

# Effective Altruism

Topics in Ethical Theory | Spring 2024

PHIL-301 | TR 10-50 AM – 12:05 PM | ECTR 111

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How much good can you do? How much should you? Effective Altruism (EA) is a movement dedicated to using reason and evidence to help people figure out how to do the most good they can—whether through charitable giving, their career, or their advocacy. This course will examine the philosophical foundations of EA, especially what it says about living an ethical life, the importance of beneficence, how to approach some of the world’s most important problems, and the relations between moral theory and altruistic behavior. EA can be applied in many domains from global health to animal welfare to existential risks raised by artificial intelligence, pandemics, and nuclear war. In this course, you will learn about cost-effectiveness, cause prioritization, moral uncertainty, and what we owe (or not) to strangers, other animals, and future generations. We will also read many critiques of EA, especially regarding institutional change, career choice, resource allocation, AI, and the far future.

**Prerequisites**: 6 credit hours in philosophy excluding PHIL-120, or with the instructor’s permission

**Objectives**: The main goal of the class is to provide students with the tools to understand the core philosophical commitments of EA and approach its various applications with a critical mind, whether or not they later choose to implement its recommendations in their own life. More specifically, the course will provide students with the tools to make, grasp, and evaluate ethical arguments on global priorities; a solid and comprehensive theoretical and empirical background on these issues; and a selection of classic and contemporary readings.

**Student learning outcomes**. At the end of this class, students should be able to:

* distinguish, define, and discuss the theoretical foundations of effective altruism and their relation to broader issues in moral theory;
* understand and apply core concepts such as beneficence, cost-effectiveness, demandingness, impact, impartiality, prioritization, risk, trade-offs, and well-being, among others;
* incorporate course materials and arguments into their written work;
* critically evaluate arguments about altruism and philanthropy;

### Required Materials

There is no required textbook for this class. All readings will be available on OAKS. However, we'll read much of **William MacAskill, *Doing Good Better*** (Penguin Random House, 2015). You may want to purchase a copy. It will come in handy during the semester. There are plenty of cheap, used copies on Amazon. There is also a copy in the course reserve (2-hour hold) at the Addlestone Library.

OAKS, including Gradebook, will be used for this course throughout the semester to provide the syllabus and class materials and grades for each assignment, which will be regularly posted.

Laptop use is strongly discouraged, all the more as this will be a largely discussion-based class. Cellphones must be silenced and left in your bag. Electronic devices cause serious distractions for yourself and others and are normally not needed for class meetings unless necessary for notetaking. If you can spare it, it’s much better for everyone. Handouts will be provided regularly, and slides made available after class. You will need an electronic device for some class activities. I will notify you in advance.

For reading and writing purposes, Jim Pryor (NYU) offers valuable guidance on his website:

* Philosophical terms and methods (<http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/vocab/index.html>)
* Reading philosophy (<http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/reading.html>)
* Writing a philosophy paper (<http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html>)

### Course Policies

**Lateness/Extensions**: Out of fairness to other students and out of concern for my schedule, plan ahead and advise early if you anticipate that you will be unable to complete an assignment in time. Extensions will only be granted in exceptional circumstances **and** if requested early. As a rule, do not count on extensions as they will only be granted on a case-by-case basis. “Technical issues” will not normally be accepted as excuses (again, plan ahead).

Please refer to the course schedule for deadlines. You are expected to complete assignments unless they are marked as optional. Most of the assignments should be submitted on OAKS. Don’t wait until the last minute to submit in case you face technical issues, and always save and back up your drafts. Don’t write in OAKS first; draft, save, and back up on cloud-based storage, then copy/upload to OAKS.

**Expectations:** As a student, you are expected to read all assigned material before class, attend class, take notes, and review them in-between class meetings, participate in discussions, and complete assignments on-time. Check your email and OAKS regularly for announcements. You are responsible for knowing material covered in the assigned readings even if the material is not presented during class. Likewise, you are responsible for material covered during class (including discussions and activities) even if it is not covered in the assigned readings. Please seek help from me or your classmates and never hesitate to ask questions, consult campus resources for assistance. Needing help is expected and there are no silly questions. Silly is not asking questions when you need to.

**Time, food, and attire etiquette**. Please be in class on time. I will start class promptly and may turn away students who casually come to class significantly late without prior notice. Take bathroom/water breaks between classes if you can, otherwise be quiet and respectful. You may drink water in class, but please only consume food if you really can’t have lunch before class. If you do eat, be mindful of others. If you’re late and carrying coffee, you probably could have been on time. Don’t leave class early unless previously authorized.

### Evaluation

I use a standard grading scheme:

A 93-100%

A- 90-92

B+ 87-89

B 83-86

B- 80-82

C+ 77-79

C 73

C- 70-72

D 60-69

F 0-60

I use a balance of criteria to grade your work:

1. form (structure, rigor, precision, clarity)
2. understanding and application of references and material (accurate, detailed discussion)
3. critical skills (analysis, arguments, objections, persuasion)
4. originality (going beyond a mere restatement of lectures and readings)

Other factors I may take into account include significant efforts to consider objections to your arguments and timely completion of assigned tasks.

Your assignments will include frequent discussion posts or reading quizzes (20% of your grade); a class presentation (10%); a midterm exam (20%); and two papers (including a final paper) (20% each). Your evaluation will also include your participation (in class and online) (10%). No final exam.

**Participation** (online and in class). Come prepared. I will assess your efforts to engage with arguments, verify assertions, research facts, unpack implicit assumptions, critically examine your positions, and work with the class with mutual respect and dedication. Understandably, some of you are shyer than others and less willing to speak in class. You should contribute to OAKS discussions and come to office hours. Please feel welcome to express yourself as long as you do so respectfully.

**Essays.** The grade for each essay has several components:

* submission and approval of a topic
* completion of a draft and participation in peer review
* the paper itself (along the four dimensions noted above)
* incorporation of feedback received

Your first essay will be short (around 1,000 words). Your final essay will be longer (around 2,000 words). You are welcome to build upon the former for the latter. *Everyone will be required to discuss their draft with me during office hours.*

**Class Presentations.** Everyone will sign up to present on a different reading (from week 2 onwards). You will prepare a brief handout (one page) for your presentation. It should not be a detailed summary of the reading but instead highlight its central ideas (and if applicable, a clear restatement of the central argument). It should also include 3 - 4 questions for class discussion. You must email me the draft of your handout by Monday at noon the week of your presentation so that I can suggest revisions. This is a required step. My evaluation of your presentation will take it into account. When your handout is ready, I will print it for the class.

### Attendance Policy

No more than three classes without permission/documented excuse will be allowed. I will do my best to accommodate you. If possible, bring documentation. Email me **before missing class whenever possible (if not, ASAP after class)**. You are solely responsible for catching up with missed materials and pertinent information. Ask your classmates for notes. Don’t ask me if you missed anything important.

Only students officially registered (graded or auditing) for this course may attend class. During the week following the drop/add deadline, I will verify student enrollment in this course. Any student appearing on the class roll but determined not to have attended the class even once will be removed, except for cases where a student is absent because of quarantine or isolation due to illness.

### Academic Integrity Policy Statement

*As members of the College of Charleston community, we affirm, embrace and hold ourselves accountable to the core values of integrity, academic excellence, liberal arts education, respect for the individual student, diversity, equity and inclusion, student centeredness, innovation and public mission. Congruent with these core values, the College of Charleston expects that every student and community member has a responsibility to uphold the standards of the honor code, as outlined in the* [*Student Handbook,*](https://deanofstudents.cofc.edu/honor-system/studenthandbook/index.php) *In pursuit of academic learning, you are expected to reference the work of other scholars, and complete your own academic work, while utilizing appropriate resources for assistance. Any acts of suspected academic dishonesty will be reported to the Office of the Dean of Students and addressed through the conduct process. Your adherence to these practices and expectations plays a vital role in fostering a campus culture that balances trust and the pursuit of knowledge while producing a strong foundation of academic excellence at the College of Charleston. Any questions regarding these expectations can be clarified by your instructor.*

### Accommodations for Students with Disabilities

The College of Charleston is committed to providing access and inclusion for all persons with disabilities. Students with disabilities who anticipate or experience disability-related barriers in the academic setting should notify their professor, and also initiate contact with the [Center for Disability Services (CDS)](https://disabilityservices.cofc.edu/) to move forward with the college’s established accommodation process (email: [snap@cofc.edu](mailto:snap@cofc.edu); phone: 843-953-1431; location: Lightsey Center 104). Students already connected with CDS for academic-related accommodations should share their Professor Notification Letter (PNL) with each professor as early in the semester as possible so that accommodations can be made in a timely manner. The PNL informs faculty of potential course access and accommodations that might be necessary and reasonable. It is the student’s responsibility to follow this process each semester.

### Inclement Weather or Substantial Interruption of Instruction

If in-person classes are suspended, faculty will announce to their students a detailed plan for a change in modality to ensure the continuity of learning. All students must have access to a computer equipped with a web camera, microphone, and Internet access. Resources are available.

### Permissible use of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GAI)

In this class, we may use generative artificial intelligence (GAI) writing tools such as ChatGPT. I will inform you as to when, where, and how these tools will be permitted for use, along with guidance for referencing. Any use outside of this permission constitutes a violation of the CofC Honor Code.

There are a variety of GAI programs available to assist writers, yet such tools must not replace human creativity, originality, and critical thinking. However, within limited circumstances, and with proper referencing, GAI programs may be used as a tool per the guidance/instructor of your professor.

The use of generative artificial intelligence (GAI) tools is permitted as a resource and starting point in this course, and may be used for brainstorming, outlining, generating ideas, and collecting information about the basic understanding of a topic/idea. All uses of GAI must be cited and have appropriate documentation and references. Failure to do so constitutes an Honor Code violation and will be reported to the Honor Board. If you use GAI, be **explicit and reflective** about it in your work. Note that I have allowed the use of GAI in previous classes: it shows and does not yield the best results.

### The Center for Student Learning

The [CSL](https://csl.cofc.edu/) offers academic support services for most College classes in a centralized location in the Addlestone Library. Services include drop-in and by appointment tutoring, SI (Supplemental Instruction), and academic coaching, offered at no additional charge for CofC students. Peer educators—recommended by faculty and trained by CSL staff—comprise the bulk of the staff, and as one of the largest student employers on campus, the CSL can offer on-campus employment to 130+ qualified students each year. All students are encouraged to visit, call, or email the CSL at the start of each semester to discuss which academic support services align with their current course schedule; they can also request a Personalized Resource Plan.

### Mental & Physical Wellbeing

The College takes each student’s mental and physical wellbeing seriously. If you find yourself experiencing physical illnesses, please reach out to student health services (843.953.5520). And if you find yourself experiencing any mental health challenges (for example, anxiety, depression, stressful life events, sleep deprivation, and/or loneliness/homesickness) please consider contacting either the Counseling Center (professional counselors at CofC Counseling Center or 843.953.5640 3rd Floor of Robert Scott Small Building) or the Students 4 Support (certified volunteers through texting "4support" to 839863, or meet with them in person 411 (4th Floor) Stern Center). Learn more about Students 4 Support on CofC’s Hub. These services are there for you to help you cope with difficulties you may be experiencing and to maintain optimal physical and mental health.

### Food & Housing Resources

Many CofC students report experiencing food and housing insecurity. If you are facing challenges in securing food (such as not being able to afford groceries or get sufficient food to eat every day) and housing (such as lacking a safe and stable place to live), please contact the Dean of Students for support (SALT - Student Affairs Leadership Team). Also, you can go to Student Food and Housing Insecurity to learn about food and housing assistance that is available to you. In addition, there are several resources on and off campus to help. You can visit the Cougar Pantry in the Stern Center (2nd floor), a student-run food pantry that provides dry-goods and hygiene products at no charge to any student in need. Please also consider reaching out to Professor ABC if you are comfortable in doing so.

### Safe Environment

CofC is committed to providing an environment free of all forms of prohibited discrimination, including sexual harassment and violence (i.e. sexual assault, domestic and dating violence, and gender or sex-based bullying and stalking). If you have experienced discrimination or harassment, help and support are available. CofC employees, other than designated confidential resources, must report information they receive about prohibited discrimination, including sexual harassment and sexual violence. This means that if you tell me about a situation involving sexual harassment, sexual violence, discrimination, or harassment, I must share the information with the Title IX Coordinator. You may speak to someone confidentially by contacting the Office of Victim Services at 843-953-2273, Counseling Center at 843-953-5640, or Student Health Services at 843-953-5520. You can also report any sexual misconduct or discrimination, or learn more about your options and resources, by contacting the Office of Equal Opportunity Programs at 843-953-5754.

### Religious Accommodation for Students

The College acknowledges that religious practices differ from tradition to tradition and that the demands of religious observances in some traditions may cause conflicts with student schedules. In affirming this diversity, like many other colleges and universities, the College supports the concept of “reasonable accommodation for religious observance” in regard to class attendance, and the scheduling of examinations and other academic work requirements, unless the accommodation would create an undue hardship on the College. Faculty are required, as part of their responsibility to students and the College, to ascribe to this policy and to ensure its fair and full implementation.

# Course Schedule

This schedule is subject to change. Check OAKS regularly for updates. Guest speakers will be added.

A : Tuesday readings / B : Thursday readings. Readings are to be done before the date of the class.

The calendar of assignments is not complete (check OAKS).

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| **Week** | **Questions** | Topic | Materials |  |
| **1** | **What is this class about?** |  |  | Read syllabus, check out OAKS |
| **2** | **The demands of morality** | What is morality? What does it demand of us? Are there limits to what it can demand? | A. **David Hume**, “Of the influencing motives of the will” and **Adam Smith**, “Of the influences and authority of conscience”  B. **Shelly Kagan**,“Against ordinary morality” | Discussion |
| **3** | **Introducing EA** | How to measure impact? How should we decide how to allocate our beneficence? | A. DGB, intro and ch. 1  B. DGB, ch. 2-3 | Discussion |
| **4** | **Global poverty and the demands of beneficence** | What is beneficence? How much ought we to donate? Do duties of beneficence presuppose consequentialism? | A. **Peter Singer**, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality” + study guide  B. **Travis Timmerman**, “Sometimes there is Nothing Wrong with Letting a Child Drown”  Optional:  **Onora O’Neill**, “Kantian approaches to some famine problems”  **Barbara Herman**, “The scope of moral requirement”  **Peter Unger**, *Living High and Letting Die*, ch. 2 | Discussion |
| **5** | **Do numbers count?** | Is it better to save five people than just one other? Is it ever permissible to save fewer people? | A. **John Taurek**, “Should the numbers count?”  B. **Derek Parfit**, “Innumerate ethics” | Discussion |
| **6** | **Does distance matter?** | Do distant people matter less? Are we equally strongly required to assist them or may we prioritize our own lives and those of our near and dear? | A. **Frances Kamm**, “Does Distance Matter Morally to the Duty to Rescue?”  B. **Frank Jackson**, “Decision-Theoretic Consequentialism and the Nearest and Dearest Objection”  Optional  **Jeremy Waldron**, “Who Is My Neighbor?”  **Martha Nussbaum**, “Patriotism and cosmopolitanism” | **tba** |
| **7** | **Empathy and rationality** | Can our emotions guide us in helping others? Must we be able to identify with strangers to care? Why do we feel more compelled by immediate, salient suffering? | A. **Paul Bloom**, “Against empathy”  [*Vox* explainer](https://www.vox.com/explainers/2017/7/19/15925506/psychic-numbing-paul-slovic-apathy) on Paul Slovic’s work  **Laurie Santos and Joshua Greene**, *The Happiness Lab*, “How to give more effectively”  B. **Dan Brock**, “Identified versus Statistical Lives: Some Introductory Issues and Arguments”  **Michael Slote**, “Why not empathy?” | **tba** |
| **8** | **Other animals** | Should we care about nonhuman animal suffering? Is species membership morally relevant? How much weight should we give to the interests of animals? | A. **Peter Singer**, “All Animals are Equal”  **Kieran Setiya**, “Humanism”  B. **Jeff Sebo**, '[The Rebugnant Conclusion](https://jeffsebodotnet.files.wordpress.com/2022/04/the-rebugnant-conclusion-revision-2.pdf)'  Optional  **Alastair Norcross**, “Puppies, Pigs, and People: Eating Meat and Marginal Cases”  **Mark Budolfson and Dean Spears**, “Public Policy, Consequentialism, the Environment, and Non-Human Animals” | **tba** |
| **9** | **EA and the future** | How much weight should we give to future people relative to present people? How should we evaluate tradeoffs between quantity and quality of life?How clueless are we about the far future? Is expected utility the right decision tool? | A. **Will MacAskill**, *What We Owe the Future*, introduction and ch. 1  ***Our World in Data*,** “The Future Is Vast”  **Utilitarianism.net**, “[Population Ethics](https://www.utilitarianism.net/population-ethics)”.  B. **Hilary Greaves**, “Cluelessness” | **tba** |
| **10** | **Existential risks** | How bad would human extinction be? What is the value of human civilization? What are the most significant low-probability/high-stakes risks? | A. **Toby Ord**, *The Precipice*, ch. 2 & 6  **Roger Crisp**, “Would Extinction Be So Bad?”  B. **Will MacAskill**, WWOF, ch. 3-4  Optional  Richard Pettigrew, “Effective altruism, risk, and human extinction” | **tba** |
| **11** | **Global health and international aid** | Why does cost-effectiveness matter? How should we measure impact? Is most philanthropy ineffective at best, harmful at worst? Is aid skepticism justified? | A. **Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo**, “Low-Hanging Fruit for Better (Global) Health?”  **Toby Ord**, “The Moral Imperative Toward Cost-Effectiveness in Global Health”  B. **Angus Deaton**, “Response to effective altruism”  **Larry Temkin**, “Being Good in a World of Need: Some Empirical Worries and an Uncomfortable Philosophical Possibility”  **Dambisa Moyo**, *Dead Aid* (excerpt) | **tba** |
| **12** | **Do I make a difference?** | Can individuals make a difference and what are their obligations? What are collective harms? Are there collective obligations? | A. **Shelly Kagan**, “Do I Make a Difference?”  B. **Julia Nefsky**, “Collective Harm and the Inefficacy Problem”  **Stephanie Collins**, “Beyond individualism” | **tba** |
| **13** | **Justice, institutions, structural change** | Is individual behavior the right locus of evaluation? Is EA sensitive to considerations of justice? Does it leave society as it is? | A. **Amia Srinivasan**, “Stop the robot apocalypse”  **Iason Gabriel**, “Effective altruism and its critics”  B. **Brian Berkey**, “The institutional critique of effective altruism”  **Elizabeth Ashford**, “Severe poverty as an unjust emergency” | **tba** |
| **14** | **Impersonality and meaningful lives** | Why be moral? Does the good life involve more than being moral? Are we allowed to prioritize personal projects or beauty or culture? | A. **Susan Wolf**, “Moral saints”  **Larissa Macfaquahr**, *Strangers Drowning*  ***The Good Place***, “Don’t let the good live pass you by”  B. **Peter Singer**, “Why act morally”  **Todd May**, *A Decent Life* | **tba** |
| **15** | **ACTIVITIES (TBD)** | Career Choice  Charities Selection | DGB, ch. 9: “Don’t follow your passion”  80,000 hours recommendations |  |