

PHIL 2070, Philosophy of the Environment- 2017

Questions for the Final Exam

The exam will contain most of the questions below. There will be no surprise questions. I strongly recommend that you practice writing down your answers so that they are formulated concisely in advance. You will have two hours to complete the exam. Good luck studying!

A. Aesthetic value

1. Suppose that a patch of forest in Guelph called Hanlon Creek has been slated for industrial development. Your task is to present an argument to City Council, concluding that we have a moral duty to conserve Hanlon Creek on account of its high level of aesthetic value. Please outline that argument in premise-conclusion form. (3 points)
2. A popular way of dismissing your argument claims that beauty is merely in the eye of the beholder. On this view, it would be unfair to spend Guelph City funds on the protection of Hanlon Creek, because only a small segment of society appreciates its beauty. How might a philosopher respond to this argument? (3 points)
3. At the end of the day, how convincing is the argument from “beauty to duty.” Identify what you take to be a key strength or weakness of this argument. (3 points)

B. Scientific Misconduct

Scientists disagree about whether fish farms pose a serious risk to populations of wild salmon. Some studies report elevated levels of disease in wild salmon located close to fish farms; other studies report no such correlation.

4. Suppose that someone arguing in favour of fish farms was to dismiss the study that found elevated disease-levels, arguing that scientists failed to strictly adhere to the scientific method. In a short paragraph, briefly explain the flaw in this argument. Make sure to describe what the scientific method is and why it is not an adequate guideline for generating reliable scientific knowledge. (4 points)
5. Suppose that a critic of fish farms was to argue that studies indicating no elevated disease are untrustworthy, because the scientists who produced them are motivated by personal gain. First, which solution to the consumer problem is assumed by this argument? Second, in a short paragraph, briefly explain the flaw in this argument. (4 points)
6. Briefly explain how one might use the “at stake” rule to evaluate the conflicting reports about the link between disease and fish farming. (2 points)

C. Climate change and the precautionary principle

7. What are the ‘three levels’ of the climate change debate? Provide examples of questions that arise at each level (3 points).
8. Some environmentalists claim that legislation governing the use of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) should follow the precautionary principle. Since the threats to human health are large and irreversible, they argue, we should ban GMOs even though we are uncertain about whether they are indeed harmful. Briefly explain why someone who is trained in risk analysis would not find this argument convincing (4 points).

D. Environmental Economics

9. The economic approach to environmental decision making views the individual person as a bundle of stable preferences. An optimal decision, on this view, is one that maximises preference satisfaction for the majority of people who are impacted by it. Briefly outline an objection to each of these two assumptions (4 points).
10. The economic approach to valuing nature attempts to place a dollar value on ‘externalities’ (i.e. goods and services that are valuable to society, but which people do not pay a price to use or consume). Ecosystem services are presented as one type of externality. Economists attempt to calculate the dollar value of ecosystem services so that people who threaten them can be taxed accordingly. Briefly identify two objections that Sagoff raises against this approach (4 points)

E. Place based decision making

11. Briefly explain how Sagoff, in his chapter on the concept of place, defines what it means to be ‘natural’? (2 points)
12. The place-based approach to valuing nature, as it is outlined by Sagoff, suggests that values are rooted in particular regions. On this view, people must identify the unique nature and geography of a given region, and make an effort to preserve it. Identify one potential advantage of this approach as well as one of its drawbacks. (4 points).