

Greaves, H & Pummer, T (eds.) *Effective Altruism: Philosophical Issues*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019) 272 pages, ISBN: 9780198841364. Hardback/eBook, £55.00/52.25

Effective altruism—a collective effort to identify and resource the most impactful altruistic organisations and interventions—has been picking up momentum as a philosophical topic for several years now, expanding beyond the primarily evangelistic literature which kickstarted the movement, such as William MacAskill’s *Doing Good Better* (New York: Avery, 2015) and Peter Singer’s *The Most Good You Can Do* (London: Yale University Press, 2015). An increasing number of articles are appearing in prominent journals, and research institutes such as the Global Priorities Institute and the Centre for Ethics, Philosophy and Public affairs, respectively directed by Greaves and Pummer, are devoting considerable amounts of intellectual labour to elucidating key issues adjacent to effective altruism. However, *Effective Altruism: Philosophical Issues* constitutes the most substantial single contribution to the philosophical discussion of effective altruism since the movement’s inception, both in the sheer number of articles on show and in the breadth of topics discussed. The collection comprises 15 contributions from an impressive array of authors, most of whom are academic philosophers and economists, although a number are researchers within philanthropic organisations. The diversity of contributors admirably reflects effective altruism’s ambition to marry armchair theorising with empirical study in order to discern the most promising altruistic endeavours. Regrettably, I will not discuss every contribution, but I will touch on a few which I find to be either the most noteworthy or representative of the collection as a whole.

The volume tackles a number of issues arising from the core commitments effective altruism. However, establishing exactly what these core commitments *are* is no easy feat. This owes to the fact that, as Peter Singer notes in his foreword to this volume, effective altruism has developed in large part through the internet, via numerous forums, blogs, and a throng of recorded talks, podcasts, and conference presentations. This has generated an intimidating variety of perspectives on effective altruism’s key issues. *Effective Altruism: Philosophical Issues* begins, wisely, with an attempt to give an authoritative definition of effective altruism written by William MacAskill, one of the movement’s co-founders. MacAskill’s intent is to provide both a descriptive account of the views held by effective altruists and community leaders (drawing from various survey data), whilst maintaining a balance between ideological broadness, for the sake of ecumenicity, and narrowness, such that the term isn’t made anaemic. Preserving this balance is important to, in his words, ‘ensure that the concept has as much public value as possible’ (p.12). We might raise an eyebrow at this aspiration, as these two aims are plausibly in tension. A definition which accurately encompasses the panoply of views held by all, or even the majority, of practising effective altruists may well be one which is too nebulous to be useful. But a definition designed purely for utility in public discourse risks failing as a *definition*—that is, as

something which captures a term's actual usage. MacAskill's attempt at a definition is a brokering of the two, and serves as an illuminating indicator of how one of the community's leading thinkers, as well as a number of effective altruist organisations who have adopted the definition, construes the term. However, I have reservations about whether the definition will become orthodoxy, especially given that one of its features is arguably tendentious: the claim that effective altruism is merely 'a project, rather than a normative claim' (p.15). MacAskill provides good reasons for this claim, but it is discordant with other authors, most notably Singer, who have presented effective altruism as an entailment of our broader duty of beneficence. In fact, the very next chapter in the volume, entitled 'The Moral Imperative Toward Cost-Effectiveness in Global Health', by Toby Ord, argues that a commitment to effectiveness in health interventions is morally incumbent on first-world donors. Regardless of this potential locus for disagreement, I expect MacAskill's contribution to be a touchstone for much future literature on effective altruism.

The next three chapters of *Effective Altruism: Philosophical Issues* discuss various decision-theoretic concepts relevant to effective altruistic decision-making. The first, Amanda Askill's 'Evidence Neutrality and the Moral Value of Information', persuasively contends that, in some cases, we ought to resource interventions with *less* evidential support than well-established effective interventions. A widely held view within effective altruism is that we ought to donate money, time, and labour to causes with the most substantial scientific support. But, Askill reasons, this approach may lead us to neglect superior interventions simply because we know less about them. Instead, she advocates that we be more willing to fund promising, though less-evidenced, interventions in order to gain valuable information about their efficacy. Another notable contribution on the subject of decision-making is L.A Paul and Jeff Sebo's chapter exploring the relevance of the controversial epistemic phenomenon of "transformative experience" to effective altruism, primarily regarding the ostensible problem it creates for effective altruists making career decisions. Within effective altruism, a great deal of thought is paid to how people can effectively use their careers for good, possibly through working directly with altruistic organisations, or pursuing a high income to donate large sums of money. Sebo and Paul argue that it is impossible to form accurate credences about how career decisions will play out since, because career choices are personally and epistemically transformative, we can't accurately model them within classical decision theory. The chapter won't win over any converts from those already sceptical that transformative experiences pose a unique epistemic challenge, but it is a largely interesting application of the concept nonetheless.

The proceeding two chapters advocate for two cause areas to be prioritised by effective altruists. The first, by Nick Beckstead, provides a typical argument for a view known as "longtermism" within effective altruism. The argument goes that, provided we assign some non-trivial probability to the prospect that humanity could continue to exist into the far, far future, we ought to prioritise causes which either minimise extinction risks or positively affect the developmental trajectory of civilisation.

Such interventions may have enormously long and magnitudinous causal tails, and as such their expected values are subject to a kind of Pascal's mugging. The next article, 'Effective Altruism, Global Poverty, and Systemic Change' by Iason Gabriel and Brian McElwee, evaluates the deployment of advocacy campaigns, aimed at improving institutions and policymaking, as an effective welfare-improvement strategy. They conclude that: 'the prospects for systemic change initiatives are greater than the movement has recognized hitherto' (p.112), and call into question effective altruism's predominant methods of assessing intervention efficacy, which may be blind to high-value opportunities in the political sphere. This chapter is emblematic of one of the collection's most creditable qualities: its willingness to criticise questionable tendencies within the effective altruism movement. Not only does this make for a more philosophically fertile volume, it also evades a common accusation levied against effective altruism: that it is offputtingly self-congratulatory (see Dylan Matthews, 'I spent a weekend at Google talking with nerds about charity' *Vox*, Aug 10 2015).

This self-awareness is reflected again in Emma Saunders-Hastings' article, which makes the case that philanthropic giving often engenders problematic, paternalistic power relationships between donor and recipient. Saunders-Hastings argues that a concern for paternalism ought to play a larger role in effective altruists' decision-making, which often prioritises welfare maximisation without regard for pernicious social relations. Likewise, the contribution by Mark Budolfson and Dean Spears casts strong doubts on an integral assumption of effective altruism: that donating money to effective charities is a way for individuals to make a difference. In fact, they argue that most donations, even to fund the most effective interventions, plausibly make *no difference at all*. This is due to the empirical fact that there are a number of billionaires and philanthropic funds subscribed to the effective altruist agenda, and are willing make up for any funding shortages at many of effective altruism's most highly rated organisations. As such, the only effect of many seemingly effective donations may simply be to save the ultra-rich the money they would have donated instead. Although worrying, the scope of this chapter is limited to discussing the funding of global health charities. One might wonder whether other popular effective altruist cause areas, like animal welfare and existential risk, have the same backing from ultra-wealthy philanthropists, and thus whether they are more effective targets for individual donations.

In summary, *Effective Altruism: Philosophical Issues* is a valuable contribution to the growing literature on effective altruism. The book's blurb describes it as a 'collective study of the thinking behind the effective altruism movement', but this doesn't do service to the range and ambition of the collection. The volume not only expounds the philosophical underpinnings of effective altruism, but also aims to push it in new directions. That is not to say that all the articles are equally worthy of the reader's time, and some of the arguments will be familiar to those already well-versed in the ideas of effective altruism. However, there is a lot of valuable discussion in this collection, and I imagine it will form the spine of a number of discussion groups and undergraduate courses.

Dylan Balfour
University of Edinburgh
dylan.balfour@ed.ac.uk