

# Ethics for the Anthropocene

NRSC 685

Graduate seminar course

Department of Natural Resource Sciences, McGill University

MS3-041

Fall 2015

## Course Description

The current era in which humanity increasingly affects the environment on a global scale is called the Anthropocene. We live in a novel time. Yet many of our normative disciplines and frameworks including economics, finance, law, governance and ethics, are largely uninformed by contemporary science and remain unresponsive to our rapidly changing circumstances and declining prospects. It is increasingly apparent that these ways of thinking, developed to meet society's needs in the past, are inadequate to help us navigate the complex challenges of the Anthropocene. This graduate seminar course entitled *Ethics for the Anthropocene* seeks to rethink ethics in light of the current global reality and the findings of contemporary science by evaluating ethical systems and their adequacy for guiding humanity in the Anthropocene. It will survey contemporary ethical systems, identify key challenges and questions for ethics, explore the relationship between ethics and scientific worldviews, and examine ethical issues using real world examples such as electronic waste and climate justice. Finally, the course will explore the implications of ethics for other disciplines and define a research agenda for ethics in the Anthropocene.

## Course Objectives

This course is part of a larger effort to explore contemporary ethical systems, critique them from the perspective of humanity in the Anthropocene, and attempt to reconcile ethics with a scientific worldview to better enable humanity to address its challenges in the Anthropocene. As such, this course will:

1. Explore the role and purpose of ethical systems in society;
2. Survey the main types of ethical systems, including examples;
3. Provide a historical understanding of ethics in diverse societies;
4. Use problem-based examples to critique the adequacy of contemporary ethical systems from the perspective of humanity in the Anthropocene; and
5. Provide a starting point from which to ground a new ethics for the Anthropocene.

This course is open to graduate and senior undergraduate students from McGill University, York University and the University of Vermont. Classes will meet Tuesdays at 2:30-5:30pm in Room MS3-041. Students interested in taking the course should contact Professor Peter Brown at [peter.g.brown@mcgill.ca](mailto:peter.g.brown@mcgill.ca).

### **Faculty**

Professor Peter G. Brown

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### **Student Instructors**

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### **Learning Objectives**

By the end of the course, students will be able to:

1. Understand environmental ethics including its purpose, history, major approaches and discourses;
2. Critique societies' ethical objectives;
3. Understand how different worldviews and ethics have contributed to the current ecological crisis, including how contemporary (western) ethical systems fail to adequately meet humanity's needs in the Anthropocene;
4. Articulate the implications of an embedded, empirically informed worldview on ethics;
5. Evaluate contemporary environmental problems with respect to their ethical challenges, implications and solutions; and
6. Develop and articulate potential ways worldview and ethics can help humanity navigate the challenges of the Anthropocene.

### **Class Schedule**

This class will be offered Tuesdays 2:30-5:30pm. While most classes including several guest lectures will be hosted at the Macdonald Campus of McGill University in person, classes may also be over the internet via Skype or Adobe Connect.

### **Preparation**

Students should have a basic understanding of environmental science and contemporary global environmental challenges.

### **Restriction**

This class will only be open to a limited number of graduate or senior undergraduate students from McGill University, York University and the University of Vermont.

### **Materials**

Course and supplementary materials will be distributed in class and will be available on the E4A website: <http://www.e4a-net.org>

### **Grading and Participation**

Classes will be broken into 3 parts:

1. A presentation and discussion by the course instructors or a guest lecturer;
2. Student-led discussions of weekly readings and a general discussion among the class; and
3. A group activity including in-class exercises, multimedia, presentations and joint classes.

Course evaluation for E4A student instructors will be based on four components:

1. Presentation and leadership of classes; (30%)
2. Group revision of course syllabus and ethics research agenda; (10%)
3. An oral presentation on the student's research topic during a class they are responsible for; (25%)
4. Individual paper on Ethics for the Anthropocene. (35%)

Course evaluation for non-E4A students will similarly be based on four components:

1. Presentation of a week's readings and leadership of class discussion; (15%)
2. Class attendance and regular participation in class discussions; (10%)
3. An oral presentation on your topic during the last four weeks of the class; (25%)
4. Individual paper on Ethics for the Anthropocene. (50%)

### **Course Activities and Evaluation**

#### **1a. Preparation and leadership of classes**

E4A student instructors will prepare for and lead several classes, individually and collectively, throughout the semester.

#### **1b. Presentation of a week's readings and leadership of the discussion**

Each student will appraise one week's readings and lead a class discussion to explore the week's topic, including related material and key questions. Students will select a week at the beginning of the semester.

#### **2a. E4A student revision of the course syllabus and E4A ethics research agenda (Nov 24)**

E4A students will lead a discussion to gather feedback on the course and revise its syllabus as a deliverable for resource for E4A and future cohorts. Similarly, the class will discuss and E4A students will provide recommendations to revise the E4A ethics research agenda.

#### **2b. Class attendance and regular participation in class discussions**

Non-E4A students will be graded on their participation and involvement in class discussions.

#### **3a. E4A students: presentation on research topic (throughout the semester)**

Students will deliver a 15-20 minute presentation on a topic related to their research and answer questions.

#### **3b. Non-E4A students: presentation on paper topic (Nov 23)**

Students will deliver a 15-20 minute presentation of their paper topic and answer questions.

#### **4. Individual paper on Ethics for the Anthropocene (due Dec 1)**

The research paper will be a maximum of 5000 words and can be a topic of the student's choosing, but must relate to the themes in the course.

#### **Individual reflection on worldview and how it shapes your values and ethics (Sept 8)**

At the beginning of the course, the class will reflect on their worldview and how it informs their values, ethics and the way they interact in the world.

#### **Final reflection on worldview and ethics in the Anthropocene**

At the end of the course, students reflect on and critique their own worldview and how it defines their ethical relationship to the world in the Anthropocene. Has their worldview changed and if so, how? How does their worldview inform their values and how they behave ethically?

#### **Joint Classes\***

Joint classes will engage other E4A orphan groups three times throughout the semester. Joint classes will work in conjunction with the two other E4A orphan courses. We may cover the usual class material in one hour, while during the other two hours we will engage in group activities, presentations and discussions. For example, these may explore common starting points for different groups (Sept 15), involve a joint lecture (Oct 20), and discuss the relationships among disciplines (Dec 1).

#### **Course Outline**

Lecture	Topic	Activity/guest	Date
1	Introduction and rationale	Reflection on worldview & ethics	Sept 8
2	Foundations of ethics; joint class	Joint class*	Sept 15
3	Ethics, worldview and ontology	Guest: Bruce Jennings	Sept 22
4	Empirically informed ethics		Sept 29
5	Waste streams I		Oct 6
6	Waste streams II		Oct 13
7	Joint class	Joint class*	Oct 20
8	Waste streams III		Oct 27
9	Climate justice I		Nov 3
10	Climate justice II	Guest: Henry Shue	Nov 10
11	Climate justice III	Revisit worldview & ethics	Nov 17
12	Synthesis and rethinking ethics	Evaluation of syllabus and research agenda; presentations	Nov 24
13	Implications and applications; joint class	Joint class*	Dec 1

### **Part 1: Ethics as an Orphan in the Anthropocene**

This part of the course will introduce the rationale for the course, the Anthropocene, the problem of ethics as an orphan discipline, and connect ethics to worldviews, ontology and empirical issues.

#### **1. Introduction and rationale: ethics as an orphan in the Anthropocene (Sept 8)**

This class will introduce the rationale for the course, including the Anthropocene and the concept of the orphan disciplines. The class will then explore the problem of ethics as an orphan discipline, focusing on several critiques of it in the current era.

Steffen, W., Grinevald, J., Crutzen, P., & McNeill, J. (2011). The Anthropocene: conceptual and historical perspectives. *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society A: Mathematical, Physical and Engineering Sciences*, 369(1938), 842–867.

MacIntyre, A. 2007. *After virtue*. Chapter 1. pp 1-5. University of Notre Dame Press. Notre Dame, Indiana.

Brown, P.G. 2012. Ethics for economics in the anthropocene. *Tielhard studies* no 65.

Brown, P.G. & Schmidt, J. 2015. Ethics for the Anthropocene. E4A ethics research agenda.

#### **2. Introduction to ethics; joint class (Sept 15)**

This class will be conducted jointly with two other orphan seminar courses, Law & Governance and Economics & Finance. It will explore common foundations and approaches. This class will also explore foundational concepts, discourses and approaches of ethics: What is ethics? What is its purpose? How is it supposed to help us? We will discuss the features of ethical systems and major approaches to ethics.

Palmer, C., McShane, K., & Sandler, R. (2014). Environmental Ethics. *Annual Review of Environment and Resources*, 39, 419–442.

White Jr, L. (1967). The historical roots of our ecologic crisis. *Science*, 155(3767), 1203–1207.

#### **3. Foundations: ethics, worldview and ontology (Sept 22)**

This class will explore foundations of ethics, including the concept of a preanalytic vision or worldview. We will explore the relationship between worldviews, facts and values. Finally, we will discuss foundational ethical challenges such as the naturalistic fallacy and pluralism.

Jennings, B. (2015). Ecological Solidarity. *Minding Nature*. 8.1. 4-10.

Spash, C. L. (2012). New foundations for ecological economics. *Ecological Economics*, 77, 36–47.

Chapters 8-9 in Callicott, J. B. (1999). *Beyond the land ethic: more essays in environmental philosophy*. Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press.

#### **4. Empirically informed ethics (Sept 29)**

This class will explore the topic of empirically informed ethics, discussing the problem of relating empirical insights to normative positions, its potential and limitations.

Greene, J. (2003). From neural 'is' to moral 'ought': what are the moral implications of neuroscientific moral psychology?. *Nature Reviews Neuroscience*, 4(10), 846-850.

Markowitz, E. M., & Shariff, A. F. (2012). Climate change and moral judgement. *Nature Climate Change*, 2(4), 243-247.

Part of the preparation for this week is to listen to this podcast:

<http://www.radiolab.org/story/91509-chimp-fights-and-trolley-rides/>

### **Part 2: Waste streams**

#### **5. Waste streams I: The Philosophy, History and Ethics of Waste (Oct 6)**

Historical evidence indicates that underlying social biases against the lower echelons of society influence the philosophy of waste disposal as that those social groups that consume the most and correspondingly create the most waste and pollution are least likely to live, work or recreate near the facilities that manage those environmental externalities. In this lecture we explore the historical roots that have shaped how we deal with our waste.

Schulze, W. D., Brookshire, D. S., & Sandler, T. (1981). Social Rate of Discount for Nuclear Waste Storage: Economics or Ethics, The. *Natural Resources J.*, 21, 811.

OR

Andren, M. (2012). An Uncomfortable Responsibility: Ethics and Nuclear Waste. *The European Legacy*, 17(1), 71-82.

Wilding, E. T. (2012). Framing Ethical Acceptability: A Problem with Nuclear Waste in Canada. *Science and engineering ethics*, 18(2), 301-313.

Into Eternity The Place You Must Always Remember to Forget - Nuclear Waste the film.

– <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gQ3dT7xcMgU>

#### **6. Waste Streams II: The Problem of Overconsumption (Oct 13)**

This lecture will focus on the topics of overconsumption, ethics and racism. The discussion for today will therefore be based on the initial set of questions posited by the author Clapp (2002).

1. Are consumers also culpable in the waste problem
2. Where is the away place that waste is thrown?
3. Why is the waste sent there and not elsewhere?
4. Who is affected in these away places?
5. Can such practices continue on a finite planet?
6. Do consumers have an ethical responsibility to the people of these away places?

Dauvergne, P. (2010). The Problem of Consumption. *Global Environmental Politics*, 10(2), 1-10.

Clapp, J. (2002) The Distancing of Waste: Overconsumption in the Global Economy. In Conca, et al., (Eds.). *Confronting Consumption*. MIT press. (Chapter 7)

OR

Rice, J. (2007). Ecological unequal exchange: Consumption, Equity, and Unsustainable Structural Relationships within the Global Economy. *International Journal of Comparative Sociology*, 48(1), 43-72.

Scanlan, J. (2005). *On Garbage*. Reaktion books. Chapter TBD

PBS Frontline; Ghana: Digital Dumping Ground: Frontline Documentary

<http://www.pbs.org/frontlineworld/stories/ghana804>

### **7. Joint course (Oct 20)**

This class will be conducted jointly with two other orphan seminar courses, Law & Governance and Economics & Finance. Topic and readings to be determined.

### **8. Waste streams III: The Body, Human Health, & The Environment (Oct 27)**

In this lecture we move beyond discussions of material waste and examine how the human can be categorised as waste and thus disposable in contemporary capitalist societies.

Rob Nixon. (2011). *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, Introduction, pp. 1-30, 40-44.

Yates, M. (2011). The Human- As- Waste, the Labour Theory of Value and Disposability in Contemporary Capitalism. *Antipode*, 43(5), 1679-1695.

Giroux, Henry (2006). Reading Hurricane Katrina: Race, Class, and the Biopolitics of Disposability, Vol. *College Literature*. Vol. 33(3), pp. 171-196

Bauman, Z. (2013).

*Wasted lives: Modernity and its outcasts*. John Wiley & Sons. – Chapter Two

Overpopulation is a LIE... A Huge Agenda 21 Hoax! -

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZgHAVtHHTPc>

### **Recommended**

Joe Belinger (2009). *Crude: The Real Price of Oil*

[http://watchdocumentary.org/watch/crude-the-real-price-of-oil-video\\_2add2faf4.html](http://watchdocumentary.org/watch/crude-the-real-price-of-oil-video_2add2faf4.html)

### **Part 3: Climate justice**

#### **9. Climate Justice I: The problem (Nov 3)**

Climate change raises very difficult ethical dilemmas. This class will introduce ethical dimensions of climate change: unequal burdens responsibility. We will ask the overarching question: Climate Justice

brings in to one view environmental and social justice- how then do we conceptualize of these two things to design just climate policy and action. What existing theories of justice can guide us through this?

Gardiner, S. M. (2006). A perfect moral storm: climate change, intergenerational ethics and the problem of moral corruption. *Environmental values*, 397-413.

Caney, S. (2010). Climate change, human rights, and moral thresholds. *Climate ethics: Essential readings*, 163-177.

<http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/mar/06/dont-look-away-now-the-climate-crisis-needs-you>

### **10. Climate Justice II: Guest Lecture with Henry Shue (Nov 10)**

In this class we will explore Climate ethics and ask whether framing climate change as a predominantly ethical issue (as opposed to technical or economic) can help us foster the much needed collective action towards mitigating climate change.

Henry sent us a not yet published paper to read. "Uncertainty as the Reason for Action".

### **11. Climate Justice III: The climate justice movement (Nov 17)**

This class focusses on the good news - the global and local movement emerging around climate justice issues. We also focus on indigenous leadership in these movements and the different ethics and discourses coming from Indigenous communities and the implications of these for the study of climate ethics. The Indigenous ethic of responsibility to the land and waters is a central theme.

Selected Chapters from: Klein, N. (2014). *This changes everything: capitalism vs. the climate*. Simon and Schuster. (Chapters 9 & 11)

Video about Indigenous Resistance to pipelines in Canada:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZDR11\\_Xw7ts](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZDR11_Xw7ts)

## **Part 4: Ethics for the Anthropocene**

### **12. Synthesis and rethinking ethics in light of parts 1-3 (Nov 24)**

In this class we will synthesize and revisit how we can rethink ethics for the Anthropocene in light of parts 1-3. We will (1) revisit and revise the course syllabus and (2) develop recommendations for the E4A ethics research agenda.

### **13. Joint class: connecting ethics with other disciplines (Dec 1)**

This class will explore how ethics relates to other normative disciplines and the implications that rethinking ethics for the Anthropocene has for other disciplines. This will be a joint class with other orphan groups in which we share and discuss the results and questions developed during the previous class.

### **Academic Integrity**

McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures (see <http://www.mcgill.ca/integrity/> for more information).

**Right to submit in English or French written work that is to be graded:** In accord with McGill University's Charter of Students' Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded.