

Economics, Ethics and the Environment: Syllabus

Econ 4999

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This syllabus is a work in progress.

Course Description

This course will attempt to answer four questions

1. What is ethics?
2. What is economics?
3. What is the environment?
4. And, how do they all relate?

Put simply, *ethics* are *limitations* a society imposes upon its members. I started to say *constraints* rather than limitations but ethics don't always bind; rather, they guide and suggest behavior. Ethics typically apply to behavior, as in doing A is ethical, doing B is not.

Said another way, ethics is a list of principles or rules to determine which behaviors are good, which are acceptable, and which are bad. For example, the ethics of a society might allow the killing of animals or slaves (because their preferences do not count in the societal calculus – they have no moral standing) but not allow the killing of citizens of the State, except, of course, by the State.

The 10 commandments are ten rules for ethical behavior as accepted by Christians and Jews. Other ethical principles include stuff like “do no harm”, “do unto others as you would have them do unto you”. Quoting from Aldo Leopold

An ethic, ecologically, is a limitation on freedom of action in the struggle for existence. An ethic, philosophically, is a differentiation of social from anti-social conduct. These are two definitions of one thing. The thing has its origin in the tendency of interdependent individuals or groups to evolve modes of co-operation. The ecologist calls these symbioses. Politics and economic are advanced symbioses in which the original free-for-all competition has been replaced, in part, by co-operative mechanisms with an ethical content. (From the *Land Ethic*)

Ethics can stand alone or be based on philosophical, religious or historical principles. For example, *sins* are unethical acts, where what is and is not a sin is determined by religious beliefs – for example, some believe homosexuality is both sinful and unethical. These principles can be religious, the goal of increasing happiness/decreasing pain, inalienable rights, etc.

Simply put, the ethics of economics are *efficiency*, *equity* and sometimes *sustainability*.

Economics is two things: (1) the development of models to explain the allocation of resources and the distribution of goods, including how the allocation and distribution will change if things exogenous to the models change (e.g. government policy), and (2) investigations and conclusions as to whether one allocation and distribution is better or worse than another. The former is typically called *positive economics* because it is devoid of judgments, the latter called *normative economics*.

The environment, simply put, is where everything comes from and where everything goes. All that we produce and consume has its origins in the environment. Commodities are rearrangements of stuff taken from the environment. We call these rearrangements production. Production produces three things: things we want (the stuff the producer will sell), waste, and pollution. Consumption of the wanted things is, again, nothing more than another rearrangement – the stuff doesn't disappear, rather most of it is discarded back into the environment as waste and pollution, a bit is recycled.

When we investigate how economists think about good and bad (whether one allocation is better or worse than another), two or three words come to mind: always efficiency and equity, and sometimes sustainability. We will need to understand these concepts and why economists use them to determine good from bad. Put another way, what are the ethical and philosophical foundations of normative economics?

Whether something is good or bad from an economist's perspective typically comes down to whose preferences count and whose preference don't count (white men? foreigners? women? future generations? animals?). We will return to this question of who is and who is not a member of society many times.

For those of you wondering, there is nothing in neoclassical economics that precludes animals from being members of society; whether they are members (have moral standing) is an assumption one can choose to make. That said, most economics assume, without thinking much about it, that only humans can be members of society (probably because few non-human animals choose careers in economics).

As an aside, note that there is nothing that says all member of society need be treated equally; that would be an additional assumption. For example, most would consider U.S. citizens, independent of age, to be members of the U.S. society, but most would not advocate equal treatment for babies and adults.

This is only my second time teaching this course. In my defense, I have been thinking about playing with the issues for quite a while. I need your input and suggestions in terms of topics and presentation. You either need to drop the class or to help me figure out what we are doing in the course. **I need your help. There is a lot of flexibility in terms of the material I present.**

My proposed objectives for the course (as of January 10, 2007) are pretty simple:

1. To make you think hard and long about economics and its foundations
2. To investigate the philosophical and ethical foundations of economics – think a philosophy course.
3. To think about how economics defines “good” and “bad”. That is, how do we, as economists, decide whether some allocation of resources and distribution of goods is better or worse than some other allocation and distribution.
4. Related to all of the above will be detailed discussions of “efficiency”, “equity” and “sustainability”.
5. To do a lot of the above in the context of environmental and natural resource applications – what I know the most about.
6. To make you spend great effort writing essays on the above topics. You will choose the topics for your essays with my help. So, writing well will be a big component of the course. When I use the word “essay”, I don’t mean term paper; rather, I mean something more in the five to ten page range, something that could become a future reading for the course. You will write two essays during the term. Each essay will go through at least three versions of refinements and improvements. I will likely discuss your essays in class, and you will be prepared to discuss them as well. You will also need to discuss your essays and ideas with your classmates outside of class.
7. In addition to the essays we have a few quizzes and take-home assignments. I don’t want to have a final.
8. Class participation will also be an important part of the class and your grade. If you don’t want to attend class on a regular basis and participate when you are there, you will not want to take the course.
9. Many of the classes will be structured around a specific reading or question. You will need to prepare for class by doing the appropriate prep work – gratuitous bullshitting will not cut it.

If all you care about is “thinking in the box” and think only of an economics major as the best way to make money since you did not get in the business school, this might not be the course for you.

Some proposed topics (in no special order) are:

- The importance of defining society in questions of efficiency and equity
- Animal rights
- The pursuit of happiness for both the individual and society. Isn't that what economics is all about? We will ask how psychologists and neuroscientists think about stuff like preferences – they don't all believe we have them.
- Locating highly-polluting entities in poor neighborhoods and poor countries.
- Environmental protection as a luxury good.
- Occupational safety and product safety as luxury goods (think, for example, mine safety in China vs. the U.S. or organic vs. milk chuck full of growth hormones)
- Discounting – how much should future generations count and what exactly is a future generation
- Discounting and global warming
- Global warming effects on us versus poor countries such as Bangladesh vs. rich countries such as the U.S.
- Law, the environment, and economics
- Materials balance (what goes in must come out): everything we take from the environment eventually ends up back in the environment in one form or another - how an environmental economists should view the system.
- The basic philosophical underpinnings of economics (based on the welfare of individuals – people only? And which ones?)
- Do non-human animals, plants, and ecosystems have rights independent of man? How about women and foreigners? That is, who does and does not count in our definition of society.

- Animal factory farms
- Another important topic is the extent to which ethics affects the magnitude and extent of market failures. That is, is instilling ethics in us, one way to reduce inefficiencies in the market place? Said another way, is one purpose of ethics to increase efficiency?
- Business/corporate ethics (that said this is not a course in corporate ethics)
- **Your topic here**

One of my goals will be to provoke you and to disagree with you (independent of the extent to which I do or don't agree with you). The objective is to make you think.

So, please send me an email with your thoughts about what you would like to get from the course. Don't comply at your peril: what will happen in the course will depend a lot on what you do or don't tell me. Thanks.

An aside: what is *environmental economics*?

This course, per se, is not a course in environmental economics. I include the following so you know how a course in environmental economics differs from what we hope to do. A number of you have taken a course in environmental economics.

Environmental Economics considers the efficient and equitable use of society's scarce environmental resources. Environmental resources include air, water, land, wilderness areas, parks, wildlife and genetic diversity, and other ecological systems.

Environmental economics accepts, without much discussion, efficiency and equity as goals for environmental policy – we will question these goals.

A course in environmental resources would consider environmental resources from four perspectives: the market allocation, efficient allocations, equitable allocations, and government attempts to achieve more efficient and more equitable allocations.

Environmental economics is applied welfare economics (how to increase the welfare of society). It considers market failure (particularly externalities and common property resources), and the economic valuation of environmental amenities such as clean air, wilderness and ecological systems.

Courses in environmental economics and natural resource economics both consider natural resources but differ in that natural resource courses have historically dealt with the inter-temporal utilization of conventional renewable and nonrenewable natural resources such as fish, trees and minerals; whereas environmental courses have considered pollution and other environmental issues from a static perspective. This historical distinction is blurring.

I want to make a few comments about what environmental economics is not. Economics and environmental economics are not about making money or how to run a firm. Economics is the study of the allocation of society's scarce resources. Economics per se is not pro-market or pro-government. The purpose of a course in environmental economics is not to argue that government action to protect the environment is bad or good; sometimes its bad, and sometimes it is good. The purpose of an environmental-economics course is not to extol the virtues of the market. Markets have many virtues, but, when it comes to the environment, they also have many faults. In some ways, environmental- economics courses can be described as courses on market failures and government actions to correct those failures.

Environmental economics is about measuring the costs of decreasing pollution, cleaning up the environment and protecting scarce ecological systems such as wetlands and wilderness. I want to stress that environmental economics is also about measuring the benefits of decreasing pollution, cleaning up the environment and protecting scarce ecological systems. An important issue is the costs and benefits to whom.

Environmental economists don't consider society's production of goods and services and the distribution of those goods and services as separate from the environment; put simply, what we take from the environment to produce our goods and services ultimately ends up emitted back into the environment in terms of emissions, pollution and wastes. Very simply, the total weight of what is taken from the environment to produce goods and services must eventually equal to weight of what we put back into the environment ("what goes in must come out"). This fact is often referred to as "materials balance". The same balance holds for energy – we change its form but do not create or destroy energy.

Course Details

Web page: My web site is located at <http://www.colorado.edu/Economics/morey/index.html> . From it you can link to the web page for Econ 4999ethics, or you can go directly to the web page for the course, <http://www.colorado.edu/Economics/morey/4999Ethics\4999ethics-home.html>

Lecture notes, readings and review questions will be put on the web page, or updated, on an as-needed basis.

You might want to visit the web sites for the natural resource and environmental courses that I teach. You will find overlap. The undergraduate environment and natural resources course for economics majors can be found at

<http://www.colorado.edu/Economics/morey/4545/4545home.html>

and

<http://www.colorado.edu/Economics/morey/4535/4535home.html> .

My natural resource and environment course for M.A. students (the M.A. program is now extinct) is at <http://www.colorado.edu/Economics/morey/6535/6535home.html> , and my PhD level environmental course at

<http://www.colorado.edu/Economics/morey/8545/8545home.html>

Some papers by past student of Econ 4999 can be found on the course web page.

Some papers by past student of Econ 4545 and Econ 4535 can be found on the web page for Econ 4535(<http://www.colorado.edu/Economics/morey/4535/4535home.html>)

Office hours: My office hours will be on Tuesdays and Thursdays 2:00-2:45, Thursdays 11:00 to 11:30. If you can't make it to the office hours, catch me before or after class to schedule a time. My office is Econ 122. Please feel free to contact me by email Edward.Morey@Colorado.edu about setting up an appointment. Sometimes it will take a day or so for me to get back to you.

Prerequisites: Intermediate micro. The following sorts of courses would be helpful but are not necessary: environmental economics, natural resource economics, public finance, ethics courses, philosophy courses, etc. You should view 4999 a critical thinking course for serious students of economics who are getting close to finishing their undergraduate studies.

Readings: There is no text book for the course. I will post all of the required readings on the course web page. Many readings are already there.

Your required readings consist of journal articles, magazine articles and newspaper articles. They vary in length from a few newspaper columns to twenty-page journal articles.

I am in the process of trying to get all of the class readings onto the web page for the course. The articles on the course web page are in either .pdf or .html format. Note that some of these files are large. See the course web page for details.

I will be revising and updating the list of articles during the semester.

You will write two essays: You will spend much time writing, working on, and revising your essays (each in the five to ten page range, no more). You will choose your topics with my guidance, and the guidance of your mentor (see below).

Each essay will go through at least three iterations. The intent of the first essay assignment will be to nail down your topic and produce a working draft. The second will be your essay. From your perspective it will be your best shot, from my perspective it will be a draft on which I comment. You will revise based on my comments and turn in the final version of your essay a few weeks later. The process will then restart for your second essay.

If you work hard and give me your best effort on an intermediate assignment on your essay, I will give you lots of help and feedback. If an intermediate assignment is based on little thought and little work, I will simply say that and provide few suggestions. To comment productively, I need something to work with.

Hopefully, a lot of these essays will become readings for the course.

For each essay you will have a mentor: The mentor's job will be to make sure your essay, at each step in the process, is great. They will have a strong incentive to help you achieve greatness. The rules for choosing mentors are as follows: If someone is your mentor (on either essay) they can never be your mentee, and an individual can only mentor one of your papers. So you will have to work with four different classmates on essays (you will have two different mentors, and you will mentor two different people, neither of which mentored you).

The mentoring program has a number of goals: everyone effectively researches and works on four topics rather than two, you learn to do joint work, and you help someone to improve their research and their essay. The interaction should make both parties better critical thinkers and better writers. These are skills that should benefit you in the workplace.

Choose your mentors and mentees wisely. I understand that everyone will not be perfectly satisfied with each of the four other students they work with. You will want to get feel for your different classmates before any choices are made. Maybe one day soon we will have everyone talk to everyone else for five minutes about essay ideas. (kind of like speed dating).

If you hate the idea of the mentoring process, you might want to take a different course.

A lot more details will be forthcoming on your essays and the process. The specific essay assignments will be posted on the course web page.

Grading: *Your two essays will determine 60% of your course grade (35% for the best of the two, 25% for the other one).*

20% of your course grade will be for mentoring others (10% for each essay). Your mentoring grade will be your mentee's essay grade weighted by 10%. In explanation, your mentoring grade for an essay will be determined by the grade on the essay you mentor. An intent is to give you a big incentive to make the essay great. For example, if your mentees get 100% on their essays, your final course grade will be two letters higher than if they both get 0% on their essays. You will likely spend a lot of time on your mentoring. Mentees will have to make ideas, drafts, etc. available to their mentor in a timely fashion.

10% of your course grade will be for participation in class. I am the "decider". Attending class on a regular basis is a necessary but not sufficient condition for getting the whole 10%

10% will be based on quizzes and other assignments. I am thinking we will have 4 or so in-class or take-home assignments. I will drop the lowest of the 4 scores, so your best three will be 10% of your course grade.

I grade on the following scale:

90% or greater = A
80% = B
70% = C
60% = D
59% or less = F

Class format: Come prepared and be involved. I will lecture some and hope to have lots of class discussion. You will be expected to discuss topics in class, particularly the topics related to your essays. And, I will discuss your essays in class.

That's all.