

# PL250 Ethics and Aesthetics in the Face of Ecological Crisis

Seminar Leader: Manuel Gebhardt  
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Office hours: by appointment

Tuesday: 14:00 – 15:30  
Thursday: 14:00 – 15:30

## Course Description

The debate about climate change and the resulting contemporary ecological crisis has brought into prominent focus the relation between humankind and the environment. Over the past decades, artists and thinkers in the field of environmental ethics have developed various ways of determining ethical forms of human action in relation to nature. In order 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 in regard to moral commitments. Building on this foundation, we will evaluate the soundness and validity of contemporary artistic and theoretical approaches to the field of environmental ethics. 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, political emotions 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** Immanuel Kant, J.S. Mill, John Rawls, Martha Nussbaum, and Angelika Krebs (Part I). In Part II, we will turn to the relationship between ethics, aesthetics, and artistic practice, drawing on the works of Herbert Marcuse, Ursula K. Le Guin, Friedrich Schiller, Bruno Latour, and Donna Haraway. This discussion will be framed by an engagement with contemporary artworks addressing ecological concerns, for example by Pierre Huyghe and Tino Sehgal. Finally, authors such as Val Plumwood, Vandana Shiva, Donna Haraway, and Amitav Ghosh will open up synthetic perspectives on ecopolitics and beyond.

## 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 through Google Classroom 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.

### **Accommodations**

Bard College Berlin is committed to inclusion and providing equal access to all students; we uphold and maintain all aspects of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, and the ADA Amendments Act of 2008, and Section 3 of the German Disability Equality Act of April 27, 2002 (Federal Law Gazette I p. 1468). If you have a disability, or think you may have a disability, please contact the Disability Accommodation Coordinator, Atticus Kleen, ([accommodations@berlin.bard.edu](mailto:accommodations@berlin.bard.edu)) to request an official accommodation.

Requests for accommodations should be made as early as possible to ensure adequate time for coordination and planning. Please note that accommodations are not retroactive and may require advance notice to implement.

If you have already been approved for accommodations with the Disability Accommodation Coordinator, please arrange to meet with me outside of class so that we can develop an implementation plan.

Students may face extenuating circumstances related to various personal or external factors, which impact their academic performance. While these circumstances often do not fall within the legal framework of Disability Accommodations, Bard College Berlin is committed to supporting students experiencing such circumstances. A student needing a short extension or a replacement assignment because of an extenuating circumstance is encouraged to make arrangements directly with instructors if possible. If further support is needed, please visit the [Bard College Berlin Accessibility page](#). Questions about this process can be directed to James Harker ([j.harker@berlin.bard.edu](mailto:j.harker@berlin.bard.edu)) or Maria Anderson-Long ([m.andersonlong@berlin.bard.edu](mailto:m.andersonlong@berlin.bard.edu)).

### **Use of Generative AI in This Course**

It is generally acceptable to use generative AI to search for information and to deepen your understanding of course content. For example, using AI-powered web searches or engaging in conversations with tools like ChatGPT can be helpful for exploring ideas, refining your thinking, identifying examples, or clarifying complex material.

However, unless explicitly stated otherwise, it is not permissible to submit work that has been predominantly written by generative AI. This includes simply rewriting or slightly editing a draft produced by an AI tool. Such use would be comparable to copying from a book or article without proper attribution and does not meet the academic integrity standards of this course.

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.

### **Assessment**

This course combines short reflective writing, two formal essays, and a class presentation. Students are expected to come prepared, submit drafts on time, and revise based on feedback. Writing support (peer feedback or Learning Commons) is strongly encouraged, especially for the longer assignments.

### **Graded Components and Timeline:**

- 4 Short Responses (Weeks ...): ungraded but required for essay development
- Mid Term Essay – Draft (Week ...), Final (Week ...)
- Final Essay – Draft (Week ...), Final (Week ...)
- Presentation (t.b.d. in 1<sup>st</sup> session)
- Preparation and Participation (ongoing)

### **Assignments**

Over the course of the semester, students will complete a series of written assignments totaling approximately **6000–6500 words**, in accordance with departmental guidelines. These include shorter and longer writing formats designed to build toward independent analytical thinking and structured academic writing.

- **Short Responses** (*4 total, spaced across the semester*)  
You will submit four 1–2 page reflections on the assigned readings. These regular exercises are meant to help you develop ideas, clarify your perspective, and prepare for

the longer essays.

*Estimated total: 1500–2000 words*

- **Mid-Term Essay Draft & Final Version**

In your mid-term essay, you will be engaging critically with one of the course's core topics. You are expected to bring at least two course readings into a productive dialogue. A draft is required and will receive oral feedback during office hours.

*Estimated total: 1500–2000 words*

- **Final Essay – Draft & Final Version**

A 2500–3000 word essay due at the end of the semester. This assignment invites you to synthesize and extend course discussions by developing a focused argument based on the readings and concepts we have explored. A draft is required and must be submitted two weeks prior to the final version.

*Estimated total: 2500–3000 words*

### **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 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**

Preparation and Participation (weeks 1 – 7)	15%
Preparation and Participation (weeks 8 – 14)	15%
Midterm Essay (ca. 2000 words):	20%
One In-Class Presentation:	25%
Final Essay (ca. 3000 words):	25%

## **Schedule**

### ***Please note that this schedule is subject to change.***

We will often read only excerpts from the works listed. As a general rule, readings will be assigned for the Tuesday sessions, which are dedicated to contextual framing and close reading, fostering a deeper understanding of the texts and their backgrounds. On Thursdays, we will then open the floor to broader discussion, building on our Tuesday work.

This practice is meant to connect broader historical or philosophical contexts – whether a period, a school of thought, or a single author – with our own thinking and argumentation, grounded in a solid foundation of understanding. It follows the Socratic idea that opinion (*doxa*)

should be replaced by knowledge (*episteme*), which then allows us to form our own well-considered judgments (*kritike*). I invite you to walk this path with genuine benevolence toward one another's perspectives – and with a sharp mind (and still: benevolence) when it comes to critically examining our own positions.

As we go along, I will either designate in advance – depending on our seminar progress – the passages we will focus our collective discussion on, or I will ask you to suggest the parts you feel deserve particular attention. If we find that we wish to devote more time to a specific aspect, or if you have reading suggestions based on your own studies, we may adapt accordingly. Readings can be adjusted or rescheduled in response to our shared interests.

### **Week 1: Introduction**

Tuesday, September 2

Thursday, September 4

### **Philosophy or The Art of Reasoning**

What is Philosophy, Ethics, Aesthetics?

### **On Fictions and Facts: The Climate Crisis**

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

Amitav Ghosh (2016): *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*.

Bruno Latour – *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*.

### **Week 2: Deontology**

Tuesday, September 9

Thursday, September 11

### **Freedom, responsibility and “the moral good” Part**

Immanuel Kant: *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals, Part I*.

Exhibition: *Shifting Tides: Art in a Changing Climate*

### **Week 3: Utilitarianism**

Tuesday, September 16

Thursday, September 18

### **Freedom, Happiness, and Suffering**

Immanuel Kant: *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals, Part II*.

J.S. Mill: *On Liberty / Utilitarianism*.

Peter Singer (1975): *Animal Liberation*.

**(1<sup>st</sup> Short Response due Monday, Sep 22)**

### **Week 4: Virtue Ethics**

Tuesday, September 23

Thursday, September 25

### **In between Utilitarianism and Kantian ethics?**

Aristotle: *Nicomachean Ethics*

Martha Nussbaum (1988): *Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach*.

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

### **Week 5: Justice**

Tuesday, September 30

### **Global Justice and Sustainability**

Immanuel Kant: *Metaphysics of Morals, Doctrine of Right*.

John Rawls (1958): *Justice as fairness*.

Thursday, October 2

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

(2<sup>nd</sup> Short Response due Monday, Oct 6)

**Week 6: Ethics of Nature, I**

Anthropocentrism vs. Physiocentrism

Tuesday, October 7

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

Thursday, October 9

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

What is your point of view (Standpunkt)?

Tuesday, October 14

Angelika Krebs (1999): *Ethics of Nature*.

➔ Case Studies

Thursday, October 16

*Friday, October 17: Midterm Essay due*

**Fall Break (Mon Oct 20 – Sun Oct 26)**

**Week 8: A Critical Theory of Consumerism**

Culture, Commodities, and the Loss of Critical Thought

Tuesday, October 28

Horkheimer/Adorno (1944): *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

Thursday, October 30

Herbert Marcuse (1964): *One-Dimensional Man*.

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

Bridging the gap between Knowing and Doing?

Tuesday, November 4

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

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

Herbert Marcuse (1955): *Eros and Civilization*.

Thursday, November 6 (evening)

Film Screening Yann Arthus-Bertrand: *Human/Terra*.

**Week 10: Aesthetics of the Anthropocene**

Composing the common world through arts and politics

Tuesday, November 11

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*.

Thursday, November 13

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

Pierre Huyghe: *selected works*.

**Week 11: Art and Political Emotions**

Tuesday, November 18

Thursday, November 20

**Week 12: Ecofeminism**

Tuesday, November 25

Thursday, November 27

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

Tuesday, December 2

Thursday, December 4

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

Tuesday, December 9

Thursday, December 11

**Completion Week**

**Thursday, December 19: Final Essay due**

Wim Wenders (film, 2014): *The Salt of the Earth* (on the photographer Sebastiao Selgado)

Why Love and Compassion matter for Justice

Guest Lecture by Artist Tino Sehgal

Why Love and Compassion matter for Justice

Martha Nussbaum (2013): *Political Emotions*.

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

**(3<sup>rd</sup> Short Response due Monday, Nov 24)**

Feminism and "Mastery" (of Nature)

Val Plumwood (1993): *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*.

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

Mies, Maria / Shiva, Vandana (2023): *Ecofeminism* (New Edition)

Sumac Kawsay and Racial Eco-Justice

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

E. Tendayi Achiume (2022): *Ecological crisis, climate justice and racial justice*.

**(4<sup>th</sup> Short Response due Monday, Nov Dec 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*.