

Effective Altruism

CORE 2994 D01 Fall 2016

Instructors

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Course Description

This course explores the ethical and economic underpinnings of the effective altruism movement. Effective altruists use reason and evidence to address the question: How can I help others as much as possible? In this course we study the philosophical and statistical thinking that informs the choices of effective altruists. Students will combine qualitative and quantitative methodologies to compare various options for achieving social justice goals such as eliminating poverty and reducing inequality. Students will become acquainted with central aspects of a range of ethical considerations that arise around the call to help and they will have the opportunity to apply those considerations to their own behavior.

Required texts

MacAskill, W. 2015. *Doing Good Better*. New York: Avery

Bannerjee, A. and E. Duflo 2011. *Poor Economics*. New York: Public Affairs

Moore, D. and W. Notz 2014. *Statistics: Concepts and Controversies (Eighth Edition)*. New York: W. H. Freeman and Company

Miguel, E. & M. Kremer 2004. [Worms: Identifying Impacts on Education and Health in the Presence of Treatment Externalities](#), *Econometrica* Vol. 72, No. 1, pp 159-217.

Software note: We will use Microsoft Excel for some assignments.

Primary Teaching and Learning methods

This course will involve a variety of teaching/learning methods including brief lectures, large and small group discussions, online activities, short videos, formal & informal quizzes, reading reflections, problem sets, Excel work, paper outlines, and formal papers.

Attendance policy

The quality of learning of the class as a whole depends on the engaged and prepared attendance of each class member. Because of that, attendance is required. Each unexcused absence will result in the reduction of your final grade in the course by one full letter (for example, from an A- to a B-). If you miss more than two classes you may fail the course.

Late Work Policy

Late reading reflections and course activities will not be accepted for credit. Papers that arrive late will not be accepted for credit unless you have contacted us in advance and we have granted an extension. You must turn in both papers in order to receive a passing grade in the class.

Respect and Inclusion

We request students use respectful language and think about creating an inclusive classroom. In terms of respect, we ask that people be sensitive to not use language that intentionally demeans or is otherwise hurtful to individuals or groups. We realize one is not always aware of what language is and is not hurtful. Our class will explore and respect diverse ideas, experiences, values, and communication styles. All comments deserve respectful hearings. You are not pressured to agree with everything others say, but you are expected to respectfully listen to others' views and experiences and make changes accordingly. Also realize that intent does not equal impact. We can offend each other without intending to. Should that happen, We trust appropriate apologies will be offered.

The classroom will be a safe and inclusive environment suitable for students from varying and diverse backgrounds.

- Safety versus comfort
 - We aim to create a safe environment for learning new and challenging ideas.
 - A safe environment, however, is not where we are always comfortable.
 - Being challenged and made uncomfortable is an important part of the learning process.
- Personal experiences and academic rigor
 - It can be helpful, and indeed, it is encouraged to bring up personal experiences in academic discussions. Always try to tie them to the ideas and materials being discussed as other people can learn a lot from these experiences.

Assessments

Engagement In Class

You are expected to come to class prepared to discuss the reading assigned for that day and to engage in the discussion of topics that arise during class sessions.

Reading Reflections

You will submit reading reflections on each chapter of the readings for the course. In these reflections, you will respond to these four questions:

- What is the main point of the chapter(s)?
- What was the biggest takeaway for you?
- What is the biggest question you have about the material in the chapter(s)?
- How does this reading connect to other material from the course?

Your reflections for each chapter of reading should run around 250 words. These reflections will be due before the reading will be discussed.

Problem Sets

Problems sets are opportunities for you to develop your statistics skill set. Often the problem sets are due *before* we discuss the material. This is intentional. The problem sets are designed to get you engaged with the ideas of a topic before we work on it in class. The problem sets will therefore be graded based on making a genuine effort to complete the assignment (not on whether or not your answers are correct). Explaining (in detail) where you got stuck and what you tried can count as genuine effort.

Quizzes

There are three take-home quizzes. You may *not* give or receive assistance from other students in the class on these quizzes. You may not receive assistance from anyone other than Professor West. The *minimum* punishment for violating these rules is receiving a zero on the quiz. Please refer to the academic honesty statement in your student handbook. The penalty for taking quizzes late is -10% of the grade for each day late. There is no penalty for taking quizzes early.

Class Activities

You will respond in writing to a variety of prompts on D2L and in class. Some of these will ask you to engage in and reflect on activities outside of class. Others will ask you to reflect on and/or explain material we covered in prior classes. Your written responses to these prompts should run around 250 words.

Paper Check-in

You'll schedule a meeting with us at some point over the semester to talk about your paper. In this meeting we will discuss anything you'd like to do with your papers, including ideas you have for your paper, thoughts you have about the material you'll use, an outline of your paper, or even a draft. Just let us know in advance what you'd like to talk about in connection with your paper and arrange a time that works for you to meet.

Paper

You will turn in one formal paper for the course. In this paper you will respond to prompts in the final chapter of MacAskill's *Doing Good Better* (202-204). You will present a formal thesis, a well developed and well reasoned argument in support of your thesis, a detailed objection to your argument, and a thoughtful response to that objection. You can find helpful advice for writing a paper of this kind along with a template in the "Course Info" section of our D2L site.

Grading Weights

Engagement: 10%

Reading Reflections: 15%

Problem Sets: 15%

Quizzes: 25%

Class Activities: 5%

Paper check-in: 5%

Paper: 25%

Grading Scheme

Final grades will be assigned according to the following scheme:

A: >92

B+: 87-89

C+: 77-79

D: 63-69

A-: 90-92

B: 83-86

C: 73-76

D-:60-62

B-: 80-82

C-: 70-72

F: <60

Disabilities Resources/Requests for Accommodations

Classroom accommodations will be provided for qualified students with documented disabilities. Students are required to contact the O’Neill Center for Academic Development about accommodations for their courses within the first two weeks of the term. Appointments can be made at the O’Neill Center by calling 651-690-6563 or emailing oneill_center@stkate.edu.

Incomplete Grade

A grade of incomplete is given only when unusual circumstances deem it appropriate. Ordinarily, such circumstances would involve matters that are not wholly within your control, such as illness. If you wish to receive an incomplete grade you must complete a Petition for Incomplete Grade form (available online) no later than the last day of the term in which course requirements are due. You must be making satisfactory progress in the course and you must have completed 75% of the course at the time the petition is filed. Incompletes are awarded at the instructor’s discretion. If granted, the normal deadline for completion of the work is no more than eight weeks after the last day of classes in the session or sub-session in which the course is offered. The instructor may establish a due date after the normal deadline if you request it and special circumstances warrant it. The instructor will submit an alternate grade that will automatically be recorded if you do not complete the requirements for the course by the deadline. If you complete the course requirements in the time allotted, the instructor must submit the final grade by the deadline. Extensions to the due date originally agreed to by you and your instructor must be approved by the appropriate academic dean.

Academic integrity

Any student found to have engaged in academic dishonesty will fail the course and (according to the St. Catherine University Student Code of Conduct) could be expelled. The SCU Student Code of Conduct defines academic dishonesty like so¹:

“Academic dishonesty, defined as any deliberate attempt to falsify, fabricate or otherwise tamper with data, information, records, or any other material that is relevant to a student's participation in any course, laboratory, or other academic exercise or function. Most, although

¹ <http://catalog.stkate.edu/undergraduate/student-rights-responsibilities/academic-integrity-policy/>

not all, such attempts fall into one or more of the following three categories (see St. Catherine University Academic Integrity Policy for details):

- Cheating or other forms of academic dishonesty which are intended to gain unfair academic advantage.
- Plagiarism, defined as deliberately presenting work, words, ideas, theories, etc., derived in whole or in part from a source external to the student as though they are the student's own efforts.
- Other academic misconduct, including but not limited to falsifying or fabricating data, records, or any information relevant to a student's participation in any course or academic exercise, or tampering with such information as collected or distributed by the faculty member."

Tentative Schedule

Philosophy

9/7-9/9: Introduction

9/12-9/16: *Doing Good Better* Introduction, 1 & 2; *Statistics* 8

9/19-9/23: *Doing Good Better* 3-5; *Statistics* 9

9/26-9/30: *Doing Good Better* 6, 7; *Statistics* 10

Economics

10/3-10/7: *Statistics* prelude, 1-2; *Poor Economics* 1 & 2

10/10-10/14: *Statistics* 3-4; *Poor Economics* 3

10/17-10/21: *Statistics* 5-7; *Poor Economics* 4 & 5

10/24-10/28: *Statistics* 11-12; Quiz 1 due 10/24

10/31-11/4: *Statistics* 13; *Poor Economics* 6 & 7

11/7-11/11: *Statistics* 14-15; *Poor Economics* 8

11/14-11/18: *Statistics* 21; *Poor Economics* 9-10; Quiz 2 due 11/14

11/21-11/23: *Statistics* 22-23

Philosophy (Again)

11/28-12/2: *Doing Good Better* 8, 9; Quiz 3 due 11/28

12/5-12/9: *Doing Good Better* 10, Conclusion, Appendix

12/12-12/16: Wrapping up; Final Paper Due by 12/23