

Moral Sainthood

HMRT/PHIL 39003

Spring Quarter 2016

Tuesdays & Thursdays 1:30 – 2:50pm

Location: TBD

INSTRUCTOR

Dr. Adam Etnison

- *Lecturer in Human Rights*, Pozen Family Center for Human Rights, University of Chicago
- *Visiting Assistant Professor*, Department of Philosophy, University of Chicago

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Office Hours: Fridays 10:00-12:00, or by appointment.

Office Location: Room 206, Pozen Family Center for Human Rights, 5720 S Woodlawn Ave.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Few of us do as much as we should to help others, and this is often a powerful source of guilt and regret. At the same time, those of us who are fastidiously concerned with the needs of others, and who act accordingly (call them altruists, or “moral saints”), can sometimes seem almost inhuman and even misguided. Is the moral life a good life? Or is morality less demanding than is often thought? How should we balance our self-interest, let alone other goods (the survival of the planet, the interests of animals, etc.), against the interests of others? This course will take a close look at these fundamental questions of moral philosophy, using real-world examples of ‘moral saints,’ alternative archetypes, and a wealth of literature on the demands (and demandingness) of morality, as a focus of analysis. The course is designed to be of interest to both undergraduate and graduate students in any discipline, but most of the readings will be philosophical in nature, and of special interest to students of philosophy. Students of human rights are also encouraged to register, given their (admirable) interest in helping others.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

(35%) Class Participation: All students will be expected to come to class prepared with a discussion question about the assigned readings for the day. The question can be critical (i.e., it may raise an objection against an assigned author), interpretive (i.e., it may raise an issue of interpretation in an assigned text), or thematic in nature (e.g., the question may interrogate a broad idea or theme that emerges from the readings). Since there won’t be enough time for every student to ask their question in any given class, the instructor will call on students to raise questions at random. The purpose of this exercise is to allow students to play an active role in lectures, and also to generate engaged classroom discussion. Student participation will be evaluated on the basis of (i) the quality of a student’s prepared questions, and (ii) a student’s

effort and engagement in class discussions more generally. As far as general participation goes, my advice is: don't be shy. If you have something on your mind, we are all interested in hearing it.

(65%) Final Writing Assignment (Due by end of day, June 7th – Email submission preferred): (Limit: 2750-3500 words for undergraduates; 3750-4500 words for graduate students) As a final written assignment, students will be expected to write a *final paper* that explores a topic drawn from an assigned reading, or set thereof. Students must convey their choice to the instructor by midterm, i.e., April 28th. Also: students are encouraged to submit an outline of their paper for consultation with the instructor before final submission.

By April 21st, the instructor will offer some suggestions of particular essay questions that might be fruitfully pursued, although if a student would like to propose an original topic that will be absolutely fine as well, so long as the instructor is consulted beforehand. In general, research papers will be assessed on the basis of (i) lucidity, (ii) effort, (iii) relevance to the chosen question, (iv) independence of thought, (v) argumentative charity; and (vi) comprehension of the relevant readings.

Note: Papers and prospectuses submitted late will be penalized by 1/3 grade per day (e.g. A- instead of A if the paper is one day late).

COURSE MATERIALS

There are two books required for purchase in association with this course. These books will be placed on reserve in the Regenstein library. All other readings listed below are available on Chalk, electronically. There are also a few readings placed on electronic library reserve.

REQUIRED TEXTS:

- (1) Larissa MacFarquhar, *Strangers Drowning: Grappling with Impossible Idealism, Drastic Choices, and the Overpowering Urge to Help* (New York: Penguin Press, 2015) [\$17.25 on Amazon]
- (2) Peter Singer, *Famine, Affluence, and Morality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), with a foreword by Bill and Melinda Gates. [\$9.95 on Amazon]

RECOMMENDED TEXTS:

- (a) William MacAskill, *Doing Good Better: How Effective Altruism Can Help You Make a Difference* (New York: Gotham Books, 2015).
- (b) Peter Singer, *The Most Good You Can Do: How Effective Altruism is Changing Ideas About Living Ethically* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), e.g., pp. 1-75.
- (c) Peter Unger, *Living High and Letting Die: Our Illusion of Innocence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

SYLLABUS

I. THE LIVED EXPERIENCE

MARCH

29 REAL SAINTS

- (1) Larissa MacFarquhar, *Strangers Drowning: Grappling with Impossible Idealism, Drastic Choices, and the Overpowering Urge to Help* (New York: Penguin Press, 2015), pp. 1-12, 119-153, 193-205, 223-269.

31 CLASS CANCELLED

APRIL

5 REAL SAINTS?

- (1) Larissa MacFarquhar, *Strangers Drowning: Grappling with Impossible Idealism, Drastic Choices, and the Overpowering Urge to Help* (New York: Penguin Press, 2015), pp. 103-119, 153-171, 269-283, 295-303.

Recommended Reading

- (a) Samuel Moyn, "The Beauty and Costs of Extreme Altruism" in *The Nation*, November 5, 2015.

II. DEFINING THE MORAL "SAINT"

7 MORAL SAINTHOOD

- (1) Susan Wolf, "Moral Saints" in *The Journal of Philosophy* (1982), Vol. 79, No. 8, pp. 419-439.

12 MORAL SAINTHOOD II

- (1) Vanessa Carbonell, "What Moral Saints Look Like" in *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* (2009), Vol. 39, No. 3, pp. 371-398.

III. DOING THE MOST GOOD

14 SINGER'S CHALLENGE

- (1) Peter Singer, *Famine Affluence, and Morality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), with a foreword by Bill and Melinda Gates [READ WHOLE BOOK].

Recommended Reading

- (a) Larissa MacFarquhar, *Strangers Drowning: Grappling with Impossible Idealism, Drastic Choices, and the Overpowering Urge to Help* (New York: Penguin Press, 2015), pp. 61-69.

19 **LIVING HIGH AND LETTING DIE**

- (1) Peter Unger, *Living High and Letting Die: Our Illusion of Innocence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), Chs. 2 & 6, pp. 24-62, 133-158.

21 **DOING GOOD BETTER**

- (1) William MacAskill, *Doing Good Better: How Effective Altruism Can Help You Make a Difference* (New York: Gotham Books, 2015), pp. 1-54.

Recommended Reading

- (a) William MacAskill, *Doing Good Better: How Effective Altruism Can Help You Make a Difference* (New York: Gotham Books, 2015) [THE REST OF THE BOOK].

26 **RECENT CRITIQUES (GUEST DISCUSSANT: ALEXANDER PRESCOTT-COUCH)**

- (1) Iason Gabriel, “Effective Altruism and its Critics” in *Journal of Applied Philosophy* (Forthcoming), pp. 1-17.

Recommended Reading

- (a) Amia Srinivasan, “Stop the Robot Apocalypse” in *London Review of Books* (2015), Vol. 37, No. 18.

IV. ALTERNATIVE IDEALS

28 **INDIVIDUALISM (GUEST DISCUSSANT: DAVID EGAN)**

- (1) Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self-Reliance” [1842] in *Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), ed. K. S. Sacks, pp. 53-75.

MAY

3 **EGOISM (GUEST DISCUSSANT: KATELYNN MCBRIDE)**

- (1) Ayn Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness: A New Concept of Egoism* (New York: Penguin Group, 1964), Chs. 1, 3 & 12, pp. 13-40, 49-57, 108-118.

5 **SELF-AUTHORSHIP** (GUEST DISCUSSANT: CHIARA CORDELLI)

- (1) Jean Hampton, "Selflessness and the Loss of Self" in *Social Philosophy & Policy* (1993), Vol. 10, No. 1, pp. 135-165.

10 **MURDOCH'S MORAL PHILOSOPHY** (GUEST DISCUSSANT: DHANANJAY JAGANNATHAN)

- (1) Iris Murdoch, "Vision and Choice in Morality" in *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Penguin Group, 1999), pp. 76-99.

Recommended Reading

- (a) Charles Taylor, "Iris Murdoch and Moral Philosophy" in *Dilemmas and Connections: Selected Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), Ch. 1, pp. 3-24.

11 **SPECIAL CLASS SESSION ON *STRANGERS DROWNING*** (WITH LARISSA MACFARQUHAR)

- (1) Larissa MacFarquhar, *Strangers Drowning: Grappling with Impossible Idealism, Drastic Choices, and the Overpowering Urge to Help* (New York: Penguin Press, 2015) [WHAT WE READ BEFORE & PP. 71-102]

V. MORAL DEMANDS AND THE MEANING OF LIFE

12 **THINKING TOO MUCH** (GUEST DISCUSSANT: DANIEL TELECH)

- (1) Bernard Williams, "Persons, Character, and Morality" in *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), Ch. 1, pp. 1-20.

Recommended Reading

- (a) Nakul Krishna, "Add Your Own Egg" in *The Point Magazine* (Available Online).

17 **ALIENATION** (GUEST DISCUSSANT: HEATHER WHITNEY)

- (1) Peter Railton, "Alienation, Consequentialism, and the Demands of Morality" in *Philosophy and Public Affairs* (1984), Vol. 13, No. 2, pp. 134-171.

19 **ASKING TOO MUCH**

- (1) Garrett Cullity, "Asking Too Much" in *The Monist* (2003), Vol. 86, No. 3, pp. 402-418.

Recommended Reading

- (a) Larissa MacFarquhar, *Strangers Drowning: Grappling with Impossible Idealism, Drastic Choices, and the Overpowering Urge to Help* (New York: Penguin Press,

2015), pp. 205-221.

24 **MEANING AND MORALITY** (GUEST DISCUSSANT: ANSELM W. MEULLER)

- (1) Anselm W. Meuller, “What Do We Live for? On The Competition Between Perfection and Well-Being” (DRAFT PAPER), pp. 1-31.

Recommended Reading

- (a) Susan Wolf, “Meaning in Life” in *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), Ch. 1, pp. 1-34.

VI. DISTANCE AND FAIRNESS

26 **MORALITY AND PROXIMITY** (GUEST DISCUSSANT: BEN LAURENCE)

- (1) Richard W. Miller, “Beneficence, Duty, and Distance” in *Philosophy and Public Affairs* (2004), Vol. 32, No. 4, pp. 357-383.

Recommended Reading

- (a) Frances Kamm, “Does Distance Matter Morally to the Duty to Rescue?” in *Intricate Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), Ch. 11, pp. 345-368.

31 **WHY ME?**

- (1) David Miller, “‘Are they *my* poor?’: The Problem of Altruism in a World of Strangers” in *Justice for Earthlings: Essays in Political Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), Ch. 8, pp. 183-206.

Recommended Reading

- (a) Liam Murphy, “The Demands of Beneficence” in *Philosophy and Public Affairs* (1993), Vol. 22, No. 4, pp. 267-292.