Foundational Issues in Effective Altruism (October 2022 Version)

This syllabus is based on an 8-week course run at Oxford in Michaelmas 2017, led by Hilary Greaves—the original course can be found here. It has been expanded to fill a 13-week semester, and some citations have been updated.

About this course

Effective altruism is a philosophy and social movement that uses evidence and reasoning to determine the most effective ways to benefit others. This course explores the philosophical foundations of this approach. We will see that this brings us into contact with a number of issues in philosophy, from epistemology, to the philosophy of mind, to the philosophy of science, and beyond.

Each week covers a single topic. To get a sense of how the topics hang together, we have grouped topics around a few core themes:

- Weeks 1-5: Who should we help, and how?
- Weeks 6-7: Individual Efficacy and Collective Action.
- Weeks 8-9: Epistemological issues facing Effective Altruists.
- Weeks 10-13: Should Effective Altruists embrace longtermism?

Target Audience

The course is intended undergraduates with an interest in ethics, policy, or decision theory. It is strongly advised that students have taken a prior course in ethics (or at least, enough prior courses in philosophy that they feel comfortable with a reasonably fast-paced introduction to some core concepts in ethics).

A useful book to introduce Effective Altruism and many of the issues that will be discussed throughout the course is William MacAskill’s Doing Good Better. It is recommended pre-reading.
How Should I Use This Material?

Short answer

You’re welcome to use this material however you like.

Longer answer

We think that Effective Altruism is an important movement to study, and we think it raises substantive philosophical questions that students can engage well with. Our goal in putting sharing this syllabus is to help lecturers and students engage with the material, regardless of what form that ultimately takes. You might like to teach through the entire syllabus, incorporate individual topics into your own materials, or just use the reading lists for ideas and inspiration. It could also be used for self-guided study.

Giving feedback

We’d love to hear your feedback! This is a young research area, so we plan to revise this teaching material reasonably regularly (about once a year). We’d welcome all feedback on everything from the small (Did you spot a typo? Did we miss a key reading?) to the big (Did the topics work? Have we underrepresented a view?). You can submit feedback here.
Topic 1: Duties in a World of Need

Motivating question: There is a great deal of suffering in the world, and some are much better off than others—how should we respond to those facts?

Core Readings


Optional Readings

Peter Unger (1996), Chapter 2 in Living High and Letting Die: Our Illusion of Innocence, Oxford University Press.


Leif Wenar (2017), Blood Oil: Tyrants, Violence and the Rules That Run the World, Oxford University Press. (Book-length, but a very good, accessible discussion of international resource privilege.)
Topic 2: Duties and Demandingness

Motivating question: Are there limits on how much we are required to sacrifice to aid those in need?

Core Readings


Travis Timmerman (2015), Sometimes There Is Nothing Wrong With Letting A Child Drown, Analysis, vol. 75, no. 2, pp. 204-212.

Optional Readings


Topic 3: Duties and Distance

Motivating question: Do we have the same duties to those far away from us as we do those in close proximity to us? Are we permitted to give special consideration to our nearest and dearest?

Core Readings


Optional Readings


Any article in The Monist's 2003 special issue on moral distance.

**Topic 4: Who Matters?**

*Motivating question:* If our goal is to do the most good possible, whose wellbeing should we focus on: humans or animals?

**Core Readings**


**Optional Readings**


Ruth Faden, Tom Beauchamp, Debra Matthews & Alan Regenberg (2021), *Toward a Theory of Moral Status Inclusive of Nonhuman Animals: Pig Brains in a Vat, Cows versus Chickens, and Human-Nonhuman Chimeras*, in *Rethinking Moral Status*, S. Clarke et al. (eds.), Oxford University Press.1

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1 Interested students could read any other chapter in *Rethinking Moral Status.*
Topic 5: Empathy and Identified Lives

Motivating question: Should we treat identified and statistical lives equivalently? Is it justified to prioritize identified lives over statistical lives on the grounds of empathy?

Core Readings


Optional Readings

Any chapter in Identified versus Statistical Lives: An Interdisciplinary Perspective.

Larry Temkin (2022), Chapter 3 (especially 3.4-3.6) in Being Good in a World of Need, Oxford University Press.
Topic 6: Making a Difference

Motivating Question: For many morally significant phenomena (e.g., factory farming or climate change), it seems like our individual choices do not make a difference. Is that true, and what (if anything) does that tell us about how we should contribute to addressing those phenomena?

Core Readings


Optional Readings

Felix Pinkert (2015), What if I Cannot Make a Difference (and Know It)?, Ethics, vol. 125, no. 4, pp. 971-998.


Julia Nefsky (2021), Climate Change and Individual Obligations: A Dilemma for the Expected Utility Approach, and the Need for an Imperfect View, in Philosophy and Climate Change, M. Budolfson, T. McPherson & D. Plunkett (eds.), Oxford University Press.2

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2 Interested students could read any other paper in Section 3 of Philosophy and Climate Change.
Topic 7: Individual Efficacy and What We Do Together

Motivating question: Does Effective Altruism focus too much on individual difference-making? Should our focus instead be on institutions, states, or social structures?

Core Readings

Stephanie Collins (2019), Beyond Individualism, in Effective Altruism: Philosophical Issues, Hilary Greaves and Theron Pummer (eds.), Oxford University Press.


Optional Readings


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Topic 8: Evidence, Interventions, and (Disputed) Efficacy

Motivating question: How can we know what kinds of interventions are effective, and how does this affect our prioritization among causes?

Core Readings


Optional Readings

Dambisa Moyo (2008), Dead Aid: Why Aid is Not Working and How There Is Another Way for Africa, Allen Lane, London. (The whole book is a readable introduction to aid-scepticism—Chapter 3 is a good starting point to get to grips with the core issues.)


Interested students might like to look at GiveWell's material on Randomized Controlled Trials. GiveWell is a large charity evaluator aligned with the Effective Altruist movement. (You can start at the link given and follow the links to explore further, depending on time and interest.)


Nancy Cartwright (2010), What Are Randomised Controlled Trials Good For?, Philosophical Studies, vol. 147, no. 1, pp. 59-70.
Topic 9: Cluelessness

Motivating question: If we care about efficacy, then should we care about all of our acts’ effects? Can we know what the total effects of our acts are, and if not, is that a problem?

Core Readings


Optional Readings


\(^4\) Students unfamiliar with Expected Utility (or decision theory more generally) might want to read Ray Briggs’ *Stanford Encyclopedia article on Expected Utility Theory*. The Greaves reading in particular introduces *imprecise probabilities*: see Brian Weatherson’s *Imprecise Decision Theory* or Section 4 of Lara Buchak’s *Stanford Encyclopedia entry on Rivals to Expected Utility Theory*. 
Topic 10: Longtermism

Motivating question: The future potentially contains a vast number of people. If our goal is to do the most good, then should we shift our focus away from present generations and towards the (very) long-term future?

Core Readings

Longtermism: The Future Is Vast - What Does This Mean for Our Own Life?, Our World in Data.


Optional Readings


Topic 11: Population Ethics

Motivation question: How should we think about the value not just of individual lives, but populations as a whole? How much does population size matter, and what do we owe people who may or may not come to exist in the future? Do such questions affect how we should prioritise among causes?

Core Readings

Hilary Greaves (2017), Population Axiology, Philosophy Compass, vol. 12, no. 11.


Optional Readings


**Topic 12: The Long-term and Humanity’s Trajectory**

*Motivating question:* How should we think about the future of humanity—is it good or bad, getting better or worse?

**Core Readings**

William Macaskill (2022), Chapters 3 and 4 in *What We Owe The Future*, Basic Books.

**Optional Readings**


Elizabeth Anderson (2014), *Social Movements, Experiments in Living, and Moral Progress: Case Studies from Britain's Abolition of Slavery*, The Lindley Lecture for 2014, University of Kansas, Department of Philosophy.\(^5\)

Allen Buchanan & Rachell Powell (2018), *The Evolution of Moral Progress*, Oxford University Press.\(^6\)

William Macaskill (2022), Chapter 9 in *What We Owe The Future*, Basic Books.

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\(^5\) This reading discusses the treatment of slaves in a way that some people might find difficult. This can be largely (though not entirely) skipped by beginning at page 3.

\(^6\) Students could start with the Introduction, then move on to Chapters 1 and 4 for especially relevant discussion, then other chapters depending on time and interest.
Topic 13: The Long-term and Humanity’s Survival

Motivating question: If our goal is to do the most good, should our top priority be minimising extinction risk? How does that goal compare to, say, improving the lives of people who currently exist?

Core Readings

Toby Ord (2020), Chapters 2 and 6 in The Precipice, Bloomsbury.

Core Readings


Any other chapter in Ord’s The Precipice.

Roger Crisp (2021), Would Extinction Be So Bad?, New Statesman.