

Achieving equity and agreement: The importance of inclusion of marginalized groups in hospital policy initiatives

Jennifer Wineke*

ABSTRACT

As the EA and 80,000 Hours movements have gained traction in recent years, critics have claimed that the movements' focus on individual philanthropy detracts from the need for more systemic reform. In this paper, I will defend the fairness of that critique and discuss why a focus on individual contributions rather than systemic change can be harmful, particularly when one considers issues of sustainability and privilege.

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INTRODUCTION

Effective altruism (EA) is a movement focused on doing the most good one can do. Born out of utilitarianism, a philosophy that advocates for actions that produce the most good for the most people, the movement describes itself as seeking to answer a simple question: "How can we use our resources to help others the most?"¹ Effective altruists seek to answer this question systematically, by narrowing down the world's most pressing problems, identifying organizations that are able to have the most impact in addressing those problems, and donating a portion of their income—many pledging as much as 10% of their lifetime earnings—to those organizations.² In this way, the EA movement hopes to change the world by encouraging evidence-based, cost effective giving by individuals, while the affiliated organization 80,000 Hours encourages people to choose careers that offer the highest social impact. As the EA and 80,000 Hours movements have gained traction in recent years, critics have claimed that the movements' focus on individual philanthropy detracts from the need for more systemic reform. In this paper, I will defend the fairness of that critique and discuss why a focus on individual contributions rather than systemic change can be harmful, particularly when one considers issues of sustainability and privilege.

* Jennifer Wineke, MD Candidate, University of Pennsylvania

ANALYSIS

In “Stop the Robot Apocalypse,” Amia Srinivasan critiques the effective altruism movement on the basis that its effects are merely superficial:

[It] does not address the deep sources of global misery – international trade and finance, debt, nationalism, imperialism, racial and gender-based subordination, war, environmental degradation, corruption, exploitation of labour – or the forces that ensure its reproduction. Effective altruism doesn’t try to understand how power works, except to better align itself with it. In this sense it leaves everything just as it is.³

Because the EA movement is based on the principle of using the tools of social and economic capital to help the world’s neediest—for example, using a Princeton degree to get a job on Wall Street, then donating half of your income— it does not question the legitimacy of the foundation underlying that capital.⁴ An effective altruist seeks to effectively redistribute resources once they’ve come into possession by those in power, not to question how resources might be distributed more equally in the first place. The EA mission is not to “burn down the system,” so to speak, but to do as much good as can be done within the system we are currently in.

But what if the current system *is* the root of the problem? In “Against Charity,” Matthew Snow explains why focusing on individual philanthropy is misguided:

Rather than asking how individual consumers can guarantee the basic sustenance of millions of people, we should be questioning an economic system that only halts misery and starvation if it is profitable. Rather than solely creating an individualized “culture of giving,” we should be challenging capitalism’s institutionalized taking.

We don’t have to accept capital’s terms for addressing its own problems or purported moral imperatives that presuppose them. We can overturn those terms completely.⁵

In Snow’s view, the EA movement and true radical system reform are mutually exclusive, as effective altruism not only relies on the power structures already in place, but perpetuates them. To truly address problems like world poverty and starvation, we must reform the institutions that have led to those problems, or else long-term, sustainable solutions will remain out of reach.

Critiques like Srinivasan and Snow’s are based on the presupposition that radical systematic reform is within the realm of possibility. An effective altruist would argue that overturning the world’s power structures is simply not the most effective use of time— better to work within our current system to improve people’s lives than waste time and energy on radical reformation when the chances of success in that arena are remote at best. Peter Singer, the movement’s philosophical founder, has stated as much: “If there is little chance of achieving the kind of revolution you are seeking, then you need to look around for a strategy with better prospects of actually helping some poor people.”⁶ On the subject of capitalism, he is highly pragmatic:

I’m waiting for someone to, first, describe a better system than capitalism, and second, set out a realistic path for getting from here to there. When that happens, it will be worth thinking harder about the ethical flaws in capitalism. Until then...there is a huge amount we can all do, within the current economic system, to make the world a much better place.⁷

Effective altruists might argue that the odds of instituting an alternative economic system or eradicating institutional racism, sexism, or imperialism are merely theoretical, while the benefits of donating your income to provide insecticide-treated malaria nets in sub-Saharan Africa are direct, supported by evidence, and can be seen virtually immediately. “Effective altruists are usually not radicals or revolutionaries,” writes Robert Wiblin, Research Director for 80,000 Hours, in a blog post entitled “Effective altruists love systemic change.”⁸ “Sometimes we view existing attempts at systemic change as more symbolic or idealistic than realistic, and so push back against them.” For example, Wiblin has written about why advocating for gun control or open borders is not an effective use of

time in the current US political climate. The EA movement is a scientific approach to maximizing the greatest good, which demands that goals be attainable and measurable.

But this focus on measurable achievements necessarily prioritizes causes that can be effectively tracked by metrics. “The value of deworming might be measurable,” *The Atlantic’s* Derek Thompson writes, “but what of the values of women’s rights, equality, or democracy?”⁹ The EA movement’s focus on quantifiable data points likely reflect the demographics of the movement itself. In an account of the 2015 Effective Altruism Global Conference, self-identified effective altruist Dylan Mathews described the EA movement as “very white, very male, and dominated by tech industry workers,” and “increasingly obsessed with ideas and data that reflect the class position and interests of the movement’s members rather than a desire to help actual people.”¹⁰ While the EA movement’s overarching goal is certainly to help people, it is fair to question whether the strategies for doing so have been narrowed by its members’ socioeconomic backgrounds and resulting myopic view of which issues should be considered the most pressing. One of the EA movement’s established priorities, for example, is addressing the threat to human extinction by advanced artificial intelligence; it is difficult to argue with the fact that the movement’s tech industry background influences that priority. Similarly, it is easier to view existing attempts at systemic change as symbolic rather than realistic when you occupy a privileged place in a society whose power structures are organized in your favor. For people who are poor, marginalized, and affected daily by issues like gun control or US immigration law, the prospect of toppling existing oppressive systems might not be considered very radical or revolutionary at all.

Perhaps it might be fair to concede that one social movement cannot be everything the world needs—if effective altruism is lessening the world’s suffering, why fault it for its shortsightedness? Could other movements work on the power structures behind the root causes of suffering with a focus on sustainable change, and in the meantime, EA will do its part to alleviate suffering through individual philanthropy? Certainly it is difficult to condemn a movement that encourages the wealthy—which, as the 80,000 Hours website points out, includes anyone earning a professional salary in the US—to share that wealth with those who need it.¹¹ But it is hard to avoid the fact that those with the social and economic capital who are attracted to EA are precisely those who are in the unique position to challenge the power structures that have given them that capital in the first place. The world’s marginalized cannot be expected to shoulder the burden of systemic reform when they are working from a place of fewer resources and smaller platforms for change. While it is true that individual donations can help empower people to advocate for systematic change in their own interests—and in Matthews’ words, EA is “not a replacement for movements through which marginalized peoples seek their own liberation”—the EA movement’s ability to attract wealthy people who have the privilege to be seen and heard, and who are willing to devote their life to an ethical movement, could enormously strengthen the efforts of those already fighting for radical systemic change across the globe.

CONCLUSION

Kerry Vaughan, one of the organizers of the 2015 Effective Altruism Global Conference, declared that “effective altruism could be the last social movement we ever need.”¹² For those who are benefitting from the current power structures in place, that may ring true. But for those who don’t view radical systemic change as symbolic or idealistic, ignoring issues at the root of so much suffering in the world—economic inequality, institutionalized racism and sexism, imperialism, war—in favor of achievements that can be more accurately measured in disability-adjusted life years seems misguided at best and harmful at worst. The EA movement’s lack of focus on radical systemic change is a missed opportunity to address the foundations of inequity and work toward sustainable progress that might very well be more effective in the long run.

¹ The Centre for Effective Altruism, "Effective Altruism." <https://www.effectivealtruism.org/>.

² The Centre for Effective Altruism, "Giving What We Can." <https://www.givingwhatwecan.org/>.

³ Srinivasan, Amia. "Stop the Robot Apocalypse." Rev. of *Doing Good Better: Effective Altruism and a Radical New Way to Make a Difference*, by William MacAskill. *London Review of Books* 37.18 (2015): 3-6. 13 Dec. 2018. <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v37/n18/amia-srinivasan/stop-the-robot-apocalypse/>.

⁴ Kristof, Nicholas. "The Trader Who Donates Half His Pay." *The New York Times*, 4 April 2015. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/05/opinion/sunday/nicholas-kristof-the-trader-who-donates-half-his-pay.html/>.

⁵ Snow, Mathew. "Against Charity." *Jacobin*, 25 August 2015, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/08/peter-singer-charity-effective-altruism/>.

⁶ Singer, Peter. *The Life You Can Save: How to Do Your Part to End World Poverty*. Random House, 2010.

⁷ Singer, Peter. "Is capitalism unethical?" 2015. *Goodreads*, <https://www.goodreads.com/questions/389696-is-capitalism-unethical/>.

⁸ Wiblin, Robert. "Effective altruists love systemic change." *80,000 Hours*, 8 July 2015. <https://80000hours.org/2015/07/effective-altruists-love-systemic-change/>.

⁹ Thompson, Derek. "The Greatest Good." *The Atlantic*, 15 June 2015. <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2015/06/what-is-the-greatest-good/395768/>.

¹⁰ Mathews, Dylan. "I spent a weekend at Google talking with nerds about charity. I came away...worried." *Vox*, 10 August 2015. <https://www.vox.com/2015/8/10/9124145/effective-altruism-global-ai/>.

¹¹ Wiblin, Robert. "How accurately does anyone know the global distribution of income?" *80,000 Hours*, 6 April 2017. <https://80000hours.org/2017/04/how-accurately-does-anyone-know-the-global-distribution-of-income/>.

¹² Mathews, "I spent a weekend at Google."