

# **SUNY ESF Environmental Ethics**

## **EST 296: Introduction to Land Use Ethics**

Alejandro Marx, Instructor: *AMarx@schools.nyc.gov*

*Office Hours:* 6<sup>th</sup> (12:40-1:25 PM) or 7<sup>th</sup> period (1:30-2:15 PM) in our classroom (2082B); other times by mutual arrangement (e-mail Mr. Marx to request an appointment if needed).

*“The hand seeks tools to cut the wood, to till the soil, and harness the power of the water. Then the hand seeks other hands to help; thus the dream becomes not one man’s dream alone, but a community dream. Not my world alone, but your world and my world.”*

-- Langston Hughes, from *Freedom’s Plow*

### **Course Description**

This course, for advanced high-school seniors, will explore the way long-standing norms of justice and fairness, both Western and non-Western, have been employed in contemporary situations to reinforce, modify, challenge and evaluate ideas related to ethical right-doing, especially in relation to the environment. The scope of our discussions will include a careful review of several key approaches to environmental ethics. We’ll consider the evolution, implications and limitations of each perspective.

We’ll also examine the nature of various environmental, political and practical problems through the lens of these different theories of right-doing, and the tensions or disagreements that exist between these differing ethical methods.

Throughout the term, we’ll pay particular attention to how issues of environmental ethics are played out in the context of land use decisions and the shaping of actual communities. We’ll look at how the philosophical ideas that we’ve begun to study, underlie and inform how contemporary ethical principles function. Students will be introduced to this in a twofold way as the instructor 1) begins each unit with guided readings and discussions about the philosophical history of ethics broadly, value theory, morality and individual and community responsibility as it is written into each method, 2) connects this historical overview to contemporary issues being debated in environmental ethics, and then 3) relates these debates to New York City’s own environmental challenges and controversies.

### **Why the Two Course Names?**

This course is being offered by H.S.E.S. in conjunction with the State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry (SUNY ESF). Professors from the College are overseeing the content and rigor of the class to ensure that it is consistent with the kind of work that is done in their philosophy courses and workshops.

Because of this partnership with SUNY ESF, you will be eligible to take this course for college credit if you choose to do so. This will require you to register as a student with the College, and to agree to be responsible for the course fees that they require of all students.

(A generous amount of financial aid is available to those who qualify.) All this will be explained in more detail in a separate document, but the price structure is as follows:

Students not eligible for school lunch:	\$200 for the course
Students eligible for school lunch: (you must have documentation on file)	\$75 for the course

Should you choose to enroll as a SUNY ESF student, you will be given a college grade at the end of the semester (ranging from A+ to F) in addition to your numerical high school grade. This grade will be posted on an official transcript from SUNY ESF that certifies your participation in this college-level course. Be advised that your college grade may be lower than the equivalent high school number grade you received, since you are being held to a higher standard as a college student.

### **Course Structure**

An introductory exploration, lasting around two weeks, will investigate the following questions:

- Why should we choose to act ethically? (with reference to the Ring of Gyges and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*)
- What are the differences between intrinsic and extrinsic motivations for ethical behavior, and for valuing natural beings and landscapes?
- How can these reasons contribute to an answer of why we should act ethically from an ecological perspective?
- What are the differences between – and potential problems with – intrinsic and instrumental accounts of value?
- What different land uses are worthy of preservation for intrinsic and/or instrumental reasons – or neither?

The course will be cover up to six main units corresponding to six different ways of defining what is “right” or “good”:

- **Communitarian Ethics**
- **Theories of Social Justice & Fairness**
- **Utilitarian/Consequentialist Ethics**
- **Rights Ethics & Deontology**
- **Virtue Ethics**
- **Ethics of Care**

A final unit will put these theories into practice by making a presentation to younger students about climate change, and engaging in an in-class debate about a contemporary issue in environmental ethics.

Each of the six main units will be further divided into three categories: **THEN**, **NOW** and **HERE**, which will examine the theory's origins in past traditions of thought, then apply it to issues happening in present or contemporary discourse, and finally connect it to practical decision-making at the level of city or neighborhood life. The units will last approximately 3 weeks each.

The central questions for each category will be:

- THEN:** How have thinkers of the past established influential definitions of ethical conduct that have carried down to today?
- NOW:** What does it mean to be a good global citizen in today's age? What are the changes we should make in order to create a more ethical and just world?
- HERE:** What does it mean to be an ethical resident of NYC? What are the changes we should make in order to create a more equitable and compassionate city?

At the end of each unit, there will be a Critical Reading Response (CRR) short paper due, whose purpose is to synthesize the ideas from that unit into a coherent set of conclusions or principles, and defend them with arguments from the readings. A possible question or topic for each CRR appears below in each unit:

**1. Communitarian Ethics:** The right is what creates the best overall society or community

**CRR Question:** How should we weigh the needs and interests of communities (including ecosystems and future generations collectively) against the rights and freedoms of people in the present? Which should get priority, under what circumstances, and why?

**2. Theories of Social Justice & Fairness:** The right is what makes a society equitable for all

**CRR Question:** What would a truly just and equitable society be like from the perspective of both human and environmental health? What steps could/should be taken to enable such a society to become a reality?

**3. Utilitarian/Consequentialist Ethics:** The right is what maximizes happiness or minimizes suffering for all beings that are capable of experiencing those emotions

**CRR Question:** How do we find the proper ethical balance between taking animal suffering seriously while also considering human suffering in our decision-making?

**4. Rights Ethics & Deontology:** The right is whatever doesn't violate one's moral obligations to oneself or others

**CRR Question:** In light of the different perspectives we explored, is gentrification an ethically acceptable form of urban change, or a morally impermissible form of displacement of already marginalized and disenfranchised communities?

**5. Virtue Ethics:** The right is what a good person would do, or what makes one a good person

**CRR Question:** How can the differing conceptions of what defines a good or virtuous person in relation to the environment enable us to clarify our own ideas about this question in a 21<sup>st</sup>-century Western society facing a global ecological crisis?

**6. Ethics of Care:** The right is what a caring person would do, or what maintains networks of caring relationships among all the beings in one's universe of obligation

**CRR Question:** How can a consideration of all potential stakeholders using an Ethics of Care lens ensure that concern for the well-being of our planet and also for the economic well-being of the present generations of people can be complementary, and not mutually exclusive, objectives?

### **Final Projects**

A final unit and capstone project will put these theories into practice through active participation in reaching out to others. There are two main options for this, although alternative proposals from the students will be considered as well:

**Part 1:** The environmental/climate education residency

- **Guiding texts:** *Teaching Climate Change to Adolescents* by Richard Beach, Jeff Share and Allen Webb  
Baba Dioum's quotation: "In the end, we will keep only what we love; we will love only what we understand; we will understand only what we are taught."
- **Assignment description:** Students work in teams to develop a method for teaching younger students about climate change or environmental stewardship. It can be in the form of a set of lessons, a dramatic performance or skit, a song or animated film, or even an interactive webpage or video game.
- **Implementation:** In collaboration with the course instructor and/or other teachers from the students' present and past studies, the method's creators schedule a time to present or premiere their method to a room of younger students of the selected target age. The audience provides feedback which then turns into improvements on the method for any future presentations of it.

**Part 2:** The environmental ethics debate

- **Guiding texts:** The National High School Ethics Bowl case sets and debate format

- **Assignment description:** Students work in teams to prepare a respectful debate about a contemporary environmental ethics issue from the Ethics Bowl case sets of prior years.
- **Implementation:** Students debate the topic in class, with guest judges in attendance to offer commentary and questions on each side's presentation.

### **Expectations**

Since this is essentially a college class being conducted in a high school setting, you will be expected to adhere to the kinds of guidelines that a college course expects of its students with regard to academic responsibility, attendance, punctuality, maturity and independence. This especially includes following the college's academic honesty standards regarding copied or plagiarized work, which can be found on pages 6-7 of this document:

<https://www.esf.edu/provost/documents/AcademicIntegrity.pdf>

Also, since this is a discussion-based class, you are expected to make meaningful contributions to the class conversations on a regular basis. This should be done at least once a week by every student. Also, distractions and audio devices that prevent full participation in verbal discussions (e.g. earphones) are not permitted to be used in class.

**One further expectation, which applies to ESF classes at HSES: You must pass EACH marking period of an ESF-partnered course at our school in order to receive a passing final grade in this course.**

### **Grades**

Your grade in the course will be based on the following elements, weighed in the manner shown below:

- 30% Studentship, including daily classwork, attendance, punctuality, and participation
- 10% Homework assignments (about 2 per week)
- 60% The Critical Reading Response papers (CRRs) and other major projects or assessments

All grades will be entered in the school's electronic grading system, known as Jupiter Grades. You are therefore responsible for keeping track of your own progress in the course.