

PHIL 3309 Environmental Ethics

MW3 Mon, Wed 3:40pm – 4:55pm

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The 21st century has brought with it a range of environmental problems that humanity (and the rest of the earth) have never encountered. Global warming gets much of the press but mass extinction, soil degradation, water scarcity, and atmospheric and oceanic pollution pose problems potentially as catastrophic. Relatedly, a global economy heavily reliant upon oil, coal and gas threaten to further destabilize the global ecology as do further processes of economic development, urbanization, and population growth.

So what should be done and who should do it? This is a central question in applied ethics.

An array of ethical problems arise: 1) is there a right to a clean and health environment? If so, who defines “clean”? Many talk about “sustainability” but what would an economy that did not destroy the environment look like? Is capitalism inherent ecologically destructive? Is another economy possible? If so, how do we get there? 2) If the world recognizes that certain wild parts of the globe should be preserved (e.g. the Amazon rainforest), who should pay to preserve it? 3) Do nonhumans have rights in these kinds of debates or do only humans possess them? Ecuador and Bolivia now recognize the rights of “mother nature” in their constitutions, should the US adopt such a amendment? 4) As a consumer YOU make choices that directly impact on the environment every day. What sorts of moral guidelines should we follow as consumers? We shall examine a range of ethical perspectives to deal with these issues, but virtue ethics, democratic and rights perspectives will be of special focus.

Furthermore, we shall be especially focused on the issue of “sustainability” and sustainable development and related issues of agriculture, food, and democracy as they apply to both rural and urban areas. Brooklyn and Brooklyn College itself will be of particular focus as we look at activities and proposals to make the campus and the borough more “sustainable” and fights over just what that means. Also, students will be required to morally evaluate some of their own consumption practices.