

Economics, Ethics and the Environment: Syllabus

Econ 4999

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This syllabus is a work in progress.

Course Description

One intent is 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 behaviors, as in doing behavior A is ethical, doing behavior 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”, etc.

That *increasing efficiency is a good thing* is an ethic, that *the market is a good way to allocate resources and distribute goods and services* is an ethic

Quoting from Aldo Leopold (a famous, dead, environmentalist)

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. There are many different, and often conflicting, foundations for ethics: religious, to increase happiness/decrease pain, inalienable rights, precedent, 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 preferences 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; making them members (having moral standing) is an assumption one can choose to make or not make. That said, most economists assume, without thinking much about it, that only humans are members of society (probably because few non-human animals choose careers in economics).

As an aside, note that there is nothing that says all members 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 third time teaching this course.

In my defense, I have been thinking and playing with the issues for quite a while. I need your input and suggestions in terms of topics and presentation.

There is a lot of flexibility in terms of the material I present. I would like your input and suggestions.

My proposed objectives for the course (as of January 14, 2008) are pretty simple:

1. To make us think hard and long about economics and its foundations – make us think critically
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.

9.

Some proposed topics (in no special order) are:

- The basic philosophical underpinnings of economics (based on the welfare of individuals – people only? And which ones?)
- 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 importance of defining society in questions of efficiency and equity
- Animal rights: 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.
- 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?
- 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
- Animal factory farms

- 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 really do or don't agree with you). The objective is to make you think.

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 accomplish. A number of you have taken a course in environmental economics, some of you from me.

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 considers 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 historically 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 it is 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

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

They vary in length from a few newspaper columns to twenty-page journal articles.

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.

Each of you has a responsibility to help others improve their essays. When you turn in each of your paper assignments, you will also send me a separate note indicating the three people, or less, that helped you most to date with your essay, and how they helped you. When you turn in the final version of your essay, your added note will include your recommended grade for each of the people, three or less, who helped you.

You will grade your helpers on a scale of one to five, giving five points means that they, not you, are primarily responsible for your essay, one point meaning that they did something but not much (for example, they sent you an email, with a comment like “there is a typo on page 3” – hopefully your third-best helper will have done more than that). If an individual provides you with substantive help that substantively changed your essay for the better, they should probably get 3 points. A factor to consider in grading your helper is for how long did they provide help, from the beginning of the process or only at the last minute?

Helpers, consider both providing help in person and by email. If you email someone comments, email them to everyone in the class, including me.

This mentoring program has a number of goals: everyone effectively researches and works on more than two essay topics, you learn how to productively help others and how to productively receive help, and you help others to improve their research and essays. The interactions will hopefully make us all better thinkers and better writers.

I understand that everyone will not be satisfied with all of the aspects of the mentoring process.

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