

**California State University, Chico**  
**DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY      DEPARTMENT OF RELIGIOUS STUDIES**  
**PSY 136H / R S 136H**  
**WHAT MOTIVATES ALTRUISM? -HONORS**  
**FALL 2004**  
TR 3:30-4:45; Taylor 206

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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 like to be, or, as it is sometimes put, a process of bridging the “is/ought” gap. One conspicuous example of moral improvement in this model is love of the neighbor. But there is some question as to how easily “love of the neighbor” comes to most human beings. Because we labor under the handicap of feeling the pull of self-interest, loving the neighbor is not a common thing to witness. In light of this truism, examples of altruism, when we encounter them in this world, cry out for an explanation. What motivates altruism? Is there even such a thing as “altruistic” behavior, or is it the case that when we help other people it is self-interest that is lurking behind our motivations? In our society, what accounts for the imperative that we *should* be altruistic?

This course explores answers to these fundamental questions about the phenomenon of helping others by looking at religious, philosophical, psychological, biological, economic, and sociological approaches to accounting for selfless behavior. It is distinctive in that you will be asked to address these questions theoretically *and* empirically. Thus, while you are gaining exposure to a variety of accounts for explaining altruistic conduct that span the disciplines, you will simultaneously be testing these theories by serving as “participant-observers” among real altruists in the larger Chico community. You will shadow a person directly engaged in social advocacy, welfare, or service, in the hopes of arriving at some tentative conclusions about what motivates his or her conduct. Over the course of the semester, you will spend on average of five hours per week with this person outside of class, you will keep a detailed journal chronicling this experience, and you will write a term paper in which you will carefully analyze the behavior and motivations of your altruist.

**Honors Upper Division Theme:** Honors Upper Division theme courses are designed to provide a highly rigorous, intellectually exciting, and integrated learning experience for a cohort of honors students. This course is not only no exception, it will be (at least) twice as rigorous as other honors courses because it is six units. In it, we emphasize the building of interdisciplinary learning communities that involve interaction between the student body and the larger Chico community, as well as promote conversations that incorporate several academic fields into the discussion. In keeping with the goals of the upper division thematic, we intend to engage you in self-reflection and arrange venues for you to discuss, debate, and write about a variety of contemporary social issues. This course counts for two of the three courses required for your upper-division thematic, including the capstone experience. It includes significant content related to Areas B2 (Biological Science), C (particularly C3—Philosophy, Religion, and Humanities), and D (Behavioral and Social Sciences).

## COURSE OBJECTIVES

- To assess the adequacy of competing definitions of altruism, paying close attention to such issues as personal cost; consequences versus intentions; relationship between the giver and the recipient; etc.
- To examine various examples of altruistic behavior through fictional and historical accounts, as well as empirically through experiences shadowing people in the Chico community known for their service activities.
- To analyze the moral status of altruistic acts. (Under what circumstances are they required versus supererogatory?)
- To promote conversations across the disciplines by examining a conspicuous human phenomenon from conceptually and methodologically distinct viewpoints.
- To encourage interaction between the student body and the community.
- To examine critically and integrate a variety of disciplinary explanations for what motivates altruism, such as:
  - 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, and evolutionary psychology
  - kin selection, reciprocal altruism, and group selection
  - Kantian, utilitarian, and Aristotelian models of moral action
  - theological and hagiographic accounts of benevolence
  - samaritanism based on scriptural narratives and love commandments
  - accounts of social justice in relation to religious and secular understandings of love.

## BOOKS REQUIRED FOR PURCHASE

- 1) Camus, Albert. (1991). *The Plague*. trans. Stuart Gilbert. (New York: Vintage Press).
- 2) Dawkins, Richard. (1976). *The Selfish Gene*. (New York: Oxford University Press).
- 3) Kant, Immanuel. (2002). *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, edited and translated by Allen Wood. (New Haven: Yale University Press).
- 4) London, Jack. (1904/1991). *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) Oliner, Samuel P. (2003). *Do Unto Others: Extraordinary Acts of Ordinary People*. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press).
- 7) Course Packet, available at Mr. Kopy. (119 Main Street, Chico). Ask for Packet #18.

## COURSE REQUIREMENTS

**Attendance:** Attendance is absolutely mandatory. We expect nothing less than perfect attendance from everyone. Missing class—including any absence for any reason, arriving late, or leaving early—will result in a significant deduction to 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 find that you will be 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 not everyone will contribute to the same extent during 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, put in the time with their altruists (more on that below), write thoughtfully in their journals, and otherwise immerse themselves in the course in significant ways from those who try to slide by with something less than maximum effort.

**Readings:** You can expect about 250 pages of reading per week. (Keep reminding yourself as you consider the course requirements that as a 6-unit course, the workload is necessarily double that of a “regular” 3-unit course, and as an upper-division honors course, the required rigor is further amplified.) 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, before class on the day that the reading is due (see Course Schedule below for assigned readings). You should also bring the current readings to class each day, as we will often examine particular passages. The reading is substantial and at times will be difficult. Do not despair. We will help you to understand the concepts and the authors’ arguments, and we will go out of our way, in class and in office hours, to answer any questions you may have. Please consider, however, that adequately understanding these authors necessarily requires effort on both of our ends. We cannot stress strongly enough how important both preparation at home and attendance are.

**Field Experience:** During the first class meeting, you will select one person from a list, already compiled by us, of community members who exemplify altruistic behavior. You must immediately make contact with your selected altruist and arrange to spend time observing them. You should plan to spend five hours per week “shadowing” your altruist, every week for the entire semester. The community members participating in this course are among the most interesting, active, and caring people you are likely ever to meet, so please do your best to be respectful, flexible, and accommodating with them. And to ensure that you get the best possible experience, try to be present at the full spectrum of activities that comprise your altruist’s routine. Your goal is to get to know the person through seeing them in action, so that you can form some of your own hypotheses and opinions about the nature of altruism and its motivations.

**Journal:** You must immediately acquire a bound journal or notebook in which you will record your field notes and other writings. Your journal entries ultimately will form a substantial basis for the term paper. Your journal will be inspected periodically to ensure that you’re keeping up with the requirements of the field experience. The journal must include, at minimum:

- A complete and accurate record of the dates and times during which you shadow or meet with your altruist or conduct other activities related to the field experience. This can be done either

by reserving some pages at the beginning for a log, or by noting dates and times throughout the journal as you add entries.

- Descriptive accounts of the activities observed while shadowing and the operations of the facilities or organizations that you visit.
- Transcripts, notes, or summaries of conversations or interviews with your altruist or others whom you encounter during this experience. While keeping in mind that you should avoid creating additional burdens on your altruist's time, you will probably have lots of opportunities to ask questions and engage your altruist in conversation, and the information gained will be invaluable with respect to the composition of your term paper. In order to address the question, "What motivates altruism?" it will be helpful to find out as much as you can about your altruist's background and life history. The altruist's own introspective account of her or his motives is, of course, also very interesting, but you should be cautious in assuming that people understand their own motives very well. Additional valuable insights may be gleaned by interviewing others who are familiar with your altruist and her or his work.
- Your personal impressions and reactions.
- Thoughtful explorations of the topics covered in class in light of your empirical experience with your altruist. You should plan to write a page or two per week of informal reflections that integrate and analyze the theoretical material from class with your field observations. In many cases, the readings and classroom discussions will generate questions or hypotheses that might be addressed in your field experience. It will be useful to record questions to be posed to your altruist as you think of them, and to jot down hypotheses and your thoughts on how those hypotheses might be addressed or tested in the field.
- Any other material that you find useful, such as handouts from meetings, newspaper clippings, email exchanges, and other miscellaneous notes.

**Exams:** Exams will include several multiple-choice items and one or two essay questions requiring one page each to answer. They will not be cumulative. The exams will require you to demonstrate a detailed understanding each of the authors whom you have read, as well as any additional material presented in class. More specific information on the 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. They *do*, however, require considerable thought on your part. Your papers will be evaluated on the basis of: (1) correspondence to that assigned topic and thoroughness of coverage, (2) thoughtfulness and insightfulness of your arguments and analyses, and (3) quality of written expression, including technical correctness (grammar, spelling, etc.). Both papers must be word-processed, with double spacing, one-inch margins all around, and a standard 12-point font such as Times New Roman.

- **10-page Paper:** The formal requirements for this paper will be distributed in class on September 16 and the paper will be due on October 5. In general, this paper will deal with issues raised in Camus's book, *The Plague*, and Urmson's article, "Saints and Heroes."
- **25-page Paper:** The formal requirements for this paper will be distributed later in the semester and the paper will be due on December 9. This paper will present your analysis of the altruist whom you shadow over the course of the semester. It must include your own definition of what constitutes altruism and arguments in support of your definition. You must also describe your altruist in such a way that your reader will get to know the person as you did. The bulk of the

paper, however, will analyze your altruist's behavior in light of the various disciplinary perspectives and theories examined over the course of the semester. You do not need to make reference to every single reading that we cover, but you must address all of the major perspectives and refer to relevant writings. The best analysis is most likely one that pulls ideas from a variety of perspectives and integrates them in a meaningful way that sheds light on the behavior of the altruist. If you do a good job with your journal over the course of the semester, this paper should come together fairly smoothly.

## GRADING BREAKDOWN

Exam 1: 10% (Part I of course)

Exam 2: 20% (Social-scientific and Biological Perspectives)

Exam 3: 15% (Philosophical and Religious Perspectives)

10-page Paper: 15%

25-page Paper: 25%

Participation: 15% (Attendance, Field Work, Journal)

**Note on Academic Honesty:** Cheating/plagiarism constitutes the *worst* possible thing that you can do as a student. It is automatically grounds for failure of the course. When writing papers, any ideas that are not your own require acknowledgement. Thus, 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.

## Part 1: What is Altruism?

### Aug 24: Course Overview and Selection of Altruists

### Aug 26: Altruism and The Question of Costs

J.O. Urmson, "Saints and Heroes" (Course Packet)  
Samuel Oliner, *Do Unto Others*, pp. 1-90.

### Aug 31: Altruism: Towards a Definition of a Distinctive Human Phenomenon

Kristen R. Monroe, *The Heart of Altruism*, Preface: "The Human Face of Altruism;"  
Introduction; and Chapter 1: "The Puzzle of Altruism"  
Samuel Oliner, *Do Unto Others*, pp. 91-172.

### Sep 2: No class

Begin reading Albert Camus, *The Plague*.

### Sep 7: Embodied Love, "Surmenage," and the Ethics of Excess

Edith Wyschogrod, "Pythagorean Bodies and the Body of Altruism" (Course Packet)  
Samuel Oliner, *Do Unto Others*, pp. 173-213.

### Sep 9: Altruism as Part of Self-Fulfillment?

Neera Kapur Badhwar, "Altruism versus Self-Interest: Sometimes a False Dichotomy"  
(Course Packet)  
Albert Camus, *The Plague*, Parts 1 and 2, pp. 1-164.

### Sep 14: Varieties of Altruists

Monroe, *Heart of Altruism*, Chapter 2: "The Entrepreneur;" Chapter 3: "The Philanthropist;"  
Chapter 4: "The Heroine;" Chapter 5: "Rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe"  
Camus, *The Plague*, Part 3, pp. 167-185

**\*\*\* First Journal Inspection Due \*\*\***

### Sep 16: Exam #1 on Part one of Course

**Paper #1 to be announced**

### Sep 21: The Hero as Ordinary Mortal: A Close Look at Dr. Rieux

Camus, *The Plague*, Parts 4 and 5, pp. 189-308  
**In Class Discussion on *The Plague***

## Part 2: What Motivates Altruism?

### A. Social-scientific Perspectives

### Sep 23: Egoism: Altruism as Reducible to Self-Interest

Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*---selections (Course Packet)  
Begin reading Jack London, *The Sea Wolf*

**Sep 28: More on Egoism, and a Rebuttal**

Finish *The Sea Wolf*

James Rachels, "Psychological Egoism" (Course Packet)

Axelrod, Robert, *The Evolution of Cooperation*, chapters 1-4 (Course Packet)

Monroe, *Heart of Altruism*, Chapter 7: "Economic Approaches to Altruism" (optional)

**Sep 30: Altruism as Learned Behavior: Developmental and Social Psychological Perspectives**

Daniel Bar-Tal, *Prosocial Behavior: Theory and Research*, Chapters 2 & 3 (Course Packet)

Nancy Eisenberg & Carlos Valiente, "Parenting and Children's Prosocial and Moral Development" (Course Packet)

Monroe, *Heart of Altruism*, Chapter 6: "Sociocultural Attributes of Altruism"

Monroe, *Heart of Altruism*, Chapter 9: "Psychological Discussions of Altruism" (optional)

**Oct 5: Class Discussion on Social-scientific Perspectives**

**\*\*\* Ten-page Paper is due \*\*\***

**B. Biological Perspectives**

**Oct 7: Natural Selection: A "Gene's-Eye View" of Altruism**

Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, pp. 1-122.

Kristen Monroe, *Heart of Altruism*, Chapter 8: "Explanations from Evolutionary Biology"

**Oct 12: Mechanisms of Cooperation: Kin Selection and Reciprocal Altruism**

Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, pp. 123-188.

Axelrod, Robert, *The Evolution of Cooperation*, chapter 5 (Course Packet)

**Oct 14: Altruism and Natural Selection**

Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, pp. 189-266.

**Oct 19: Towards a Naturalist Account of Morality**

Steven Pinker, "I and Thou" (Course Packet)

Michael Ruse, "A Darwinian Naturalist's Perspective on Altruism" (Course Packet)

Peter Singer, *The Expanding Circle*, Chapter 1 (Course Packet)

**Oct 21: Expanding Our Circle: From Kin to the Stranger**

Peter Singer, *The Expanding Circle*, Chapters 2, 3, and 6 (Course Packet)

**Oct 26: Class Discussion on Biological Perspectives**

Begin Reading Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork to the Metaphysics of Morals* (Wood, ed.)

**\*\*\* Second Journal Inspection Due \*\*\***

**Oct 28: Exam #2 on Social-scientific and Biological Perspectives**

## **C. Philosophical Perspectives**

### **Nov 2: Duty Derived from Reason: Kant and the Categorical Imperative**

Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork to the Metaphysics of Morals* (Wood, ed.)

### **Nov 4: Kantianism and Consequentialism (“The Right”)**

Finish Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork to the Metaphysics of Morals* (Wood, ed.)

Peter Singer, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality” (Course Packet)

### **Nov 9: Altruism, Virtue, and Other-regard (“The Good”)**

Iris Murdoch, “The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts” (Course Packet)

### **Nov 11: Kantianism and Consequentialism Criticized on the Basis of Special Relations**

William Galston, “Cosmopolitan Altruism” (Course Packet)

Susan Wolf, “Moral Saints” (Course Packet)

## **D. Religious perspectives**

### **Nov 16: “Agape” and The Good Samaritan**

Luke 10: “The Good Samaritan Parable” (Course Packet)

Martin Luther King, Jr., *Speeches and Writings*, “An Experiment in Love;” “A Christmas Sermon on Peace;” and “The World House” (Course Packet)

### **Nov 18: A Self Born in Debt**

Edith Wyschogrod, *Saints and Postmodernism*, “Sainthood Influence” and “The Indentured Subject” (Course Packet)

### **Thanksgiving Break: November 20<sup>th</sup> to November 28<sup>th</sup>**

Begin reading Andrew Flescher, “Suffering Saints” (Course Packet)

### **Nov 30: Saints, Sainthood Exhortations, and Sainthood Admonishments**

Andrew Flescher, “Suffering Saints” (Course Packet)

### **Dec 2: Class Discussion on Philosophical and Religious Perspectives**

### **Dec 7: Conclusion: The “Altruistic Perspective”**

Monroe, *Heart of Altruism*, Chapter 10: “The Altruistic Perspective: Perceptions of a Shared Humanity;” Chapter 11: “Perspective and Ethical Political Acts: Initial Thoughts.”

### **Dec 9: Final Class Discussion and Feedback On Experience with Altruists**

**\*\*\* 25-page Paper due, with journal \*\*\***

### **Dec 16, 2-3:50 PM: Exam #3 on Philosophical and Religious Perspectives**