

# Philosophy, climate change and the Anthropocene

Ph 490 Fall 2021

This course outline is © Thomas Heyd



"View of Cayambé" (print), von Humboldt, *Vues de cordillères...* (1810-1813)<sup>i</sup>

Instructor: Thomas Heyd, Ph.D.  
Lectures: MTh 13-14:20  
Office hrs: WTh 14:40-15:30  
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**Provisional outline:** Given changing circumstances in relation to Covid-19, there may be some changes to this outline before the course starts.

## Territory acknowledgment

We acknowledge with respect the Lekwungen peoples on whose traditional territory the university stands and the Songhees, Esquimalt and WSÁNEĆ peoples whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day. This acknowledgment entails a commitment to ongoing dialogue and reconciliation with the peoples of these lands. For information about support for indigenous students and efforts to foster reconciliation, please visit the UVic Office of Indigenous Academic & Community Engagement.

## Description and structure

### *Seminar overview*

Students are expected to actively participate in all class periods, and to research and write a paper on a topic chosen by students in consultation with the instructor. Furthermore, students will give oral presentations and offer peer-commentary on a regular basis. There are no exams. The expectation is that by exploring the philosophical dimensions of climate change and the Anthropocene we may become better equipped to meaningfully contribute to ongoing discussions about these matters, while also, personally, finding our place in today's rapidly changing world. In addition to papers in philosophy, materials, as well as experts, from the natural and social sciences, will be drawn upon.

### *Focus*

According to the best science available, there presently is unequivocal evidence that we are presently experiencing rapidly progressing anthropogenic climate change, and that its consequences will continue to be felt into the indefinite future.<sup>ii</sup> It has recently been suggested, moreover, that the combined impact of human activities on the planet may be ushering a new geological epoch that has been christened 'The Anthropocene'. Both concepts, climate change and the Anthropocene, and the realities that they refer to have led to considerable discussions among researchers and the general public. Arguably, these concepts and realities should be subject to attentive, philosophical consideration, both open-minded and critical.

Given the breadth and reach of philosophy as a field of enquiry, these matters may, among other things, be considered under the following headings:

- **Epistemology/ Philosophy of Science:** how we know that climates are changing
- **Ethics and Political Philosophy:** what we ought to do about this from the point of view of ethics and politics
- **Metaphysics:** how the concept of the Anthropocene may call upon a new conception of history and of humanity
- **Conceptual Analysis:** whether the Anthropocene starts as early as anthropogenic impacts can be detected
- **Cross-cultural Philosophy:** what Indigenous perspectives on changing climates contribute
- **Ancient Philosophy:** how Ancient Philosophy may help us to live in troubling times such as the present
- **Aesthetics:** how we may appreciate our environments if increasingly transformed by anthropogenic impacts

### *Course organisation*

In the first part of the course, we jointly read selected texts that bring in distinct perspectives on climate change and the Anthropocene, respectively, in order to generate a common ground for discussion. These readings are also intended as well as in preparation for the guest lectures that address specific questions from each topic area. Class periods either are dedicated to a guest lecture or to class discussion of weekly texts assigned. Unless there is reason for re-organisation at some point in time, the course topics will follow the order of the headings set out above. Please look at the course schedule attached. In the second part of the course, students present drafts of their own research on topics agreed upon with the instructor at the beginning of the semester.

### *Student engagement and texts*

In the first part of the course, students weekly submit written responses to readings (up to half a page), including at least one question for the guest speaker of the week. Students also take turns in leading class discussions on the required readings of the week. (A schedule will be made up in the first week of classes.)

By the third week of classes students are required to meet with the instructor to discuss a topic for their research paper. An itemised, well-developed, outline of their paper project (including a one-page bibliography of relevant references) must be submitted by 1 October. Presentations of draft essays will be scheduled in the last three weeks of classes (depending on class size). Students are expected to revise their papers on the basis of the feedback received from members of the seminar as well as the instructor.

Texts for weekly class discussions are made available online. References to other texts that may be relevant for the preparation of research papers may be found in the bibliography that will continue to be built throughout the semester.

### **Grading**

Term paper (40%): An essay that focuses on climate change or the Anthropocene, written from the perspective of a recognised philosophical perspective, such as those listed under the headings above. The paper should be between 3,000 and 3,500 words long, double-spaced. It will function as a 'take-home exam' and will be due on the 10<sup>th</sup> of December, both as hard copy and uploaded to Brightspace. Late papers will only be accepted in the case for documented medical reasons or personal crisis. Further information on the paper will be made available at the beginning of the semester.

Outline (5%): An itemised, well-developed, outline (5%), including a one-page bibliography of relevant texts, should be handed in by 1 October. Outlines for topics that have not been discussed with me at least one week prior to the due date will not be accepted.

Class Presentations (40%): Two types of class discussions will be led by students. Marks will be based on quality of research and arguments presented, on appropriateness of the format of the presentations, and on leadership of class discussions.

- Presentation of assigned course readings (20%). In the first week of classes course readings will be divided up for presentation among class members.
- Seminar presentation of draft paper (20%). Draft papers should be made available to fellow class member a week before presentation date, so as to facilitate peer feedback. Feedback by seminar members, including the instructor's, is to be applied in the further development of the paper.

Weekly responses (10%): Weekly responses are submitted to the instructor as hard copy at the beginning of class discussion periods (Thursday of Monday, depending on the scheduled day for discussion of papers). Maximum grade for this component is 90% (A+). No late weekly responses will be accepted. The responses should be one paragraph long, reflecting on issues raised in the particular weekly readings. Once we turn to the presentation of draft papers of fellow students, responses should be in terms of constructive comments of those drafts.

Specifically, you are asked to formulate a question (including at least one question for the guest speaker of the week), offer a summary, or raise an objection in response to the week's reading. The function of this assignment is to aid your understanding and facilitate class discussion. You need to show that you are engaging with the reading, so perfunctory questions (such as, 'what's the argument on p. 99?', 'I don't understand such-and-such') do not count. Instead, if you want to write about a point you don't understand, you need to do the following: say *what you do* understand and then articulate *what is puzzling*, and *why*.<sup>iii</sup>

General participation (5%): Grades will be assigned on the basis of regular attendance, as well as degree of respectfulness, quality and thoughtfulness of comments, questions, and responses to lectures and class presentations. Maximum grade for this component is 90% (A+).

### Grading scale and interpretation

Percentages will convert to a letter grade according to the standard University scheme:

A+ = 90-100	B+ = 77-79	C+ = 65-69	D = 50-59
A = 85-89	B = 73-76	C = 60-64	F = 0-49
A- = 80-84	B- = 70-72		

#### *What the Grading Scale Means:*

- A+, A, or A-** Earned by work which is technically superior, shows mastery of the subject matter, and in the case of an A+ offers original insight and/or goes beyond course expectations. Normally achieved by a minority of students.
- B+, B, or B-** Earned by work that indicates a good comprehension of the course material, a good command of the skills needed to work with the course material, and the student's full engagement with the course requirements and activities. A B+ represents a more complex understanding and/or application of the course material. Normally achieved by the largest number of students.
- C+ or C** Earned by work that indicates an adequate comprehension of the course material and the skills needed to work with the course material and that indicates the student has met the basic requirements for completing assigned work and/or participating in class activities.
- D** Earned by work that indicates minimal command of the course materials and/or minimal participation in class activities that is worthy of course credit toward the degree.
- F** Work that is not worthy of course credit toward the degree.
- N** An N grade indicates that the student did not complete one or more of the course's five grading components (see above under 'Grading'). "N" is a failing grade and factors into the student's GPA as "0".

Interpretation of these grade definitions is up to the discretion of the instructor. If you receive a grade during the course that you believe is in error or unfair, please begin by discussing the matter with the instructor in a respectful, open-minded manner. Rest assured that if you still believe the grade that you received is in error or unfair you can appeal the matter to the chair of the department. For additional information regarding grades, please see the most recent edition of the *UVic Undergraduate Calendar*. All evaluations will be given in percentage scores. Letter grades and grade point scores are listed purely for reference.

### **Other matters**

#### *Late assignments and papers*

Late weekly assignments and late papers are only acceptable with documented medical reasons or personal crisis, which should be submitted with an explanatory statement in writing no more than three days after the deadline.

#### *Academic integrity and University academic regulations*

Plagiarism is not tolerated. Ignorance is no excuse. The University Calendar states that “Academic integrity requires commitment to the values of honesty, trust, fairness, respect, and responsibility and... Any action that contravenes this standard, including misrepresentation, falsification or deception, undermines the intention and worth of scholarly work and violates the fundamental academic rights of members of our community.”

In addition to plagiarism, violations of academic integrity include, multiple submissions, falsifying materials subject to academic evaluation, cheating on work, tests and examinations, unauthorized use of an editor, and aiding others to cheat. To avoid plagiarism and cheating please view the Libraries’ plagiarism guide <https://www.uvic.ca/library/research/citation/plagiarism/>. I reserve the right to use plagiarism detection software or other platforms to assess the integrity of student work.

Penalties for violations vary, with first violations generally resulting in a failing grade on the work. Please view [https://www.uvic.ca/calendar/undergrad/index.php#/policy/Sk\\_0xsM\\_V?bc=true&bcCurrent=08%20-%20Policy%20on%20Academic%20Integrity&bcGroup=Undergraduate%20Academic%20Regulations&bcItem=polices](https://www.uvic.ca/calendar/undergrad/index.php#/policy/Sk_0xsM_V?bc=true&bcCurrent=08%20-%20Policy%20on%20Academic%20Integrity&bcGroup=Undergraduate%20Academic%20Regulations&bcItem=polices). Also, please familiarise yourselves with Undergraduate Academic regulations here: <https://www.uvic.ca/calendar/future/undergrad/index.php#/policies>.

#### *Copyright statement*

All course content and materials are made available by instructors for educational purposes and for the exclusive use of students registered in the class. The material is protected under copyright law, even if not marked with a ©. Any further use or distribution of materials to others requires the written permission of the instructor, except under fair dealing or another exception in the Copyright Act. Violations may result in disciplinary action under the Resolution of Non-Academic Misconduct Allegations policy (AC1300). In cases that students are circulating materials without permission, they will be referred to the Chair of the Department for investigation.

#### *Technology in the classroom*

Some students require laptops or voice recognition apps for their learning strategies, so they are not prohibited in the classroom. However, studies demonstrate that multi-tasking reduces the performance of other nearby students, so anyone caught on social media, internet surfing, etc. may be asked to leave and potentially subject to disciplinary action.

#### *Inclusivity/diversity*

The Philosophy Department is committed to providing an environment for all students, staff, and faculty that is safe, inclusive, and respectful. We affirm the diverse identities of persons and the rights all individuals have to be treated with dignity and respect irrespective of their gender, race, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion, class, or national origin. This basic commitment entails, among other things, specific recognition and support for trans, queer, two-spirited, and non-binary people, and we respect individuals’ rights to self-determination and self-description. Information about UVic policies on human rights, equity, discrimination and harassment are available at [www.uvic.ca/calendar/undergrad/index.php#/policy/HkQ0pzdAN](https://www.uvic.ca/calendar/undergrad/index.php#/policy/HkQ0pzdAN). If you have any particular concerns about these matters in our course please don’t hesitate to contact me. Information regarding accommodation of religious observance can be located in the UVic Calendar at <https://www.uvic.ca/equity/education/religious/index.php>. Any student who has a need for religious accommodation during this course, please contact the instructor at the earliest point in time in the semester.

### *Student Mental Health Supports / UVic Support Connect*

Many, if not most, students experience some difficulties with their mental health during their years as students. This may especially be the case during the present Covid-19 times. It is hard to shake the stigma associated with problems like depression and anxiety, however, if at any point you believe that you could benefit from help with mental health issues, please contact the UVic Student Wellness Centre / UVic Support Connect. In addition to providing face to face help, they offer a 24 x 7 phone & online mental health counselling and support program, no matter where you are located, at any time. This is an excellent resource at your disposal on campus. They genuinely want to help, so *do consider taking advantage of this free resource.*

### *Health Services and Centre for Accessible Learning (CAL)*

A note to remind you to take care of yourself, especially in these times. Do your best to maintain a healthy lifestyle by eating well, exercising, getting enough sleep and taking some time to relax. This will help you achieve your goals and cope with stress. All of us benefit from support during times of struggle. You are not alone. The sooner you let any of these on-campus services know your needs the quicker they can assist you in achieving your learning goals. Resources include

- Counselling Services, at the Student Wellness Centre. See <https://www.uvic.ca/services/counselling/>.
- University Health Services (UHS) provides a full-service primary health clinic for students and coordinates healthy student and campus initiatives. <http://www.uvic.ca/services/health/>
- Students with diverse learning styles and needs are welcome in this course. In particular, if you have a disability/health consideration that may require accommodations, please feel free to approach me and/or the Center for Accessible Learning (CAL) as soon as possible. CAL staff members are available by appointment to assess specific needs, provide referrals, and arrange appropriate accommodations: <https://www.uvic.ca/services/cal/>. Please note that instructors cannot provide CAL-type accommodations without CAL documentation.

### *Important dates and academic advising*

Important dates for the 2021-2022 Academic Year are found here: <https://www.uvic.ca/calendar/dates/>. Please consult the Important Dates for information about last possible dates to withdraw from courses without penalty, examinations period start/end dates, etc. For information about declaring a program, academic concessions or interpreting your UVic CAPP report, please visit Undergraduate Advising or make an appointment with an advisor.

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<sup>i</sup> Plate XLII, Vue du Cayambé, in Humboldt, Alexander von (1810-1813), *Vues de cordillères et monumens des peuples indigènes de l'Amérique* (Paris: Schoell).

<sup>ii</sup> IPCC (2014), *Climate Change 2014: Synthesis Report*.

<sup>iii</sup> With thanks to professors Thomas Land and James Young for some of the wording.