ETHICSOC 155: THE ETHICS AND POLITICS OF EFFECTIVE ALTRUISM*
Stanford University
Spring 2018: T, Th 3:00–4:20 pm
Lane Hall, 200-205

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

What is an ethical career? What do we owe to strangers—especially those stuck in desperate poverty abroad? Is it wrong to eat meat? What are the best charitable causes, and what are the best ways to support them? When, and how, should an ethical person engage in politics? These are key questions in practical ethics, a branch of philosophy that attempts to identify the best reasons for acting.

"Effective altruism" (EA), an emergent school of thought, offers a clear and attractive framework for answering these questions. It holds that we should try to do the most that we can for the whole world, and that we should do so on the basis of careful reasoning and reliable evidence. In a short amount of time, effective altruism has also become a popular social movement, offering numerous resources for reflecting on, and discharging, our duties to others.

But effective altruists striving to change the world have also found themselves embroiled in conflict with proponents of different schools of thought. Alternative perspectives on practical ethics reject or qualify its underlying premises. Meanwhile, several social scientists challenge effective altruism's understanding of social phenomena (e.g., poverty) as drastically oversimplified and potentially harmful.

This course examines the theoretical assumptions behind effective altruism, its internal debates, external criticisms, and rival alternatives. We explore these topics in part by focusing on case studies that highlight different elements of the EA approach to pressing social issues: organ donation, career choice, animal treatment, and, especially, global poverty. Guest lecturers, including prominent advocates and critics of effective altruism, may also be added to the program, schedule-permitting.

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* This course satisfies the Ethical Reasoning (ER) Ways of Thinking/Ways of Doing requirement.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

This is a course in "interdisciplinary ethics," meaning ethical theory that interacts closely with social science. The course strives to engage students with no familiarity with ethical or social scientific inquiry as well as advanced students with particular interests in the subject matter. At its most general level, the course aims to cultivate the capacity for practical reasoning, through analytical reading, facilitated discussion, and writing exercises. Students will leave the course having honed their skills at analyzing and evaluating arguments, at deliberating productively in group settings, and at writing persuasively. Specifically, the course aims to equip students to develop their own theoretical perspectives on how to adjudicate ethical disputes, and how to integrate empirical evidence into ethical decision-making. Students will also develop their own well-reasoned viewpoints on specific ethical controversies.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Undergraduates: 4-unit option

- Paper 1, 500 words, due Apr. 22 (10%)
- Paper 2, 1000 words, due May 13 (20%)
- Paper 3, 2000 words, due June 3 (30%)
- Final exam, June 9 (25%)
- Participation (15%)

Undergraduates: 5-unit option

- Paper 1, 750 words, due Apr. 22 (10%)
- Paper 2, 2000 words, due May 13 (20%)
- Paper 3, 2500 words, due June 3 (30%)
- Final exam (25%)
- Participation (15%)

Postgraduates: long-paper option

- 6000-word paper, due June 3 (85%)
- Participation (15%)

Postgraduates: short-paper option

- Paper 1, 750 words, due Apr. 22 (15%)
- Paper 2, 2500 words, due May 13 (30%)
- Paper 3, 2500 words, due June 3 (40%)
- Participation (15%)

REQUIRED TEXTS (FOR PURCHASE)

James Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, 8th edn. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2015)*

Will MacAskill, *Doing Good Better: Effective Altruism and How You Can Make a Difference* (New York: Gotham Books, 2015)

Peter Singer, *The Most Good You Can Do: How Effective Altruism is Changing Ideas About Living Ethically* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015)

J.J.C. Smart and Bernard Williams, *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1973)

Other assigned readings are available online or uploaded to Canvas

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* Note: Earlier (and cheaper) editions of the Rachels are acceptable alternatives, going as far back as the 4th edition.

COURSE TOPIC OUTLINE AND READING ASSIGNMENTS *(subject to change)*

Apr. 3   Course Overview and Expectations

Peter Singer, "The Logic of Effective Altruism," *Boston Review* forum, July 6, 2015
William Schambra, "The Coming Showdown Between Philanthrolocalism and Effective Altruism," *Philanthropy Daily*, May 22, 2014

Apr. 5   Effective Altruism: Basic Ideas

Will MacAskill, *Doing Good Better*, pp. 1–25
Peter Singer, *The Most Good You Can Do*, pp. 3–20
Robert Mark Simpson, "Moral Renegades," *New Rambler Review*, July 12, 2016

Apr. 10   (How) Is Moral Argument Possible?

James Rachels, *Elements of Moral Philosophy*, pp. 1–62
Helena de Bres, "The Pink Guide to Philosophy"

Apr. 12   Consequentialism: Promoting Value

James Rachels, *Elements of Moral Philosophy*, pp. 99–125
Philip Pettit, "Consequentialism," Philosophy Bites podcast, Sept. 11, 2011

Apr. 17   Case Study in Decision Theory: What's an Ethical Career Choice?

Will MacAskill, *Doing Good Better*, pp. 147–78
Peter Singer, *The Most Good You Can Do*, pp. 23–68
Skim the website 80000hours.org
Tom Cutterham (ed.), "The Ethical Careers Debate," *Oxford Left Review* 7 (May 2012): 4–9

Apr. 19   Workshop on Philosophical Writing

Helena de Bres, "The Pink Guide to Philosophy"
William Strunk, Jr., *The Elements of Style* (Ithaca, N.Y.: W.P. Humphrey, 1918)
Other readings TBA

Apr. 22   Paper 1 due by midnight

Apr. 24   How Much Does Morality Demand?

Peter Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 1, no. 3 (1972): 229–43
Peter Singer, *The Most Good You Can Do*, pp. 67–74

Apr. 26   Integrity and Sacrifice

Bernard Williams, "A Critique of Utilitarianism," in Smart and Williams, *Utilitarianism: For and Against*, 77–150

Judith Lichtenberg, "[Peter Singer's Extremely Altruistic Heirs](#)," *The New Republic,* Nov. 30, 2015

May 1   Case Study in Assessing Evidence: What's the Best Charity?

Peter Singer, *The Most Good You Can Do*, pp. 149–64
Will MacAskill, *Doing Good Better*, pp. 103–27
Skim the website [GiveWell.org](#)

May 3   The Complexities of Social Science

Leif Wenar, "[Poverty is No Pond: Challenges for the Affluent](#)," in Patricia Illingworth, Thomas Pogge & Leif Wenar (eds.), *Giving Well: The Ethics of Philanthropy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 104–32
Daron Acemoglu, "[The Logic of Effective Altruism: Response](#)," *Boston Review*, July 1, 2015
Angus Deaton, "[The Logic of Effective Altruism: Response](#)," *Boston Review*, July 1, 2015
Emily Clough, "[Effective Altruism's Political Blind Spot](#)," *Boston Review*, July 14, 2015

May 8   What Makes a Life Go Well?

Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 54–86
Emma Saunders-Hastings, "[The Logic of Effective Altruism: Response](#)," July 1, 2015
Monique Deveaux, "[The Global Poor as Agents of Justice](#)," *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 12, no. 2 (2015): 125–50

May 10 What about Rights?

James Rachels, *Elements of Moral Philosophy*, pp. 126–46
Thomas Pogge, "[Are We Violating the Human Rights of the World's Poor](#)?" *Yale Human Rights and Development Law Journal* 14 (2011): 1–33

May 13   Paper 2 due by midnight

May 15 Morality as Social Contract

James Rachels, *Elements of Moral Philosophy*, pp. 82–98
T.M. Scanlon, "[Contractualism and Utilitarianism](#)," in his *The Difficulty of Tolerance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 124–50

May 17 Who Matters? The Case of Animals

[Meet Your Meat](#) (film), dir. Bruce Friedrich and Cem Akin (PETA, 2002)
Peter Singer, "[Equality for Animals](#)?" in his *Practical Ethics,* 3rd edn. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 48–70
Roger Scruton, "[Eating Our Friends](#)," from his *A Political Philosophy* (London: Continuum, 2006), 47–64

May 22 Charity versus Justice

Will Kymlicka, "Altruism in Philosophical and Ethical Traditions: Two Views," in *Between State and Market: Essays on Charities Law and Policy in Canada*, ed. Jim Phillips, Bruce Chapman, and David Stevens (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2001), 87–126

May 24 The Moral Division of Labor

Leif Wenar, "Justice and Charity: Roles, Rawls, and Rights" (unpublished ms.)
Barbara Herman, "The Scope of Moral Requirement," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 30, no. 3 (2001): 227–56

May 29 Political Activism

Will MacAskill, *Doing Good Better*, pp. 79–99
Jeff Stout, *Blessed Are the Organized: Grassroots Democracy in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), selections TBA
Steven Teles and Mark Schmitt, "The Elusive Craft of Evaluating Advocacy," *Stanford Social Innovation Review* (Summer 2011): 39–43

May 31 General Critiques

Iason Gabriel, "Effective Altruism and Its Critics," *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 34, no. 4 (2017): 457–73
Jennifer Rubenstein, "The Lessons of Effective Altruism," *Ethics & International Affairs* 30, no. 4 (2016): 511–26

June 3   Paper 3 due by midnight

June 5   Responses to the Critics

John Halstead et al., "Effective Altruism: An Elucidation and Defence," Centre for Effective Altruism, April 14, 2017
Jeff McMahan, "Philosophical Critiques of Effective Altruism," *The Philosophers' Magazine* 73 (2016): 92–9

June 9   Final exam, 3:30–6:30pm

COURSE POLICIES

Essays and Exams

My grading practices strive to reward effort and thoughtfulness, rather than prior knowledge or inherent ability. This is because I hope to encourage students to develop their capacities for practical reasoning and to pursue additional opportunities for further study in ethics.

Essays. Though the papers offer students the opportunity to develop their own positions, I recommend thinking of these as self-contained exercises in philosophical writing—neither personal reflections nor research papers. Essay prompts will be distributed in advance. We will devote significant class time to discussing what makes for successful writing in philosophy—and how practicing these skills also pays off in other settings. I look forward to meeting students in office hours to discuss their essay ideas (or lack thereof). I will grade each paper against a rubric distributed in the first few weeks of class.

Rewrites. Students who receive a grade of B or lower on the second paper will have the option to rewrite it. The revision will be due one week after initial papers are returned. The revision will then count for two-thirds of the total grade for the second paper. The option to revise applies to the second paper only.

Exam. The final exam is cumulative and is meant to reward persistent engagement with the course readings. It consists of a mixture of short-answer questions, asking students to identify and explain the significance of major concepts that emerge in the readings, and short-essay questions, asking students to develop brief but well-reasoned arguments about controversies we have studied. There will be some choice in the questions to which students must respond.

Preparation and Participation

Preparation. Students should come to class having carefully read the assigned readings for that class session in advance. Reading papers in a philosophy course requires different methods than is customary in other settings. In certain cases, you may need to read a piece twice in order to analyze and evaluate it. We will review how to analyze and evaluate a philosophical paper.

Participation. Students will be assessed on the quality of their participation over the length of the course. This includes thoughtful participation in class discussions. We will review in class what it means to participate thoughtfully, taking special care to provide speaking opportunities for introverted students and to train more energetic students in the art of discretion. Each week students will also submit discussion questions based on the readings. I will incorporate some of these questions into our conversations. The quality of these questions will form part of the participation grade. You may choose to skip submitting discussion questions for one week of your choice.

Attendance and Lateness

Attendance. Attendance is mandatory at all but one of the class sessions. (One absence is excused with no questions asked.) Absences beyond this will only be excused in the event of reasonably unforeseeable and unavoidable scheduling conflicts. The student will be asked to provide evidence that the conflict was in fact unforeseeable and unavoidable.

Extensions. Paper deadline extensions of 48 hours are available with no questions asked, but only if the student requests the extension at least 48 hours in advance. Unexcused late papers will be docked one-third of a letter grade per day (or portion thereof) past the deadline.

Students with Documented Disabilities

Students who may need an academic accommodation based on the impact of a disability must initiate the request with the Office of Accessible Education (OAE). Professional staff will evaluate the request with required documentation, recommend reasonable accommodations, and prepare an Accommodation Letter for faculty dated in the current quarter in which the request is being made. Students should contact the OAE as soon as possible since timely notice is needed to coordinate accommodations. The OAE is located at 563 Salvatierra Walk (phone: 723-1066, URL: http://oae.stanford.edu).

Laptops: Discouraged, but Allowed

In light of the mounting evidence that electronic devices in the classroom undermine educational outcomes, many instructors now allow these devices only in exceptional circumstances, namely when a student has a documented disability that requires the aid of an electronic device. In my view, however, limiting electronic devices to students with documented disabilities violates the privacy of these very students. It effectively forces students with disabilities to reveal their disability status to their peers. I believe that disabled students have an overriding interest in controlling whether and how they communicate their disability status publicly. A no-laptops policy fails to show equal respect for these students, and the failure of equal respect outweighs concerns about the destructive tendencies of electronic devices.

I conclude, therefore, that all students are permitted to use electronic devices. In return I expect that students will abide by an honor system to limit the quantity and scope of this use to reading and note-taking.

The Stanford University Fundamental Standard

The Stanford University Fundamental Standard is a part of this course. It is Stanford's statement on student behavioral expectations articulated by Stanford's first President David Starr Jordan in 1896. It is agreed to by every student who enrolls at Stanford. The Fundamental Standard states: "Students at Stanford are expected to show both within and without the university such respect for order, morality, personal honor and the rights of others as is demanded of good citizens. Failure to do this will be sufficient cause for removal from the university." Penalties for violation of the Fundamental Standard can be serious (e.g., suspension, and even expulsion). *So, re-read the Fundamental Standard, understand it and abide by it.*

The Stanford University Honor Code

The Stanford University Honor Code is a part of this course. It is Stanford's statement on academic integrity first written by Stanford students in 1921. It articulates university expectations of students and faculty in establishing and maintaining the highest standards in academic work. It is agreed to by every student who enrolls and by every instructor who accepts appointment at Stanford. The Honor Code states:

> The Honor Code is an undertaking of the students, individually and collectively that they will not give or receive aid in examinations; that they will not give or receive unpermitted aid in class work, in the preparation of reports, or in any other work that is to be used by the instructor as the basis of grading; that they will do their share and take an active part in seeing to it that others as well as

themselves uphold the spirit and letter of the Honor Code. The faculty on its part manifests its confidence in the honor of its students by refraining from proctoring examinations and from taking unusual and unreasonable precautions to prevent the forms of dishonesty mentioned above. The faculty will also avoid, as far as practicable, academic procedures that create temptations to violate the Honor Code. While the faculty alone has the right and obligation to set academic requirements, the students and faculty will work together to establish optimal conditions for honorable academic work.

Penalties for violation of the Honor Code can be serious (e.g., suspension, and even expulsion). *So, re-read the Honor Code, understand it and abide by it.*

Plagiarism

In order to clarify what is regarded as plagiarism, the Board on Judicial Affairs adopted the following statement on May 22, 2003:

> For purposes of the Stanford University Honor Code, plagiarism is defined as the use, without giving reasonable and appropriate credit to or acknowledging the author or source, of another person's original work, whether such work is made up of code, formulas, ideas, language, research, strategies, writing or other form(s).

If you are in doubt about what constitutes plagiarism in the context of a particular assignment, talk with the instructor.

Additional Writing Resources

Hume Center (hume.stanford.edu): "The Hume Center offers free one-to-one writing tutorials to students at any stage of the writing process and for any written or digital media assignment. Students can make an appointment via our online appointment system or drop-in during our opening hours. In addition to our tutoring services, we offer tailored support for students applying to Introductory Seminars, taking Writing in the Major courses, or completing Honors theses."