



CONTEMPORARY ETHICS

PHI 4360 - FALL 2026
TR 9:30-10:45 AM
MH 205

DR. ANNE JEFFREY

WELCOME TO CONTEMPORARY ETHICS!

professor: Dr. Anne Jeffrey

office hours: World Hunger Relief Farm on Mondays 9-10 am or on campus by appointment. Please use the booking tool in outlook through anne_jeffrey@baylor.edu

I'm looking forward to learning from you, your community, and authors as well as sharing my knowledge with you. In this class, you can expect to learn from each other just as much as from me as an instructor and the philosophers we will read.

Shoot me an email with a fun fact about yourself anytime in the semester and I'll return the favor!



PHI 4360

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WHAT IS THIS COURSE ABOUT?

The central question of ethics is *how are we to live?* Answering this question is not optional. Every person has a life to live, and must figure out a good way to live it.

Constructing theories that help us answer this question in the contexts in which we find ourselves is a central task of *philosophical ethics*. What do we owe other people in our communities? What sorts of things in the world are valuable, worth caring about?

If something or someone is valuable, how should we respond to it? If someone or something has a moral right, is that because they have a special kind of value? And how should we treat (or not treat) the rights-bearer?

In this class we waded into these deep waters by examining the philosophies behind *rights of nature* debates. These are debates happening all around the world at present concerning whether entities in nature, even ecosystems and species, have value and have the sort of value that gives those things rights. These debates also raise questions about what to do when different people groups disagree about what has value and is a rights-bearer, and how we should live together in the context of such conflicts.

Understanding the philosophies behind different perspectives in the rights of nature movements and resistance to them can help us better appreciate what the disagreement is really about, and perhaps allow us to envision a way forward.



TAKING PHILOSOPHY OUTSIDE

There is a kind of philosophical ethics done from the classroom (or, historically, the “armchair”). It deals in logic puzzles and mental math about things like values and rights. It is an important tool in our toolkit.

But when it comes to figuring out how to live in the context in which we find ourselves, it is limited—because it tells us nothing whatsoever about that context.

To deepen our ethical understanding, we need to go outside. That is, we need to move from the classroom (or armchair) to the sites of ethical complexity.

Each week we will have an encounter with the very people, plants, animals, land, or water whose status as valuable or rights-bearers is up for debate. We will ask, *What has value here? Why? Do we have a duty to protect, preserve, admire, appreciate? If so, to whom (or what) do we owe it?*

We will broaden the possibility for these encounters by reading a book, Robert MacFarlane’s *Is a River Alive?*, that chronicles the global travels of one curious philosopher who wanted to visit the people and places that generated the rights of nature movements.

At the end of this course you will better positioned to answer the question of how you are to live in your context today.



COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Community-based learning and research, a rapidly growing approach, requires some learning to take place outside the bounds of the classroom. We will use this approach to understand ethical theories as they relate to problems facing our communities right now concerning human ecology. This allows us to get purchase on ethical theories and philosophical dialectics whose nature and significance can be difficult to grasp in the abstract.

Part of our class time will take place at physical sites where ethical questions come alive. We will devote time to being present, listening, and attending to community members and creation as we consider what has value, rights, and what our own obligations to ourselves and other creatures might be. You will be invited to participate in new practices such as planting a fruit tree, composting, or assisting with a river clean-up, and then to reflect on our fundamental questions of ethics in light of these experiences.



This may stretch you. It might cause you to question an ethical claim of which you were confident. It might make you socially or physically uncomfortable. In these moments, perhaps remember how Plato depicts the activity of philosophy: Socrates as the torpedo fish shocks us into perplexity, preparing the way for us to appreciate the real and the good.

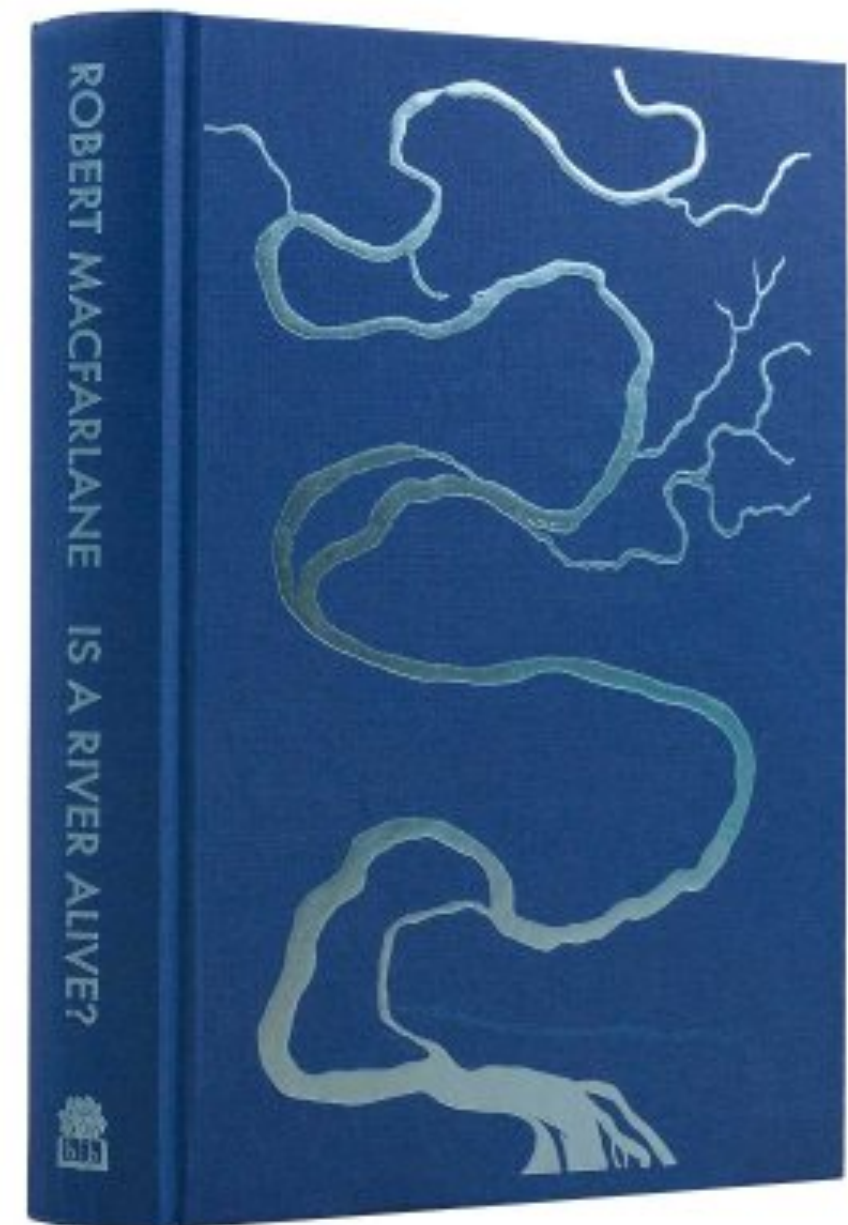
WHAT WILL WE READ?

As this is the highest level ethical theory course offered at the university, expect to do a significant amount of close reading of difficult texts. We'll work our way through chapters of books and articles written recently in ethics (roughly 2 per week, slightly less than a graduate seminar). You are responsible for printing the readings and bringing the printed copy to class, as there are no electronics used in the seminar.

Days when we will learn by attending and listening to the community and world around us are listed on the course schedule as "**Grounded Learning**" times. The location will be announced through Canvas. There is never reading assigned for these days, though we may discuss past readings as we sit or walk or work.

You will also be invited to participate in **Novel Nights** where people in the Baylor community gather to read portions of *Is a River Alive?* aloud together.

Learn more about [novel nights](#) and how they are proving that our generations still have the attention span, appetite, and aptitude for reading!



WHAT WILL WE LEARN?

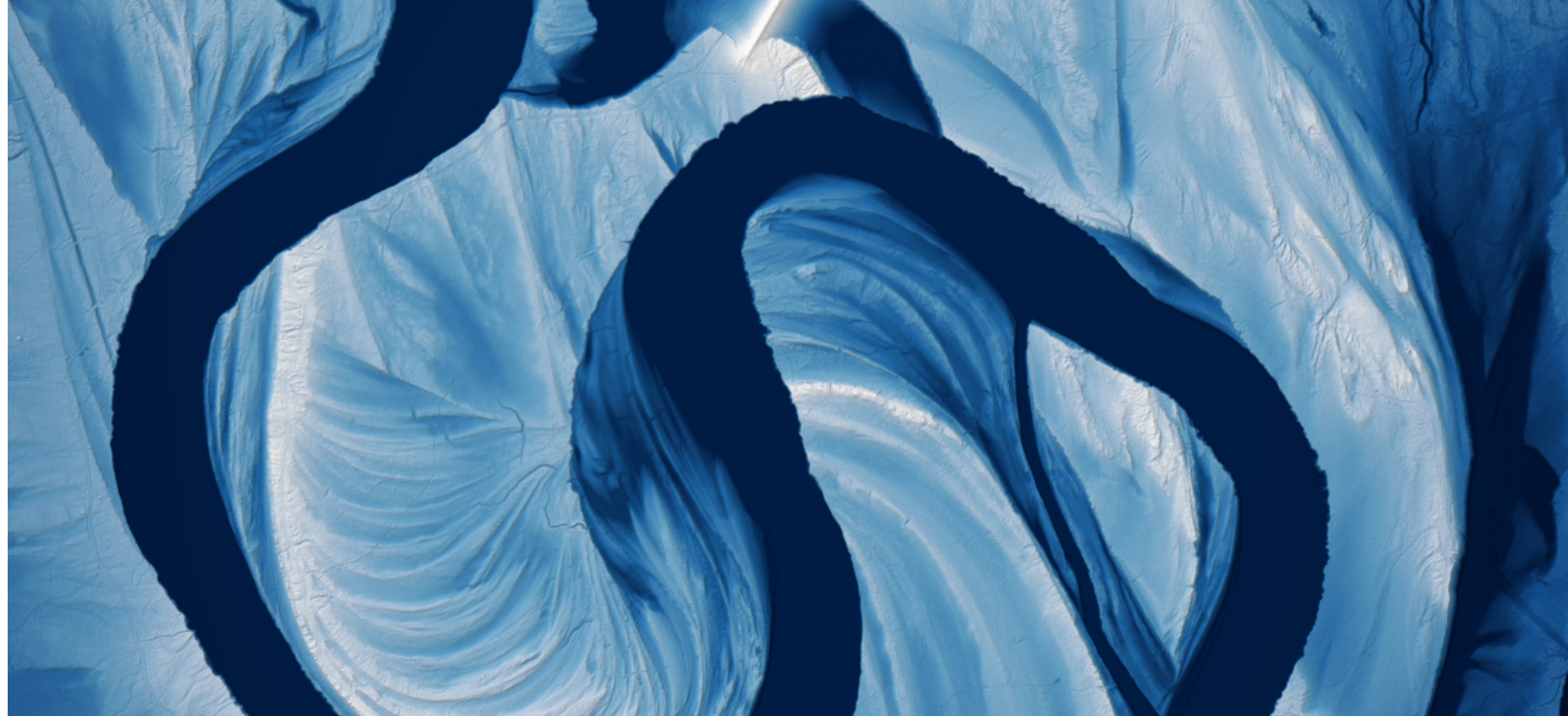
Learning goals are big-picture and intangible.

You can make measurable progress towards the goals by achieving *course objectives*.

Course objectives are tangible and specific ways of meeting these learning goals.

UNDERSTAND THEORIES

You'll learn to differentiate, and identify the motivations for different views, and understand practical implications of them.



SPEAK & WRITE PHILOSOPHICALLY

You'll practice communicating with others as philosophical ethicists do: in a careful, charitable, patient, and principled way. This includes professional written communication and in person discussion.

APPLY THEORY

You'll practice ethical analysis, argument, and practical application of theory in our experiential learning activities and in articulating how different philosophical views underpin the practices of ordinary people in their contexts.

ENGAGE COMMUNITY

Philosophy is done in community. You'll gain relationships characterized by mutual encouragement, honesty, respect, and esteem for each other as offering perspectives and gifts that will help us figure out how to live well.

You'll also build relationships with people outside our classroom who are here to deepen our understanding of how our ethical theories matter in diagnosing and addressing obstacles to thriving in our local community. trustworthiness, and reciprocity.

HOW WILL WE TRACK OUR PROGRESS?



There are 9 **course objectives**: tangible ways you're progressing towards the learning goals.

The assignments assess one or more of these objectives. Your course grade is based on points you accumulate by achieving these objectives.

> UNDERSTAND THEORIES

1. Identify main claims that differentiate theoretical approaches to ethics accurately
2. Read texts about theories closely and charitably
3. Reconstruct arguments from course texts correctly

> SPEAK & WRITE PHILOSOPHICALLY

4. Analyze or diagnose an underlying philosophical view germane to rights of nature debates
5. Present a compelling philosophical argument to address a question or illuminate an issue at play in rights of nature debates
6. Communicate clearly your ideas through academic philosophical writing (conforming to grammatical, organizational, and style standards)

> APPLY THEORY

7. Articulate plausible connection between an experience of your own or shared by a community partner and one of the philosophical theories we studied
8. Integrate experiences, practices, or what you learn from community members' experiences into your consideration of ethical questions

> ENGAGE COMMUNITY

9. Contribute to the flourishing of our local community in the way you engage our conversations in class and participating in creation care practices in the community

WHAT WILL WE DO?

READING RESPONSES

Some days, at the beginning of class, I will invite you to write a brief reflection on a specific question raised by the texts we read for that day. You may be asked to share your response aloud to help move forward discussion. You can earn up to 10 points over the semester for these responses based on how well the writing conforms to professional academic standards (objective 6), accuracy in identifying the main claims differentiating the view (objective 1), evidence of close and charitable reading (objective 2), and correctness of the reconstruction of arguments (objective 3).

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

We have eleven planned [Grounded Learning](#) days. Grounded Learning provides an opportunity for us to get outside and listening to those with rich experience of the very entities and landscapes about which ethicists are debating (plants, animals, rivers, and people). Another way you will learn on these days is by experimenting yourself with practices of creation care that our neighbors see as critical to living a good human life (objective 9). You will keep reflection notes in a journal, which I collect at the end of class time on Grounded Learning days. I will also provide regular feedback on these aspects of your in-class participation at the end of each unit and at the end of the mini conference. Altogether you have seventeen opportunities to meet objective 9 for up to 15 points.

MIDTERM ESSAY

The midterm essay is an in-class, handwritten essay in which you respond to your choice of one of three questions. This will require that you be ready to compare multiple theories we have considered and exhibit close and charitable readings of multiple texts and the ability to recount key arguments from multiple theories. You will have the chance to connect these to rights of nature debates (objectives 1, 2, 3, 4, 6). You can earn up to 7 points on this essay.

CAPSTONE PAPER

Throughout the semester you will work incrementally on a paper about one of the ethical theories and an issue of human ecology relevant to the rights of nature debates. You will meet with me by 10/15 to approve the topic and trajectory. You will write an abstract of 500 words and will share your idea with the class for initial feedback on 11/11. You will submit a complete draft by 12/4 and give a 10 minute presentation on the paper at our mini-conference with 5 minutes for written and oral feedback from your peers. You can double up on some of the points from objectives you met in the first draft by submitting a final draft accompanied by a detailed cover letter addressing comments and concerns from your reviewers— (professor and classmates) for a total of 16 points across the different stages.

SUMMARY OF ASSIGNMENTS, DUE DATES, OBJECTIVES

Assignment	Objective(s)	Due	Max Points Possible	% Final Grade
Reading Responses Unannounced, in-class, written reflections and responses to questions about the text	1, 2, 3, 6	Intermittently	10	20%
Community engagement In-class participation (assessed once per unit), feedback on peers' papers in the mini conference, and written reflections on what you learn by listening to community members in outdoor learning opportunities, contributing to community projects in grounded learning time	9	9/3, 9/17, 9/26, 10/1, 10/8, 10/22, 10/24, 10/29, 11/5, 11/12, 12/1	15	32%
Midterm in-class essay Blue book essay on one of three questions, completed during the class time without notes; will ask you to synthesize and compare multiple views we have covered and arguments for them	1, 2, 3, 4, 6	10/13	8	16%
Capstone Paper individual, independent research projects on an ethical theory from the course and an issue relevant to rights of nature debates	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 (x2)	10/24- approval 11/12- outline 11/19- draft, mini conference 12/10- final manuscript and cover letter due	16	32%

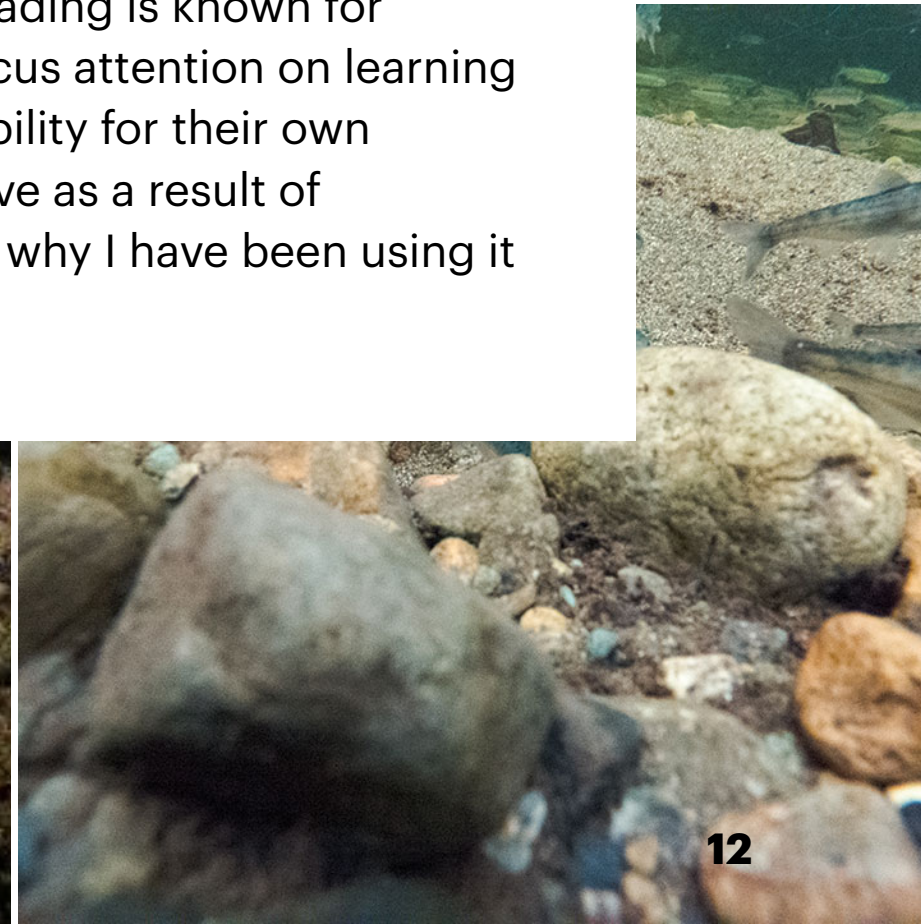
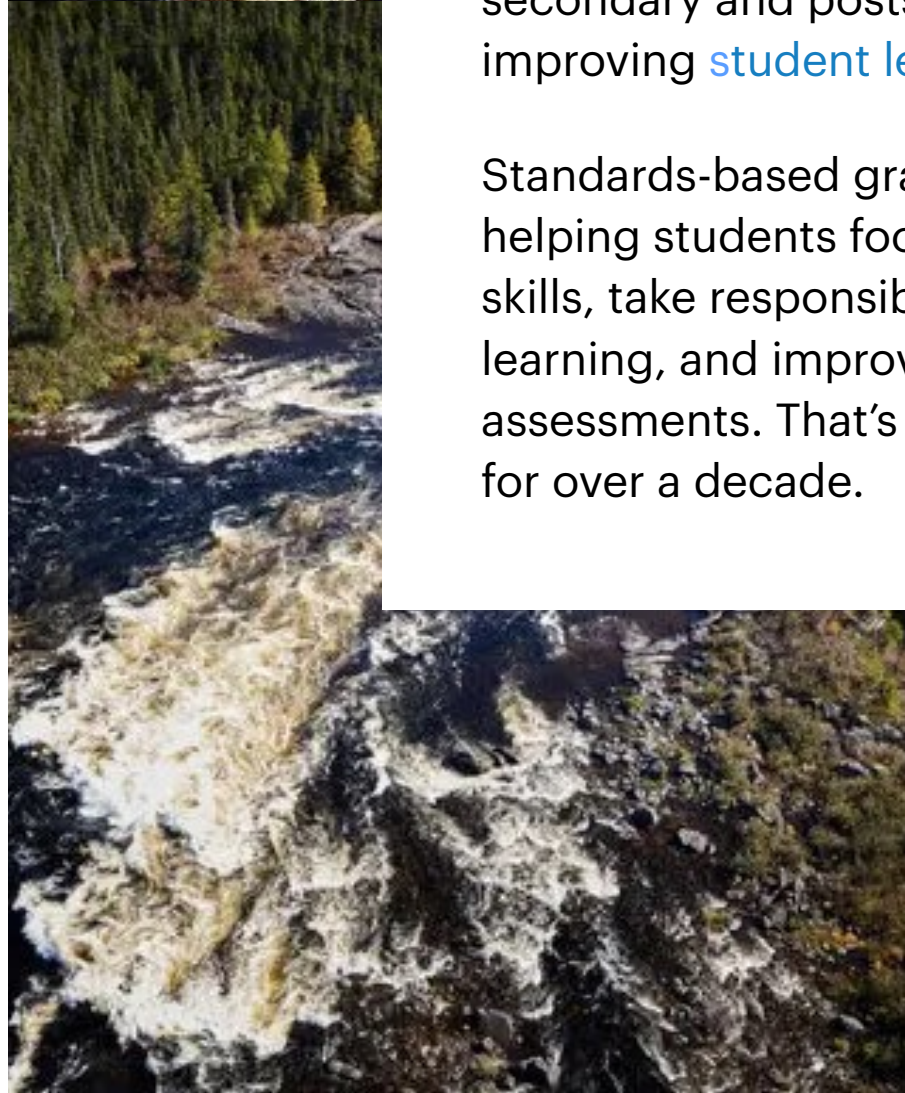
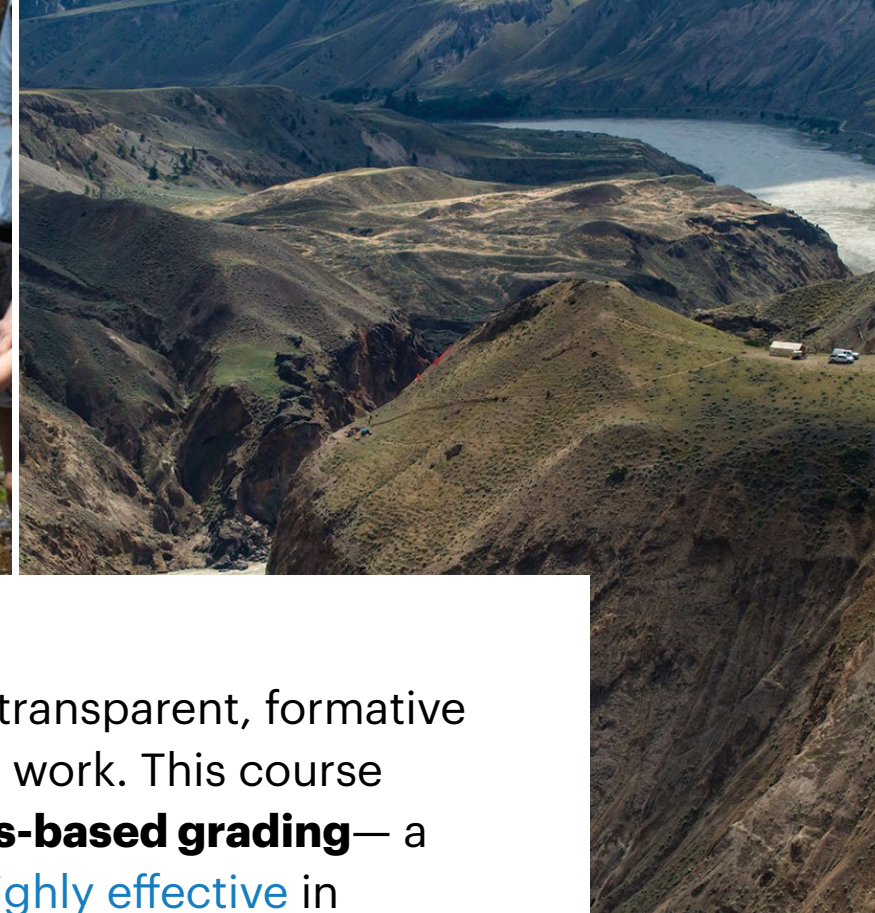
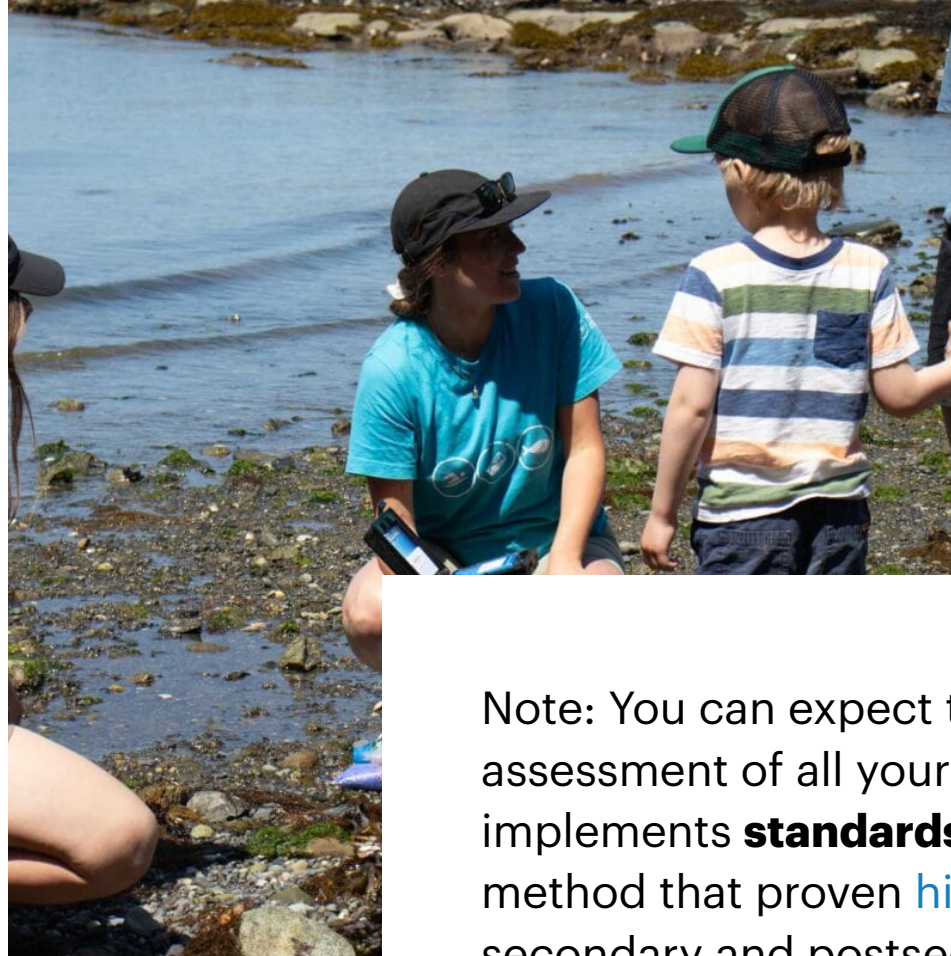
WHAT IS THE GRADING SCALE?

Each grade corresponds to a number of points you've accumulated by meeting course objectives. Thus, the grade earned reflects your progress towards the learning goals measured by objectives.

A	47-50 pts
A-	45-46 pts
B+	43-44 pts
B	41-42 pts
B-	40 pts
C+	38-39 pts
C	36-37 pts
C-	35 pts
D+	33-34 pts
D	31-32 pts

Note: You can expect transparent, formative assessment of all your work. This course implements **standards-based grading**— a method that proven [highly effective](#) in secondary and postsecondary education for improving [student learning outcomes](#).

Standards-based grading is known for helping students focus attention on learning skills, take responsibility for their own learning, and improve as a result of assessments. That's why I have been using it for over a decade.



WHAT'S THE SCHEDULE?

DUE DATE	READINGS AND ASSIGNMENTS
Tuesday 8/25	Introduction to the course— the scope of the moral <u>Te Urewera Act of 2014</u> & Leopold Aldo, “The Land Ethic” excerpts (read aloud in class) Submit availability and accessibility info for grounded learning by midnight
RIGHTS AND INTEREST THEORIES	
Thursday 8/27	Christine Korsgaard, <i>Fellow Creatures</i> , ch. 1 Joel Feinberg, “The Rights of Animals and Unborn Generations”
Tuesday 9/1	Online Meeting Christine Korsgaard, <i>Fellow Creatures</i> , ch. 8, 11.1-11.5
Thursday 9/3	Grounded Learning, World Hunger Relief Institute
Tuesday 9/8	Stephen Darwall, “Bipolar Obligations” Neil Williams, “The No Interest Argument and the Rights of Nature” Is A River Alive? Novel Night part I 6-8 pm
Thursday 9/10	NO CLASS- makeup Grounded Learning on 9/26 or 10/24
Tuesday 9/15	Daniel Steel et al, “Rights of Nature, Intercultural Respect, and Climate Change” Christopher Stone, “Should Trees Have Standing?”
Thursday 9/17	Grounded Learning

KINDS OF VALUE	
Tuesday 9/22	Jussi Suikkanen, "Buck-Passing Accounts of Value"
Thursday 9/24	Tom Regan, "Does Environmental Ethics Rest on a Mistake?" Katie McShane, "Why Environmental Ethics Shouldn't Give up on Intrinsic Value"
Saturday 9/26	Grounded Learning, River Cleanup with Keep Waco Beautiful (optional)
Tuesday 9/29	T.M. Scanlon, <i>What We Owe to Each Other</i> , excerpts Christine Korsgaard, <i>Fellow Creatures</i> , ch. 2
Thursday 10/1	Grounded Learning
RIGHTS BEARERS AND BEARERS OF VALUE	
Tuesday 10/6	Katie McShane, "The Bearers of Value in Environmental Virtue Ethics" John Nolt and Trevor Hedburg, "Nonanthropocentric Climate Ethics" Is a River Alive? Novel Night part II
Thursday 10/8	Grounded Learning
Tuesday 10/13	Midterm Essay
Thursday 10/15	Katie Morrow, "Towards a Consensus on the Intrinsic Value of Biodiversity" Daniel Steel et al., "Rights of Nature, Intercultural Respect, and Climate Change"
Tuesday 10/20	Jenae Nelson et al., "Minobimaadiziwin and the Pursuit of Harmony" Enrique Salmon, "Kincentric Ecology"
Thursday 10/22	Grounded Learning, World Hunger Relief, Farm Day preparations
Saturday 10/24	Grounded Learning, World Hunger Relief Farm Day (optional) Last day for topic approval for capstone paper
HOW TO RESPOND TO VALUE	
Tuesday 10/27	Jeff Sebo, "The Repugnant Conclusion: Utilitarianism, Insects, Microbes, and AI Systems" Liezl van Zyl, "Wonder and Environmental Virtue"
Thursday 10/29	Grounded Learning
Tuesday 11/3	Dale Jamieson, "Loving Nature" Zhang, "Anthropocentrism and Loving Nature" Is a River Alive? Novel Night part III

Thursday 11/5	Grounded Learning
Tuesday 11/10	Jason Kawall, "Patience and Sustainability" Anne Jeffrey, <i>Being and Becoming Good</i> , excerpts Tyler DesRoches et al., "Ecological Humility and Geoengineering the Earth"
Thursday 11/12	Grounded Learning Outline of capstone paper due
POLICIES AND POLITICS HOSPITABLE TO ETHICAL LIVING	
Tuesday 11/17	Andy Lamey, "The New Omnivorism" Anne Barnhill and Tyler Doggett, "Food ethics: Food production and Food Justice"
Thursday 11/19	Mini conference, capstone paper draft due
Tuesday 11/24-26	THANKSGIVING HOLIDAY
Tuesday 12/1	Sustainability in Global Supply Chains- panel with Dr. Jessica Ford and Dr. Ade Oyedijo Is a River Alive? Novel Night part IV
Thursday 12/3	Kyle Whyte, "Indigenous Environmental Movements and the Function of Governance Institutions" Henry Shue, <i>Climate Justice: Vulnerability and Protection</i> , ch. 8
Tuesday 12/8	Closing conversation and reflection
Thursday 12/10	Final capstone manuscript and cover letter due

WHAT RESOURCES DO WE HAVE?

OFFICE HOURS

Coffee hours are times I've set aside to get to meet one-on-one or in small groups at the World Hunger Relief Institute farm on Mondays. I hope you'll take time to visit with me in the community garden on Wednesdays or by appointment over coffee. We can talk about what brought you to Baylor, your major; what you are thinking about, getting out of class and readings; ideas you have to improve the course, and what's working well for you.

Sometimes college students think "office hours" are only for students struggling or with other issues. I hope to dispel this myth! This is a fun, learning-enhancing opportunity.

FOSTER SUCCESS CENTER

Everyone in our class has the ability to meet the goals and objectives outlined. The Foster Success Center is here for you to help you exercise that ability. Those who use it regularly are among the most successful students at Baylor, so I highly encourage you to let them partner with you in your academic journey.

UNIVERSITY WRITING CENTER & LIBRARIANS

I came to college thinking I was a good writer. In my freshman year I bombed the first essay in a medieval philosophy class and ended up learning that academic philosophy writing standards were different.

Even if we are very good at some kinds of writing, we can all improve. The University Writing Center can help you at any stage from brainstorming to editing. And our librarians can help you learn how to research using methods that will take your writing to the next level.

FIRST IN LINE

My father did not complete a 4-year college degree. I married someone whose father was a college professor. My partner's experience navigating college and grad school was *totally* different from mine. Professors' expectations, how to sign up for the "right" courses, and certain aspects of success in class were unfamiliar and confusing to me.

If your parents did not complete a 4-year college degree, I encourage you to take advantage of the First in Line program! It's here to support you in your college experience so that you have access to that knowledge of what people call "the hidden curriculum" (firstinline@baylor.edu).

OALA

If you need academic accommodations related to having different ability/disability, please let me know as soon as the semester starts and get signed up with the Office of Access and Learning Accommodation. They'll help walk you through documentation and information.

PSYCHOLOGICAL RESOURCES

If you need emotional or psychological support, the Baylor Counseling Center is here for you at 254-710-2467. In crisis or emergency, you can reach out to our wonderful Chaplain at 254-710-3517.

TITLE IX AND EQUITY

Baylor University does not tolerate unlawful harassment or discrimination on the basis of sex, gender, race, color, disability, national origin, ancestry, age over 40, citizenship, genetic information or the refusal to submit to genetic test, past, current, or prospective service in the uniformed services, or any other protected characteristic under federal, Texas, or local law.

If you or someone you know would like help related to an experience involving sexual or gender based harassment, sexual assault, sexual exploitation, stalking, intimate partner violence, or retaliation for reporting one of these types of prohibited conduct, please visit www.baylor.edu/titleix or call 254-710-8454 or email titleIX_Coordinator@baylor.edu.

If you or someone you know would like help related to an experience involving harassment excluding those listed above, or adverse action, based on protected characteristics, please visit www.baylor.edu/equity or call 254-710-7100 or email equity@baylor.edu.

The Office of Equity and Title IX understand the sensitive nature of these situations and can provide information about available on and off campus resources, such as counseling and psychological services, medical treatment, academic support, housing, advocacy, and other forms of assistance that may be available. Staff members at the office can also explain your rights and procedural options. You will not be required to share your experience.

If you or someone you know feels unsafe or may be in imminent danger, please call the Baylor Police (254-710-2222) or Waco Police (911) immediately.

Except for Confidential Resources, all University Employees are designated Responsible Employees and thereby mandatory reporters of potential sexual and interpersonal misconduct violations. Confidential resources who do not have to report include those working in the Counseling Center, Health Center, and the University Chaplain.

WHAT ARE THE GROUND RULES?

CONVERSATION

We will set the ground rules for class conversations together in the first week and I will update this section of the syllabus accordingly.

ATTENDANCE

We follow the university-wide attendance policy. In addition to this, parts of your grade are tied to in-person activities which require attendance.

Since the reading responses are unannounced, for example, an unexcused absence means you miss the opportunity to earn points on that assignment.

I know that life happens. When something is going on outside the classroom that will impact your performance, please email me or let me know in class immediately that this is the case (you don't need to tell me why) and make a plan for how you will contribute to your class work if you need an adjusted schedule. I will do what I can to accommodate these requests so long as you complete the work within the semester. Otherwise you may apply for an incomplete.

AI POLICY

This class is designed to contribute to your own ethical formation, that is, deepening your ability to do ethics and live well, rather than cultivating technical skills or amassing information. Ethical formation is something you cannot in principle outsource (trying to outsource it is itself an ethical choice, displays of a kind of ethical character). That is the fundamental reason for an AI ban in this course.

Our best scientific evidence to date shows a negative impact of generative AI use on the habits of mind that are those philosophy values, such as creative thought and expression. It is my job as your philosophy teacher to help you hone these qualities before you go on to use AI or to help you make an informed decision about your AI use. Using AI to do this philosophical reflection would interfere with that work. A group of MIT and Wellesley researchers found, using tools like chatGPT for just one semester makes it likely you will struggle with memory recall, not make as many connections to other topics as your peers, be more susceptible to cognitive biases from search engine optimization than your peers, and, lower your executive functioning abilities such as planning, revising, and generating content.

There is also the economic reason not unrelated to education, namely, AI threatening skilled jobs of the kind that make college a financially intelligible choice. And the building of massive facilities and cooling computers that enable generative AI have significant impacts on water security for people not to mention environmental impacts for people, animals, and plants that are displaced.



LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

“We are gathered on the unceded land of the Comanche, Hueco, Tawakoni, and the Wichita and Affiliated Tribes. We also acknowledge that it was founded upon exclusions and erasures of many Indigenous peoples, including those on whose land this institution is located.”*

Baylor was founded by Baptist leaders who owned enslaved persons, supported the institution of slavery both during and following the Civil War. This includes Baylor’s founders, most members of its initial board of trustees, and several early leaders of the institution. The University that today grants students such benefits as a Christian liberal arts education has a history marked by deep injustice antithetical to Christian life and mission.

As a professor of Baylor, I enjoy and distribute benefits partly gained through these injustices and inequalities. This acknowledgement marks a commitment to the ongoing work of restoration, redemption, and God’s justice for all people at Baylor University.

*Research done by Baylor Theater Department, 2020