The Greater Good

How Effective Altruism Can Help You Maximize Your Impact

Learning Objectives

Students will analyze the Effective Altruist (EA) decision framework of Altruism, Consequentialism, Maximization, and Egalitarianism (ACME), and apply the framework to real-world problems, such as cause selection, charity evaluation, and career decisions. They will use this as a jumping off point to develop and articulate their own code of practical ethics and make concrete plans based on it.

Class Structure

This is a 13 week class. We will meet once a week for two hours each session; readings or written exercises are assigned each week, to be completed before class.

Most class sections will be held in a discussion format, focused on a worksheet. Through the worksheets, students will apply the concepts discussed in class to relevant problems, and articulate how they personally relate to the class material. Some weeks, students will turn in a short personal response.

Some weeks, we will have a guest speaker present on a cause or concept related to their field of expertise. On these and other weeks, we will play a *giving game*: groups of 3-4 students are given an amount of money (generally $50) and choose one of a few nonprofits to donate it to. There will be a final giving game at the end of the semester in which each student individually chooses where to allocate $50. We match further student contributions on top of the provided amount up to a certain threshold, including contributions by friends of the student and others not in the class.

Grading

Grading is based on a points system; students need 32 points out of 40 possible to pass the class. The breakdown is as follows:

- Short pre-class assignments: 2 points per assignment (14 possible)
- Short in-class responses: each out of 2 points (16 points possible)
- Take home essays: each out of 10 points (20 points possible)
- Final giving game decision response: out of 20 points

Additionally, the following will result in an **automatic fail:**

- More than 3 absences
- Failing to complete a feedback survey (Responses will be anonymous, and students will receive a code to prove that they have taken it)

Schedule

Week 1: Good vs. Good

What's more important, eliminating racism or curing cancer? We're often uncomfortable comparing two causes or choices that are both doing good. But we cannot escape making these tradeoffs every day. We discuss the ethics of such choices and strategies for making them.

Readings: None

Week 2: Framework of Effective Altruism

Effective Altruism is an intellectual and social movement that provides a framework for answering these questions: Altruism, Consequentialism, Maximization, and Egalitarianism (ACME). We practice thinking in this framework, and discuss its often radical implications.

Readings: What Is the Greatest Good?, Four Focus Areas of Effective Altruism

Weeks 3: Who Counts?

We feel more compassion towards people who are closer to us or similar to us; we discuss why the ACME framework would reject the idea that this implies we have a greater obligation to these people, through a case study comparing domestic and global poverty.

Readings: The way to produce a person, An embarrassment of riches, Consequentialism FAQ

Week 4: Impact Evaluation

We continue to explore global poverty as a cause area, focusing on how we can measure the effects of an intervention. Global health and poverty is a very large field with thousands of charities; we discuss the criteria nonprofit evaluator GiveWell uses to choose from among them.

Readings: The Unintuitive Power Laws of Giving, Random Acts, RCTs: Panacea or Mirage?, In Defense of the Streetlight Effect

Guest Speaker: Sean Conley, GiveWell traditional

Giving Game: Against Malaria Foundation vs. Give Directly

Week 6: Evaluating EA, Evaluating Ourselves

We study scope insensitivity, opportunity cost neglect, status quo bias, and other results from behavioral psychology and cognitive science, and examine how they affect our decision making (altruistic and otherwise) through exercises and activities.

Readings: See the dark world, A critique of effective altruism, Allkind

Guest Speaker: TBA

Week 5: Cause Selection

We introduce a principle for choosing causes to work on: choose a cause that is Important, Tractable, and Neglected (ITN). We discuss the practical implications and practice using this heuristic on a variety of causes.

Readings: Strategic Cause Selection, A Framework for Strategically Selecting a Cause

Guest Speaker: Cat Hollander, Open Philanthropy Project

Week 7: Animal Welfare

We introduce the cause of animal welfare, why effective altruists tend to focus on reducing factory farming, and study concrete actions to support animal causes. We apply the principle of Egalitarianism, through a case study comparing feelings for pets and farm animals.

Readings: Speciesism, Does Vegetarianism Make a Difference?

Guest Speaker: Jacy Anthis, Animal Charity Evaluators

Giving Game: The Humane League vs Against Malaria Foundation

Week 8: Dealing with Uncertainty, Part 1: Numerical Reasoning

When we're trying to do good, there is often much more that we're uncertain about than that we're certain about. Our choices are nearly infinite, and there's always a substantial chance that we'll accidentally do harm. What strategies can we use to manage uncertainty usefully?

Readings: Why Maximize Expected Value?, Stock Options

Week 9: Dealing with Uncertainty, Part 2: Limits of Numerical Thinking

When we're trying to do good, there is often much more that we're uncertain about than that we're certain about. Our choices are nearly infinite, and there's always a substantial chance that we'll accidentally do harm. What strategies can we use to manage uncertainty usefully?

Readings: Why We Can't Take Expected Value Estimates Literally

Week 10: The Long Term

We focus on the EA concept of Maximization, and why that could imply that we should focus mostly on the long-term ripple effects of our actions. We introduce the concepts of global catastrophic risks and flow-through effects, and apply our strategies for dealing with uncertainty to evaluate long-term causes.

Readings: Global Catastrophic Risks, Flow Through Effects

Guest Speaker: TBA

Giving Game: THL vs AMF vs Center for the Study of Existential Risk

Week 11: What to Actually Do

If we want to make helping others a substantial part of our lives, what are our options? We discuss the advantages and disadvantages of donation, research, direct work, and activism, and form personal career plans tying together the causes we care about and the skills we can offer.

Readings: 80000 Hours Career Guide, True vs. Tangible Impact, Donating as a Student

Week 12: Meta Charity

If we think that an approach to doing good, like effective altruism, is especially valuable, then one of the most valuable things we can do is to spread that idea and provide support for people trying to live by it. We present and evaluate organizations that try to do this kind of outreach.

Readings: Meta-charities, EA Risks Falling into a Meta Trap

Guest Speaker: TBA

Week 13: The Final Game: Each student donates $50 of our money to one of eight charities in one of four cause areas. Students submit a final essay written in class about the decision. We match student contributions on top of the allocated amount until we run out of money.