counseling Center: https://counseling.umn.edu/
   - The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: https://plato.stanford.edu