

Shifting Perspectives in Environmental Ethics

Spring 2021. Professors: Jay Bernstein and Alice Crary

This course will focus on the ongoing destruction of nature from anthropogenic planetary climate change. This catastrophe poses a problem for which traditional ethical theories have left us ill-prepared, and attempts at dealing with it in the form of “applied ethics” have proved unhelpful. A productive engagement needs to start from a willingness to radically rethink the categories that we use to describe this historical moment and the resources we have to respond to it meaningfully. We will talk about how climate crisis has challenged not only engrained metaphysical understandings of the relation between nature and culture but also received understandings of moral notions such as justice, responsibility and blame. We will also consider how it brings into question familiar conceptions of political institutions such as markets, property, states. We will attempt this kind of transformative approach to climate crisis by reading widely—and in a fully interdisciplinary manner—in the literature. Course topics will include the Anthropocene, ecocide, ecofeminism, environmentalism and animal ethics, anthropocentric/biocentric/ecocentric environmental ethics, responsibility (i.e., who is responsible for change?), global justice, justice vis-a-vis future generations and questions of mitigation/adaptation/celebration of collapse (or collapsology).