

Ethics and the Anthropocene

Spring 2018



Description

Many people believe that we are now in the Anthropocene, a geological age in which human activity is the dominant force on the planet. This course examines the nature and ethics of the Anthropocene. How is human activity affecting the world, and what is the moral significance of these effects? For example, do we have different moral obligations to other humans, nonhumans, or the environment if our activity is harming them than if not? Can we effectively intervene in human-caused harms to other humans, nonhumans, and the environment, and, if so, should we do so? Finally, are some interventions more acceptable than others? For example, should we consider bioengineering or geoengineering as options, or would that simply make the problem worse?

General Information

- Time: MW 12:30pm-1:45pm
- Place: 194M 205
- Instructor: Jeff Sebo
- Email: jeffsebo@nyu.edu
- Office: 285 Mercer, #908
- Office hours: MW 3:30pm-4:30pm or by appointment

Readings

This course will draw primarily from the following books: Nick Bostrom and Milan M. Cirkovic, *Global Catastrophic Risks*, Human Animal Network Editorial Collective, *Animals in the Anthropocene*, Dale Jamieson, *Reason in a Dark Time*, Dale Jamieson and Bonnie Nadzam, *Love in the Anthropocene*, Sheila Jasanoff, *The Ethics of Invention*, Tim Mulgan, *Ethics for a Broken World*, and Ronald Sandler, *The Ethics of Species*. All required chapters will be made available as PDFs. You can also find these books at online retailers.

Grading

Your grades will be determined as follows:

- **Papers (70%):** You will write two research papers and submit them to anthropocene2018@gmail.com. For each paper, you can either create your own prompt (provided that you clear it with me in advance) or select from prompts that I create. Each paper will be 8 pages long and account for 35% of your grade. The first will be due 3/25 at 11:59pm, and the second will be due 5/9 at 11:59pm.
- **Presentations (10%):** You will give a 10-15 minute presentation. For your presentation, you will find a scientific article related to the topic of discussion for that day, summarize the article, and then raise some questions or comments about this research and its implications for animal minds. You will also send an outline to anthropocene2018@gmail.com at least 24 hours before class.
- **Daily Writing (10%):** Prior to each session, you will send an email to anthropocene2018@gmail.com with the subject heading Last Name Date (e.g. Smith 1/24) that briefly (a) summarizes a main idea from each reading for that day and (b) presents a question or comment about these ideas. This assignment is due at least 30 minutes before class each day and will be graded Pass/Fail.
- **Attendance and Participation (10%):** I expect regular attendance and participation from all students.

Policies

- **Late Assignments:** Late papers will lose 1/3 letter grade for each day late. Late DW assignments will be accepted for half credit up until the start of class. Extensions and incompletes will be granted only in exceptional circumstances. If you want to request either, you must do so in advance.
- **Academic Dishonesty:** Plagiarism results in failure in the class and referral to a dean. Plagiarism includes: not citing sources, copying material without quotes or references, and more. You are subject to the CAS guidelines on plagiarism: <https://cas.nyu.edu/content/nyu-as/cas/academic-integrity.html>.
- **Academic Accommodations:** Academic accommodations are available to any student with a chronic, psychological, visual, mobility, learning disability, or who is deaf or hard of hearing. Students should please register with the Moses Center for Students with Disabilities at 212-998-4980.

NYU Henry and Lucy Moses Center for Students with Disabilities
726 Broadway, 2nd Floor
New York, NY 10003-6675
Voice/TTY Fax: 212-995-4114
Web site: <http://www.nyu.edu/csd>

Schedule

- **Week 1 - Introduction**

1/22 - No Class

1/24 - Dale Jamieson and Bonnie Nadzam, "Love in the Anthropocene"

- **Week 2 - Ethics 1**

1/29 - Tim Mulgan, "Nozick on rights," "Self-ownership," "The Lockean proviso"

1/31 - Tim Mulgan, "Nozick in a broken world," "Nationalism"

- **Week 3 - Ethics 2**

2/5 - Tim Mulgan, "Act utilitarianism," "Rule utilitarianism," "Mill on liberty"

2/7 - Tim Mulgan, "Utilitarianism and future people," "Utilitarianism in a broken world"

- **Week 4 - Politics 1**

2/12 - Tim Mulgan, "Hobbes and Locke," "Rawls"

2/14 - Tim Mulgan, "Rawls and the future," "Rawls in a broken world"

- **Week 5 - Politics 2**

2/19 - No Class

2/21 - Jedediah Purdy, "What kind of democracy?"

- **Week 6 - The Anthropocene 1**

2/26 - Bill McKibben, "The end of nature"

2/28 - Jason Moore, "Anthropocene or capitalocene"

- **Week 7 - The Anthropocene 2**

3/5 - Florence Chiew, "Agency and intervention in the Anthropocene"

3/7 - Clare Palmer, "Taming the wild profusion of existing things"

- **Week 8 - Spring Break**

3/12 - No Class

3/14 - No Class

- **Week 9 - The ethics of species 1**

3/19 - Ronald Sandler, "The value of species," "The conservation biology dilemma"

3/21 - Ronald Sandler, "Assisted colonization," "Shifting goals and changing strategies"

- **Week 10 - The ethics of species 2**

3/26 - Ronald Sandler, "The (in)significance of species boundaries"

3/28 - Ronald Sandler, "Homo sapiens in particular," "Artifactual species"

- **Week 11 - Existential risk 1**

4/2 - David Frame & Myles Allen, "Climate change," Edwin Kilbourne, "Plagues and pandemics"

4/4 - Ali Nouri & Christopher Chyba, "Biotechnology," Chris Phoenix & Mike Treder, "Nanotechnology"

- **Week 12 - Existential risk 2**

4/9 - Eliezer Yudkowsky, "Artificial intelligence," Bryan Caplan, "The totalitarian threat"

4/11 - Joseph Cirincione, "Nuclear war," Robin Hanson, "Catastrophe"

- **Week 13 - The ethics of invention 1**

4/16 - Sheila Jasanoff, "The power of technology," "The ethical anatomy of disasters"

4/18 - Sheila Jasanoff, "Remaking nature," "Tinkering with humans"

- **Week 14 - The ethics of invention 2**

4/23 - Sheila Jasanoff, "Information's wild frontiers," "Whose knowledge, whose property?"

4/25 - Sheila Jasanoff, "Reclaiming the future," "Invention for the people"

- **Week 15 - The meaning of life 1**

4/30 - Dale Jamieson, "The frontiers of ethics"

5/2 - Dale Jamieson, "Living with climate change"

- **Week 16 - The meaning of life 2**

5/7 - Roy Scranton, "Learning to die in the Anthropocene"