

Philosophy 306: Egoism and Altruism

POSSIBLE PAPER TOPICS

The final paper must be 8-10 pages (2200-3000 words), double-spaced, reasonable margins.

You must come up with a paper topic of your own. A 1-page (250-word minimum) paper "prospectus," with a bibliography of the readings you intend to use, is **due on April 16**. The prospectus should state very clearly the issue you plan to examine in your paper, and some of the sub-topics or sub-questions under your topic. The point of the prospectus is to help you to formulate and clarify your ideas as a stage on the way to producing the final version of the paper, and also for me to give you feedback on your topic. You are encouraged to communicate with me prior to the prospectus due date, but this is not required.

The final version is due **Tuesday, May 19** (during exam week).

The requirements of the topic are that it be

- (1) philosophical, or at least have a strong philosophical dimension even if parts of it are empirical.
- (2) involve research, that is, some scholarly readings other than those assigned in the course (but this research need not be extensive; one book or several articles could be adequate).
- (3) I would prefer that your paper make use of one reading from the course, partly as a way to keep it grounded in the issues of the course; however, this is not strictly necessary and you may try to convince me that you want to write on a topic for which all the reading is outside the course.
- (4) Your paper cannot substantially overlap with any of your answers on the take-home exams. The safest way to ensure this result is to pick a different topic than one you write on for the exam. However, you may also choose to write on a similar topic to an exam one, as long as the paper ends up being substantially different from your answer on the exam.

Here are some suggested topics or topic areas. But you can come up with a topic of your own, as long as it is substantially related to the issues of the course. The course is divided up into different topic segments, and most of the segments could be easily turned into paper topics. For example:

1. There is a fairly extensive philosophical (and sometimes psychological or evolutionary) literature on both psychological and ethical egoism. Either would make a fine topic.

2. Love as an ethical emotion. Compare Freud's view of love with Kierkegaard's, or more generally Christian views of love. This could be combined with a discussion of the relative merits of universal vs. particularistic forms of love, an issue we will deal with later in the course, but one that Freud deals with. This last topic has an extensive literature on its own, and could be treated as a separate topic—not necessarily strictly about 'love' but about whether morality demands a fully universalistic outlook, or whether certain particularistic loyalties and carings—for friends, family, ethnic group, nation, etc.—are morally good, or even morally required. We will deal with this latter issue in the class, at the very end. (So I have really suggested two different though related topics here.)

3. Both Anna Freud and Spelman open up questions about the complex interplay of self and other in thinking about altruism. The unconscious dimension of this (seen more in AF than Spelman) is a particularly interesting issue, one that is an implicit part of many discussions of psychological egoism. That is PE-ists often assume or argue that even if we think we are acting altruistically, we are really acting egoistically, unconsciously perhaps. It's a great area to dig into.

4. Later in the course we will deal with Christian and other non-Jewish rescuers of Jews during the Holocaust. This area has recently been pretty thoroughly studied; there are some very interesting books about it. None of them are by philosophers, but some are by political theorists, and they look at the motivations of these rescuers. You could look at whether these motivations count as altruistic, and also whether there are interestingly or importantly different kinds of altruism at play. For example, some of this literature (and the film we will see on this topic) deals with religious and non-religious motives for rescue. That is an interesting and important subject.

5. Following on the suggestion at the end of #4, you could write on religious and non-religious forms of altruism, love, compassion, etc. How do they differ? Or do they really differ in a significant way?

6. Evolution and altruism is a fascinating and huge area, if you have some background in the former. One possible topic that does *not* require much understanding of the science itself is the one that Kitcher and Singer's articles take De Waal up on, and that is how to think about the findings about animals in relation to morality itself. That is, accepting that there is some sort of non-egoistic behavior on the part of the animals, how is this related to morality? The other essays in Primates and Philosophers, especially the one by Korsgaard, would be good further sources for this sort of topic.

7. We deal briefly with some social psychological findings about altruism (in the reading by Doris). There is a lot of work done in this area. You would have to pull the philosophy out of it (as Doris does) but you could do it.