

WESTERN UNIVERSITY
DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY
Undergraduate Course Outline 2018-19

Philosophy 2356G: Philosophy and Climate Change

Winter Term

Class Times: T 10:30-11:30, Th 10:30-12:30

Class Location: UCC 58

Instructor: Gillian Barker

Office Hours: WIRB 7058, Times TBA

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Global climate change is one of the most urgent and consequential problems of our time. In some important ways it is a unique problem in human history, while in other ways it echoes earlier challenges that human societies have faced (with more or less success.) This course looks at the problem of climate change from a philosophical perspective, examining the philosophical questions that it raises and exploring the possibility of casting new and useful light on our predicament by making use of philosophical tools and frameworks.

Climate change raises philosophical questions in several different areas. Debates about the evidence for anthropogenic climate change raise questions about **epistemology of science**: about the use of computer models, about knowledge in historical sciences (where controlled experiments are difficult or impossible to carry out), about the value assumptions built into scientific research, and about the role of trust in science. The interactions between different scientific frameworks raise questions about **metaphysics**: about the kinds of objects that we are trying to understand in thinking about climate change. Is the climate system best understood in physical mechanistic terms, for example, or does it involve organic wholes that require a different kind of understanding? How should we conceive the relationship between natural earth systems and human social systems? The choices we face about how to respond to climate change raise profound **ethical questions** about our responsibilities to future people, to nonhuman organisms and ecosystems, and to the biosphere itself. What are our individual responsibilities in the face of what we know about climate change? Under what circumstances would radical geoengineering interventions be ethically justified? How should we respond to the manifest injustices associated with climate change, and to the plight of the rising number of climate refugees? These questions are complicated by the uncertainties we also face: how should we weigh the dangers of extreme climate disruption, for example, when we cannot confidently assess its probability?

This course will explore a wide range of philosophical issues related to climate change, including questions in epistemology, metaphysics, and ethics, and questions that bridge these categories in different ways. We will approach these questions with the aim of deciding for ourselves how to live and make decisions (in our personal lives and in our communities and institutions) in light of the best understanding of climate change available to us.

TEXTS

Readings and other resources will be posted on OWL.

OBJECTIVES

This course has three main aims:

- To acquaint students with the core philosophical discussions related to climate change, including the main questions, positions, and arguments, and how they are related to broader philosophical frameworks.
- To give students training and practice in the use of philosophical methods to tackle “wicked problems”—complex, intractable problems with both moral and practical dimensions—including following, analyzing and evaluating logically complex arguments, contributing to fruitful exploratory discussions and debates with their peers employing the concepts of epistemology, metaphysics, and ethics, and constructing clear and cogent arguments in philosophical terms that are well-informed by empirical science.
- To provide students with the opportunities and models that they need to begin to do some substantial philosophical exploration of issues surrounding climate change themselves—to make sense of the relationships between philosophy and climate science, to identify and weigh philosophical problems in our understanding of climate change and our possible responses to it, and to formulate substantial claims in this area and defend them both orally and in writing.

REQUIREMENTS

The class format will consist of lecture and discussion. Discussion will be an important element of the course, so it is important that you stay on top of the reading and do some thinking about it before class. Course requirements include active participation, several short informal writing exercises, one short (6 page) paper, a longer (10 page) final paper, and a short-essay final exam. They are weighted as follows:

Participation.....	10%
Informal Writing.....	15%
Short Paper.....	20%
Exam.....	25%
Final Paper.....	30%

AUDIT

Students wishing to audit the course should consult with the instructor prior to or during the first week of classes.

DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY POLICIES

The **Department of Philosophy Policies** which govern the conduct, standards, and expectations for student participation in Philosophy courses is available in the Undergraduate section of the Department of Philosophy website at <http://uwo.ca/philosophy/undergraduate/policies.html>.

It is your responsibility to understand the policies set out by the Senate and the Department of Philosophy, and thus ignorance of these policies cannot be used as grounds of appeal.

ACCOMMODATION

Students seeking academic accommodation on medical grounds for any missed tests, exams, participation components and/or assignments worth 10% or more of their final grade must apply to the Academic Counselling office of their home Faculty and provide documentation. Academic accommodation cannot be granted by the instructor or department. Documentation shall be submitted, as soon as possible, to the Office of the Dean of the student's Faculty of registration, together with a request for relief specifying the nature of the accommodation being requested. The UWO Policy on Accommodation for Medical Illness and further information regarding this policy can be found at

http://uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/accommodation_medical.pdf.

ACADEMIC OFFENCES

Scholastic offences are taken seriously and students are directed to read the appropriate policy, specifically, the definition of what constitutes a Scholastic Offence, at

http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/scholastic_discipline_undergrad.pdf

PLAGIARISM CHECKING

All required papers may be subject to submission for textual similarity review to the commercial plagiarism detection software under license to the University for the detection of plagiarism. All papers submitted for such checking will be included as source documents in the reference database for the purpose of detecting plagiarism of papers subsequently submitted to the system. Use of the service is subject to the licensing agreement, currently between The University of Western Ontario and Turnitin.com <http://www.turnitin.com>.

SUPPORT SERVICES

Registrarial Services <http://www.registrar.uwo.ca>

Student Support Services <https://student.uwo.ca/psp/heprdweb/?cmd=login>

Services provided by the USC <http://westernusc.ca/services/>

Student Development Centre <http://www.sdc.uwo.ca/>

Students who are in emotional/mental distress should refer to Mental Health@Western <http://www.uwo.ca/uwocom/mentalhealth/> for a complete list of options about how to obtain help. Immediate help in the event of a crisis can be had by phoning 519.661.3030 (during class hours) or 519.433.2023 after class hours and on weekends.