

# PHIL2026 Philosophy and the Environment



Instructor: Gui Sanches de Oliveira (sanchege@mail.uc.edu)

Class Meetings: Tuesdays and Thursdays 12:30 PM - 1:50 PM, at Swift 816

Office hours: Right after class or by appointment, in McMicken Hall or online

## Course Description

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Is climate change a moral emergency? Should we seek out consumer products that are “natural” and “green,” and foods that are “GMO-free” and “humanely-raised”? Do non-human animals, plants, and ecosystems have moral interests? Are individuals and corporations obligated to reduce their environmental impact, even if others are not making an effort? How do social and political factors like poverty, gender, race, and inequality relate to environmental issues? These questions and others are explored in this introductory course on the ethical and philosophical issues raised by environmental problems. No prior background in philosophy is necessary. All assigned readings will be provided on Blackboard.

## Course Goals and Student Learning Outcomes

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The main goal of this course is to help students develop a basic understanding of the philosophical (ethical, political, existential and metaphysical) dimensions of our current ecological situation. By the end of the course students should be capable of demonstrating this understanding through their ability to:

- (1) *recognize* central philosophical concepts and ideas at play in debates about environmental issues, and *employ* these concepts and ideas to *develop* and *express* their own perspectives on those issues
- (2) *determine* which implicit theoretical motivations underlie views on debates about environmental issues, and *articulate* and *defend* theoretical assumptions in support of their own views

In the process of working toward the learning outcomes above, students will also hone their critical thinking and argumentation skills, becoming better able to:

- (3) *identify* and *formulate* clearly-defined philosophical theses
- (4) critically *assess* arguments and *provide reasons* for their success or failure to support a given conclusion
- (5) *write* well-organized, effective, and focused texts critiquing, defending and/or advancing a position on a particular issue
- (6) *orally express* well-organized, effective, and focused views on a particular issue under discussion

## Course Requirements, Activities, and Evaluations

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**Reading Response:** a short essay (200-250 words) engaging with the week's readings.

✱ You may begin your reading response with a very brief summary (no more than three sentences) of the/a main idea presented in the text(s). The bulk of the reading response should be dedicated to your critical assessment of, and reaction to, the text(s). You may choose to: (i) identify an idea described in the text that you agree with, and explain why you agree with it; *or* (ii) identify an idea described in the text that you disagree with, and explain why you disagree with it; *or* (iii) identify something you didn't understand in the text, explaining exactly what was unclear to you; *or* (iv) in the case of texts that present opposing perspectives, you may identify which perspective you prefer and explain why; *or* (v) if the text presents complementary perspectives, you may discuss what is missing in one of the perspectives that the other provides. A reading response that only summarizes the text without critically reacting to it will not receive credit.

✓ You will compose one reading response per week (always due before 11:00 AM on Tuesdays, and submitted online through Blackboard), for a total of 12 throughout the course, corresponding to 15% of your final grade. Reading Responses will undergo peer review in class every week (see below).

**Papers 1 and 2:** essays (1,500 to 2,000 words each) engaging philosophically with an environmental issue.

✱ Your papers may expand on some idea you developed in one of your readings responses, or it may be on a new topic. Detailed instructions will be provided in class.

✓ The first draft of paper #1 will be due in class on Oct 15, when it will undergo peer review (see below). The revised version of paper #1 will be due on Oct 18. As for paper #2, the first draft will be due in class on Dec 3, when it will undergo peer review (see below). The revised version of paper #2 will be due on Dec 10. Paper #1 is worth 15% of your final grade; Paper #2 is worth 20%.

**Peer Review:** careful, critical, and constructive engagement with another student's written work.

✱ Every week you will read another student's Reading Response and complete a brief critical evaluation of its content and form. In Week 8 and Week 15 you will also engage in more detailed peer review of another student's paper. Peer Reviewing is a

very useful tool for the author of the text being reviewed, who benefits from receiving another person's input on how to improve their thinking about the issue at hand and their writing more generally. Peer reviewing is also very useful for the reviewer, who benefits from being exposed to the original ideas and argumentation of another person, and from gaining more practice in thinking critically about the issues at hand, which will also help the reviewer to become a better writer and thinker. For these reasons, you should take very seriously your role as peer reviewer and you should provide the best constructive feedback you can.

✓ Peer reviewing assignments correspond to 15% of your final grade: 5% for weekly in-class assignments, 5% for Paper #1, and 5% for Paper #2.

**Quiz:** five to ten multiple-choice or short-answer questions on the week's readings, lectures, and discussions.

✓ You will complete a total of 13 quizzes, for 20% of your final grade.

**Concept Map:** a visualization that illustrates how different ideas are connected.

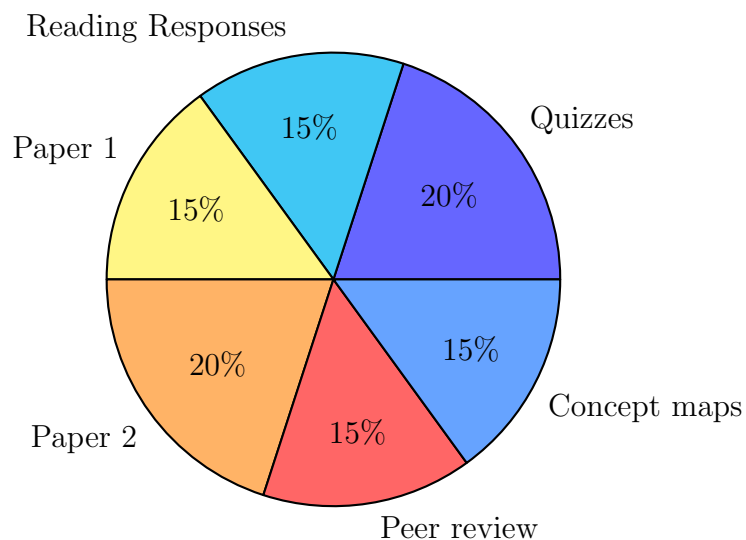
\* Identify key ideas (concepts, theories, or issues) that you have learned about through the readings, lectures and discussions in class, and then draw a diagram, infographic or other visualization showing how they are related to one another. You have complete freedom on how to design your concept map, as long as you are able to explain the rationale behind it. Each concept map must be accompanied by a caption of 75 to 100 words that explains your choice of design and ideas. You will submit four concept maps throughout the semester. While the first three maps may be narrow in focus, the last one should engage with topics related to the course as whole.

✓ Your four concept maps (along with captions) correspond to 15% of your final grade.

#### Grade Scale:

A = 93 – 100%;  
 A- = 90 – 92;  
 B+ = 87 – 89;  
 B = 83 – 86;  
 B- = 80 – 82;  
 C+ = 77 – 79;  
 C = 73 – 76;  
 C- = 70 – 72;  
 D+ = 67 – 69;  
 D = 63 – 66;  
 D- = 60 – 62;  
 F = 59 and below

#### Grade Distribution:



# Policies

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**Deadlines and Extensions:** Late assignments will generally not be accepted. If you will need a deadline extension, talk to the instructor as soon as possible and *before* that deadline. Alternative arrangements will only be considered for good reasons such as documented conditions, medical or family emergencies, or under extreme circumstances. The instructor reserves the right to determine what counts as a good reason or exception on a case-by-case basis. If an extension is granted, the new due date that we agree upon is firm (that is, you will not get a second extension).

**Code of Conduct, Rights and Responsibilities:** The University of Cincinnati's student code of conduct will be in effect. I encourage you to familiarize yourself with UC's description of your rights, freedoms and responsibilities as a student:  
<https://www.uc.edu/campus-life/conduct/student-code-of-conduct.html>.

**Academic Honesty:** You are encouraged to discuss any and all material with other participants in the course, but all written work must be completed on your own and must contain your own ideas. If you discuss or use ideas that are not your own, you must cite the sources you consulted and clearly identify any direct quotes. Failing to do either of these counts as plagiarism. Whether intentional or not, any instances of plagiarism will be taken very seriously and addressed according to UC's policies. Please talk to me if you are uncertain about how to avoid plagiarism. [Students sometimes don't read their syllabus very carefully. If you are reading this, send me a short email telling me (1) what your favorite place on Earth is, and (2) if you could go anywhere for free, where you would go.]

**Accessibility Statement:** The University of Cincinnati is committed to providing all students with equal access to learning opportunities. If you have a disability (e.g., visual impairment, hearing impairment, physical impairment, communication disorder, and/or specific learning disability, etc.) which may influence your performance in this course, you must meet with the Accessibility Resources Office to arrange for reasonable accommodations to ensure an equitable opportunity to meet all the requirements of this course. If you require accommodations due to disability, please contact Accessibility Resources at 513-556-6823, Campus Location: 210 University Pavilion.

**Important Dates:** Students should be aware of official dates and deadlines in UC's academic calendar. See [https://www.uc.edu/registrar/calendars/academic\\_calendar\\_1920.html](https://www.uc.edu/registrar/calendars/academic_calendar_1920.html)

# Schedule

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## PART 1: Ethics

### Week 1: Course Introduction & the Philosophical Toolkit

<b>Dates:</b>	<b>Readings:</b>
Tue Aug 27,	Syllabus
Th Aug 29	James Rachels (1999) "Some Basic Points about Arguments"
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	<b>Assignments:</b>
	Quiz #1 in class on Th

### Week 2: Ethics and the Environment

<b>Dates:</b>	<b>Readings:</b>
Tue Sep 3,	James Rachels (1999) "A Short Introduction to Moral Philosophy"
Th Sept 5	
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	<b>Assignments:</b>
	Reading Response #1 due on Tue (by 11AM before class)
	Quiz #2 in class on Th

### Week 3: A Theoretical Fresh Start?

<b>Dates:</b>	<b>Readings:</b>
Tue Sep 10,	Richard Sylvan (1973) "Is There a Need for a New, an Environmental
Th Sept 12	Ethic?"
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	<b>Assignments:</b>
	Reading Response #2 due on Tue (by 11AM before class)
	Quiz #3 in class on Th

### Week 4: Rights and Interests

<b>Dates:</b>	<b>Readings:</b>
Tue Sep 17,	Joel Feinberg (1974) "The Rights of Animals and Unborn Generations"
Th Sept 19	
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	<b>Assignments:</b>
	Reading Response #3 due on Tue (by 11AM before class)
	Quiz #4 in class on Th
	Concept Map #1 due on Th

## Week 5: Intrinsic Value

**Dates:**

Tue Sep 24,  
Th Sept 26

**Readings:**

Paul W. Taylor (1981) "The Ethics of Respect for Nature"

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**Assignments:**

Reading Response #4 due on Tue (by 11AM before class)  
Quiz #5 on Th

## Week 6: Conservation and Restoration

**Dates:**

Tue Oct 1,  
Th Oct 3

**Readings:**

Eric Katz (1992) "The Big Lie: Human Restoration of Nature"

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**Assignments:**

Reading Response #5 due on Tue (by 11AM before class)  
Quiz #6 in class on Th

## Week 7: Against Nature

**Dates:**

Tue Oct 8,  
Th Oct 10

**Readings:**

Steven Vogel (203) "The Nature of Artifacts"

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**Assignments:**

Reading Response #6 due on Tue (by 11AM before class)  
Quiz #7 in class on Tue

## Week 8: Conclusion of Part 1

**Dates:**

Tue Oct 15,  
Th Oct 17

**Readings:**

no new readings

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**Assignments:**

Paper #1 draft due on Tue  
Peer editing in class on Tue  
Concept Map #2 due on Th

## PART 2: Culture, Identity, Meaning, Power

### Week 9: Why is there an Ecological Crisis?

<b>Dates:</b>	<b>Readings:</b>
Tue Oct 22,	Lynn White, Jr. (1967) "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis"
Th Oct 24	J. Donald Hughes (1975) "The Ancient Roots of Our Ecological Crisis"
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	<b>Assignments:</b>
	Reading Response #7 due on Tue (by 11AM before class)
	Quiz #8 in class on Th

### Week 10: Specialization and Efficiency

<b>Dates:</b>	<b>Readings:</b>
Tue Oct 29,	Wendell Berry (1979) "Energy in Agriculture"
Th Oct 31	
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	<b>Assignments:</b>
	Reading Response #8 due on Tue (by 11AM before class)
	Quiz #9 in class on Th

### Week 11: Energy, Body and Earth

<b>Dates:</b>	<b>Readings:</b>
Tue Nov 5,	Wendell Berry (1977) from "The Unsettling of America: Culture & Agriculture"
Th Nov 7	
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	<b>Assignments:</b>
	Reading Response #9 due on Tue (by 11AM before class)
	Quiz #10 in class on Th

### Week 12: From Mother Nature to Nature as Machine

<b>Dates:</b>	<b>Readings:</b>
Tue Nov 12,	Carolyn Merchant (1980) from "The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution"
Th Nov 14	
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	<b>Assignments:</b>
	Reading Response #10 due on Tue (by 11AM before class)
	Quiz #11 in class on Th
	Concept Map #3 due on Th

## Week 13: Ecofeminism

<b>Dates:</b>	<b>Readings:</b>
Tue Nov 19, Th Nov 21	Karen J. Warren (1990) "The Power and the Promise of Ecological Feminism"
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	<b>Assignments:</b>
	Reading Response #11 due on Tue (by 11AM before class)
	Quiz #12 in class on Th

## Week 14: Environment, Gender and the Global South

<b>Dates:</b>	<b>Readings:</b>
Tue Nov 26, Th Nov 28	Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva (1993) from "Ecofeminism"
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	<b>Assignments:</b>
	Reading Response #12 due on Tue (by 11AM before class)
	Quiz #13 in class on Tue

## Week 15: Conclusion of Part 2

<b>Dates:</b>	<b>Readings:</b>
Tue Dec 3, Th Dec 5	no new readings
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	<b>Assignments:</b>
	Paper #2 draft due on Tue
	Peer editing in class on Tue
	Concept Map #4 due on Th

## Exams Week

<b>Date:</b>	<b>Assignments:</b>
No classes	Paper #2 due on Th Dec 10