

## Contemporary Social Problems

A social or ethical issue (also called a social problem or a social illness) refers to an issue that influences and is opposed by a considerable number of individuals within a society. There are many of these issues ranging from inequality and homelessness, from abortion and capital punishment, and from war to damage to the environment; in this class we will be discussing a number in detail. The topics we will be discussing are not uniformly agreed upon, these are issues in which the popular opinion among society is divided; they are hotly debated.

The difference in society's opinion springs from people holding different values, or what one judges to be important in life. We will be examining various viewpoints on a number of controversial contemporary issues, from people who hold different values. The goal of this course is to teach you, the student, how to critically analyze arguments and write papers in a social science context; with the hopes that you will learn to transform your own assertions and viewpoints into coherent arguments.

It is important to write about these subjects because any change one wants to see in the world must begin with education, and in order to convince anyone of your side of the argument you must be able to articulate and defend it from attack. If you truly care about an issue then you must take the time to research it so you know what you are talking about, that is what this course aims to do.

The emergence of a socially conscious society during the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries has been a result of many factors. The spread of democracy throughout the developed country has made the people's right to self-rule a more or less universal value, and there is much and there is much said whenever that right is seemingly violated. Improvements in communication and new forms of social media have made the world a much smaller place so to speak, and problems that were once "too far away" to worry about are now known to the global community. The generations of young people in the world today care about these things and want to see change.

Most colleges and universities recognize this rise in social consciousness and require some form of meaningful community service, or service learning, from their students. They do this with the hopes that the students will want and be able to make a difference in society and will be able to reflect on that experience. Participants may find that the giving of themselves to the public good may result in a more solidified view of self and purpose. The community service act of 1990 states that service learning "helps foster civic responsibility; and that is integrated into and enhances the academic curriculum of the students." These programs seek to create socially conscious citizens, and many universities take community service into serious consideration when reviewing applications.

The problems we will be discussing all have to do with the field of philosophy known as ethics. The field of ethics (or moral philosophy) involves systematizing, defending, and recommending concepts of right and wrong behavior. Before we examine specific contemporary social problems we will begin with an introduction to ethics. We will go over briefly some different ethical concepts and theories, with this knowledge the student can begin to go over their own ethical standards to be sure they are reasonable and well founded.

Philosophers usually divide ethics into three fields, *metaethics*, *normative ethics*, and *applied ethics*. Metaethics investigates where our ethical principles come from, and what they mean. Metaethics is concerned with defining ethical terms and answering such questions as “what *is* good”. Normative ethics is more practical and seeks to investigate *how* we should act, by arriving at moral standards that regulate right and wrong conduct in general. Finally, applied ethics draws upon ethical theory in order to ask what a person is obligated to do in some *very specific* situation; applied ethics involves examining specific controversial issues. In this course we will be focusing mainly on normative and applied ethics.

People act for many reasons; but for whom, or what, do or should they act—for themselves, for God, or for the good of the planet? Can an individual ever act only according to her own interests without regard for others’ interests? Conversely, can an individual ever truly act for others in complete disregard for her own interests? Morally speaking, one can ask whether the individual should pursue her own interests, or, whether she should reject self-interest and pursue others’ interest instead: to what extent are other-regarding acts morally praiseworthy compared to self-regarding acts?

Throughout the ages there have been different normative ethical systems advanced by philosophers as being valid for all of mankind, the first one we will be discussing is known as *ethical egoism*. According to this normative ethical theory, a person’s only duty is to promote his own good as much as possible. This means that in order to live a moral life, a good life, a person ought to do only what is in their self-interest. Arguments commonly used to justify egoism are that we each are intimately familiar with our own individual wants and needs, and therefore we should only focus on those because if we attempted to meet others needs we might mess things up; therefore we should all “mind our own business”. Many ethical egoists claim that to give charity to someone is to degrade them and denies their individual value.

One famous proponent of ethical egoism is the author of *Atlas Shrugged*, Ayn Rand, who you will often here mentioned by those seeking to show the morality of capitalism and praising the notion of individualism. In her book *The Virtue of Selfishness: A New Concept of Egoism*, Ayn Rand discusses an ethical theory she calls *rational self-interest*, or *Objectivism*. According to Rand, a rational man holds his own life as his highest value, rationality as his highest virtue, and his happiness as the final purpose of his life. Objectivism places great emphasis on keeping promises

or “contracts” with others, and sees human interactions on the whole as a series of mutually beneficial business exchanges; wherein each individual is gaining something from the other person. Rand holds that it is both irrational and immoral to act against one's self-interest, and she was highly critical of the ethical doctrine of altruism, saying “the irreducible primary of altruism, the basic absolute is *self-sacrifice*” and “The issue is whether man is to be regarded as a sacrificial animal. Any man of self-esteem will answer: No. Altruism says: Yes.”

In economics, the *invisible hand of the market* is a metaphor used by Adam Smith to describe the self-regulating behavior of the marketplace. Individuals can make profit, and maximize it without the need for government intervention. The phrase has come to capture his important claim that individuals' efforts to maximize their own gains in a free market may benefit society, even if the ambitious have no benevolent intentions. Basically, everybody being out for themselves will somehow end up being good for society, thanks to this invisible hand. Adam Smith was an 18<sup>th</sup> century Scottish moral philosopher and a pioneer of political economy. He is known as the ‘father of modern economics’ and is quoted often by those who hold a libertarian philosophy.

Critics of rational egoism may claim that reason may dictate that one's interests should not govern one's actions. In certain situations what is rational may not be what is in your best interest. Another criticism is that it leaves those less fortunate in society at a clear disadvantage, because they cannot “offer” anything of value to exchange they are not to be considered, unless in a charitable context. If for some reason you are mentally or physically incapacitated, this ethical theory leaves much to be desired. Another common criticism is that one individual's wishes, desires, and wants may come at the expense of frustrating another's. In these cases there is a clear conflict of interest which leads to the question “why should one person's self-interest count more than anyone else's?”

Thomas Jefferson wrote, “Self-interest, or rather self-love, or egoism, has been more plausibly substituted as the basis of morality. But I consider our relations with others as constituting the boundaries of morality. With ourselves, we stand on the ground of identity, not of relation, which last, requiring two subjects, excludes self-love confined to a single one. To ourselves, in strict language, we can owe no duties, obligation requiring also two parties. Self-love, therefore, is no part of morality. Indeed, it is exactly its counterpart.”

Ethical egoism is contrasted with the theory of ethical altruism, which is an ethical doctrine that holds that the moral value of an individual's actions depend solely on the impact on other individuals, regardless of the consequences on the individual itself. An action is morally right if the consequences of that action are more favorable than unfavorable to everyone except the agent; altruism calls for living for the sake of others.

The word "altruism" was coined by Auguste Comte, a French philosopher, in order to describe the ethical doctrine he supported. He believed that individuals had a moral obligation to renounce self-interest and live for others. Comte says, in his *Catéchisme Positiviste*, that:

"[The] social point of view cannot tolerate the notion of rights, for such notion rests on individualism. We are born under a load of obligations of every kind, to our predecessors, to our successors, to our contemporaries. After our birth these obligations increase or accumulate, for it is some time before we can return any service.... This ["to live for others"], the definitive formula of human morality, gives a direct sanction exclusively to our instincts of benevolence, the common source of happiness and duty. [Man must serve] Humanity, whose we are entirely"

Altruistic behavior is common throughout the animal kingdom, particularly in species with complex social structures. For example, vampire bats regularly regurgitate blood and donate it to other members of their group who have failed to feed that night, ensuring they do not starve. In numerous bird species, a breeding pair receives help in raising its young from other 'helper' birds, who protect the nest from predators and help to feed the fledglings. Vervet monkeys give alarm calls to warn fellow monkeys of the presence of predators, even though in doing so they attract attention to themselves, increasing their personal chance of being attacked. In social insect colonies (ants, wasps, bees and termites), sterile workers devote their whole lives to caring for the queen, constructing and protecting the nest, foraging for food, and tending the larvae. Such behavior is maximally altruistic: sterile workers obviously do not leave any offspring of their own—so have personal fitness of zero—but their actions greatly assist the reproductive efforts of the queen.

An ethical altruist will always act according to what will bring about the greatest good for other people, even if this means sacrificing her/his self. Some classic examples of altruistic acts include a soldier jumping on a grenade in order to save his comrades, or a person walking in to a burning building in order to save someone else (while giving no thought to their personal safety). While the ethical altruist may receive praise for their actions after the fact, this is not their motivation for acting.

Some common criticisms of ethical altruism include the idea that to treat others as more important than oneself is degrading and demeaning to the self. Friedrich Nietzsche believed that the idea that others have a higher value than oneself hinders the individual's pursuit of self-development, excellence, and creativity. Another criticism is that there is no rational ground for asserting that sacrificing yourself in order to serve others is morally superior to pursuing your own (long-term, rational) self-interest; that those who assert helping others selflessly is "good" are relying on some form of mysticism or another.

Egoism and altruism are opposite poles on the ethical spectrum. One holds that the 'right' thing to do is to always act in one's own self-interest while the other

holds you should always act in order to benefit others, disregarding yourself. These systems are relatively 'simple'; for the next session we will be examining some more sophisticated ethical systems.