

# Ethics and the Environment

PHIL 268-CN  
Northwestern University  
Evanston Campus  
Thursday Evenings from 6:15 pm – 9:15 pm  
Fall 2009

John Laing *Instructor*  
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Office Hours 1:00 – 3:00 Tuesdays  
1:00 – 6:00 Thursdays

## Course Description:

“Ethics and the Environment” offers an animated and analytical examination of a range of issues relating to humanity’s relationship to the environment. We will explore such questions as:

- What is our responsibility to nature?
- Is biological diversity a value, in and of itself?
- What are our obligations to future generations, when it comes to the environment?
- What is the moral status of animals?
- Are there different obligations for individuals, corporations or nations regarding the environment?
- What are some of the leading public policy options for addressing problems of “green house gas emissions” (e.g. “cap and trade” vs. a “carbon tax”)?
- What is the proper perspective from which to evaluate such public policy options?
- What does “sustainability” mean?
- What are the connections between sustainability, justice, and the distribution of environmental goods?
- Would pending climate change of a potentially catastrophic nature create special moral obligations for each of us?

## Objectives:

Students will:

- Gain a deeper understanding of some of the most interesting and important environmental issues of our day
- Learn how to view those issues from an ethical perspective, grounded in an introduction to leading ethical theories
- Become better informed citizens and leaders

## **Additional Benefits:**

Students will also:

- Learn to make more polished, analytical and persuasive presentations
- Deepen their ability to listen respectfully, rationally, and critically to the (sometimes opposing) points of view of others
- Develop the capacity to assess public policy debates in a more informed and reasoned fashion
- Sharpen their ability to make reasoned, analytical arguments in written form

## **Readings and Assignments**

Readings will be selections from *Environmental Ethics: Readings in Theory and Application* ed. Louis P. Pojman and Paul Pojman (5<sup>th</sup> Edition), ISBN-13: 978-0-495-09503-3 and ISBN-10: 0-495-09503-6. Additional assignments from other sources will be posted on Blackboard. Thomas Friedman's book, "*Hot, Flat and Crowded*" is highly recommended reading (though not required.)

## **Teaching method**

Lectures, student presentations and discussion (both in person and on-line).

**Grading:** On the first day of class, I will explain in detail my approach to grading the different elements of this course. I will distribute rubrics summarizing my approach as well. I will post those rubrics on Blackboard.

## **Course elements and relative importance**

Oral team presentation on a topic of the student's choosing (25%), contribution to discussion (25%) final exam essay (25%) and a 10 to 15-page term paper (25%).

## **Presentations**

On the first day of class, we will develop together a schedule for student presentations during the remainder of the term. I will explain what I expect regarding student presentations. This explanation will include a list of possible topics from which students may choose. I will try to make presentation assignments in a way that respects individual student preferences as much as possible.

## **Attendance and Late Assignments**

There will be no unexcused absences from this class. (This means there will be no absences without an explanation submitted to me and approved in advance.) Any more than one absence for any reason will lower your final evaluation one full letter grade. Missing assignments cannot be made up.

### ***Students with Disabilities***

In compliance with Northwestern University policy and equal access laws, I am available to discuss appropriate academic accommodations that you may require as a student with a disability. Requests for academic accommodations need to be made during the first week of the quarter, except for unusual circumstances, so arrangements can be made. Students are encouraged to register with Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD) for disability verification and for determination of reasonable academic accommodations. For more information, visit: <http://www.northwestern.edu/disability/>

### ***Academic Integrity at Northwestern***

Students are expected to comply with University regulations regarding academic integrity. If you are in doubt about what constitutes academic dishonesty, speak with me before the assignment is due or examine the University web site. Academic dishonesty includes, but is not limited to, cheating on an exam (e.g., copying others' answers, providing information to others, using a crib sheet) or plagiarism of a paper (e.g., taking material from readings without citation, copying another student's paper). Failure to maintain academic integrity on an assignment will result in a loss of credit for that assignment -- at a minimum. Other penalties may also apply. For more information, visit: [http://www.scs.northwestern.edu/student/issues/academic\\_integrity.cfm](http://www.scs.northwestern.edu/student/issues/academic_integrity.cfm)

### ***Discrimination and Sexual Harassment***

Northwestern University's Policy on Discrimination and Harassment and Sexual Harassment Policy apply to all members of the University community, including students, staff, and faculty. Any student, staff, or faculty member who believes that he or she has been discriminated against or harassed on the basis of his or her race, color, religion, national origin, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, parental status, marital status, age, disability, citizenship, or veteran status should contact the Office of Equal Employment Opportunity, Affirmative Action, and Disability Services at (847) 491-7458 or the Sexual Harassment Prevention Office at (847) 491-3745. Additional information about the University's discrimination and harassment policies, including the campus resources available to assist individuals with discrimination or harassment concerns, is available online at: [www.northwestern.edu/sexual-harassment](http://www.northwestern.edu/sexual-harassment) and [www.northwestern.edu/hr/eo](http://www.northwestern.edu/hr/eo).

## About the Instructor

John Laing has had careers both as a university faculty member with a special interest in ethics and as a public affairs counselor with a special interest in environmental issues.

John served as Chicago head of Burson-Marsteller's Worldwide Environmental Practice Group for several years. In that capacity he acted as consultant to such leading international firms as Procter & Gamble, Kraft General Foods and S.C. Johnson Wax. On behalf of his clients, he has:

- written a textbook as part of an award-winning middle-school curriculum in environmental studies
- guided and publicized a groundbreaking series of research on American attitudes and behaviors regarding the environment (the Roper Environmental Research)
- acted as a liaison to the President's Council on Environmental Quality (*PCEQ* 1991-1993)

John has helped manage relationships between several international corporations and such environmental groups as the World Wildlife Fund, the Environmental Defense Fund, and the National Resources Defense Counsel. He received a special commendation from the World Wildlife Fund for philanthropic advisory activities.

John has worked on environmental issues in Chicago, Washington D.C., Toronto, Brussels and Stockholm. He has worked with journalists, scholars, regulators, legislators, business executives, and environmentalists.

John has taught in philosophy departments at the University of Illinois at Chicago and at Illinois State University, in addition to Northwestern University. He is an enthusiastic outdoorsman, an avid skier and a lifelong sailor.