

Environmental Ethics

THE BASICS

Course Instructor

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Web Site

We will be using Canvas to organize the course. You'll use the site, among other things, to find class documents, access additional readings and resources, check plans for each week, and submit some assignments.

Resources

There is one required text for the course, available through the Georgia Tech Bookstore: Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There* (Oxford, 2020; ISBN 978-0-19-75026-2). It will be helpful for everyone to have the same edition of the text, preferably in print rather than electronically.

Additional readings will be provided on Canvas as PDFs; you'll access them through the Modules page.

THE COURSE

Overview

The first thing you should know is that this course presupposes an unusually broad understanding of *environment* and of *environmental ethics*. The key is to shift from thinking and speaking about "the environment" in an absolute sense – as a somewhat mysterious, unitary entity that can be "harmed" and so needs to be "protected" – to thinking and speaking of environment in the relative sense. An *environment* is that which surrounds an organism or system; a *shared environment* is any setting in which the various surroundings of living organisms and systems – and the projects they pursue there – intersect and impinge on one another, for good and for ill.

A suburban neighborhood may be such a shared environment, or a college campus, or the watershed of an urban stream, just as much as an undisturbed salt marsh or tract of old-growth forest. What matters is the *projects* that are in play within those shared environments, their various *prospects* for success, and whether and how conflicts among projects can be resolved.

The Goal

The overall goal of any ethics course worth its salt is to foster the development of mature and adept moral practice, the ability to respond well to complex problem situations as they arise. The aim in short is to cultivate the *moral imagination* of everyone who participates in the course.

The more modest goal for this term is to make a few changes in how you perceive and think about problem situations involving shared environments, taking a *project* as the basic element of ethical analysis, and considering the ways in which projects may be assessed, revised, or reconciled with other projects.

For our purposes, these goals should be enough for us to go on. For administrative purposes, though, the syllabus must include some more determinate “outcomes,” which align with our aims.

Ethics Requirement

Many of you are taking this course to fulfill the Ethics Requirement of your degree program. You may get more out of your experience with the course if you know the background of that requirement.

Degree programs in engineering are evaluated and accredited by a non-profit organization known as ABET, the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology. In the current version of the criteria for accreditation, Criterion 3.3 specifies that students should come away from a degree program in engineering with “an ability to recognize ethical and professional responsibilities in engineering situations and make informed judgments, which must consider the impact of engineering solutions in global, economic, environmental, and societal contexts.”

In April 2023, The Academic Faculty of the Institute specified outcomes for courses that fulfill the Ethics Requirement. Students should come away with:

- An ability to recognize ethical and professional responsibilities in real-world contexts.
- An ability to assess actions or decisions based on established ethical principles and theories, or through deliberative processes.
- An ability to consider the implications of actions, both broadly (e.g., global, economic, environmental, or societal) and for individuals.

This course is designed to foster the kind of moral imagination that is a prerequisite for these three “outcomes.”

The Work

Reading for Understanding

For most class sessions, there will be a reading assignment to be completed before we meet. Perhaps the most important work you do for this course will consist in sitting alone, with no distractions, giving your full attention to reading.

As a practical matter, read with some means at hand both to mark key points in the text and to jot down notes for yourself. It’s a good idea to write down one or more prompts for class discussion: something you found especially puzzling or provocative, a question that arose for you while you read, or a connection between the text and something important to you in the wider world.

Discussion

The class is officially designated as “lecture,” but don’t imagine that means you may be entirely passive. Dr. Kirkman will lecture, of course, at least some of the time, but the hope is that it will be *interactive* lecture, with opportunities for questions and answers, small-group discussion, brief videos, and even short writing assignments (see below). You’ll learn more – and maybe even enjoy yourself, a little – if you participate actively in the work of the class.

Written Assignment: Engagement

An Engagement assignment is a *very* short piece of writing to be completed *and submitted* during a class session, based on a prompt provided by the instructor. These will not be announced in advance, though you can anticipate that there will be at least one per week.

These may range from one sentence to one short paragraph; each will concern something that arises during that lecture session.

Each Engagement assignment is to be graded 1 or 0: it either meets expectations or it does not. The expectation is that you are present and engaged in the work of that class session – hence the name – and that you respond directly to the prompt.

You will receive instructions for each assignment in class and will complete the work on paper – so be sure to bring a pen!

Written Assignment: Exercise

An exercise is a slightly longer writing assignment – a few short paragraphs – in which you will practice using the tools and concepts introduced in lecture and discussion.

An Exercise will be due by 5:00pm most Fridays during the term, to be submitted as text entry or as an uploaded file to the assignment posted to Canvas.

Note that you may ask questions about the assignment and talk with your classmates about it during class time, but the work you hand in should be written in your own words, based on your own understanding and judgment.

Exercises will be assessed on the three-point scale specified under the Assessment policy, below. To meet expectations, simply respond directly and adequately to the prompt with a few well-formed paragraphs.

As for how to *exceed* expectations, see the policy on Assessment below.

Exam:

There will be three “old-school” Exams – in class, on paper, with no books, notes or electronic devices – one just before Fall Break, one in early November, and one during the Final Exam period.

Each exam will consist of 5 short-answer questions, which call for *at most* a few paragraphs in response to a prompt which may require explanation of a principle or concept, a demonstration of your ability to use a concept or tool of ethical analysis in understanding and responding to a scenario, or the like. These will be graded on the same 3-point scale as the Exercise assignments (see below).

ASSESSMENT

With the exception of the Engagement assignments, written assignments will be assessed on a 3-point scale, built around the *expectations* of each assignment as specified above: 3 = exceeds expectations; 2 = meets expectations; 1 = does not meet expectations; 0 = not submitted.

To meet expectations, accomplish the basic work of the assignment or exam prompt, demonstrating a solid understanding of the matter at hand, making the necessary distinctions and/or connections, and no more.

To exceed expectations, do more than just put in effort: take a risk; reach for some new connection among ideas; try an unusual angle, a shift in perspective; or, really, just do anything that demonstrates full engagement with the process of inquiry aimed at understanding.

The final grade will be determined by an accumulation of points, up to a maximum of 80:

- 13 Engagement Assignments, dropping the lowest two = 11 possible points.
- 8 Exercises = 24 possible points;
- 3 Exams (5 questions, up to 3 points each) = 45 points.

Final grades will then be determined by the following scale:

A = 74-80

B = 66-73

C = 58-65

D = 50-57

Please note that the gradebook on Canvas will be of limited use to us: while it may provide a record of how many points you have earned on each assignment, it will attempt to calculate your final grade as a weighted average. Ignore that.

BASIC EXPECTATIONS

Policy on Timeliness

The deadlines for all written assignments are firm. Assignments submitted after the deadline may be accepted if you have some credible, legitimate reason for the delay. For best results, let me know ahead of time if something is happening that might cause you to miss a deadline.

Policy on Academic Integrity

Georgia Tech aims to cultivate a community based on trust, academic integrity, and honor. Students are expected to act according to the highest ethical standards. For information on Georgia Tech's Academic Honor Code, please visit <http://www.catalog.gatech.edu/policies/honor-code/> or <http://www.catalog.gatech.edu/rules/18/>.

Any student suspected of cheating or plagiarizing on a quiz, exam, or assignment will be reported to the Office of Student Integrity, which will investigate the incident and identify the appropriate penalty for violations of the Honor Code.

Take this seriously. All suspected instances of academic dishonesty will be dealt with immediately, according to Institute procedures.

Policy on the Use of LLMs/Generative AI

Do not use an LLM (e.g., ChatGPT) to complete the work of the course. To do so would be contrary to the goal and the work of the course specified above as well as a direct violation of the Policy on Academic Integrity.

In the wider world there may be some contexts in which limited use of an LLM could be acceptable, if only provisionally and never for the production of finished written work. Even in the best case, though, an LLM should be treated as an unreliable and slow-witted research assistant, one which must be given careful and precise instructions, and one whose work must always be checked against the informed judgment of an actual human being.

In any case, this course is *not* one of the contexts in which use of an LLM is acceptable.

If the machine doesn't simply hallucinate something, it will engage in a process of "distributed plagiarism" by skimming other people's work and generating a string of words with a high probability of being minimally coherent to a human user. Hence the violation of the Policy on Academic Integrity.

But consider the goal and the work of this course, which is to prepare *you* for *your* responsibilities as a professional and, really, as an adult human being. As a professional, your stock-in-trade will be your informed, considered judgment.

If you were to outsource your judgment to a machine, what would *you* then have to offer to anyone?

You would make yourself obsolete.

Accommodations for Students with Disabilities

If you are a student with learning needs that require special accommodation, contact the Office of Disability Services at (404)894-2563 or <http://disabilityservices.gatech.edu/>, as soon as possible, to make an appointment to discuss your special needs and to obtain an accommodations letter. Please also e-mail me as soon as possible in order to set up a time to discuss your learning needs.

Student-Faculty Expectations Agreement

At Georgia Tech we believe that it is important to strive for an atmosphere of mutual respect, acknowledgement, and responsibility between faculty members and the student body. See <http://www.catalog.gatech.edu/rules/22/> for an articulation of some basic expectations that you can have of me and that I have of you. In the end, simple respect for knowledge, hard work, and cordial interactions will help build the environment we seek. Therefore, I encourage you to remain committed to the ideals of Georgia Tech while in this class.

Ivan Allen College Statement on Inclusiveness

The Ivan Allen College of Liberal Arts supports the Georgia Institute of Technology's commitment to creating a campus free of discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, cultural background, political outlook or veteran status. We further affirm the importance of cultivating an intellectual climate that allows us to better understand the similarities and differences of those who constitute the Georgia Tech community, as well as the necessity of working against inequalities that may also manifest here as they do in the broader society.