



HOW TO HELP MILLIONS OF PEOPLE

Human Rights at Scale / Frontiers of Human Rights

Fall 2026

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Overview:

In this study session, we will together explore a simple question – how can one, in our “one wild and precious life,” (The Summer Day, Mary Oliver) help millions (or even billions) of people?

The goals of this group are to encourage students to think big, to bridge theory and practice, and to provide students with a front-row seat to real-life endeavors that seek to help millions.

My approach to this question is evolving, but I do feel it is an important one, as our challenges are vast. We live in a world where, for example, millions and billions of people in countries rich and poor lack proper access to health care, healthy food, and education. Core freedoms are being abridged, good governance is lacking, basics are unaffordable, children suffer in war, and despair is widespread.

In this group, I will try to seed our discussion by sharing tales, the nitty gritty, problem analyses, frameworks, and context from my real-world and perhaps quixotic attempts to actually address the question. It’s the story of an evolution of imperfect approaches, prompted, oddly enough, in part by a philosophy class I took as a first-year student at Brown with Professor Onésimo Almeida called The Shaping of World Views, in which we had to write a paper setting forth our credo. I wrote that my life goal was to help millions of people, and I have tried to follow that ever since.

In terms of approaches, out of many possible alternatives, a major lens used in this study session to address this question will be that of human rights, broadly construed – to wit, the frontiers of human rights.

Structure:

Pedagogically, and curriculum-wise, during the course of the semester we will explore the fundamentals of human rights (e.g. key legal documents, the nature of the rights, and/or key issues). Each meeting will have at least one case study, or less prosaically, a story. (Research shows that what we remember most are stories; they lodge in our brains, and are a launching pad for explorations of the larger issues). Each case study will begin with a presentation of basic

facts and context, so that we have a common basis for discussion. I have been personally involved in most of the cases we will discuss.

Some brief optional readings are in this linked [document](#). Classes with one exception are on Thursday from 230-4pm. Office hours are to be determined. To have more interaction, there will be an optional group pizza or other lunch or dinner before or after many of our sessions. The topics may change depending on schedules and as we learn what works best for us in this study session format.

Sessions Outline:

October 1, 2026: Session One

The Question

In this session we will discuss the question – how can one help millions, or even billions, of people? Is it a question worth asking? What are possible answers to it? Are there downsides to what the question presumes? What can lead one to ask such a question?

For me, this question led me to the realm of human rights. We will discuss some of the basics of human rights, which are arguably idealism embedded into law and society, including some major legal instruments and sources of human rights. Portions of foundational American documents, the basis of our civic life, are worth revisiting in this time of flux.

- the Declaration of Independence
- the US Constitution and its Bill of Rights
- the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

We will then discuss the frontiers of human rights, limned below. This includes the key distinction between negative human rights (i.e. don't torture me, and don't infringe on my freedom of speech), and positive human rights (e.g. the right to food). We will explore the distinction between what might be called classical and frontier approaches to human rights. Classical approaches can involve negative human rights, and presentations or cases before international bodies. The frontiers of human rights can include positive human rights (which have been in some settings less reified than negative human rights), and also actions before domestic courts, which have the virtues of real enforcement power and the ability to consider high volumes of cases. To be sure, however, the distinction between the two approaches is not hard and fast. We may also attempt a few exercises for structured reflection and discussion.

Possible co-teacher for a small portion of the session: Professor Onesimo Almeida, whose class I took as a first-year student at Brown, as noted above.

October 15, 2026: Session Two

Human Rights in the US Criminal Justice and Immigration Systems: Meet David Wong

Possible Co-Teacher, via Zoom: David Wong, joining live from Hong Kong.



Situation: You are a rookie lawyer. On your first day of work, you are assigned the case of David Wong, formerly a restaurant worker in New York City’s Chinatown. He has been in prison for 15 years, serving life for murder. He claims he is innocent. You are the fifteenth lawyer on the case. You have a brief due in two weeks. What do you do?

Illumination: We will walk through Wong’s case, and discuss the myriad issues that arise at each turn, from his entry to the United States, his conviction for murder, hunting through the toughest prisons of New York for the purported real killer, his exoneration, his ICE detention, and his release. (We could do an entire semester on it, as his narrative illuminates so many aspects of the immigration, constitutional and criminal justice systems, but we will for purposes of time just do a small sliver.) I represented Wong – I was assigned his case on my first day as a rookie lawyer.

October 29, 2026: Session Three

Human Rights and International Affairs

Radovan Karadzic and Li Peng

Situation: A relatively undisputed array of war crimes and a genocide has been committed in Bosnia, per scholars, observers, and UN bodies. A political leader of the effort, Radovan Karadzic, remains uncharged and free. He lives in Bosnia, but is about to visit New York.

Li Peng, the former Premier of China, who gave the key orders that resulted in the killings of the student leaders in Tiananmen Square in Beijing, lives in Beijing but is about to visit New York.,

What do you do?

I have some personal experience here – I helped represent the plaintiffs in the above cases.

The Nation of Hawai’i

In 1993, the US Congress passed a joint resolution, known as the “Apology Resolution”, which stated that the US Government had in some ways improperly and illegally annexed the kingdom

of Hawaii. What are the implications of the annexation and that resolution and what has happened since? What are the different types of sovereignty – political, legal, economic, and cultural, and how do they relate to human rights? One case study will be the practical experience of the Nation of Hawai'i. Founded via a constitution in 1995, the Nation of Hawaii has explored legal sovereignty and the preservation and restoration of traditional systems of language, land tenure, and belief. It has a community that lives on forty-five acres on the island of Oahu.

Co-Teachers (via Zoom): Dennis “Bumpy” Kanahele and/or Brandon Maka’awa’awa, the President and Vice President of the Sovereign and Independent Nation State of Hawai’i, respectively.

November 5, 2026: Session Four

Narratives and Human Rights

In accordance with the thought of Henkin (“culture of constitutionalism”), Fletcher (“law as discourse”), and others, human rights are not to be found solely in dry legal instruments, but as a part of culture, discourse, and stories. Here we will look at a few narratives that relate to human rights, including for example, personal accounts of those who have experienced human rights violations, and the stories behind landmark legal cases. Narratives of course are also interesting because they form the basis of testimony. Texts will include stories from Voice of Witness, a series of oral history books published by McSweeney’s/Voice of Witness press (founding editors Studs Terkel and Dave Eggers, I was an associate editor of one book), whose aim is to illuminate human rights crises, and from Constitutional Law Stories, edited by Michael Dorf. In class, we will do a brief exercise of taking oral history from a classmate, and there will be an optional outside-of-class exercise of constructing an oral history with an older relative.

WEDNESDAY November 11, 2026: Session Five

(this session is on a Wednesday, and as such might not fit with your schedule, and is thus optional)

Positive Human Rights

Affordable Medicine for All

95% of diseases have no FDA-approved medicine. Most diseases (think neglected/tropical, rare, and those where addressing them provides limited recurring revenue streams) lack sufficient profit potential for industry to pursue them. It typically costs \$2-5 billion and takes 10-20 years to develop a single drug. New medicines can cost \$100,000 per patient annually. The majority of humankind is affected. Is there another way? In this session we will discuss complements to the current pharmaceutical model, drawing from my work leading the Open Source Pharma Foundation. Illustrative projects include developing an open source, ten-cent pill for the scourge of tuberculosis, which kills more people than any other infectious disease (one person every

twenty seconds), and developing a low-cost, patent-free ultra-broad spectrum countermeasure for the next pandemic in advance, without first waiting for it to start.

November 12, 2026: Session Six

Positive Human Rights

Combating Malnutrition at a Scale of Billions

Positive human rights – to food, water, and health, are an issue for billions of people. Philosophers of global justice have laid out the problems succinctly and starkly.

Over one billion people lack enough calories. About two billion people lack sufficient micronutrients, with myriad health effects.

In this session we will examine the case study of “DFS” – salt “double-fortified” with iron and iodine, designed to combat the world’s most widespread form of malnutrition, namely, iron deficiency, which afflicts two billion people. We will introduce concepts of designing backwards from scale, open IP, and translating science to on the ground reality, tracing the effort from need to concept to lab to production to distribution to tens of millions of people to measurable impact. A co-teacher may be my collaborator in the DFS project, James Levinson, the former head of nutrition for USAID, and former professor of nutrition at Tufts.

December 3, 2026: Optional Bonus Session

Designing in class a project of one’s own, or an approach one wishes to pursue, to address serious problems in the world, with brainstorming and advice from the instructor and classmates.

Instructor Profile

Jaykumar Menon is a human rights lawyer, writer, and social entrepreneur. He has held academic positions at McGill and Harvard and is now a Senior Fellow at the Watson School of International and Public Affairs at Brown. As a litigator, he has freed a man from death row, freed another man serving life (via hunting for the real killer through maximum-security prisons of New York), helped win a \$4b default judgment on behalf of victims of the Bosnian genocide, represented the student leaders of Tiananmen Square, and helped win a settlement against Shell Oil on behalf of the family of executed Nigerian environmental activist Ken Saro-Wiwa. Pursuing the human right to health, he co-founded and leads the Open Source Pharma Foundation. With colleagues, he has helped take salt “double-fortified” with iron and iodine to tens of millions of people with measurable impact, and the effort also has multiple low-cost patent-free pharmaceuticals at late state clinical trials in areas of vast unmet need. The work has been described in peer-reviewed journal articles and in media accounts in The New Yorker, Newsweek, Fast Company, The New York Times, and other outlets. He was named to Newsweek’s America’s 50 Greatest Disruptors:

Visionaries and Innovators Who Are Changing the World, and received the William Rogers Award from the Brown Alumni Association, provided to one alum annually, and described as the BAA's highest honor.