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Global climate change is one of the most urgent and consequential problems of our time. In some important ways it is a unique problem in human history, while in other ways it echoes earlier challenges that human societies have faced (with more or less success). This course looks at the problem of climate change from a philosophical perspective, examining the philosophical questions that it raises and exploring the possibility of casting new and useful light on our predicament by making use of philosophical tools and frameworks.

Climate change raises philosophical questions in several different areas. Debates about the evidence for anthropogenic climate change raise questions about the epistemology of science about the use of computer models, about knowledge in historical sciences (where controlled experiments are difficult or impossible to carry out), about the value assumptions built into scientific research, and about the role of trust in science. Tensions between different scientific frameworks raise questions about metaphysics: about the kinds of objects that are trying to understand in thinking about climate change. Is the climate system best understood in physical mechanistic terms, for example, or does it involve organic wholes that require a different kind of understanding? How should we conceive the relationship between natural earth systems and human social systems? The choices we face about how to respond to climate change raise profound ethical questions about our responsibilities to future people, to nonhuman organisms and ecosystems, and to the biosphere itself. What are our individual responsibilities in the face of what we know about climate change? Under what circumstances would radical geoengineering interventions be ethically justified? How should we respond to the manifest injustices associated with climate change, and to the plight of the rising number of climate refugees? These questions are complicated by the uncertainties we also face: how should we ourselves how to live and make decisions (in our personal lives and in our corporations and institutions) in light of the best understanding of climate change available to us.

TEXTS

Readings and other resources will be posted on OWL.

OBJECTIVES

This course has three main aims:

- To acquaint students with the core philosophical discussions related to climate change, including the main questions, positions, and arguments, and how they are related to broader philosophical frameworks.
- To give students training and practice in the use of philosophical methods to tackle “wicked problems”—complex, intractable problems with both moral and practical dimensions—including following, analyzing and evaluating logically complex arguments, contributing to fruitful exploratory discussions and debates with their peers employing the concepts of epistemology, metaphysics, and ethics, and constructing clear and cogent arguments in philosophical terms that are well informed by empirical science.
- To provide students with the opportunities and models that they need to begin to do some substantial philosophical exploration of issues surrounding climate change themselves—to make sense of the relationships between philosophy and climate science, to identify and weigh philosophical problems, to improve our understanding of climate change and our possible responses, and to formulate and defend substantial claims in this area and defend them both orally and in writing.

REQUIREMENTS

The class format will consist of lecture and discussion. Discussion will be an important element of the course, so it is important that you stay

Students who are in emotional/mental distress should refer to Mental Health@Western <http://www.uwo.ca/uwocom/mentalhealth/> for a complete list of options about obtaining help.

Students are directed to view the Policy on Accommodation for Medical Illness (<https://studentservices.uwo.ca/secure/index.cfm>).

Policy on Academic Offences

Scholastic offences are taken seriously and students are directed to read the appropriate policy, specifically, the definition of what constitutes a Scholastic Offence, at the following Web site:

http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/scholastic_discipline_undergrad.pdf.”

Statement on Use of Plagiarism Software

All required papers may be subject to submission for textual similarity review to the commercial plagiarism detection software under license to the University for the detection of plagiarism. All papers submitted for such checking will be included as source documents in the reference database for the purpose of detecting plagiarism of papers subsequently submitted to the system. Use of the service is subject to the licensing agreement, currently between The University of Western Ontario and Turnitin. (<http://www.turnitin.com>).”

Additional Links

- Registrar Services (<http://www.registrar.uwo.ca>)
- Student Support Services (<http://westernusc.ca/services/>)