

PHILOSOPHY 329

Environmental Ethics

Spring 2025

Term Paper Assignment

Due Wednesday, May 14 (1:50 PM)



Living on the Edge

As summarized at the beginning of this course, I suggested that we are all *living on the edge*. This is true literally to some extent for all of us living on the Big Island of Hawai‘i, on the slopes of Kīlauea, the world’s most active volcano. But I meant this also as a metaphor for the time we are living in, a time in which we are challenged by “a ‘perfect storm’ of environmental problems” which biologists Paul and Anne Ehrlich draw attention to.¹ I also drew attention to the philosopher Martin Schönfeld who explains that “*the world is on the edge*” as a result of the climate crisis brought on by the burning of fossil fuels that powers our modern civilization.² I suggested the metaphor of living on the edge of a volcano for this crisis we are all facing partly in reference to a famous quote by Nietzsche: “For believe me—the secret to harvesting the greatest fruitfulness and the greatest enjoyment from existence is to *live dangerously*! Build your cities on the slopes of Vesuvius!”³ I explained that the context of the quote makes it clear that Nietzsche was using this metaphor of living dangerously on the slopes of a volcano to describe the crisis of modern civilization which is the focus of much of his late philosophical reflections. But I was also influenced by the poet Albert Saijo who shares his story of moving to the edge of Kīlauea, closing his book with this memorable line: “ANOTHER EDGE—LIKE THEY SAY IF YER NOT LIVIN ON THE EDGE YER TAKIN UP TOO MUCH SPACE”.⁴ The point of Saijo’s line, I have suggested, is similar to Nietzsche’s—the crisis we are facing is going to require a profound transformation of our civilization.⁵ If we are not living on the edge and taking part in this transformation, we are taking up too much space.

The term paper assignment is to write a 7-10 page philosophical reflection on this environmental crisis we are facing. You can use any of the texts we have covered in this course. I would like to see evidence that you have read some of the texts (at least more than one). An A paper will be well-written, have a good exposition of the main points of the readings, some thoughtful reflection, and a list of the works cited (either in notes or a bibliography). Upload your essay to Laulima by the end of the final exam period as stated above. You can turn it in earlier at the end of the course. Please label your file with the following format: last name, Phil 329 final. Here are some suggestions for your final paper:

Deep Ecology

What did Arne Naess mean by “Deep Ecology” and what are the eight principles he suggests for tentatively framing the deep ecology movement? To what extent would you agree or disagree with these principles. Since he suggests in one of the principles involves a profound, or deep, transformation of our “economic, technological, and ideological structures” many different philosophers are included in the conversation regarding deep ecology. Reflect on how some of the philosophies we have covered might be included within the deep ecology movement.

Environmental Ethics and Asian Philosophy

Towards the end of his essay, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” Lynn White Jr. suggests that the “beatniks, who are the basic revolutionaries of our time, show a sound instinct for their affinity for Zen Buddhism.” Zen Buddhism developed in China and Japan with the coming together of Mahāyāna Buddhism from India with Daoism from China. What is it about these Asian philosophies that provides a different understanding of the relationship between human beings and nature from the dominant Western tradition? How might these Asian traditions of philosophy be helpful in overcoming the environmental crisis today? Can these Asian philosophies ever be influential enough in the world today to make a difference?

Nietzsche and Environmental Philosophy

How did Nietzsche's critique of Christianity in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and *The Antichrist* anticipate in some ways Lynn White's thesis in, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," that Christianity bears a significant responsibility for the environmental crisis today? How does Nietzsche's perspectivism, his understanding of the philosopher as artist, challenge the traditional conception of *nature as origin*? If Nietzsche was right in the ‘hard truth’ that life is *will to power*, how can we possibly “remain loyal to the earth” as he implores us to do in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*? How is the strange thought of the eternal recurrence crucial to the task of overcoming the values of Western culture and becoming capable of remaining loyal to the earth? Is it necessary to overcome the longing for eternal life in another world in order to become loyal to the earth?

The Problem of Technology

What does Heidegger, in “The Question Concerning Technology,” consider to be the main problem with the development of modern technology, and how does he trace this problem back to a way of thinking that began with the ancient Greeks? What does Heidegger mean by the “enframing” (*Ge-Stell*) that makes overcoming the problem of technology so difficult? Toward the end of the essay, Heidegger turns to a line in a poem by the Romantic poet Hölderlin, “poetically man dwells on this earth,” to suggest a different way of being-in-the-world than that determined by the “enframing” determined by the history of Western thought. How might the examples Heidegger considers, the contrast, for example between an old wooden bridge and a modern hydroelectric powerplant, suggest about a more poetic dwelling upon the earth that may save us from the dangers of modern technology? Is it possible that humanity can break through this enframing and change the way we live upon the earth?

Food and the Ecological Crisis

Reflect on some of the readings in the text on agriculture and the environment. Why is the ecological crisis a crisis of agriculture as Wendell Berry observes? How does the eating of animals contribute to the ecological crisis? What are the implications that result from the ecological crisis upon the ethics of what we eat? To what extent are human beings going to be able to make the necessary changes in agriculture and in the food we eat in order to overcome the ecological crisis? Does the awareness of this problem lead you to consider changing your choice of food?

Population Growth

To what extent is there a problem with human overpopulation? Does the Earth have a finite carrying capacity for human population growth or is it just a matter of more efficient food production and distribution? How can the problem of human overpopulation be addressed in a way that is consistent with respect for human rights? Does the awareness of this problem lead you to consider how many children you would have?

The Economy and Climate Change

Reflect on some of the readings in the online readings. Can Capitalism become sustainable or is it necessary to change the economic system to something like the “steady-state” economy proposed by Herman Daly? In her book *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs the Climate*, Naomi Klein contends that the problem of climate change cannot be solved without transitioning from the global economy based on deregulated capitalism. What evidence does she provide to make this case and to what extent do you find her argument convincing?

The Mālama Honua Worldwide Voyage of the Hōkūle‘a

How might the Hawaiian view concerning the relationship between human beings and the natural world be compared to any of the other philosophies we have considered? Does the Hawaiian view of the kinship relationship between humans and nature compare more with the Land Ethic or Deep Ecology? Nainoa Thompson, the noted navigator of the Hōkūle‘a, once summed up the problem with our modern civilization when he said: “The sail plan we’re on is not sustainable.” Doug Herman, a geographer and specialist in cultural knowledge of Hawai‘i and the Pacific Islands, emphasizes that it may be difficult to make the transition to a sustainable civilization, but it might be possible, he suggests, if we realize that “we are all in the same boat.” We might indeed be on the same boat, but unfortunately, if we pay attention to the seriousness of the problem of climate change, it is not the Hōkūle‘a, but the Titanic. Can we get off the Titanic and on board the Hōkūle‘a?

¹ Paul and Anne Ehrlich, “Can a collapse of global civilization be avoided?” *Proceeding of the Royal Society* (2103):1. The Ehrlichs explain that this metaphor of a ‘perfect storm’ of environmental problems comes from the UK’s Chief Scientific Advisor John Beddington.

² Martin Schönfeld, *Global Ethics on Climate Change: The Planetary Crisis and Philosophical Alternatives* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013), 1. Schönfeld is here drawing attention to the book by Lester Brown, president of the Earth Policy Institute. Lester R. Brown, *World on the Edge: How to Prevent Environmental and Economic Collapse* (London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2011).

³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Joyous Science* (London: Penguin Random House, 2018), 182.

⁴ Albert Saijo, *OUTSPEAKS: A RHAPSODY* (Honolulu: Bamboo Ridge Press, 1997), 199.

⁵ Timothy Freeman, “Living on the Edge of a Volcano: Reflections on Nietzsche’s Philosophy and Albert Saijo’s Zensational Rhapsody” *Journal of World Philosophies* 8 (Summer 2023): 40-59.

Bibliography

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