**EFFECTIVE ALTRUISM**

**PY4651**

Semester 1, 2016-17

University of St Andrews

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**LECTURE:** Mon, 9-11, Edgecliffe 104

**TUTORIAL:** Tues, 10-11, Edgecliffe 104 (sign up on MMS)

**DESCRIPTION:** ‘Effective altruism’ is a social movement that encourages us to do as much good as we can with our charitable activities (donations of money, time, and effort). In this module, we will explore a variety of philosophical questions that arise in the context of effective altruism. One set of questions concerns the core philosophical commitments of effective altruism: What philosophical views essentially underpin effective altruist claims about the importance of cost-effectiveness, numbers, and making a difference? Are they defensible? Is effective altruism compatible with non-consequentialism, including agent-centered moral options (e.g. to give some priority to oneself, or to those near and dear) and moral constraints (e.g. against doing harm)? What is the relation between effective altruism, rights, and justice? Another set of questions deals with issues arising from ‘within’ the effective altruist standpoint: What is the most important cause? Fighting extreme poverty, reducing animal suffering, reducing global catastrophic risks (more specifically reducing existential risks), shaping the far future, or what? Should we take into account the well-being of merely possible future persons? If so, how much weight should we give it relative to the well-being of actual persons? How should we decide where to give if there is no clearly best cause, or if we are clueless about the long term effects of our acts?

**LEARNING OUTCOMES:** By the end of this module, students should have gained a good critical understanding of the philosophical underpinnings of the effective altruism movement, the key arguments for and against various core effective altruist theses, and the potentially high impact role of philosophical research and teaching in the context of effective altruist efforts. Students will be able to analyze and evaluate critical discussion of and within effective altruism as it appears in philosophical literature and popular venues. They will be able to formulate and articulate their own views on the issues covered, and provide a rational defence of these views in written work and discussion.

**COURSE MATERIALS:** Nearly all of the course materials can be found online; citations or links are provided below. Some materials, marked with an ‘(MMS)’, will be made available on MMS. William MacAskill’s book, *Doing Good Better: Effective Altruism and a Radical New*
*Way to Make a Difference* (London: Faber & Faber, 2015), is available for purchase at Blackwell’s Bookshop at the Student’s Union in St Andrews (or can be purchased online).

**POLICIES:** Please read the latest version of the booklet ‘Philosophy Handbook for Undergraduates’ very carefully regarding absences, lateness of essays, academic alerts, plagiarism etc. Copies are available from the main office in Edgecliffe or online at: [http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/philosophy/current/ugrad/](http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/philosophy/current/ugrad/).

**ASSESSMENT:** Your final grade for this module will be determined by two essays (40% of the overall course grade each) and participation on the blog (20% of overall course grade).

**About the Two Essays:**
The first essay must be submitted to MMS by Monday 24 October at 11.59pm (beginning of week 7), and the second by Friday 2 December at 11.59pm (end of week 12). The maximum length of each essay is 3,000 words (excluding the bibliography). Double-spaced 12-point Times New Roman font with normal margins; any internally consistent citation format is fine. Any requests for extensions or anything of an administrative nature should be addressed to the module coordinator (Pummer).

The first essay should be on a topic of your choosing relating to any of the topics spanning weeks 1 through 5, and the second relating to any of the topics spanning weeks 7 though 11 (see below for the schedule of topics). You will need to have your topic approved in advance: to have your topic approved, please simply add two to three sentences outlining the topic of your paper and the main claim you plan on defending at the end of your blog posts for weeks 4 and 8 (week 4 for the first essay and week 8 for the second essay; see below for details of the blog assignment). If you hear nothing back from us within a week, your topic is approved. We will contact you if we think you need to revise your focus.

Please do get in touch at any point if you are at all unsure about the appropriateness of your topic (we hope you’ll make use of our recommended readings in searching for a paper topic; if you are thinking about writing on something that does not significantly connect with any of the required or recommended readings, that is a sign that it may be inappropriate, and thus wise for you to check with us before proceeding further). One point that’s worth flagging right now: this is a philosophy course. This means that your paper will need to somehow contribute to a philosophical debate. While there are many extremely important empirical questions surrounding effective altruism – and we encourage you to think carefully about them – your two essays must have a sufficiently philosophical focus. Again, if you are in doubt about the appropriateness of your topic, please come speak with us.

The Philosophy Handbook for Undergraduates contains lots of valuable information and advice about writing your essay. In addition, you may benefit from the following resources on writing philosophy essays:

- Portmore, D., ‘Tips on Writing a Philosophy Paper’
- MacAskill, W., ‘How to Do Well in Philosophy Part #1 – Essays and Productivity’

**About the Blog:**
You are required to post a blog each week on the module’s Moodle page (no blogs are required for weeks 1 and 6, making a total of nine blogs). You are required to post to the blog by Monday
of the relevant week at 4pm. Post one question, comment, or objection regarding one of the assigned readings for the week. Your post should be no longer than two paragraphs.

Blog contributions will be scored on simple scale: ‘2’ is full credit (thoughtful and clear contribution), ‘1’ is partial credit (for unclear contributions, or contributions that lack any independent thinking or analysis), and ‘0’ is no credit (for very confused, very minimal, or off topic posts, or for failing to submit a post by the set deadline). Obviously you must be concise if you aren’t to exceed the two paragraph limit. Don’t bother mentioning whether you enjoyed the assigned reading; this isn’t literary criticism. Your question, comment, or objection should help with the assessment of a philosophical claim or argument found in the required reading.

There is one blog for each seminar group. You should have access to the blog for your seminar group only. The module coordinator (Pummer) will start each discussion with an initial post merely announcing the topic of the week (e.g. ‘Week 4: Making a Difference’). You should enter your post as a response to this initial post, instead of as a new discussion topic. You won’t get any credit for responding to others’ posts, but it would be great if you did so anyway!

There is a blog competition: Pummer and Mulgan will together select two blog posts from weeks 2-5, and another two from weeks 7-11, as ‘outstanding posts’. Winners of the competition will be invited to have their posts displayed publicly on the Centre for Ethics, Philosophy and Public Affairs website: http://ceppa.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/. (Upon receiving this invitation, posts to go on the website may be expanded from two paragraphs to three or four paragraphs, if desired.)

ADVICE AND EXPECTATIONS: This is a 30-credit module, so it should occupy about half of your working week – around 18-20 hours per week. If you feel that you are having trouble keeping up, even though you’re spending 18-20 hours per week on this module, come and talk to us.

You should come to lectures and tutorials each week prepared to discuss the material from the assigned readings. Since most of the readings have been written with an audience of professional philosophers in mind, this will likely require reading, making notes, and re-reading. Remember that only three of the 18-20 hours per week will be spent in class, so you should expect and plan to spend 15-17 hours per week thinking about the material on your own. For each week, there are required readings for the lecture and tutorials, and several recommended readings. To excel, you should read at least some of these supplementary readings each week. That said, it is better to gain a good understanding of a couple of them rather than rushing through all of them.

In preparing for the lectures and tutorials, you need to think about what you hope to get out of them: what you don’t understand, what you’d like to understand better, what you think about the issues. Make a note of these points in advance of lectures and tutorials. Make time afterwards to look at those notes again, to see how you’ve progressed. If you don’t feel you’ve progressed, then come and talk to one of us.

Lectures will be primarily for introducing the issues. But since the class is two hours long, we expect there to be a significant amount of discussion even in lectures. Thus, you should read through the material at least once before lecture.

You also need to plan ahead for your essays. Beyond the required reading for lectures and tutorials, you may also want to explore the recommended readings, and you will need to read more deeply on the topic you select for your essay. In addition to those listed below, we will be
happy to suggest further readings if you talk to us about your interests; you can also make use of the following resources:

- Google Scholar (http://scholar.google.com)
- Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (http://plato.stanford.edu)
- Philosophy Compass (http://philosophy-compass.com/)
- PhilPapers (http://philpapers.org)

A final bit of advice is that philosophy is not just for dead white guys. Please see here for some evidence: http://looksphilosophical.tumblr.com/

SCHEDULE OF TOPICS AND READINGS:

**WEEK 1: Introduction to Effective Altruism** (Pummer)

**Required Reading:**

**Recommended Reading:**
- Clough, E., ‘Effective Altruism’s Political Blindspot’ Boston Review (and Hauke Hillebrandt’s response, also see ‘The Logic of Effective Altruism’ particularly Angus Deaton and replies to him, Boston Review) (2015).
- Wiblin, R., ‘Effective altruists love systemic change’ 80,000 Hours Blog (2015).
- Timmerman, T., ‘Sometimes there’s nothing wrong with letting a child drown’ Analysis 75 (2): 204-212 (2015).

**WEEK 2: Cost-Effectiveness: Size, Number, Uncertainty, and Aggregation** (Pummer)

**Required Reading:**

**Recommended Reading:**

**WEEK 3: Justice and Doing Harm** (Pummer)

**Required Reading:**

**Recommended Reading:**

**WEEK 4: Making a Difference** (Pummer)

**Required Reading:**

**Recommended Reading:**
- Pinkert, F., ‘What If I Cannot Make a Difference (And I Know It)?’ Ethics 125, no. 4 (July 2015): 971-998.

WEEK 5: Demands on Where to Give (Pummer)

Required Reading:

Recommended Reading:

WEEK 6: Independent Learning Week
- The first essay must be submitted to MMS by Monday 24 October at 11.59pm (beginning of week 7).

WEEK 7: Future People Part I: The Nonidentity Problem (Mulgan)

Required Reading:

Recommended Reading:
- Parfit, D., Reasons and Persons, Oxford University Press, 1986 edition, Appendix G: Whether causing someone to exist can benefit this person. (e-book)

WEEK 8: Future People Part II: The Repugnant Conclusion (Mulgan)

Required Reading:
- Mulgan, T., Future People, Oxford University Press, 2006, chapter three. (e-book)

Recommended Reading:
- Greaves, H., ‘Population Axiology’ Philosophy Compass (forthcoming)
- Parfit, D., ‘How we can avoid the repugnant conclusion’, John Dewey Memorial Lecture, 2012. (MMS)
WEEK 9: Ethics for a Broken World (Mulgan)

Required Reading:

Recommended Reading:

WEEK 10: Existential Risks (Mulgan)

Required Reading:

Recommended Reading:
- Mulgan, T., ‘Moral Philosophy, Superintelligence, and the Singularity’, draft manuscript. (MMS)

**WEEK 11: Cluelessness and the Far Future** (Pummer)

**Required Reading:**

**Recommended Reading:**
- Askell, A., ‘Effective Altruism and Cluelessness’. (MMS)

**WEEK 12:**
- The second essay must be submitted to MMS by Friday 2 December at 11.59pm (end of week 12).