



The Examined Life: Uncovering Meaning in American Ecological Traditions Ross Jensen

Class Meets: TH 2:00 – 3:20, Malloy 215
Office Hours: W 12:00 – 2:00, Malloy 200
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A companion to *God and the Good Life*, this course will address the ways in which philosophy, as an intellectual discipline or set of practices, can contribute both to our understanding of meaning in life and to our actually living meaningful lives. This semester we will focus on a range of issues in the philosophy of ecology, including those, such as global climate change and mass extinction, that may seem to threaten the possibility of living meaningful lives at all. Readings will come primarily from the American tradition of ecological writing, since we have inherited that tradition as students at an American university. Classes will proceed in seminar fashion, with an open discussion format that emphasizes thoughtful consideration of various and opposing points of view.

Course Objectives

In taking this course, students will have opportunities to

- i. acquire historical and philosophical understandings of major American traditions of ecological thought;
- ii. practice thinking critically about ecological issues in American contexts through classroom discussion and essay assignments; and
- iii. develop the ability to organize and moderate their own philosophical discussions.

Assessment

Reading Questions/Comments (20%): Before each class period, please add at least one thoughtful question/comment about each of the day's readings to the course Google doc. Submitted questions and comments will guide our group discussions. You get two points for an excellent submission, one point for a reasonably good submission, and zero points for no submission or for a submission that evinces little effort or relevance. Your ten highest-scoring submissions will count towards your overall grade.

For/Against Essays (10% Each): Over the course of the semester, you will be expected to write four 1,000-word essays in a "For/Against" style. Each essay prompt will ask you to choose one item from a particular selection of readings, identify one of the author's main lines of argument, agree or disagree with the author's conclusion (or else explain why you cannot do so), and defend your choice. You will have opportunities to rewrite your essays if you so desire. Due Dates: 1/31, 2/28, 3/28, 4/30

Examined Life Immersion Project (25%): Towards the end of the semester, you will be expected to form groups of three or four so as to design an immersion project for the class. These projects should incorporate readings, discussion, and some sort of hands-on element that exemplifies ecological thinking in practice (in an American context). Half of the assignment grade will apply to selection and discussion of relevant readings. The other half will apply to the immersion project proper.

Effective Facilitation (15%): Your performance as a GGL Sustained Dialogue Leader will factor into your overall grade for the course. You will be expected to make regular progress reports during class meetings. Additionally, you will be expected to submit lesson plans (along with your Sustained Dialogue partner) each week. Some facilitation training will take place before and during the semester.

Letter Grades Key

93+ = A
90 - 92 = A-
87 - 89 = B+
83 - 86 = B
80 - 82 = B-
77 - 79 = C+
73 - 76 = C
70 - 72 = C-
60 - 69 = D
59- = F

Textbook

American Earth: Environmental Writing Since Thoreau

Ed. Bill McKibben

Foreword by Al Gore

Published by the Library of America:

<https://loa.org/books/283-american-earth-environmental-writing-since-thoreau>

Supplementary readings will be supplied.

Reading Schedule

1/15 – Introduction

- No Readings

1/17 – Thoreau

- Selections from *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*
- Supplement: Selections from Phil Cafaro, *Thoreau's Living Ethics: Walden and the Pursuit of Virtue*

1/22 – Austin

- “The Scavengers”
- Supplement: Lisa Gerber, “Standing Humbly Before Nature”

1/24 – Burroughs

- “The Art of Seeing Things”
- Supplement: Lori Gruen, “Attending to Nature: Empathetic Engagement with the More Than Human World”

1/29 – Porter

- “The Last Passenger Pigeon”
- Supplement: Holmes Rolston, III, “Duties to Endangered Species”

1/31 – Leopold

- Selections from *A Sand County Almanac*
- Supplement: Bill Shaw, “A Virtue Ethics Approach to Aldo Leopold’s Land Ethic”

2/5 – Nearing & Nearing

- Selections from *Living the Good Life*
- Supplement: Gambrel & Cafaro, “The Virtue of Simplicity”

2/7 – Jacobs

- Selections from *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*
- Supplement: Roger Scruton, Selections from *How to Think Seriously About the Planet: The Case for an Environmental Conservatism*

2/12 – Carson

- Selections from *Silent Spring*
- Supplement: Ashlee Cunsolo Willox, “Climate Change As the Work of Mourning”

2/14 – Zahniser

- Selections from The Wilderness Act of 1964
- Supplement: Phil Cafaro, “For a Grounded Conception of Wilderness and More Wilderness on the Ground”

2/19 – Boulding

- Selections from *The Economics of the Coming Spaceship Earth*
- Supplement: Donald G. Richards, “Eudaimonia, Economics, and the Environment: What Do the Hellenistic Thinkers Have to Teach Economists About ‘The Good Life’?”

2/21 – White, Jr.

- “On the Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis”
- Supplement: Paul Kingsnorth, “Confessions of a Recovering Environmentalist”

2/26 – Abbey

- “Polemic: Industrial Tourism and the National Parks”
- Supplement: Amy Irvine, Selections from *Desert Cabal*

2/28 – Hardin

- Selections from “The Tragedy of the Commons”
- Supplement: Stephen Gardiner, “The Real Tragedy of the Commons”

3/5 – McPhee

- Selections from *Encounters with the Archdruid*
- Supplement: Dale Jamieson, Selections from *Reason in a Dark Time*

3/7 – Berry

- “The Making of a Marginal Farm”
- Supplement: Robert L. Thayer, Jr., Selections from *LifePlace: Bioregional Thought and Practice*

3/19 – Intensive Dialogue Workshop

- No Readings

3/21 – Dillard

- “Fecundity”
- Supplement: Wendell Berry, “It All Turns on Affection”

3/26 – Momaday

- “A First American Views His Land”
- Supplement: Whyte, “Our Ancestors’ Dystopia Now: Indigenous Conservation and the Anthropocene”

3/28 – Silko

- Selections from *Ceremony*
- Supplement: Whyte & Cuomo, “Ethics of Caring in Environmental Ethics: Indigenous and Feminist Philosophies”

4/2 – Jackson

- “Outside the Solar Village: One Utopian Farm”
- Supplement: Wendell Berry, “Conservation and Local Economy”

4/4 – McKibben

- Selections from *The End of Nature*
- Supplement: Byron Williston, “Climate Change and Radical Hope”

4/9 – Williams

- Selections from *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place*
- Supplement: Kirkpatrick Sale, Selections from *Dwellers in the Land: The Bioregional Vision*

4/11 – Meloy

- “The Flora and Fauna of Las Vegas”
- Supplement: Mike Branch, Selections

4/16 – Hogan

- “Dwellings”
- Supplement: Aristotelis Santas, “Aristotelian Ethics and Biophilia”

4/18 – Kingsolver

- “Knowing Our Place”
- Supplement: Jason Kawall, “The Epistemic Demands of Environmental Virtue”

4/23 – Solnit

- “The Thoreau Problem”
- Supplement: Toby Svoboda, “Environmental Philosophy As a Way of Life”

4/25 – Immersion Project Presentations

- No Readings

4/30 – Immersion Projects Presentations

- No Readings

Boilerplate