Social Studies 68EA

Engaged Philosophy: The Theory and Practice of Altruism

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**Life’s most persistent and urgent question is, “What are you doing for others?” –Martin Luther King, Jr.**

Many people feel that it is important to make the world a better place and to help others. This altruistic mission sounds like a noble goal, but like all missions, it requires thoughtful planning and reflection. The main question this course will address is “What is altruism?” We will approach this question from a variety of interdisciplinary perspectives: biology, psychology, political theory, and moral philosophy. Are we naturally altruistic, or are all actions in some sense selfish? How do we know when we are helping others? What is charity, or philanthropy, and what role does it play in a functioning democracy? Should we rely on charity to solve significant social problems? We will spend a good portion of the course on the “effective altruism” movement, which aims to maximize the amount of good that each of us can do. How are these calculations made? What sorts of problems can be alleviated by giving away money? What are some problems with this approach? More importantly, who are effective altruists, and how do they live their lives? We will read stories of people who earn money for the sake of giving it away, people who have donated kidneys to strangers, people who adopted over 20 children, and many other examples that illustrate (or not!) different ways of being altruistic. The ultimate goal of this course is to think about what it means to help not just theoretically, but also in practice.

Engaged Scholarship

A main goal of this course is for students to participate in and reflect upon practices of helping others (whether humans or animals). Students will be required to volunteer in a PBHA or other community-based program for a minimum of two hours a week (inclusive of travel) for at least ten weeks. Examples might include volunteering at a homeless shelter, animal shelter, at-risk youth tutoring, and such. Other volunteering jobs will be considered as long as they involve interacting with others outside of Harvard in an already extant organization whose aim is to help others in need.

In order to maximize potential for engaging in the complexity of our class discussions around how “help” is conceived and enacted, students’ volunteering can take a variety of forms. It could include face-to-face interactions, but also necessary tasks like cleaning floors, restocking supplies, basic accounting, etc. These experiences will feed into weekly journal entries, class discussions, and a final project that asks students to think about questions such as “Is this the most good I can do?” Is the “glow” I feel when serving food at a soup kitchen what is valuable about that experience, or should I instead focus on tasks that are often left unattended to? These questions will extend beyond particular volunteer experiences and allow students to think not only about how they can best help in the soup kitchen, but also to be able to articulate whether and why the soup kitchen is the place where their help is most needed.

The ultimate goal of the course is to help students understand the power they have to contribute to solutions for significant problems in both local and global communities. This is why, as Peter Singer claims, “altruism changes sometimes quite dramatically the lives of those who take courses in it.”

Requirements and grading:

1. Participation: 30%: this includes:
   1. Attendance and participation in class discussion
   2. Weekly (one-page) assignments which will require reflecting on one’s own actions and experiences.
   3. Participation in some altruistic activity (as described above).
   4. Panel attendance: “Engaged Scholarship and the Good Life”
   5. Final Class Presentation
2. Mid-Term Essay (4-6 pages): 30% due April 20
3. Final Essay (6-10 pages): 40% due May 11

Reading List:

Please note that the readings for this course contain potentially distressing material. Also note that the syllabus is very tentative and may change as the course progresses. There are only two books that we will be reading in their entirety (or close to it):

1. Larissa MacFarquhar’s *Strangers Drowning*;
2. William MacAskill’s *Doing Good Better*.

All other readings will be available via Hollis or the course website.

**Week 1**: (January 27) Introduction and course overview; discussion of terms—what is altruism?

**Week 2**: (February 3) Is altruism a moral goal, or perhaps the moral goal in life? We will look at stories of altruists and consider whether the moral goal of helping others is compatible with the good life.

*Strangers Drowning*, pp. 3-40

Susan Wolf, “Moral Saints,” *Journal of Philosophy* 1982 (419-439).

Vanessa Carbonell, “What Moral Saints look like,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 2009 (371-398).

**Week 3**: (February 10) Duties to help: a closer examination of our moral duties to help others (humans and animals).

*Strangers Drowning* pp. 41-69.

Peter Singer, “Famine, Affluence, Morality,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1972 (229-243).

Peter Unger*, Living High and Letting Die*, Chapter 2.

**Week 4**: (February 24) Is helping others natural?

*Strangers Drowning*, pp. 103-117.

Elliott Sober, “The ABC’s of Altruism,” in *Altruism and Altruistic Love*.

Isen, A. and P. Levin, “Effect of Feeling Good on Helping: Cookies and Kindness,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 1972 (384–388).

Darley and Batson, “From Jerusalem to Jericho: A Study of Situational and Dispositional Variables in Helping Behavior,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 1973.

Frank, Gilovich, and Regan, “Does Studying Economics Inhibit Cooperation?,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 1993.

Daniel Batson, “Addressing the Altruism Question Experimentally,” in *Altruism and Altruistic Love*.

**Week 5**: (March 2) The urgency to give: Class visit with Julia Wise

*Strangers Drowning* pp. 71-102

Elizabeth Ashford, “Severe Poverty as an Unjust Emergency,” in *The Ethics of Giving: Philosophers' Perspectives on Philanthropy* 2018.

Peter Railton, “Alienation, Consequentialism, and the Demands of Morality,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1984.

**Week 6**: (March 9) The Pitfalls of Giving

Rob Reich, *Just Giving: Why Philanthropy is failing Democracy and how it can do Better*, Chapters 2 and 3.

“Why Shouldn’t New York’s Wealthiest P.T.A.’s Share with its Neediest Schools?,” Nytimes.com January 2020.

Anand Giridharardes*, Winners Take All: The Elite Charade of Changing the World*, Prologue and Chapters 1, 2, and 7, pp. 3-59 and 201-244.

Optional: Michael Maren, *The Road to Hell*, 1997, pp. 13-41

Raymond Bonner, “Bad Samaritans,” NYtimes.com 1997.

**Week 7**: (March 23) Are some people naturally more empathetic than others? How much should these feelings matter?

Jamil Zaki, *The War for Kindness: Building Empathy in a Fractured World*, Introduction, Chapters 1, 2, and Epilogue.

Paul Bloom*, Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion,*Chapters 1 and 4.

Peter Singer, Forum Response “Against Empathy,” *Boston Review* 2014.

*Strangers Drowning*, pp. 189-203.

bell hooks, *Love as the Practice of Freedom*.

**Week 8**: (March 30) Effective Altruism

William MacAskill, *Doing Good Better*, pp. 1-99 (Part I, Chapters 1-6).

**Week 9**: (April 6) Effective Altruism continued

MacAskill, pp. 101-199 (Part II, Chapters 7-10 and Conclusion).

Nick Beckstead, “A Brief Argument for the Overwhelming Importance of Shaping the Far Future,” in *Effective Altruism: Philosophical Issues* 2019.

**Week 10**: (April 13) Effective Altruism and its Critics

Jennifer Rubenstein, "The Lessons of Effective Altruism," *Ethics and International Affairs* 2016.

Leif Weinar, “Poverty is no pond: Challenges for the Affluent,” in *Giving Well: The Ethics of Philanthropy* 2011.

Serene Khader, “Why are Poor Women Poor?,” NyTimes.com 2019.

*Strangers Drowning* pp. 223-268

Optional: Paul Gomberg, “The Fallacy of Philanthropy,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 2002.

**Week 11**: (April 20) Effective Altruism and Its Critics Continued

Jefferson MacMahan, “Philosophical Critiques of Effective Altruism,” *The Philosophers Magazine* 2016.

Emily Clough, “Effective Altruism’s Political Blind Spot,” *Boston Review* 2015.

Iason Gabriel, “Effective Altruism and its Critics,” *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 2017.

*Strangers Drowning*, pp. 283-301.

**Week 12**: (April 27) Conclusion and class presentations

**Academic Integrity**

Discussion and the exchange of ideas are an essential part of intellectual engagement. For assignments in this course, you are encouraged to discuss the readings with your classmates; to consult with your classmates on the choice of paper topics; and to share sources. You may find it useful to discuss your chosen topic with your peers, particularly if you are working on the same topic as a classmate’s. You should ensure that any written work you submit for evaluation, however, is the result of your own research and writing, and reflects your own understanding and approach to the topic. You must also adhere to standard citation practices in the social sciences (broadly conceived) and properly cite any books, articles, websites, lectures, or other sources that have helped you with your work. If you received any help with your writing (feedback on drafts, for example), you must also acknowledge that assistance. In short, you are expected to observe the Harvard College Honor Code:

Members of the Harvard College community commit themselves to producing academic work of integrity—that is, work that adheres to the scholarly and intellectual standards of accurate attribution of sources, appropriate collection and use of data, and transparent acknowledgement of the contributions of others to their ideas, discoveries, interpretations, and conclusions. Cheating on exams or problem sets, plagiarizing or misrepresenting the ideas or language of someone else as one’s own, falsifying data, or any other instance of academic dishonesty violates the standards of our community as well as the standards of the wider world of learning and affairs.

**Laptop Policy:**Laptops and other electronic devices are strongly discouraged in class. Please talk to me if this poses a problem in any way.