

# PL250 Ethics in the Face of Ecological Crisis

Seminar Leader: Manuel Gebhardt  
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Office hours: by appointment

Wednesday: 15:45 – 17:15  
Friday: 15:45 – 17:15

## Course Description

The debate about climate change and the resulting contemporary ecological crisis has brought into prominent focus the relation between humankind and environment. Over the past decades, thinkers in the field of environmental ethics developed various approaches to determining correct ways of human acting in relation to nature. To grasp and evaluate these positions, we will – in a first step – study traditional ethical theories (consequentialism, deontology, virtue ethics): we will discuss their premises and the conclusions they suggest regarding moral commitments. Building on this foundation, we will evaluate contemporary approaches to the field of environmental ethics in respect to their validity and soundness. The seminar aims for students to acquire the competence to develop their own ethical stances and to advocate for their moral judgments. On our way, we will analyze the implication of anthropocentric and physiocentric arguments (caring for nature for the sake of humankind or for the sake of nature itself?), touching on the realms of human rights, animal rights, (global) justice, sustainability, ecopolitics (e.g. sumac kawsay, a concept of the “good life” alongside nature), ecofeminism and moral psychology (how can we bridge the gap between knowing what is right and doing what is right?). Readings will include works by Immanuel Kant, David Hume, J.S. Mill, and Martha Nussbaum (part I) as well as Donna Haraway, Ursula Le Guin, Hans Jonas, Christine Korsgaard, Angelika Krebs, Bruno Latour, Catriona McKinnon, and Val Plumwood, et al. (part II).

## Requirements

Students are required to come to class prepared and with the relevant materials and texts, as well as to take part in fieldtrips to places off-campus. This may involve allowing for extra-time for making the way to and from BCB campus; if necessary, a class may be moved to the evening to attend a theater performance. Students should also be willing to make time for one or two film screenings in the evening (e.g. Human/Terra by Yann Arthus-Bertrand).

Participation consists in contributing productively to class discussion in a respectful manner, and in demonstrating a sound knowledge of the texts assigned.

Reading materials will be made available via through a reader and/or GoogleClassroom prior to classes dedicated to these texts and subjects. Unless stated otherwise, these texts should be printed for use in class.

All assignment must be completed to pass the course. Assignments and deadlines are specified in the schedule below.

### Academic Integrity

Bard College Berlin maintains the highest standards of academic integrity and expects students to adhere to these standards at all times. Instances in which students fail to meet the expected standards of academic integrity will be dealt with under the Code of Student Conduct, Section 14.3 (Academic Misconduct) in the Student Handbook.

### Use of AI

I agree with and will enforce the following statement from the Harvard Kennedy School on the use of AI:

“It is generally acceptable to use generative AI for finding information and for solidifying your knowledge of the course content. For instance, it is fine to use AI-powered web search and to have conversations with tools like ChatGPT to help you explore ideas, refine your thinking, identify examples, and better understand the course material. However, unless otherwise specified, it is a violation of the HKS Academic Code to incorporate into your coursework text produced predominantly by generative AI — similar to copying from a book or article. For example, it would be inappropriate to simply rewrite a draft generated by AI.”

Please note that computer-generated text and ideas (including anything from ChatGPT) are sources that require citation.

### Attendance

Attendance at all classes is a crucial part of the education offered by Bard College Berlin. To account for minor circumstances, two absences from twice-per-week courses or the equivalent (e.g. one absence from a once-per-week course) should not affect the participation grade or require documentation.

Bard College Berlin may not offer credit for any course in which a student has missed more than 30% of classes, regardless of the reasons for the absences. The full Bard College Berlin attendance policy can be found in the Student Handbook, Section 2.8.

### Policy on Late Submission of Papers

Essays that are up to 24 hours late can be downgraded up to one full grade (from B+ to C+, for example). Instructors are not obliged to accept essays that are more than 24 hours late. Where a professor agrees to accept a late assignment, it should be submitted by the new deadline agreed upon by both parties. Thereafter, the student will receive a failing grade for the assignment. Grades and comments will be returned to students in a timely fashion. Students are also entitled to make an appointment to discuss essay assignments and feedback during instructors' office hours.

Students receive mid- and end-of-semester grades for their seminar work. Students are entitled to make an appointment with an instructor to discuss seminar participation, or may be asked to meet with the instructor at any stage in the semester regarding class progress.

## Grade Breakdown

Participation and Homework, including occasional one-paragraph responses:	35%
Midterm Essay (ca. 2000 words):	20%
One In-Class Presentation:	20%
Final Essay (ca. 3000 words):	25%

## Schedule

Please note that this syllabus is subject to change. We will only read excerpts of the works mentioned; as a general idea, readings will be assigned for Wednesday sessions to dive into context and close readings to foster a better understanding of the texts and their backgrounds, while on Friday we will discuss further questions, based on our Wednesday's work with the text.

This practice is meant to combine a broader context into a period, philosophical viewpoint or an author with our own thinking and arguing on a solid and firm fundament of our understanding – based on the Socratic idea that opinion (doxa) should be replaced by knowledge (episteme) on which we finally base our own judgments (kritike). I invite you to walk down this path together with genuine benevolence towards each other's opinions, and with a sharp mind (and benevolence, still) when it comes to discuss our judgments.

As we go along, I will either designate – based on our seminar progress – in advance the passages on which we will focus our collective discussion, or I will ask you to identify the works that you think we should discuss most intensely. If we should find that we would like to devote more time to certain aspect or if you have reading suggestions based on your studies, we have the option to include them. We may then adjust the readings or move a text.

### Week 1: Introduction / Ethics / Ecological Crisis

Wednesday, January 31

What is Philosophy? What is Ethics?

Friday, February 2

On Fictions and Facts: The Climate Crisis

Harald Welzer (2012): Climate Wars: What People Will Be Killed For in the 21st Century.

Stefan Rahmstorf (Lecture, 2020): The Climate Crisis - What We Know About It And How We Can Stop Further Warming [Video-Recording].

David Archer/Stefan Rahmstorf (2010): The Climate Crisis.

### Week 2: Deontology

Wednesday, February 7

Freedom, responsibility and “the moral good”

Immanuel Kant: Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals.

Friday, February 9

### Week 3: Utilitarianism

Freedom, Happiness, and Suffering

Wednesday, February 14

J.S. Mill: On Liberty / Utilitarianism.

Peter Singer (1975): Animal Liberation.

Friday, February 16

**Week 4: Virtue Ethics**

**In between Utilitarianism and Kantian ethics?**

Wednesday, February 21

David Hume: An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals.

Martha Nussbaum (2009): Virtue Ethics: A Misleading Category.

Friday, February 23

**Week 5: Justice**

**Global Justice and Sustainability**

Wednesday, February 28

John Rawls (1958): Justice as fairness.

Immanuel Kant: Metaphysics of Morals, Doctrine of Right.

Martha Nussbaum (2013): Climate Change – Why Theories of Justice Matter.

Catriona McKinnon (2019): Climate Justice. Integrating economics and philosophy.

Friday, March 1

**Week 6: Responsibility**

**In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age**

Wednesday, March 6

Hans Jonas (1979): The Imperative of Responsibility.

Horkheimer/Adorno (1944): Dialectic of Enlightenment.

Herbert Marcuse (1964): One-Dimensional Man.

Friday, March 8 (Local Holiday)

**Week 7: Ethics of Nature, I**

**Anthropocentrism vs. Physiocentrism**

Wednesday, March 13

Angelika Krebs (1999): Ethics of Nature. A Map.

Friday, March 15

(One paragraph responses due Friday, March 15)

**Week 8: Ethics of Nature, II**

**What is your point of view (Standpunkt)?**

Wednesday, March 20

Angelika Krebs (1999): Ethics of Nature.

➔ Case Studies

Friday, March 22

Exhibition: Climate X – Why don't we do what we know?

*Friday, March 22: Midterm Essay due*

**Spring Break (Mar 25 – Apr 1)**

**Week 9: Aesthetics and Ethics: An Intervention**

Bridging the gap between Knowing and Doing?

Wednesday, April 3

Ursula Le Guin (1986): The Carrier Bag theory of fiction.

Friedrich Schiller: Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Men / On Grace and Dignity.

Friday, April 5

Film Screening (evening): Human/Terra by Yann Arthus-Bertrand.

**Week 10: Aesthetics of the Anthropocene**

Composing the common world through arts and politics

Wednesday, April 10

Herbert Marcuse (1955): Eros and Civilization.

Bruno Latour (2011): Waiting for Gaia. Composing the common world through arts and politics.

Bruno Latour (Lecture, 2015): On Sensitivity Arts, Science and Politics in the New Climatic Regime.

Angelika Krebs (2017): "As if the Earth Has Long Stopped Speaking to Us". Resonance with Nature and its Loss.

Friday, April 12

**Week 11: Political Emotions**

Why Love and Compassion matter for Justice

Wednesday, April 17

Martha Nussbaum (2013): Political Emotions.

Christine Korsgaard (2018): Fellow Creatures. Our Obligations to the Other Animals

Angelika Krebs (2014, Lecture): And What was there Accepted Us': Landscape, Stimmung, and Heimat".

Friday, April 19

**Week 12: Ecofeminism**

Feminism and "Mastery" (of Nature)

Val Plumwood (1993): Feminism and the Mastery of

Wednesday, April 24

Nature.

Vandana Shiva (1991) Women and Children last.  
The Impoverishment of Women, Children and the  
Environment.

Mies, Maria/Shiva Vandana (2023): Ecofeminism.

Friday, April 26

**Week 13: Ecopolitics and beyond, I**

Wednesday, May 1 (Federal Holiday)

Sumac Kawsay, Racial Justice and Vitalist Politics

Thomas Fatheuer (2011): Buen Vivir. A brief intro-  
duction to Latin America's new concepts of the  
good life and the rights of nature.

E. Tendayi Achiume (2022): Ecological crisis, cli-  
mate justice and racial justice.

(One paragraph responses due Wednesday, May 1)

Friday, May 3

**Week 14: Ecopolitics and beyond, II**

Wednesday, May 8

A Vitalist politics, Critters, Kin and Chthulucene

Donna Haraway (2016): Staying with the Trouble:  
Making Kin in the Chthulucene.

Amitav Gosh (2021): A Vitalist Politics.

Friday, May 10

**Completion Week**

Wednesday, May 15: Final Essay due