

# PHILOSOPHY 306 (formerly Philosophy 295): EGOISM AND ALTRUISM

Larry Blum

W-5-012

**Office Hours:**

Tues 11:20-12:10

Thurs 3:30-4:30

or by appointment

phone: 617-287-6532 (also voice mail)

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## Required books:

1. Sigmund Freud, Civilization and its Discontents (Norton, 1989)
2. W. Somerset Maugham, The Moon and Sixpence (Penguin, 2005)  
[1 and 2 are currently available at the UMass Bookstore]
3. Stephen Macedo and Josiah Ober (eds.), Primates and Philosophers: How Morality Evolved (Princeton, 2006)
4. Dalai Lama, An Open Heart: Practicing Compassion in Everyday Life (Little, Brown, 2001)  
[Editions of these books other than those listed are fine, but you will have to figure out how to correlate the page numbers of the assigned readings, as given below on the syllabus, with your edition. I can help you do this.]

These books are on reserve at Healey Library at the Reserve Desk

\*\*Most other readings will be on Electronic Reserves (“ERes”), accessible on the Healey Library website. The password for the course is “egoism.” You should download these readings for your personal use. You must bring them to class on the day they will be discussed.

## Course website:

Course material will be posted on the course website. The site will have all course announcements, assignments, handouts, the syllabus, useful links, other materials related to the course. The syllabus on the site can be used to access the ERes reading. It will also have a few of the readings—those that are not in the books or cannot go into the ERes system. These are marked on the syllabus. You should check the website regularly and especially if you miss class. The URL of the site is:

[www.BlumPhilosophy.com](http://www.BlumPhilosophy.com)

## About the course:

The course concerns two distinct but related questions that have concerned philosophers for more than 2500 years, and have also been of concern to the great world religions, and, more recently, to psychology. The first is a question about human nature and motivation: Are human beings fundamentally self-interested, only out for themselves; or, are they capable of concern for the welfare of other persons for their own sakes and independent of any personal gain to themselves? (This is called “altruism.”) The second is a question about morality: Do human beings have good reason to be concerned about anyone’s well-being other than their own? *Should* they be concerned for others? By the end of the course students in the class will be able to recognize, describe, and analyze differing viewpoints on these two questions, and will be able to make a reasonable attempt to come up with your own answers to them. You will be able to recognize and construct philosophical arguments on these age-old questions, while also gaining some knowledge of the contributions to them from evolutionary theory, psychology, literature, and religion. Finally, you will be able to recognize and analyze a related question: If there is such a thing as love, compassion, or altruism, is the only or best form of it universal, in which all human beings are cared for purely as human beings (or children of God), as some religions assert; or, as some philosophers argue, are some forms of “conditional love” – for friends, family, or local community – morally good also?

The course will help develop students' capacity for critical reading of a variety of historical texts written in unfamiliar language, as well as contemporary ones. You must do the assigned reading for every class and bring the reading with them, prepared to answer questions about it and to explore its meaning, interest, and validity with other students. You will strengthen your ability to reason about moral issues about which no agreement seems in sight, and recognize how both philosophy and other disciplines shed light on moral questions and questions of motivation and human nature. The class will involve some lecturing, but will be heavily dependent on class discussion as the best way in which students can learn to analyze intellectual issues and back up as well as question your own and others' beliefs. These discussions will also enhance your skills of communication and interchange on moral matters. The written assignments will help you develop your skills of critical reading, as well as of engaging in philosophical analysis, including the providing of arguments of your own.

*No computer use will be allowed in class!!*

### **Requirements and grades:**

1. three 4-5-page take-home exams [due March 10, April 21, exam week {date to be determined}] (3-page) paper: 20%
2. Final paper (8-10 pages): 30%
3. Attendance and class participation: 10% [Attendance will be taken every class and students will be expected to attend class having done the reading and being prepared to discuss it.]
4. There may also be occasional "diagnostic quizzes." These will not be graded but will help me see how you are doing with the material.

### **Academic honesty:**

I expect you to approach your work in this class with honesty and integrity. An important part of doing so is that written work that you submit to me must be entirely your own. When you make use of other sources (encyclopedia, internet, journal, books, newspaper, etc.), you must give full and accurate credit to the author of this source, and not pretend that it is your own. Cheating on papers and exams, for example by presenting another student's work as your own, is not permitted. The University's detailed rules for academic honesty are stated in the Student Handbook (under "Academic Honesty," part of the "Code of Student Conduct"). Please familiarize yourselves with these rules. Our course is about morality, and cheating and plagiarism are immoral and show disrespect for the university, your fellow students, your instructor, and yourself. Penalties for cheating normally range from failing the assignment through failing the course but can also include suspension or expulsion from the university.

**Disability:** If you have a disability and feel you will need accommodations in order to complete course requirements, please contact the Ross Center for Disability Services (Campus Center, 2nd floor, room 2010): 617.287.7430

### **READING:**

**---Are human beings fundamentally selfish? The historical debate on "psychological egoism"---**  
Jan 27: Introduction. *Plato*: Gyges's Ring [handout]

29: (a) Thomas *Hobbes*, from *Leviathan* (1651), chapter XIII: "Of the Natural Condition of Mankind as Concerning Their Felicity, and Misery," pages 82-85 (paragraphs 1 - 11)[in this selection, the word "diffidence" means "distrust or fear of others"]

(b) Bishop Joseph *Butler*, excerpt from *Five Sermons* (1726)  
[handout, course website]

Feb 3: (a) Petr Kropotkin, from Mutual Aid: A Factor in Evolution (1888): "Mutual Aid Amongst Ourselves (continued)," 231-241 [last 10 pages of chapter]; and "Conclusion," 242-247 [ERes]  
(b) S. Freud, Civilization and Its Discontents (1930) [required book]  
(i) chapter II: first 4 pages (22 - 27 "...in which our organism is regulated")  
(ii) chapter IV: 56 ("Before we go on to enquire...") - 59 ("...in all organic - development.")  
(iii) chapter V: 64-74

5: Freud, continued:

(iv) chapter VI: 81-82 (last paragraph of chapter)  
(v) chapter VII: 83-86 ("...getting it punished by the external world.")  
(vi) chapter VIII: 100 ("Though it cannot be of great importance...") - 109 ("idealistic misconception of human nature.")

10: James Rachels, from The Elements of Moral Philosophy, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, "Psychological Egoism," 63-75 [handout, course website]

-----"Ethical Egoism:" Should we be concerned about the well-being of other people, or only our own?-----

12: (a) Ayn Rand, from For the New Intellectual (excerpt from the novel, The Fountainhead [1943]), 68-71, 77-86 [ERes]

recommended: Craig Biddle, "Introducing the Objective Standard" (especially the section "A Proper Morality") [ERes]

17: W.S. Maugham, The Moon and Sixpence (1919), pp. 1 - 125 (through chapter XXXIX)[explanatory notes for some references in the text are on 201-204] [required book]

19: The Moon and Sixpence, remainder of book: 125 [chapter XL] - 200

24: James Rachels, from The Elements of Moral Philosophy, 4<sup>th</sup> edition "Ethical Egoism," 76-90 [ERes]

-----Sorting out 'self' and 'other': some complexities-----

26: Anna Freud, from Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense (1936), "A Form of Altruism," 122-134 [ERes]

\*\*\*\*\*1st paper handed out\*\*\*\*\*

March 3: Elizabeth V. Spelman, Fruits of Sorrow: Framing Our Attention to Suffering, chapter 5: "Changing the Subject: On Making Your Suffering Mine," 113-132 [ERes]

5: (continued)

-----Evolutionary approaches to altruism-----

10: Frans de Waal, "Morality Evolved: Primate Social Instincts, Human Morality, and the Rise and Fall of 'Veneer Theory'," 3-42, from Primates and Philosophers [required book]

+++++1st paper due+++++

12: (a) de Waal, 42-58

(b) Philip Kitcher, "Ethics and Evolution: How to Get Here From There," 120-130 [not whole article] from Primates and Philosophers

17: [SPRING BREAK]

19: [SPRING BREAK]

24: (a) *Kitcher* (continued), 130-139

(b) Peter *Singer*, "Morality, Reason, and the Rights of Animals," 140-151 [not whole article], from Primates and Philosophers

26: (continued – no new reading)

----**The development of emotion-based altruistic motivational capacities**----

31: Shaun *Nichols*, "Sparks of Benevolence: The Varied Emotional Responses to Suffering in Others," 30-48, from Sentimental Rules: On the Natural Foundations of Moral Judgment (2004)

April 2: *Nichols*, 48-64

course withdrawal & Pass/Fail deadline

----**Egoism, Altruism, and Cooperation**----

7: V. *Held*, "The Grounds for Social Trust," from Rights and Goods, 62-74 [ERes]

----**Social influences on altruism: profound and trivial**----

9: film: "Weapons of the Spirit"

\*\*\*\*\*2nd paper handed out\*\*\*\*\*

14: remainder of film, and L. *Blum*, pages 148-169 from "Virtue and Community" (from Moral Perception and Particularity) [ERes]

16: (a) John *Doris*, "Moral Character, Moral Behavior," 28-39, from Lack of Character: Personality and Moral Behavior (2002) [ERes]

(b) Peter *Singer*, "Altruism and Commerce: A Defense of Titmuss Against Arrow," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 2, #3 (1973): 312-320 [course website]

----**Buddhist and Christian Conceptions of Compassion and Universal Love**----

21: The *Dalai Lama*, 5-25, 91-125, 147-159 (Introduction, and Chapters 7, 8, 9, 10, 13) from An Open Heart: Practicing Compassion in Everyday Life

+++++2nd paper due+++++

23: (continued)

28: Soren *Kierkegaard*, from The Works of Love (1847): 58-98, but focus on the following:  
[NOTE: the "poet" is the advocate of erotic love and friendship]

(a) 58 - 60 (top, end of paragraph at top)

(b) 62 (paragraph in middle: "Therefore we will test...") - 65 (end of par. at top)

(c) 66 (par. in middle: "That passionate preference...") - 72

(d) 73 - 79 (end of par. at top)

(e) 80 (first full par.: "Love to one's neighbor...") - 86 (end of last full par.: "... the double danger.")

(f) 89 (first full par., in middle: "Let us now consider...") - 93 (line 9 from top: " ...the advantages granted him in life")

(g) 95 (first full par.: "Consider for a moment...") - end of chapter (p. 98)

[eRes]

30: (continued)

-----**Universal vs. Particular Love**-----

May 5: John Cottingham, "Partiality, Favouritism, and Morality," *The Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 36, no. 144, July 1986: 357-373 [ERes]

7: L. Blum, from Friendship, Altruism, and Morality [1980]: chapter IV "Friendship as a Moral Phenomenon," 67-83 [ERes]

12: (continued)

final take-home exam and final paper due during exam week (May 18-22) [dates to be determined]