

PSYCHOLOGY 398H
ALTRUISM: THEORIES AND PRACTICE
FALL 2007: MW: 4:00-5:15 PM

Professor Dan Worthen

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DESCRIPTION: Ethics has traditionally been characterized as a process of bridging the gap between how we are and how we would ideally be or, as it is sometimes put, a process of bridging the “is/ought” gap. One example of a moral ideal is love of the neighbor. But how easily does “love of the neighbor” come to most human beings? Because we labor under the pull of self-interest, loving one’s neighbor is not common. In light of this truism examples of altruism, when we encounter them in this world, cry out for explanation. Is there even such a thing as “altruistic” behavior or, when we help other people, is self-interest our true motivation? If genuine altruism does exist, what motivates it? What accounts for the social belief that we *should* be altruistic?

This course explores answers to these fundamental questions about the phenomenon of helping others by looking at philosophical, psychological, biological, economic, and sociological accounts of selfless behavior. You will be asked to address these questions theoretically *and* empirically. Thus, while you are gaining exposure to a variety of theoretical explanations for altruistic conduct, you will simultaneously be testing these theories by applying them to (alleged) examples of altruistic persons/behavior that appear in the media. Over the course of the semester, you will submit bi-weekly writings in which you analyze the synchrony between various theories and persons’ actions, motives, and character, etc., in terms of the theories we study in class. As a culminating experience, you will write a term paper in which you posit and defend a definition of altruism.

HONORS UPPER DIVISION THEME: Honors Upper Division Theme courses are designed to provide a rigorous, intellectually exciting, integrated learning experience. This course will be uncommonly rigorous, in keeping with its designation as an honors course. In it, we emphasize the building of interdisciplinary analyses that incorporate several academic fields. We expect you to engage in rigorous self-reflection; to promote that end, we arrange venues for you to discuss, debate, and write about a variety of contemporary social issues. This course includes significant content related to biological science, philosophy and the humanities, and behavioral and social sciences.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

- # Students will assess the adequacy of competing definitions of altruism, paying close attention to such issues as personal cost, consequences versus intentions, relationships between givers and beneficiaries, etc.
- # Students will examine various examples of altruistic behavior through fictional, empirical, and historical accounts.

- # Students will analyze the moral status of altruistic acts. For example, under what circumstances are other-centered acts required versus supererogatory?
- # Students will engage in cross-disciplinary conversations by examining other-centered behavior from conceptually and methodologically distinct viewpoints.
- # Students will examine critically and integrate various disciplinary explanations for what motivates altruism, e.g.:
 - # social norms
 - # family, religious affiliation, community, education, and other social variables
 - # personality, history of reinforcement, empathy, and other psychological factors
 - # cost-benefit analyses and game theoretic models
 - # hedonism and psychological egoism
 - # behavioral genetics, evolutionary biology, evolutionary psychology, and moral theory
 - # kin selection, reciprocal altruism, and group selection
 - # Kantian, Utilitarian, and Aristotelian models of moral action

BOOKS (All *required* and available in AS Bookstore.) *Always bring assigned readings to class!*

- 1) Camus, Albert. (1947/1991). *The Plague*. trans. Stuart Gilbert. New York: Vintage Press.
- 2) Dawkins, Richard. (1989). *The Selfish Gene*, 2nd ed. New York: Oxford University Press.
- 3) Kidder, Tracy (2003). *Mountains Beyond Mountains*. New York: Random House.
- 4) London, Jack (1908/1991). *The Sea Wolf*. New York: Bantam Books.
- 5) Monroe, Kristen Renwick. (1996). *The Heart of Altruism: Perceptions of a Common Humanity*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- 6) Course Packet, available at Mr. Kopy. (119 Main Street, Chico). **Ask for packet # 509.**

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

- # **Attendance:** Attendance is mandatory. We expect nothing less than perfect attendance from everyone. Missing class—including absence for any reason, arriving late, or leaving early—will result in a significant deduction from the attendance and participation portion of your grade. You should not consider continuing in this class if you anticipate having attendance problems this semester. *If, due to circumstances beyond your control, you are forced to miss a class or a substantial portion thereof, you must contact one of the professors in advance and provide a reasonable explanation. This advance notification will not cancel the grade deduction to be imposed, but rather is a condition of staying in and passing the course.*
- # **Participation:** We recognize that personalities vary and that not everyone will contribute in the same fashion to class discussions. In fact, there is simply not enough class time for everyone to have his or her full say during every class meeting. What is required is that you are *prepared* to participate. It is not difficult to distinguish the students who keep up with the reading, write thoughtful papers, and otherwise significantly immerse themselves in the course from those who try to slide by with something less than maximum effort. *Note: we will randomly call on students to answer questions about and give analyses of the readings. You are expected to respond intelligently when invited to do so.*

- # **Readings:** You can expect 100-150 pages of reading per week. Class meetings will include a considerable amount of discussion about the reading material. *It is absolutely essential that you complete all of the assigned reading, and that you are prepared to discuss it, on the day that the reading is due.* You should bring the assigned readings to class each day, as we will often examine particular passages. The reading often will be difficult. Do not despair. We will help you understand the concepts and the authors' arguments, and will go out of our way, in class and in office hours, to answer any questions you may have. *Please recognize, however, that adequately understanding these authors requires significant effort on your part. We cannot stress enough the importance of seriously studying readings, careful intellectual preparation (for example, come prepared with questions about the readings and their relationship to previous readings and discussions), and attendance—in which very complex material is clarified.*

- # **Exams:** The exams, **which will be cumulative**, will require you to demonstrate a detailed understanding of each of the authors whom you have read, as well as any additional material presented in class. More specific information on the format, exact length, and coverage will be presented in class prior to each exam.

- # **Papers:** The papers in this class do *not* require you to do additional reading or library research apart from the assigned readings. In fact, we would prefer that you not appeal to outside sources. The papers *do*, however, require considerable thought on your part. Your papers will be evaluated on the basis of: (1) correspondence to the assigned topic and thoroughness of coverage, (2) thoughtfulness and completeness of your arguments and analyses, and (3) quality of written expression, including technical correctness (grammar, spelling, etc.). All papers must be word-processed, with double spacing, one-inch margins all around, and a standard 12-point font such as Times New Roman. Please do not insult our intelligence by using overly large margins or fonts.

- # **Two-page papers:** These papers will be due weeks 3, 5, 7, 9, and 11 on topics that will be assigned in class. The topics will be very narrow and will be designed to direct your attention to issues and arguments that should appear in your final paper. Topics will be selected by the faculty to complement classroom discussions, and will be announced one week before they are due.

- # **10-15-page paper:** The formal requirements for this paper will be distributed later in the semester and the paper will be due on December 10. **The exact topic will be announced later in the semester.**

GRADING BREAKDOWN

Exam 1: 10%

Exam 2: 20%

Exam 3: 20%

2-page papers: 15%

10-15-page paper: 20%

Participation: 10% (Attendance, preparation, contribution to in-class discussion)

Weekly posts on "Altruism Watch": 5%

Note on Academic Honesty:

Cheating and plagiarism constitute the worst possible behavior in which a student can engage. It is automatically grounds for failure of the course. When writing papers, any ideas that are not your own require acknowledgment. Even if you are paraphrasing someone else's views, you must always indicate the source. If you ever have any doubts, cite the source. If you still have doubts, contact one of us.

COURSE SCHEDULE

<u>Date</u>	<u>Topic/Assignments Due</u>	<u>Readings Due</u>
8.27	Goals and structure of the course	
8.29	Key Conceptual Issues	“The Gift” <i>The Heart of Altruism</i> : “The Human Face of Altruism” and Chapter 1 Begin reading <i>Mountains Beyond Mountains</i>
9.3	Labor Day; no class meeting	
9.5	The Phenomenology of Altruism and “Pseudo-altruism”	<i>The Heart of Altruism</i> , Chapters 2-5 Continue reading <i>Mountains ...Mountains</i>
9.10	Alterity-altruism	“Pythagorean Bodies/Body of Altruism” Continue reading <i>Mountains ...Mountains</i>
9.12	Supererogation	“Saints and Heroes” Continue reading <i>Mountains ...Mountains</i>
9.17	Duty vs. Supererogation: Discussion of Dr. Paul Farmer	Discussion of <i>Mountains Beyond Mountains</i>
9.19	Egoism and Rational-Actor Theory	<i>The Sea Wolf</i> : pp. 1-58 <i>The Heart of Altruism</i> : Chapter 7
9.24	Egoism Scrutinized	“Psychological Egoism” (Fienberg) “Psychological Egoism” (Rachels)
9.26	A False Dichotomy?	“Altruism vs. Self-Interest: Sometimes...”
10.1	Exam 1	
10.3	Genetics and Natural Selection	<i>The Selfish Gene</i> , through Chapter 3 Begin reading <i>The Plague</i>

10.8	Genetics and Natural Selection	<i>The Selfish Gene</i> , through Chapter 5 Continue reading <i>The Plague</i>
10.10	Kin Selection	<i>The Selfish Gene</i> , through Chapter 9 <i>The Heart of Altruism</i> : Chapter 8 Continue reading <i>The Plague</i>
10.15	Reciprocity	<i>The Selfish Gene</i> , through the end Continue reading <i>The Plague</i>
10.17	But is any of this altruism?	“I and Thou” Continue reading <i>The Plague</i>
10.22	The Empathy-altruism Hypothesis	“Is Empathic Emotion a Source...” “Empathy-induced Altruism in a...” “Empathy-induced Altruism in a ... II” Continue reading <i>The Plague</i>
10.24	Moral Development	<i>The Heart of Altruism</i> : Chapters 6 & 9 “Acquisition of Prosocial Behavior” Continue reading <i>The Plague</i>
10.29	Emergency Intervention	“There’s a Girl on the Tracks!” “Bystander Intervention in Emergencies” “From Jerusalem to Jericho” Continue reading <i>The Plague</i>
10.31	Natural Selection and Morality	“A Darwinian Naturalist’s Perspective...” <i>The Expanding Circle</i> : Chapters 1-3 Continue reading <i>The Plague</i>
11.5	Exam 2	
11.7	Discussion of <i>The Plague</i>	Finish <i>The Plague</i>
11.12	Veterans’ Day; no class meeting	
11.14	Ethics as Virtue	“The Nature of Moral Virtue”
11.19 & 21 Thanksgiving Break; no class meetings		
11.26	Ethics as Virtue	“Non-relative Virtues”
11.28	Ethics as Reason-based rules	“Morality and Rationality”

12.3	Another look at reason	<i>The Expanding Circle</i> , Chapters 4-6
12.5	Ethics as Consequences (Outcomes)	“An Introduction to the Principles of Morals...” “The Tragedy of the Commons”
12.10	The objection from special relationships	“Moral Saints”
12.12	Summing up	<i>The Heart of Altruism</i> , Chapters 10 & 11
12.17	FINAL EXAM: Monday, December 17, 6-7:50 pm	