Effective Altruism and its Intellectual Roots

Effective altruism is a growing social movement whose members are committed to directing at least some portion of their money, time, and/or other resources in the ways that available evidence suggests will do the most good. The movement includes a number of organizations that aim to contribute in particular ways to helping and encouraging people to do the most good that they can. Giving What We Can ([https://www.givingwhatwecan.org/](https://www.givingwhatwecan.org/)), founded by philosophers Toby Ord and William MacAskill in 2009, encourages individuals to pledge to donate at least 10% of their income over the course of their lives to effective charitable organizations, and provides recommendations of organizations to which they can donate. 80,000 Hours ([https://80000hours.org/](https://80000hours.org/)), co-founded by MacAskill and Benjamin Todd, provides information and advice for people who want to pursue career paths that will allow them to contribute as much as possible to addressing the world’s most morally important issues. GiveWell ([https://www.givewell.org/](https://www.givewell.org/)) produces a list of charitable organizations working on issues of global health and development that it has determined are highly effective, and provides in-depth information on the process by which its recommendations are determined. And Animal Charity Evaluators ([https://animalcharityevaluators.org/](https://animalcharityevaluators.org/)) does similar work, but focuses on organizations that aim to reduce the suffering of nonhuman animals.

The intellectual roots of the effective altruist movement can be traced to Peter Singer’s well-known paper “Famine, Affluence, and Morality” (1972; see also Unger 1996). In that paper, Singer famously argues that the moral principle that best explains why one is obligated to rescue
a nearby drowning child, even if doing so will ruin her nice clothes, also implies that well-off people are obligated to donate most of their wealth to effective efforts to alleviate famine and other causes of preventable suffering and death. In his book-length defense of Singer’s argument, Peter Unger characterizes the conclusion that we should accept about the obligations of the well-off as follows: “To behave in a way that’s not seriously wrong, a well-off person…must contribute to vitally effective groups…most of the money and property she now has, and most of what comes her way for the foreseeable future” (1996, p. 56). The early philosophical work that influenced the development of effective altruism, then, defended a very radical conclusion about the demandingness of morality, and in particular about the obligations of beneficence of well-off people in a world like ours.

In a piece a number of years later, Singer (2006) shifts his focus away from highlighting and defending the most demanding implications of his view, at least to some extent. Instead, after noting that other philosophers have defended the view that each well-off person is obligated to donate her fair share to alleviate global poverty, but is not obligated to do more in order to compensate for others’ failure to do their share (Murphy 2000; Appiah 2006, ch. 10), he offers rough suggestions regarding what the fair shares of well-off people at various income levels might be, given the funds that economists estimated would be necessary to meet the Millennium Development Goals set by the United Nations in 2000. For example, he suggests that while Americans in the top hundredth of one percent in the income distribution could donate a third of their income and still have well over $3 million per year, those in the top 10% but outside of the top one percent could donate 10% and still be quite well off. He does note that his own view remains that we can be obligated to do more than our fair share when others fail to do their share,
but adds that we may have strong reasons not to criticize those who do their fair share but no
more, in particular when most people do much less than their fair share.

The piece of Singer’s public philosophy that undoubtedly did the most to catalyze the
growth of the effective altruism movement, however, was his 2009 book *The Life You Can Save*.
Along with the book, Singer founded an organization with the same name
([https://www.thelifeyoucansave.org/](https://www.thelifeyoucansave.org/)), which became a registered charity in the United States in
2013, and expanded to Australia in 2019. The organization promotes effective giving in a
number of ways, including by providing a list of recommended charities, conducting outreach
through media engagements, and promoting talks by Singer and others on issues related to
effective altruism.

In the book, Singer restates his argument in defense of the view that well-off people have
demanding obligations of beneficence, addresses common objections to the argument, and
discusses the central empirical issues that concern many people with regard to aid to the global
poor. In the book’s final chapter, however, he steps back from the very demanding conclusion
that he takes his argument to support, and suggests that well-off people should aim to donate
roughly five percent of their annual income to effective organizations that aid the global poor (he
adds that the very rich should give “rather more” than that) (2009, p. 152). He explains that even
though he continues to believe that our obligations extend well beyond giving five percent, he
also believes that we should publicly advocate the level of giving that is such that advocating it
will generate the most donations (2009, pp. 151-152). His approach to persuading members of
the broader public to, in effect, become effective altruists, then, proceeds in three stages. First, he
makes clear what he actually thinks his central philosophical argument supports, namely a very
demanding conclusion about the obligations of the well off to aid the global poor. Next, he
concedes that most people will not be sufficiently moved by the argument, even if they are convinced that it is correct, to do all that it suggests is required of us. Finally, he highlights that individuals can still make a significant difference in the lives of some of the global poor by, at relatively little cost to themselves, by doing even much less than what he has argued is actually morally required of them.

It is an interesting question whether this strategy for motivating greater giving is the most effective one available. On the one hand, we might worry that those presented with this line of reasoning may not be particularly motivated to act in accordance with the suggestion that they give five percent, given that Singer makes it clear that he believes that their failure to give more would, strictly speaking, be wrong. Why, they might ask, should they make any sacrifice, if they will nonetheless still be failing to satisfy their obligations unless they give most of what they have? On the other hand, we might think that many people who are motivated to read a book like Singer’s will accept that our obligations are quite demanding, and be motivated to give at least five percent, recognizing that giving more is always morally better even if one does not fully satisfy morality’s demands. In addition, these people may advocate the five percent requirement when they are discussing our obligations to aid the global poor with people who are quite unlikely to be willing to give much more than that, but may be persuaded to give at that level. If this were the case, then the structure of Singer’s discussion would likely be at least close to optimal in terms of generating donations.

As I will highlight in the next section, in the years since Singer published *The Life You Can Save*, many in the effective altruism movement have shifted away from advocating the view that well-off people have demanding obligations of beneficence in their public philosophical efforts. In addition, some claim that, despite its intellectual roots in Singer’s and Unger’s
arguments for the view that morality is extremely demanding, the core commitments of effective altruism are best understood as not including any explicitly normative commitments, such as a commitment to the view that well-off people have obligations of beneficence (demanding or not) to the global poor (see, for example, the Centre for Effective Altruism’s “Guiding Principles” (https://www.centreforeffectivealtruism.org/ceas-guiding-principles); MacAskill 2019a, p. 14; for critical discussion, see Berkey 2021). Adopting this view about the movement’s core commitments has implications for what public philosophical engagement on behalf of effective altruism can look like, and it is a matter of ongoing debate whether, all things considered, effective altruists should endorse it.

Public Philosophy, Outreach and Engagement, and the Growth of Effective Altruism

Although Singer and others did much to promote the movement and its central ideas in the years immediately following the publication of *The Life You Can Save* and the founding of many of the organizations noted above (see e.g. Singer 2013), effective altruism’s public philosophy footprint began to grow more rapidly around 2015. In that year, both Singer and MacAskill published important and widely read books about effective altruism that were aimed at a general public audience (Singer 2015; MacAskill 2015a). While in the Preface of his book Singer restates his view that “[I]living a minimally acceptable ethical life involves using a substantial part of our spare resources to make the world a better place,” he does not spend any time in the book’s chapters defending that view. Instead, he describes the wide range of ways that effective altruists have contributed to making the world a better place, discusses some of the central motivational challenges associated with aiming to live as an effective altruist, and highlights and analyzes some of the important questions that arise in attempting to determine how to use one’s resources
in order to do the most good possible. MacAskill also does not devote any space to arguing for the view that the well-off have obligations of beneficence to the global poor. The first half of his book describes five central questions that effective altruists should attempt to answer in order to determine the most effective ways that they can contribute to making the world a better place, and illustrates, via examples, why these questions are important and the criteria that ought to be employed in answering them. In the second half, he highlights some important and, in some cases, counterintuitive conclusions that ought to be drawn about consequential choices that nearly all of us must make (e.g. what career to pursue, or whether to purchase products produced in sweatshops).

One of the most significant concepts that both Singer and MacAskill discuss is that of “earning to give” (Singer 2015, pp. 39-54; MacAskill 2015a, pp. 74-78, 162-167; see also Unger 1996, pp. 150-152). This is the practice of choosing a career in which one will receive a high income, rather than, for example, working directly for a charitable organization or entering academia, in order to be able to donate more than one otherwise would to effective charities. Singer opens the first chapter of his book by describing the career choice made by one his students (2015, pp. 3-4). Matt Wage took a course with Singer at Princeton in 2009, and after graduating two years later turned down the opportunity to pursue graduate work in philosophy at Oxford in order to take a job at a Wall Street arbitrage trading firm. He was soon earning a very substantial income, and donating roughly half of it to effective charities. In a later chapter (ch. 4), Singer describes others who practice earning to give, responds to concerns that have been raised about people’s ability to sustain that way of living (Brooks 2013), and defends the practice against some ethical objections. MacAskill provides advice about which careers are most promising for those who are interested in earning to give, and suggests that it is a good option for
many people who aim to do the most good (2015a, pp. 163-167; see also MacAskill 2014 for a defense aimed at an academic audience).

These discussions and defenses of earning to give generated a fair bit of interest from the media and among the broader public, which contributed to increased visibility for effective altruism more generally (see e.g. Kristof 2015). For example, *Vox* published an extended interview with MacAskill about effective altruism and career choice (Matthews 2015), and the *Washington Post* published a piece by MacAskill in which he argued that working for a hedge fund and donating a large portion of one’s income may be the most ethical choice one can make (MacAskill 2015b). Derek Thompson, who shared an apartment with MacAskill in the months prior to the release of *Doing Good Better*, published a piece in *The Atlantic* that opened with a story in which MacAskill makes the case for earning to give during a conversation at a party (Thompson 2015); Thompson goes on to describe how his engagement with the central ideas of effective altruism led him to make a large donation to the Against Malaria Foundation in honor of his mother, who had passed away shortly before he met MacAskill.

While the idea of earning to give contributed to generating increased public discussion of effective altruism, it has also drawn a fair bit of criticism (Mills 2012; Brooks 2013). In addition, the disproportionate focus within a number of public discussions on earning to give as an example of a career choice that a person committed to living as an effective altruist might reasonably make may have misleadingly suggested that leading effective altruists and their organizations advocate earning to give as the best option for most people. In fact, however, earning to give is only one among many potentially impactful career paths that 80,000 Hours encourages people to consider (https://80000hours.org/key-ideas/), and MacAskill and other leaders in the movement have been clear that for many or even most aspiring effective altruists it
will not be the best option (MacAskill 2015c; this is also helpfully noted in a *Washington Post* piece on earning to give that appeared prior to the publication of Singer and MacAskill’s books (Matthews 2013)).

In more recent years, much public engagement on behalf of effective altruism has focused in particular on encouraging the effective deployment of resources, for example by comparing what is accomplished by actual, relatively ineffective uses of significant resources with what could have been accomplished had those resources been directed where they would do much more (if not necessarily the most) good. These efforts have, at least to some extent, deemphasized advocacy of demanding moral obligations, and focused attention away from the controversies regarding earning to give. Singer, for example, compares the likely benefits of Michael Bloomberg’s 2018 donation of $1.8 billion to his alma mater, Johns Hopkins University, with the much greater good that the money could have done had it been donated to, for example, a struggling public college in the United States, or for primary education in Kenya, or to the Against Malaria Foundation (Singer 2019). In another piece, he notes that the $450 million that was spent (allegedly by the Saudi crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman) to purchase a painting attributed to Leonardo da Vinci could have restored sight to 9 million people with curable blindness, or bought enough anti-malarial bednets to protect 271 million people (Singer 2017). In a third piece, written with Michael Plant, Singer considers how much more good could have been accomplished had the $1.1 billion that was raised within one day of the fire that damaged Notre Dame cathedral in Paris to be spent on restoring the building been directed instead in ways that would effectively save lives (Singer and Plant 2019).

These discussions encourage readers to ask questions such as: If one is going to donate a large sum of money, aren’t there strong reasons to direct it where it will do more rather than less
good? If readers are persuaded that Bloomberg should not have given so much to Johns Hopkins, and should have directed at least a significant portion of what he gave where it would do much more good, then perhaps they will be led to ask structurally similar questions about their own charitable contributions. If people can be led to redirect contributions that they were planning to make anyway from less effective to more effective organizations, then a great deal of additional good can be achieved without requiring any increase in the total amount that is donated. Because of this, a great deal of good can be done without persuading people that they are morally obligated to give more than they already do (and motivating them to act in accordance with this belief). It is obvious why effective altruists would find this an appealing argumentative strategy to employ in public outreach (for versions of the argument aimed at an academic audience, see Pummer 2016; Horton 2017; for critical discussion, see McMahan 2018; Berkey 2020), and there are reasons to think that it has been successful in helping to grow the movement.

**Effective Altruism in Public Philosophical Debate**

As the effective altruism movement has grown in recent years, a robust debate about its central commitments and recommendations has developed among philosophers and others, much of which has appeared in outlets aimed at a broad readership, including those outside of academia. Shortly after the publication of Singer’s *The Most Good You Can Do*, for example, the *Boston Review* ran a forum titled “The Logic of Effective Altruism” ([http://bostonreview.net/forum/peter-singer-logic-effective-altruism](http://bostonreview.net/forum/peter-singer-logic-effective-altruism)), which included critical discussions of the movement by a range of thinkers, plus a response from Singer. While a number of different kinds of concerns about effective altruism were expressed by contributors, and have been expressed by others in the broader debate, by far the most common type of
concern expressed (both in the forum and more generally) relates to the relationship between, on the one hand, the movement’s core values and recommendations for action, and on the other, the political values and aims that animate and are endorsed by many others who are deeply concerned about global poverty, justice, and reducing suffering.

In her contribution to the *Boston Review* forum, for example, Emma Saunders-Hastings (2015) suggests that effective altruists’ commitment to donating in welfare-maximizing ways could lead them to donate in ways that are objectionably undemocratic or paternalistic. Relatedly, Rob Reich (2015) claims that the commitment to welfare-maximizing would seem to give effective altruists reason to favor technocracy over democracy, and suggests that this is problematic. And Jennifer Rubenstein (2015) claims that the movement in effect excludes poor people from its ranks (because, for example, they typically are not in a position to donate to the movement’s recommended charities), and that its outreach efforts to potential donors risk leading them to conceive of themselves as heroic saviors of the people whom they might help through their donations.

Several critics have also argued that effective altruists often fail to take into account the ways in which some of their recommended initiatives risk undermining the prospects for improved government provision of essential services in impoverished communities (for the academic discussion of this issue, see Temkin 2019; MacAskill 2019b). Daron Acemoglu (2015), for example, suggests that when philanthropic efforts provide services that ought to be provided by the state, this can undermine trust in state institutions and make it more difficult to motivate citizens to engage in political efforts in order to improve them. Angus Deaton (2015) claims that in countries such as Rwanda, authoritarian leaders are able to draw in aid that helps them consolidate their power from those who want their donations to benefit people as much as
possible by, for example, adopting generous health care provision policies for mothers and children. And Emily Clough (2015) argues that effective altruists’ heavy reliance on the results of randomized control trials (RCTs) in their efforts to determine which organizations’ programs do the most good is problematic, because while RCTs do a good job of revealing the direct effects of an intervention on members of the target population, they may have important unintended long-term side-effects, in particular for those outside of the target population, that unavoidably go unnoticed. For example, an educational intervention that can be shown, via an RCT, to help the poor children in a target community may, over time, contribute to decreasing the quality of education provided by the state to nearby communities in which the populations are even poorer. Hauke Hillebrandt, who at the time was Director of Research at Giving What We Can, responds to these concerns (and to Clough in particular), noting that GWWC relies on much more than just RCTs when determining which charities to recommend, and claiming that while the worry that interventions could have important negative unintended side effects is one that must be taken seriously, the charities that effective altruist organizations tend to recommend do not engage in interventions that are particularly likely to have the kinds of effects that Clough and others are rightly concerned about (2015).

A number of philosophers have, in contributions to public debate on effective altruism, argued that the movement’s emphasis on charitable giving to fund effective life-saving and welfare-improving interventions is misplaced, because these efforts do not contribute to addressing the root causes of global poverty and the suffering and death that often accompanies it (Gabriel 2015; Lichtenberg 2015; Snow 2015; Srinivasan 2015; Herzog 2016; Simpson 2016). Though their views and arguments differ, their common suggestion is that those concerned about global poverty and injustice ought to focus their attention on supporting efforts to bring about
large-scale institutional change, rather than on efforts to more directly prevent deaths and improve welfare among the global poor, since only such institutional change can address the issues sustainably and at their root. Proponents of effective altruism have responded by pointing out that their core commitments do not rule out concluding that the most promising way for individuals to direct their resources and/or time is to efforts to promote systemic change, and noting a range of efforts of this kind that effective altruists and organizations aligned with the movement do in fact support (Wiblin 2015). But they note that on their view whether we should think that an individual should focus her efforts and direct financial resources toward systemic change efforts or instead to, for example, the charities recommended by GiveWell, depends on which use of the resources would do the most to improve the lives of the global poor (or, more generally, do the most good).

This “institutional critique” or “systemic change objection” against effective altruism continues to be debated in popular outlets (Alkire et al. 2018; Singer 2018). It has also become a central issue in academic debates about the merits of effective altruism (Ashford 2018; Berkey 2018, 2019, 2021; Brol 2019; Dietz 2019; Gabriel and McElwee 2019; Syme 2019; Lechterman 2020). Because of the central place of the objection in the recent debates, and its appeal among people who are otherwise quite sympathetic to many of effective altruism’s central aims (e.g. improving the lives of the global poor), there are reasons to think that the movement’s ability to continue to grow may depend on how compelling a response it can ultimately provide to those who are drawn to it. I suspect, then, that this issue will continue to figure prominently in the ongoing public debate about whether we ought to embrace effective altruism.
Effective altruists have built a remarkably large and impactful global community in a relatively short period of time. The contributions of philosophers who have promoted the movement’s ideas and values through public philosophical engagement have been essential to the success of the more general project of building that community. It is an important example of how public philosophy can both contribute to shaping public discussion of important issues and play a key role in motivating action on the part of individuals.

There remain important challenges that the movement must successfully navigate if it is to continue to grow, however. One of the most significant of these challenges involves ensuring that those who share at least some of the core values of the movement, and therefore might be persuaded to become involved, are not deterred by the unfamiliar and in some cases controversial efforts that some effective altruists are involved in, or advocate, or have at least raised as possible areas in which resources might do the most good that are worthy of further investigation and reflection.

Many effective altruists, for example, now think that it is worth directing substantial resources into efforts to mitigate “existential risks,” that is, risks that threaten to either cause human extinction or radically undermine the potential for humans to live good lives into the distant future, such as runaway artificial intelligence, nuclear annihilation, pandemics, and asteroid strikes (see Ord 2020; for an example of media coverage, see Economist 2020). Others believe that it is worth considering whether it would be worth devoting resources to efforts to reduce the suffering of wild animals (see e.g. Matthews 2021), including via significant interventions in nature, such as sterilizing members of certain predator species.
These suggestions will likely at least initially strike many as highly counterintuitive. It is also likely that as these ideas are further incorporated into the movement’s intellectual and practical work, media coverage will increasingly focus on them. It will be important, then, that the public engagement efforts of members of the movement are able to succeed in persuading members of the public of the intellectual value and moral importance of at least taking these apparently radical ideas seriously.

The success of the effort to build a movement in which people take seriously the view that they ought to give away a significant portion of their income in order to effectively benefit others provides some reasons for optimism about the prospects for success in facing the further challenges that I have described. Regardless, public philosophical engagement will no doubt continue to play a central role in the evolution of the movement.

References


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