

Philosophical tools for a sustainable world

BA Sustainable Sciences – PSL University

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Description of the course

This course presents theories and concepts developed by philosophers that – I hope – could be useful to those who intend to mitigate the ecological crisis. The idea behind the course was to dig into different branches of philosophy and find ‘philosophical tools’ that can be relevantly adapted to better understand aspects of the ecological crisis and act on them more fruitfully. This course is both an introduction to philosophy in general and to philosophy of the ecological crisis.

More specifically, I present theories and concepts from ethics, political philosophy, social ontology, philosophy of language, philosophy of mind, and philosophy of science. I focus mostly on ideas from so-called ‘analytic philosophers’, though I also introduce ideas from historical figures such as Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Hobbes, Hume, and Kant. I also introduce some philosophical methodology, teaching on logic, arguments, and essay writing.

My goal is to introduce philosophical theories and concepts, show their relevance to the ecological crises, contribute to forging students’ philosophical abilities, and provide them with tips and references to go further on their own. The course consists of four main elements: (i) my presentation of the theories and concepts in question, (ii) in-class exercises to better master them, (iii) in-class discussions on how to adapt these concepts to the ecological crisis, and (iv) the writing of a philosophy essay using tools presented in the course.

Those who aim to mitigate the ecological crisis need tools from many disciplines – from branches as diverse as economics, physics, anthropology, geography, or biology. My hope and my motivation is that the philosophical insights and methods I present in this course can play a role in this critical enterprise.

A note on terminology: Oxford dictionary defines a ‘crisis’ as ‘a time of intense difficulty or danger’ and ‘a time when a difficult or important decision must be made’. By ‘the ecological crisis’ I mean the fact that we have reached a time of intense difficulty because important changes are needed without delay to maximally reduce enormous future harm, a harm due to the negative impact that industrial societies have on ecological systems. The changes needed include in particular the immediate and drastic reduction of greenhouse gas emissions (as is well documented by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change <https://ipcc.ch>), of biodiversity loss (as is well documented by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services <https://ipbes.net>), but also changes in adaptation and compensation of the present and future consequences.

Topics, tools, and slides

What could analytic philosophy do to help mitigate the ecological crisis?

Tool: Overview of the toolbox of analytic philosophy; methodology, scope, and relevance.

Slides: <https://drive.switch.ch/index.php/s/HrwXU9OpsCI4wSM>

Logic

Tools: What makes an argument good, what is a philosophical essay, some notions of logic (validity, soundness, modus ponens, modus tollens, affirming the consequent, denying the antecedent).

Slides: <https://drive.switch.ch/index.php/s/AQK1rRgXxDIRkAr>

Ethics

Tools: Consequentialism, deontology, and virtue ethics.

Slides (first part): <https://drive.switch.ch/index.php/s/WTC9eN6AtFFfkM7>

Slides (second part): <https://drive.switch.ch/index.php/s/Vmzdr6dAKpoApVV>

Political philosophy

Tools: Some issues of climate justice, social contract theory, and Rawls' theory of justice.

Slides: <https://drive.switch.ch/index.php/s/Z2UZwufbAOyv1dA>

Philosophy of action

Tools: The Humean theory of action motivation and akrasia.

Slides: <https://drive.switch.ch/index.php/s/QHen3JeEIXhBK3R>

Philosophy of emotion

Tool: Emotions as evaluative attitudes.

Slides: <https://drive.switch.ch/index.php/s/AQ91HmV9uLXEQrx>

Social ontology

Tools: How speech acts can modify social reality – declarations and institutions, incantatives and value-based groups.

Slides: <https://drive.switch.ch/index.php/s/TTa0yPiix6UIWCQ>

Philosophy of language

Tools: Implicit message mechanisms and propaganda.

Slides: <https://drive.switch.ch/index.php/s/tRW0W8Jgenoc3jj>

Philosophy of science

Tools: Science and pseudoscience and the ‘no miracle’ argument.

Slides: <https://drive.switch.ch/index.php/s/mAK4YCH6Ae9qY2A>

Methodology and evaluations

Tools: Writing an analytic philosophy essay based on a valid argument.

1. Arguments and essays: reminders and precisions. Slides: <https://drive.switch.ch/index.php/s/EOs6vz3KDcyQUsS>
2. Evaluation table: <https://drive.switch.ch/index.php/s/NgoL11Z0hoSalXk>
3. Methodology session. Slides: <https://drive.switch.ch/index.php/s/4XAoPeJAllc9pVU>

Resources

References:

- **Course bibliography**: A bibliography of the references used in the course is given at the end of each PPT.
- **Encyclopédie philosophique**: <https://encyclo-phil.fr/>. A free online encyclopedia with good articles on many themes in philosophy e.g. utilitarianism, action, emotion, etc.
- **Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy** (SEP): <https://plato.stanford.edu/>. Probably the best online encyclopedia for philosophy, and it's also free.
- **Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy** (IEP): <https://iep.utm.edu/>. Another excellent free online philosophy encyclopedia (definitely worth trying it if you're not satisfied with what you found in the preceding two).
- **PhilPapers** <https://philpapers.org/>. An index and bibliography for philosophy maintained by philosophers. If you're looking for articles and books in philosophy, try looking for keywords here. They have small guides recommending important references for many topics, this is for instance the one for the ethics of climate change: <https://philpapers.org/browse/climate-change/>
- **Google scholar**: <https://scholar.google.ch/>. The Google of... scholars. Search for articles and books from academic websites. Tells you how many times works have been quoted in other academic works and so helps you figure out which works are most influential.

Guidelines for writing your essay:

- Carefully consult the slides from the Logic and Methodology sessions and the Evaluation Table (see above).
- Guidelines for how to cite sources using an established citation style (APA, MLA, Chicago, etc.): <https://libguides.brown.edu/citations/styles> or <https://www.wikihow.com/Cite-Sources>
- An essay example (written by a former student of mine – don't circulate): <https://drive.switch.ch/index.php/s/I6fhMRgiEiTdW0E>
- Another essay example (written by a former student of mine – don't circulate): <https://drive.switch.ch/index.php/s/kPaYBb8wRFq9avh>