

PL250 Ethics and Aesthetics in the Face of Ecological Crisis

Seminar Leader: Dr. Manuel Gebhardt
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Office hours: Mo 12:45 – 13:45
and by appointment

Thursday: 14:00 – 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 the environment. Over the past decades, artists and thinkers in the field of environmental ethics and aesthetics 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 regarding 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 and the intersections between ethics and aesthetics. The seminar aims for students to acquire the competence to develop their own ethical stances, to justify their moral judgments, and to critically evaluate aims and limits of artistic approaches aiming to intersect with ethical questions.

Along the way, we will analyze the implications of anthropocentric and physiocentric arguments (caring for nature for the sake of humankind or for nature's own sake?), touching on the realms of human rights, animal rights, (global) justice, ethics of nature, critical theories of consumerism and acceleration, political aesthetics, the "power of art" and the "voice of nature", political emotions, sustainability, ecopolitics (e.g. *Sumak kawsay*, an Amerindian concept of the "good life" alongside nature), ecofeminism and moral psychology (how can aesthetic approaches help bridge the gap between knowing what is right and doing what is right?).

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 e.g. 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.

All assignments 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 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 *Claude* 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 Claude or ChatGPT et al.) are sources that require citation, cf. “Academic Integrity”.

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) 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) or Maria Anderson-Long (m.andersonlong@berlin.bard.edu).

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 is designed to foster substantive in-class dialogue and independent thinking. It therefore combines short reflective writings, two formal essays, and three short class presentations: one presentation of the midterm essay after submission, one pitch for the final essay or artistic project, and one 10- to 15-minute group introduction to one of the key readings. Students are expected to come prepared, submit drafts on time, and revise their work based on feedback. Writing support, whether through peer feedback or the Learning Commons, is strongly encouraged, especially for the longer assignments.

Graded Components and Timeline:

- 4 Short Responses (tbd): ungraded but required for essay development.
- Mid Term Essay – Draft (Week 6), Final (week 7).
- Mid Term Essay – Presentation (week 8 and 9).
- Final Essay/Artistic Project – Draft (Week 12), Final (Week 15).
- Final Essay/Artistic Project – Draft Presentation (Week 13 and 14).
- Key-Text Presentations (t.b.d. in 1st 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, not graded, 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 / Artistic Project – Draft & Final Version**

A final essay or an artistic project (accompanied by a critical reflection paper) are 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 – or engage with them via an aesthetic approach. A draft is required and must be submitted two weeks prior to the final version.

Estimated total: 2500–3000 words (Essay) / ~ 1500 words (Artistic Project).

- **3 Short Presentations**

Students will work individually or in groups on a 10- to 15-minute presentation of one of the assigned key texts (see schedule). In addition, they will briefly present their midterm paper after fall break and, toward the end of the semester, give a pitch for their final essay or artistic project, followed by a short multilogue, i.e. an open exchange of questions and responses with the class.

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 will receive feedback for their course work during and at the end of the semester. 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%
Key Reading Presentation:	10%
Midterm Essay (ca. 2000 words):	20%
Final Essay (ca. 3000 words):	20%
Project Presentations:	20%

Your written work, including response papers, the midterm essay, and the final essay, is an important foundation for your progress in developing your own judgment on the ethical questions we will discuss. In this course, however, the focus will also be on in-class dialogue and on your ability to present your thoughts, justify your judgments, and answer questions about your projects in your own words.

Schedule

Please note that this schedule is subject to change.

We will often read only excerpts from the works listed. The first part of our sessions will be dedicated to contextual framing and close reading, fostering a deeper understanding of the texts and their backgrounds – supported by your key-text presentations. In the second half, we will then open the floor to broader discussion, connecting our collective perspectives with contemporary questions.

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.

<u>Week 1: Introduction</u>	<u>Philosophy or The Art of Reasoning</u> What is Philosophy, Ethics, Aesthetics? <u>On Fictions and Facts: The Climate Crisis</u> Stefan Rahmstorf (Lecture, 2020): <i>The Climate Crisis - What We Know About It And How We Can Stop Further Warming</i> [Video-Recording]. Amitav Ghosh (2016): <i>The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable</i>. Bruno Latour – <i>Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime</i>.
<u>Week 2: Deontology</u>	<u>Freedom, responsibility and “the moral good”</u> Immanuel Kant: <i>Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals, Pt I</i>. [Possible Exhibition, tbd]
<u>Week 3: Utilitarianism</u>	<u>Freedom, Happiness, and Suffering</u> Immanuel Kant: <i>Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals, Pt II</i>. J.S. Mill: <i>On Liberty / Utilitarianism</i>. Peter Singer (1975): <i>Animal Liberation</i>. (1st Short Response due Monday, Sep 21)
<u>Week 4: Virtue Ethics</u>	<u>In between Utilitarianism and Kantian ethics?</u> Martha Nussbaum (1988): <i>Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach</i>. Martha Nussbaum (2009): <i>Virtue Ethics: A Misleading Category</i>.

<u>Week 5: Justice</u>	<u>Global Justice and Sustainability</u> Immanuel Kant: <i>Metaphysics of Morals, Doctrine of Right</i> . John Rawls (1958): <i>Justice as fairness</i> . Martha Nussbaum (2013): <i>Climate Change – Why Theories of Justice Matter</i> . (2nd Short Response due Monday, Oct 5)
<u>Week 6: Ethics of Nature</u>	<u>Anthropocentrism vs. Physiocentrism</u> Angelika Krebs (1999): <i>Ethics of Nature. A Map</i> . (Midterm Essay draft due Monday, Oct 12th)
<u>Week 7: A Critical Theory of Consumerism</u>	<u>Culture, Commodities, and the Loss of Critical Thought</u> Horkheimer/Adorno (1944): <i>Dialectic of Enlightenment, Chapter: The Culture Industry. Enlightenment as Mass Deception</i> . Herbert Marcuse (1964): <i>One-Dimensional Man, Introduction</i> . Hartmut Rosa (2026): <i>Alienation and Acceleration, Part I</i> .
Monday, October 26th: Midterm Essay due Fall Break (Mon Oct 19 – Sun Oct 25)	
<u>Week 8: Aesthetics & Ethics: An Intervention</u>	<u>Aesthetically bridging the gap between Knowing and Doing?</u> Ursula K. Le Guin (1986): <i>The Carrier Bag theory of fiction</i> . Friedrich Schiller: <i>Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Men / On Grace and Dignity</i> (excerpts). Herbert Marcuse (1955): <i>Eros and Civilization, Chapter 9: "The Aesthetic Dimension"</i> . Film Screening (evening): Yann Arthus-Bertrand: <i>Human/Terra</i> . (Midterm-Paper Presentations, Part I). (3rd Short Response due Monday, Nov 2nd).
<u>Week 9: Aesthetic Resonance Spaces</u>	<u>Uncontrollability, The Voice of Nature, and the Power of Art</u> Hartmut Rosa (2022): <i>The Uncontrollability of the World, Part I</i> . Hartmut Rosa (2019): <i>Resonance: A Sociology of Our Relationship to the world</i> (Introduction, IX.2 The Voice of Nature, IX.3, The Power of Art). (Midterm-Paper Presentations, Part II)
<u>Week 10: Aesthetics of the Anthropocene</u>	<u>Composing the common world through Arts and Politics</u> Bruno Latour (2011): <i>Waiting for Gaia. Composing the common world through arts and politics</i> .

	Bruno Latour (Lecture, 2015): <i>On Sensitivity Arts, Science and Politics in the New Climatic Regime</i>. Angelika Krebs (2017): <i>"As if the Earth Has Long Stopped Speaking to Us". Resonance with Nature and its Loss</i>.
<u>Week 11: Art and Political Emotions</u>	<u>Why Love and Compassion matter for Justice</u> Martha Nussbaum (2013): <i>Political Emotions</i>. Angelika Krebs (2014, Video-Lecture): <i>And What was there Accepted Us': Landscape, Stimmung, and Heimat</i>". Wim Wenders (film, asynchronous screening, 2014): <i>The Salt of the Earth</i> (on the photographer Sebastião Salgado).
<u>Week 12: Ecofeminism</u>	<u>Feminism and "Mastery" (of Nature)</u> Val Plumwood (1993): <i>Feminism and the Mastery of Nature</i>. Vandana Shiva (1991) <i>Women and Children last. The Impoverishment of Women, Children and the Environment</i>. Mies, Maria / Shiva, Vandana (2023): <i>Ecofeminism</i> (New Edition). (4th Short Response due Monday, Nov 30th)
<u>Week 13: Ecopolitics and beyond, I</u>	<u>Sumac Kawsay and Racial Eco-Justice</u> Thomas Fatheuer (2011): <i>Buen Vivir. A brief introduction to Latin America's new concepts of the good life and the rights of nature</i>. E. Tendayi Achiume (2022): <i>Ecological crisis, climate justice and racial justice</i>. (Final-Project Presentations, Part I)
<u>Week 14: Ecopolitics and beyond, II</u>	<u>A Vitalist politics, Critters, Kin and Chthulucene</u> Donna Haraway (2016): <i>Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthuluce</i> [excerpts]. Amitav Gosh (2021): <i>The nutmeg's Curse, Chapter 18: A Vitalist Politics</i>. (Final-Project Presentations, Part II)
<u>Week 15: Completion Week</u> Friday, December 18th	<u>Office Hours by appointment for individual writing guidance</u> Final Essay due