

Heated Debates: Philosophy and Climate Change

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In the Fall semester I will teach for the second time a course, *Heated Debates: Philosophy and Climate Change*, on philosophical issues connected to climate change and climate science. The course already focuses on several sustainability issues—global warming, intergenerational thinking, the tragedy of the commons, and the precautionary principle—but the first time I taught the course I did not have the sense that I succeeded in integrating well enough the sustainability themes with, on the one hand, more general philosophical themes and, on the other hand, more concrete, ‘local’ issues concerned with the students’ own environmental impact.

The stimulating presentations and discussions during the workshop helped me see ways in which the three dimensions on which I want to touch on in the course—very general philosophical themes, ‘sustainability ideas’, and concrete impacts—can be integrated.

One philosophical question discussed in the course is whether each of us has a personal duty not to emit any greenhouse gases—that is, whether everyone has a duty to reduce one’s carbon footprint to zero. In the new syllabus for the course I will lead up to this question through a simple general introduction to the distinction between utilitarianism or consequentialism, on the one hand, and deontology, on the other—that is, the distinction between views according to which we should judge acts according to their consequences and views that hold that certain acts are intrinsically good or bad. This will allow me to better situate the issue concerning our personal carbon footprint within a general question in value theory. Whether students have understood arguments for a personal duty not to emit and have understood how answers to this question are affected by the philosophical framework chosen will be assessed by asking the students to write a 5- to 7-page paper.

In order to connect the philosophical question of a personal duty to the students' own lifestyle and experiences, I will ask students early in the course to calculate and estimate their individual carbon footprint, compare it to that of inhabitants of less developed countries, and propose strategies for reducing their footprint. Later in the semester they will be asked to assess the success of their efforts and re-analyze their footprint. Students will be asked to hand in a first draft of their carbon footprint calculation with a critical discussion early in the semester and a revised discussion that takes into account how well they fared in reducing their footprint toward the end of the semester.

The readings for the workshop provided me with additional ideas of how to connect general philosophical discussions with discussions of concrete environmental impacts. I found many of the readings for the workshop extremely thought-provoking and stimulating. Several of the readings provide concrete illustrations of some of the philosophical themes discussed in the course. I want to incorporate these readings into the new syllabus and will pair Michael Pollan's piece with the philosophical readings on a personal duty and the essay on the collapse of the civilization on the Easter Islands with readings on the tragedy of the commons.