

Ecotheological Ethics: Bios, Anthropos, Theos

Meadville Lombard Theological School

MLTS E455: Autumn 2006

Thursdays 1:30-4:30

Professor Michael Hogue

I. Overview: Object and Method

Gravity:

For various reasons, this time in the history of life is one of unparalleled promise and peril. Our increasing human capacity to intervene within and to alter the larger world of life presents us with grave practical challenges. Where in previous historical times the natural world was interpreted as a relatively stable backdrop to human behavior, contemporary human efficacy is now capable not only of radically altering but of possibly destroying the conditions necessary to sustain life. Further, new possibilities in genetic science and technology mean that human life has crossed a moral threshold from being not only an agent but also an object of technological change. Life, human and other-than-human, is more vulnerable than ever before. A multitude of theological and ethical implications attend these radical shifts in the scope and power of human action. The primary aim of this course is to bring the gravity of these implications to visibility in order better to respond to them.

Depth:

In addition, this course seeks to engage the challenges to life in our time through a deep hermeneutical dialectic. Hermeneutical depth is demanded by the degree of interpenetration among our ideas about animal, human and divine life. For example, how one considers the issue of biological diversity in any concrete situation, for example, is shaped by one's construal of the human relation to other forms of life. For religious thinkers and practitioners, this construal is in turn shaped by understandings of the character and action of the divine within the ordering of life. Once the gravity of life's vulnerability in our time is registered, adequate moral response needs to flow from an engagement with the deep connections binding descriptive and normative theories of the interrelation of life's forms.

Breadth:

The moral gravity of life's vulnerability and the deep hermeneutical structure of this course also require us to be concerned with broad theoretical issues. Responsible religious and moral life in a time of life's endangerment requires that we engage the methodological problem of how critically to think through the divergent ways that life itself is theorized, explored, explained, and understood. As our descriptive and normative accounts of the different forms of life are not hermetically isolated from one another, and thus demand deep critical interpretation, so our response to the various challenges to life cannot be filtered through a single disciplinary framework, and therefore require theoretical breadth. For too long the divisions between "the two-cultures" of scientific and humanistic inquiry, as C.P. Snow put it, have inhibited the development of complex theories that can trace the contact points, intersections, or multidimensional interactions among forms of thought and inquiry. Given the pressing nature of endangerments to life and the fact that this concern cuts across virtually every form of inquiry,

one of the pervasive themes of this course concerns how we conceive of knowledge and critical inquiry itself.

In sum:

This course is motivated to treat the subject of life's endangerment as a pressing theoretical and practical issue to which religious scholars have something to offer and to which religious leaders have a public responsibility to attend. Under the colossal challenges to life in our time, the densely interwoven meanings and values of natural, human, and divine life are highly contested. Deep religious, ethical, and political convictions condition both the public framing of the issues we face and our individual and social responses to them. This situation demands a rigorous application of thought in both our public and private lives. Religious scholars and practitioners, whose work spans so many fields of knowledge and contemporary life, are uniquely situated to undertake this work. This course is an invitation to life's most pressing work.

II. Structure and Evaluation

This course will be conducted as a seminar. I will lead the first half of each of our sessions with a lecture providing context for our discussion and raising important issues. The second half of each session will be dialogical. These dialogues will only be as rich as our individual and collective preparations. Thus each student is responsible to him- or herself as well as to the other students to come to class having read and reflected on the assigned texts as carefully as possible.

Our reading program reflects the sequencing of concepts in the title of this course and the dialectical hermeneutic discussed above. We will begin by reading selections from Jewish philosopher Hans Jonas, who provides an especially rich account of life's vulnerability in a time of radical technology and then develops an ethical response through an existential reading of biological theory. From Jonas, who charts particularly interesting connections between human and non-human organismic life, we will move to Donna Haraway. Of particular interest for us in Haraway's work will be her account of the human, or her anthropology. We will work through the points of contact and difference between Jonas and Haraway in order to prepare the way for James Gustafson's much more self-consciously theological construal of the connections between bios, anthropos and theos. From each of these authors we will attempt to surface and critically assess the deep metaphors for life that organize their projects. And finally, we will look to the work of Albert Borgmann, a philosopher of technology who presents us with some generative concepts for thinking through the religious life in a time of technological saturation. All together, these thinkers and texts will provide us a fecund site for thinking and discussion and germinate our own constructive theological and philosophical work.

Reflection papers (1-3 pp.) will be assigned for each reading and should be electronically circulated among the students no later than Wednesday evening before class. Organizing questions for these papers will be isolated during class. A final project, a constructive paper or a creative offering, will be due no later than the end of eleventh week. The details of my expectations for these projects will be offered later in the course. Examples of creative projects include but are not limited to the construction of an RE curriculum, a workshop or retreat design, a sermon and liturgy, a series of poems, a dramatic or musical piece. Whether you choose the constructive paper or the creative option, you will be expected to demonstrate understanding of

the issues and concepts in the course and critical thinking about them. The eleventh week due date keeps student interests primarily in mind. Mainly for your benefit, MLTS strongly discourages late submissions of papers and requests for extensions.

Student evaluation will be based on your in-class participation, your brief reflection papers, and the final project. Ten percent of your grade will be based on attendance and in-class work, forty percent will be granted to your reflection papers (five percent for each, a total of eight reflections), and fifty percent to your final.

NOTE: You are responsible for reading H. G. Wells's short novel, *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, prior to the first session. This will allow us to move more quickly together into our work, will provide a framing story to which we will refer periodically through the course, and will serve as an illustration of how creatively to present and provoke thinking about the complex issues in our course.

III. Bibliography

*HG Wells, *The Island of Dr. Moreau*

*Hans Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life (selections), The Imperative of Responsibility (selections)*

*Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*

*James Gustafson, *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective, 2 vols., (selections)*

*Albert Borgmann, *Power Failure: Christianity in the Culture of Technology*

IV. Course Calendar

Week One (September 28): Introduction; Wells; and *The Forms of Life* (synopses of Jonas, Haraway, Gustafson, and Borgmann)

Week Two (October 5): Jonas: *Problem and Method: An Existential Interpretation of Bios*

*Read: Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility*, Ch. 1 (pp. 1-24); *The Phenomenon of Life*, Foreword (pp. xi-xxiv), Introduction (pp. 1-6), Second Essay (pp. 38-58), Third Essay (pp. 64-92), Fourth Essay (pp. 99-107).

Week Three (October 12): Jonas's *Organic Metaphysics of Responsibility (from Bios to Anthropos)*, and the Question of Theological Myth (*Theos*)

Read: Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, Ninth Essay (pp. 211-234), Eleventh Essay (pp. 262-281), Epilogue (pp. 282-284); *The Imperative of Responsibility*, Chs. 4 and 5 (pp. 79-135).

Week Four (October 19): Haraway: Problem and Method (The Artefactual Character of Bios and Anthropos)

Read: Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, Introduction (pp. 1-4), Ch. 1 (pp. 7-20), Ch. 3 (pp. 43-68), Ch. 4 (pp. 71-80)

Week Five (October 26): Haraway's Manifesto: The Politics of Being Hybrid

Read: Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, Chs. 7-10 (pp. 127-230).

Week Six (November 2): Gustafson: Problem and Method

Read: Gustafson, *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective*, Vol. I, Chs. 1-3 (pp. 1-156)

Week Seven (November 9): Gustafson's Fundamental Ideas and Imperative

Read: Gustafson, *ETP*, Vol. I, Chs. 5-7 (pp. 195-342) ; Vol. II, Ch. 1 (pp. 1-24), Ch. 9 (pp. 279-322)

Week Eight (November 16): Borgmann: Problem, Method and Concepts: On Technos, Bios, Anthropos

Read: Borgmann, *Power Failure*, Introduction (pp. 7-10), Part I (pp. 11-62).

Week Nine (November 23): Thanksgiving Recess

Week Ten (November 30): Borgmann's Constructive Vision: Focal Concerns and Practices

Read: Borgmann, *PF*, Part II (pp. 65-128).

Week Eleven: Summaries of Papers and Student Projects (an informal extended class session).