

The Effective Altruist’s Political Problem

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Abstract. Critics of private charity often claim that the well-off should instead assist the disadvantaged through political reform. The present article explores this idea with reference to effective altruism, a powerful new paradigm in the ethics of philanthropy. Effective altruism presses the relatively affluent not only to give generously, but also to subject their practical deliberations to rigorous evaluations of impartiality and cost-effectiveness. The article contends that the movement’s sophisticated methods are not sufficient to overcome the worries of institutionalist critics. At the same time, it shows that a transition from assistance to advocacy faces underappreciated and serious limitations. The measurement-based methods that allow effective altruists to identify promising assistance programs do not carry over well to political reform. In addition, unleashing greater private wealth into politics may exacerbate unequal opportunities for political influence. The article closes with preliminary suggestions for overcoming these concerns and connects them to broader developments in the politics of philanthropy.

Keywords: charity and justice, effective altruism, ethics of philanthropy, foreign aid, international development, randomized controlled trials, global justice, political advocacy, democratic equality

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I. Introduction

Almost no one denies that the global affluent have duties to assist the global poor in some way. What remains less clear are the bases of these duties and how best to discharge them. An important strand in the history of political thought discourages responding to poverty with donations to private charity. Writers including Wollstonecraft, Kant, Marx, Mill, and King have argued that almsgiving attends only to the symptoms of social disease.¹ Just as treating the symptoms of a disease can allow the disease to fester, treating the symptoms of poverty can overlook its institutional causes. Proponents of this *palliative critique* of charitable giving typically recommend that individuals in a position to help take a different approach: challenging and refashioning the institutions and policies that are responsible for systemic poverty and inequality in the first place.²

The emergence and surging popularity of the *effective altruism* movement presents an opportunity to test this critique. Effective altruism is at once a sophisticated ethical doctrine and a growing social movement that animates a growing number of think tanks,³ meta-charities

¹ Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (New York: A. J. Matsell, 1833), 76; Immanuel Kant, *Moralphilosophie Collins*, in his *Gesammelte Schriften* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1974), 455–56, as cited by J. B. Schneewind, “Philosophical Ideas of Charity: Some Historical Reflections,” in *Giving: Western Ideas of Philanthropy*, ed. J. B. Schneewind (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 54–75, at 55; Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert Tucker, 2nd edn. (New York: Norton, 1978), 496; John Stuart Mill, *Principles of Political Economy*, vol. 2 (New York: D. Appleton, 1896), 580; Martin Luther King, Jr., “Beyond Vietnam,” Speech delivered at Riverside Church, New York, N.Y., April 4, 1967. For remarks in a similar spirit, see also Jeremy Bentham, *Theory of Legislation* (London: Kegan Paul, 1908), 130; and Oscar Wilde, “The Soul of Man Under Socialism,” *Fortnightly Review* 49 (1891): 292–319.

² See, e.g., Will Kymlicka, “Altruism in Philosophical and Ethical Traditions: Two Views,” in *Between State and Market: Essays on Charities Law and Policy in Canada*, ed. Jim Phillips et al. (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2001), 87–126, at 94.

³ For example, 80,000 Hours (www.80000hours.org), the Centre for Effective Altruism (www.centreforeffectivealtruism.org), the Future of Humanity Institute (www.fhi.ox.ac.uk), the Effective Altruism Foundation (www.ea-foundation.org), and the Open Philanthropy Project

(charities that evaluate other charities),⁴ philanthropic foundations,⁵ internet discussion groups,⁶ and regional chapters.⁷ Inspired partly by the ideas of philosopher Peter Singer, effective altruism urges people who are well-off in global terms to do the most good that they can for the world, and to do so on the basis of careful reasoning and reliable evidence.⁸ Though its purview has broadened in recent years, a central focus of the movement remains the relief of severe poverty, particularly in the areas of the world where it is most concentrated. This reflects the judgment that global poverty is both one of the greatest sources of aggregate misery and also one of the most promising areas in which individual action can make a concrete difference. A variety of private charities have found successful, low-cost ways of reducing premature death and improving quality of life for substantial numbers of people. Donating to these organizations offers one of the most reliable ways for individuals to add value to the world. Thus, effective altruism has become most well-known for its attempts to change traditional attitudes toward organized philanthropy. Effective altruist leaders have sought to identify and publicize the charitable initiatives that relieve poverty in the most cost-effective ways while heaping shame on charitable initiatives that pursue aims that they consider less valuable or strategies that they

(www.openphilanthropy.org).

⁴ For example, Give Well (www.givewell.org), Animal Charity Evaluators (www.animalcharityevaluators.org), Giving What We Can (www.givingwhatwecan.org), and The Life You Can Save (www.thelifeyoucansave.org).

⁵ To date, Good Ventures is the only explicitly effective altruist private foundation. However, other “high-impact” foundations such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Mulago Foundation frequently adopt elements of effective altruist methods.

⁶ For example, the Effective Altruism Forum (www.effective-altruism.com).

⁷ These are loosely coordinated by the Local Effective Altruism Network (www.localnetwork.org) and the Effective Altruism Hub (www.eahub.org/groups).

⁸ For concordant definitional statements, see Peter Singer, *The Most Good You Can Do* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 4–5, and William MacAskill, *Doing Good Better: Effective Altruism and A Radical New Way to Make a Difference* (New York: Gotham, 2015), 11.

consider less scientific.⁹ Cultural philanthropy and well-meaning but untested humanitarian efforts receive the harshest denunciations.

But effective altruism has also come in for sharp criticism from commentators who see its solutions as mere bandages for institutional pathologies (and its message as too congenial to those who benefit most from these pathologies).¹⁰ These critics remind us that the prevalence of poverty is not a natural disaster lying outside of human control, but the product of institutions that we can in fact control. Modern-day proponents of the palliative critique urge those with means to deploy their resources toward institutional reform and resistance, especially through forms of political advocacy. Effective altruism's leaders have responded by defending their commitment to service delivery while also exploring certain aspects of political engagement.

This article makes two main claims. The first is that the palliative critique is stronger than participants in this debate have realized. As I explain in the next section, recent work by political economists suggests that providing resources directly to disadvantaged populations is not only ineffective but likely counterproductive to the larger aims of international development. Even when direct assistance does not undermine development, it is likely inefficient in comparison to institutional reform strategies. Meanwhile, as I detail in the third section, recent contributions to political philosophy suggest that assessments of efficacy in philanthropy must be qualified by how philanthropic initiatives exercise power. Unfortunately, the kinds of service delivery projects that effective altruists tend to recommend expose receiving communities to objectionable forms of control.

⁹ Peter Singer, "Good Charity, Bad Charity," *New York Times*, August 10, 2013, SR4.

¹⁰ See, for example, the responses by Daron Acemoglu, Angus Deaton, and Jennifer Rubenstein in "Forum: The Logic of Effective Altruism," *Boston Review*, July 1, 2015; Emily Clough, "Effective Altruism's Political Blind Spot," *Boston Review*, July 14, 2015; Amia

The article's other main claim is that proponents of the palliative critique should be careful what they wish for. As I explain in the fourth section, the evidence-based methodology that helps to define the effective altruist approach is likely to be inefficient when transposed to political engagement. Effective altruism's methodological proclivities bias it toward superficial policy reforms and away from the deeper institutional shifts that would satisfy its critics. Additionally, greater resource flows into advocacy from the relatively affluent can work to drown out less affluent voices, reintroducing concerns about objectionable exercises of power. As a result, a turn from assistance to advocacy risks succumbing to some of the very same challenges that it is meant to overcome. This is the effective altruist's political problem.

Although the article also explores some preliminary ways of solving the problem in the fifth section, it leaves the further development of these solutions for future research. My immediate aims are to dispel the myth that the relatively affluent can discharge their duties to strangers without sophisticated political analysis and the parallel myth that political advocacy is a morally unproblematic alternative. I explore these questions with particular reference to effective altruism, but, as I argue in the conclusion, their implications are clearly much broader. Philanthropists are increasingly turning to modes of political engagement to advance their aims. Whether and how they can do this ethically is a matter worthy of careful study.

The Palliative Critique: Positive Versions

Effective altruists have been especially vocal proponents of funding malaria nets and deworming initiatives, which consistently rank among the top-recommended causes of the

Srinivasan, "Stop the Robot Apocalypse," *London Review of Books* 37 (2015); and Iason Gabriel, "Effective Altruism and Its Critics," *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 34 (2017): 457–73.

charity evaluator GiveWell.¹¹ Malaria and intestinal parasites still run rampant in several areas of the world, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. Malaria remains a primary cause of death among children, while intestinal parasites, though rarely fatal, reduce quality of life and can inhibit normal functioning and development. Anti-malaria bed nets and parasite-killing drugs are cheap and effective interventions. A donor can be reasonably confident that a gift to these initiatives will indeed contribute to a long-term improvement in someone’s life—a rare feat, given the uncertainty surrounding the effects of most charitable initiatives. Another top recommendation of effective altruism’s leaders is a program that provides direct cash transfers to low-income individuals, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. Evaluations of this program have found that recipients tend to spend their receipts on substantial improvements to their living conditions, such as by weather-proofing their dwellings.

One of the most frequent criticisms of effective altruism is that, seen as responses to global poverty, these kinds of programs only address the symptoms of deeper structural problems.¹² A growing consensus among scholars of international development is that the fundamental cause of widespread poverty is the absence of morally decent and stable political institutions.¹³ Institutions are the socially defined rules of the game that coordinate human interaction. A special subset of institutions (what Rawls refers to as the “basic structure”) serves a critical function in determining a society’s major contours and its individual members’ life

¹¹ On deworming, see MacAskill, *Doing Good Better*, 9; on malaria nets, see Singer, *The Most Good You Can Do*, 6.

¹² See the responses by Acemoglu, Deaton, and Rubenstein in “Forum: The Logic of Effective Altruism”; Clough, “Effective Altruism’s Political Blind Spot”; Srinivasan, “Stop the Robot Apocalypse”; and Gabriel, “Effective Altruism and Its Critics.”

¹³ E.g., Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983); Dani Rodrik, *One Economics, Many Recipes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson, *Why Nations Fail* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2012); Mathias Risse, *On Global Justice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 63–85.

prospects.¹⁴ These institutions include the political constitution and legal system, the property regime and the design of markets, the system of public finance, public health infrastructure, the education system, and social insurance schemes. These institutions work together to define and distribute fundamental rights, duties, and opportunities. The consolidation of these critical institutions creates a social order in which individuals can interact safely, profitably, and (perhaps, in time) fairly.

Examined through the institutional lens, the prevalence of malaria and intestinal parasites is not merely an outcome of natural forces but a remarkable failure of public policy. In some countries with similar climates but well-functioning institutions these maladies do not register as epidemics.¹⁵ Providing malaria nets and deworming initiatives does little to address the dysfunctional public health infrastructure that lies at the root of these epidemics. Focusing on these initiatives distracts from the urgent but thorny process of institution building. And investing in these interventions may even work to undermine the consolidation of functioning institutions. The availability of free health services reduces pressure on the state to finance and provide public goods on its own.¹⁶ This hinders the development of effective public administration and a sustainable tax system. It lures competent professionals away from public

¹⁴ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, rev. edn. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 6–7.

¹⁵ Japan's Yamanashi Prefecture, which had struggled with schistosomiasis infections for four hundred years, declared the disease officially eradicated in 1996, thanks to a concerted campaign by local governments. See Noriaki Kajihara and Kenji Hirayama, "The War against a Regional Disease in Japan: A History of the Eradication of *Schistosomiasis japonica*," *Tropical Medicine and Health* 39 (2011): 3–44. In June 2018, the World Health Organization certified Paraguay as a malaria-free country and attributed the disease's elimination to successful government policies. See World Health Organization, "Update on the E-2020 Initiative of 21 Malaria-Eliminating Countries," June 2018, WHO/CDS/GMP/2018.10.

¹⁶ Leif Wenar, "Poverty Is No Pond," in *Giving Well: The Ethics of Philanthropy*, ed. Patricia Illingworth, Thomas Pogge, and Leif Wenar (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 105–31; Angus Deaton, *The Great Escape* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 291–312;

agencies and discourages the civic participation necessary for holding the state accountable. Strikingly, GiveWell recognizes some of these risks in its analyses of its top charities, but for reasons that are unclear it fails to take them seriously.¹⁷

Similar things might be said about cash transfers, which offer modest improvements in living standards but leave in place the many systemic causes of income poverty in the developing world. Cash transfers from abroad would appear to reduce pressure on the state to regulate the economy in ways that serve its least advantaged citizens, to develop its own assistance programs, and to demand sacrifices from local economic elites. In other words, they short-circuit the local processes of distributive conflict negotiation, processes that are developmental foundations of a well-ordered society.

The fact that even the best foreign assistance projects may have these kinds of unintended negative consequences has led some observers to what Mathias Risse calls “the Authenticity Thesis.”¹⁸ This thesis claims that the conditions necessary for development cannot be successfully imported from abroad—they can only emerge organically from within. Risse affirms that the global affluent have demanding duties to assist the global poor. But he takes the authenticity thesis to limit the range of permissible assistance options to certain strategies of institutional development. “Often all external aid can contribute otherwise is analytical work,

Clough, “Effective Altruism’s Political Blind Spot.”

¹⁷ When addressing the question of whether donations displace government health funding in the case of the top-rated Against Malaria Foundation, GiveWell’s report states, “We have little sense of how important a concern this is in AMF’s case.” For the relevant data, it then refers the reader to unpublished documents—somewhat puzzling given GiveWell’s general commitment to transparency. See GiveWell, “Against Malaria Foundation,” November 2016, n. 82 <http://www.givewell.org/charities/against-malaria-foundation#footnote82>. Similarly, GiveWell’s report on its second-highest rated charity, the Schistosomiasis Control Initiative, states, “We have limited information about whether governments would pay for the parts of the program paid for by SCI in its absence.” GiveWell, “Schistosomiasis Control Initiative,” November 2016, <http://www.givewell.org/charities/schistosomiasis-control-initiative>.

identification or training of internal reform champions, or technical assistance,”he writes.¹⁹ Risse acknowledges that the authenticity thesis can be suspended in certain cases, such as to provide assistance after natural disasters or as a temporary measure to foster conditions where strong public institutions can take root. But the authenticity thesis puts the burden of proof on proponents of direct assistance to justify case-by-case exceptions to the rule of encouraging institutional development through modest means.

Proponents of an institutionalist approach to development do not limit their sights to domestic institutions. They also draw attention to the highly consequential international policies that restrain economic growth in developing regions. Among these are agricultural subsidies in affluent countries that disadvantage farmers in poor countries,²⁰ international resource-trading privileges that enrich dictators at the expense of their subjects,²¹ and an international pharmaceutical regime that limits the accessibility of essential medicines to the global poor.²² If certain assumptions hold, subtle shifts in international rules would result in far more sweeping distributional changes than even the most effective voluntary assistance project could expect to bring about.²³

Altogether, these considerations form one face of what I call the *palliative critique*.

¹⁸ Risse, *On Global Justice*, 65.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 261–78.

²¹ Leif Wenar, “Clean Trade in Natural Resources,” *Ethics & International Affairs* 25 (2011): 27–39.

²² Thomas Pogge, “The Health Impact Fund: Boosting Pharmaceutical Innovation without Obstructing Free Access,” *Cambridge Quarterly of Healthcare Ethics* 18 (2009): 78–86.

²³ For instance, Thomas Pogge points to several alterable features of global institutions that collectively deprive the global poor of nearly \$1 trillion per year. See Thomas Pogge, “Are We Violating the Human Rights of the World’s Poor?” *Yale Human Rights and Development Law Journal* 14 (2011): 1–33, 29–30. By contrast, the total flow of private philanthropic donations from OECD countries to developing countries amounted to \$64 billion in 2014. See Carol

Stated succinctly, it holds that the types of causes that effective altruism champions only address the most superficial symptoms of dysfunctional national and international institutions. This is objectionable, according to the line of thought that I have been exploring, because it directs resources away from, and serves to undermine, more consequential institutional reforms.

What has made effective altruism vulnerable to this kind of criticism? One explanation is that it has developed an unduly narrow conception of what constitutes scientific rigor, a conception that confuses rigor with statistical certainty.²⁴

Effective altruism demands that donors make investments based on the best empirical evidence about the expected outcomes of different social interventions. Effective altruism's leaders often begin discussions of empirical rigor with the randomized controlled trial,²⁵ which is considered the best test of causal relationships in social science and medicine. Such trials attempt to isolate the effects of an intervention by assigning members of a population to treatment and control groups and monitoring differences in the ways that the two groups behave over time. If researchers observe a change in behavior among the treatment group, they can be extremely confident that the change is attributable to the treatment itself.

Randomized controlled trials have emerged as a controversial methodological tool in development studies.²⁶ Although such trials offer the most robust evidence about the effects of different social interventions, a significant limitation is that they are only practical in those rare

Adelman, Bryan Schwartz, and Elias Riskin, *Index of Global Philanthropy and Remittances 2016* (Washington, D.C.: Hudson Institute, 2016).

²⁴ For similar worries, see Gabriel, "Effective Altruism and Its Critics," 462–4, and Clough, "Effective Altruism's Political Blind Spot."

²⁵ MacAskill, *Doing Good Better*, 5–9; Singer, *Most Good*, 14–15.

²⁶ For an optimistic account, see Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo, *Poor Economics: A Radical Rethinking of the Way to Fight Global Poverty* (New York: Public Affairs, 2011). Cf. Martin Ravallion, "Fighting Poverty One Experiment at a Time," *Journal of Economic Literature* 50 (March 2012): 103–14.

situations where researchers have the power to control environmental conditions. Attempting to apply this method of analysis to large, complex institutional phenomena encounters a host of administrative, methodological, and ethical challenges. A research team cannot randomly assign citizens to countries with different public health systems, nor can it assign a treatment population to a world with a different international trading regime. But a research team faces no such hurdles in randomly assigning anti-malarial nets, deworming medicine, or cash transfers to different villages in a region, or to different households in a village. Studies that make use of randomized controlled trials thus tend to be small in scale, localized in their effects, and short in their time horizons. (Also, attempts to extract more general conclusions from such selective evidence alarm many development scholars.)²⁷ Studies of larger institutional phenomena must instead rely on other methods that yield less confident results. Imploring one's followers to rely upon the best evidence, therefore, is effectively an invitation to limit one's options to narrowly targeted interventions that lie at the margins of more consequential sociological phenomena.²⁸

It is true that compared to small-scale, neatly defined interventions by non-governmental organizations, initiatives to spur institutional change have lower prospects of success. This is both because the methods of analyzing institutional change produce lower confidence in the strength of causal relationships and because institutional change involves thornier collective

²⁷ As Clough notes, randomized controlled trials cannot easily measure externalities or long-term effects, which in some cases might negate an experiment's positive effects. See Clough, "Effective Altruism's Political Blind Spot." Meanwhile, Ravallion worries about the temptation for researchers using such trials to overgeneralize the policy implications of their results: what works well in one Rajasthan town might be disastrous elsewhere. See Ravallion, "Fighting Poverty One Experiment at a Time," 111.

²⁸ Leaders within the movement have acknowledged some of the limitations of randomized controlled trials. See, for instance, Holden Karnofsky, "How We Evaluate a Study," *The GiveWell Blog*, <https://blog.givewell.org/2012/08/23/how-we-evaluate-a-study/> (updated Sept. 2, 2016). It remains a striking fact, however, that as of 2018, each of GiveWell's top charity recommendations is based in large part on evidence from such trials.

action problems. A privately-organized, small-scale deworming program in a developing country only requires coordinating a small number of stakeholders. Most of these stakeholders also stand to gain from the intervention in some way, so getting them to go along takes little effort. By contrast, consider some of the institutional elements of parasite eradication: a publicly funded and monitored regime of sanitation regulations, vaccine distribution, health education, and access to health care. Outsiders might support internal reform initiatives to develop this infrastructure (and the background institutions necessary to sustain it) or campaign against international rules that restrain these developments. However, achieving the desired institutional changes clearly requires coordinating much larger numbers of stakeholders. Many of these stakeholders also ~~these reforms~~ stand to lose from changes in the rules, which may serve the interests of powerful minority groups—global pharmaceutical companies, foreign development professionals, and local economic and political elites. Convincing the rich and powerful to sacrifice their advantages can be extremely difficult, and such efforts take many years to gain traction. Thus, investing in institutional reform can often seem like a significant gamble.

It should be clear, however, that a high enough magnitude of potential gains can outweigh low prospects of success. In fact, it is often considered irrational to avoid gambles when their expected value is higher than sure-bet alternatives. And there are good reasons to think that the magnitude of the gains from institutional reform are so large that it would be foolish to spend one's energies on anything else. As an example, one can look to China's agricultural policy reforms, which involved radical administrative restructuring and redefinition of property rights, but are now credited with lifting 800 million people out of poverty since the early 1980s.²⁹ Sometimes effective altruists acknowledge the expected value of institutional

²⁹ Martin Ravallion, "A Comparative Perspective on Poverty Reduction in Brazil, China, and

change.³⁰ But it does not occupy as central a place in their discussions as one might expect, particularly given effective altruism's other commitments.

Choosing to pursue long-term institutional change—which will primarily benefit future persons—is bad news for people who are currently needy. Some might hold that presently existing persons have especially weighty moral claims that limit our prerogative to act on behalf of future interests.³¹ By contrast, effective altruists generally agree that we have no reason to value the lives of presently existing people any more than the lives of future persons.³² If we can do more good overall by investing in the future, that is what we ought to do. With this in mind, consider that, as far as we currently know, there will be an indefinite number of future generations. Assume further that building strong institutions tends to be a self-reinforcing process. Once a society achieves a stable and reasonably just basic structure, the beneficial effects of these institutions tend to generate the conditions of their own reproduction. Hence, if donors were to consolidate all their present efforts into reforming dysfunctional and unjust institutions, they would not merely be helping out the two billion or so people who compose the

India,” *World Bank Research Observer* 26 (Feb. 2011): 71–104.

³⁰ For example, see MacAskill, *Doing Good Better*, 94. Sometimes Singer also acknowledges that the expected value of long-range, uncertain options is significantly higher than the expected value of direct aid to victims of global poverty. However, he worries that most individuals cannot be motivated to think clearly about these complexities. “We need to encourage more people to be effective altruists,” he writes, “and causes like helping the global poor are more likely to draw people toward thinking and acting as effective altruists...” (*Most Good*, 174). It is not clear to me why Singer believes that the logic of long-term and institutional strategies is more confusing than the logic behind the case for direct assistance—which involves counterfactual reasoning and marginal econometrics. Statements like this one also raise the troubling specter of deception: that effective altruism's leaders may sometimes disguise their true beliefs for marketing purposes. Besides the potential moral objections to this tactic, deceptive advertising makes it more difficult to evaluate the movement's philosophical coherence.

³¹ One might think, for instance, that we generally have weightier obligations to people with whom we share certain kinds of interactive relationships, which are attenuated or absent in the case of future persons.

³² Singer, *Most Good*, 170–74.

current global poor. Rather, they would be preventing many billions of future persons from being born into poverty. And, each time someone donates to relieve suffering in the present, they incur a substantial opportunity cost with respect to future persons. From an effective altruist perspective, benefitting a smaller number of persons at the cost of a larger number isn't just suboptimal; it's morally wrong. Even if the data on institutional change is weak and the prospects of success are relatively dim, the expected value of institutional change suggests that it should be effective altruism's dominant strategy.

To be clear, the best understanding of the institutionalist position isn't that direct assistance is always inappropriate.³³ In some cases, for instance, providing health aid may be part of a sound strategy for laying foundations for institutional development. But to justify an intervention in developmental or emancipatory terms is very different from justifying it in terms of specific welfare improvements. These aims often pull in different directions.

The Palliative Critique: Normative Versions

While the first face of the palliative critique challenges effective altruism on the basis of its approach to empirical evaluation, the second face of this critique challenges effective altruism on the basis of its moral evaluation. Effective altruism's leaders insist that although the movement takes inspiration from utilitarian thinkers, it's not utilitarianism writ large.³⁴ Whereas utilitarianism is heroically demanding in its drive to promote a single value, effective altruism acknowledges the legitimacy of individual personal prerogative and a plurality of values worthy of appreciation and promotion. Notwithstanding, the latter view's methodological orientation tends to push out all the values but those that are easily quantified, such as years of life

³³ I thank Minh Ly for pressing me on this point.

³⁴ MacAskill, *Doing Good Better*, 215.

unburdened by disease, and rates of economic consumption. This insistence on quantification calls into question the stated commitment to pluralism. Few would deny that a long and healthy life or a comfortable standard of living are significantly valuable, or that they can serve as useful instruments or proxies for other valuable conditions. But the emphasis on quantifiable metrics prevents effective altruism from appreciating less measurable elements of a valuable human life, especially conditions of freedom and equality. Recent work in political philosophy has done much to clarify the nature of these values and the demands they make on us.

A long tradition of thought has understood freedom simply as the absence of interference.³⁵ An agent counts as free when no one interferes with their actions. Recent developments in political thought have put this understanding of freedom as noninterference on the defensive. Consider a benevolent slaveowner who never lays a hand on their slaves, or the benevolent despot who allows their subjects considerable leeway in managing their own affairs, rarely if ever resorting to physical force. Because these slaves and subjects are not directly impeded, the proponent of freedom as noninterference must conclude that these individuals are free. But since one ordinarily takes slavery and despotism to be paradigmatic cases of oppression, this seems to be an unacceptable conclusion. Alternatively, neo-republicans and neo-Kantians have proposed that freedom and its absence are better understood as structural conditions: one is unfree when one falls under the power of others in some way.³⁶ For neo-republicans, unfreedom occurs when the options one has are conditioned by the arbitrary will of

³⁵ “Negative liberty,” in Isaiah Berlin’s famous account; See Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” in his *Four Essays on Liberty* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969).

³⁶ Niko Kolodny proposes this way of synthesizing republican and Kantian positions in his “Being Under the Power of Others,” in *Republicanism and Democracy*, ed. Yiftah Elizar and Geneviève Rousselière (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 94–114.

another agent.³⁷ To be free is to be undominated, that is, to live under circumstances where no agent has the opportunity to interfere with one's choices in discretionary ways—whether or not the agent actually does so.³⁸ For neo-Kantians, meanwhile, to be free is to be independent from the wills of private persons.³⁹ One can only enjoy this independence in a constitutional state that establishes reciprocal limits on private choices and public support for those who cannot support themselves. Both schools of thought maintain that one experiences unfreedom when access to vital resources unavoidably depends on the goodwill of a benefactor rather than one's own powers or legal guarantees.⁴⁰ Slavery and benevolent despotism are paradigm examples. The slave and the subject may be materially comfortable and rarely impeded, but each can only act in ways that their respective overlords permit.

Crucially for my purposes, these insights show that philanthropy can also pose a threat to freedom. Direct interventions allow donors and their agents to stand in relationships of domination to local residents by controlling the availability of important resources. Which resources are provided, to whom, how, and for how long are decisions that lie ultimately with

³⁷ See, e.g., Philip Pettit, "The Domination Complaint," *Nomos* 86 (2005): 87–117.

³⁸ Although this definition still appeals to the notion of interference, it's distinct in two ways. First, where freedom as noninterference takes concern with actual instances of interference, freedom as nondomination is concerned with the opportunity to interfere, whether or not an agent actually exercises this opportunity. Second, republican freedom does not find interference objectionable as such: interfering with one another's choices is an ineliminable fact of political life. Rather, it objects to powers of interference that are unconstrained by law or strong norms.

³⁹ For a systematic investigation of this idea, see Arthur Ripstein, *Force and Freedom* (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard University Press, 2009).

⁴⁰ In truth, Kantians and republicans disagree on whether legal entitlement is a necessary condition for individual freedom. Both accept that legal guarantees are not sufficient for individual freedom when the laws themselves are bad or their enforcement capricious. Republicans submit that while legal entitlement is often a reliable recipe for preventing domination, domination can also be mitigated by having access to an array of private benefactors who are in some sense competing with each other. See Philip Pettit, *On the People's Terms* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 112–3. Meanwhile, for the Kantian, freedom categorically requires measures that liberate individuals from dependence on private wills; see

private benefactors. Such resources can also be withdrawn at will if recipients display less than servile gratitude,⁴¹ or in response to the latest findings on the relative effectiveness of alternative interventions.⁴² These interventions place persons in need in a precarious state of dependency.

It's one thing to be dominated by other agents from one's own social group, and another thing entirely when those agents represent a privileged group of outsiders. To see this, one needs to think about what it means to treat someone as an equal, another question that recent contributions to political philosophy have helped to clarify. Until lately, the prevailing view held that treating people as equals means ensuring that they have equal access to resources of some kind.⁴³ Difficulties with this way of accounting for inequalities in power and status have now led many philosophers to endorse a relational or social conception of equality—a notion of equality that may certainly make demands on the distribution of resources but isn't reducible to resource distribution.⁴⁴ As I prefer to construe it, social equality refers to a way of relating to others in which no person is treated as inherently wiser or worthier than another. The contrast to a condition of social equality is one of arbitrary social hierarchy or subordination.⁴⁵ Subordination

Ripstein, *Force and Freedom*, 273–84.

⁴¹ Although the law typically treats donations as contracts, the prerogative to continue donating lies with the donor. See Evelyn Brody, “The Legal Framework of Nonprofit Organizations,” in *The Nonprofit Sector: A Research Handbook*, ed. Walter W. Powell and Richard Steinberg (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 243–66.

⁴² GiveWell releases new recommendations each year that revise the list of suggested organizations or their relative ranking. Sometimes GiveWell revises recommendations because a previously recommended organization or cause has already met its funding needs. But in other cases, shifting recommendations presumably result in budget shortfalls that may leave organizations and their beneficiaries scrambling.

⁴³ Representative statements include Amartya Sen, “Equality of What?” Tanner Lecture on Human Values, Stanford University, May 22, 1979; G.A. Cohen, “On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice,” *Ethics* 99 (1989): 906–44.

⁴⁴ For a set of statements from major contributors to this movement, see Carina Fourie, Fabian Schuppert, and Ivo Wallimann-Helmer, eds., *Social Equality: On What It Means to Be Equals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

⁴⁵ Kolodny, “Being Under the Power of Others.” Kolodny sometimes argues that the value of

obtains when certain persons enjoy greater consideration or influence as a result of irrelevant characteristics or unfair advantages. Familiar examples of such traits are gender, caste, race, nationality, and class. There may often be good reasons to distribute resources or roles on a differential basis (such as between parents and children or managers and employees). But to have one's interests or judgment discounted on the basis of ascriptive or arbitrary characteristics is demeaning. When women receive lower salaries than men employed in the same job, when racial or ethnic minorities face informal discrimination in access to public education, or when the voices of poor persons are systematically excluded in political debate—all of these circumstances represent objectionable conditions of social inequality. Although the groups in question may enjoy the same formal liberties and be well off in other ways, these conditions indicate social practices that fail in some way to treat participants with equal respect and concern.

Private development assistance risks engaging in social subordination particularly when it adopts a technocratic orientation. At one end of the spectrum lie donors who merely make capital available for local communities to invest in the communities' own development projects. At the other end lie those, like effective altruists, who provide funds only for projects that satisfy the donors' beliefs about value and cost-effectiveness.⁴⁶ Because local residents lack the bargaining power to contest these positions, the superior wealth of effective altruists allows them to impose their development priorities on local communities. Ordinarily, however, the fact that someone

freedom as nondomination is also better understood in terms of nonsubordination. At other times, he concedes that nondomination is in fact a distinct value, albeit one more narrowly circumscribed than its philosophical proponents acknowledge. It seems to me that nondomination properly captures a concern with liberty that's missing from the value of nonsubordination. That is, a society of equals could still be disposed to invade one another's choices in various ways. Thus, I find it useful to keep these two values distinct.

possesses superior wealth isn't a reason for granting them greater influence over social outcomes. Using one's financial power to push one's development preferences onto a community amounts to treating the members of that community as social inferiors, as people deserving pity but not respect. The injury of subordination wounds most deeply when the wealthy intervenors are not themselves members of the community and are conspicuously marked off by different demographic attributes. Effective altruism faces this problem acutely, since the effective altruist community is composed largely of white, Anglo-American, male millennials, with backgrounds in applied science, business, and analytic philosophy.⁴⁷

Though most people will agree that freedom and equality are profoundly valuable, some may think that they represent mistaken priorities in development. After all, of what benefit is equal status if one is dying of malaria? Notice, though, that people often react to instances of domination and subordination in ways that involve greater emotional intensity than their responses to mere material deprivation. For many, freedom from certain forms of domination and subordination is worth the price of a shorter and less materially comfortable life, as shown by extensive surveys of persons living in extreme poverty. As Monique Deveaux reports, persons facing severe want tend not to point to physical pain or material discomfort as their chief concerns.⁴⁸ Rather, they describe overriding senses of powerlessness, shame, and humiliation, as

⁴⁶ Cash transfers go only partway in meeting these concerns, as I discuss in n. 54 below. [CV: adjust note number as needed during technical copy editing]

⁴⁷ For these and related reasons, some worry that effective altruism fails to sufficiently dissociate itself from practices of neocolonialism. See, for example, Cecelia Lynch, "Reconceptualizing Charity: The Problem with Philanthropy and 'Effective Altruism' by the World's Wealthiest People," *Critical Investigations into Humanitarianism in Africa* blog, Jan. 11, 2016, <http://www.cihablog.com/reconceptualizing-charity-the-problem-with-philanthropy-and-effective-altruism-by-the-worlds-wealthiest-people/>.

⁴⁸ Monique Deveaux, "The Global Poor as Agents of Justice," *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 12 (2015): 125–50, at 135–6. Deveaux is referring to the Voices of the Poor survey, which involved interviews with 60,000 individuals in 50 countries. See Deepa Narayan et al.,

well as resentment towards the arbitrary commands of local authorities. Precisely how these complaints map on to philosophical accounts of domination and social subordination isn't entirely clear. But the evidence suggests that philosophical worries about unjust power are not idle abstractions: they resonate deeply with actual people and are worth taking seriously.

One might object that this argument fails to appreciate the sense in which the global poor are *already* subject to domination and subordination.⁴⁹ Indeed, some combination of domination and subordination might explain precisely what is objectionable about poverty in the first place. By combatting aspects of material deprivation, effective altruism might then be credited with working to disrupt these unjust relationships. This objection may be persuasive to the extent that effective altruists can justify their decisions on these grounds. But as I've discussed earlier, there is no direct line between material deprivation and subjection to the power of others. It would be surprising, for instance, if anti-malaria nets and deworming pills turned out to be the most prudent strategies for increasing the relative power of poor persons. Perhaps more importantly, the fact that domination and subordination are deeply objectionable indicates that one should take avoiding these conditions as a constraint on how one helps others. In attempting to unseat these kinds of relationships, one should first try to avoid replacing them with similar forms of mistreatment. This isn't to say that a presumption against dominating and subordinating interventions cannot be suspended in the absence of acceptable alternatives. In dire emergencies, for instance, one is sometimes willing to trade away some respect for better chances of survival. But if there are other ways of assisting members of the global poor that treat them with greater dignity, the onus is on effective altruists to explain to their beneficiaries why they should accept

Voices of the Poor, vols. 1–2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press and World Bank, 2000 and 2002).

⁴⁹ Thanks to Emma Saunders-Hastings and Brian Berkey for pressing me on this point.

something less. I explore alternative assistance possibilities further in a later section.

This section started from the hypothesis that effective altruism's preoccupation with material welfare to the exclusion of other important values might be a function of measurement bias. Another perspective holds that a failure to appreciate the specific risks of domination and subordination isn't so much the result of measurement bias, but rather an inevitable byproduct of a consequentialist understanding of beneficence. Consequentialism holds that we simply ought to promote good states of affairs, and that promoting good states of affairs need not take account of why current states of affairs are bad. Our duties to others are no stronger in cases where we ourselves have caused their suffering than in cases where their suffering results from misfortune. An alternative view holds that the duties we have to make others' ends our own are weaker and less urgent than the duties we have to treat others fairly and to rectify circumstances when we fail to do this.⁵⁰ From this standpoint, our duties to distant others depend to a large extent on how we relate to those persons through institutions. We have particularly stringent obligations towards distant strangers when their disadvantages are consequences of practices in which everyone participates. We likewise have particular obligations towards distant persons when we have benefitted from their historical oppression.

One might think that these justice-based considerations simply reinforce the strength of our duties to members of the global poor and thus serve as grist for the effective altruist's mill. Those who suffer from extreme poverty occupy positions at the bottom rung of a global division of labor that disproportionately benefits and is sustained by people in affluent countries. They

⁵⁰ See, for example, Barbara Herman, "The Scope of Moral Requirement," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 30 (2001): 227–56; A.J. Julius, "Basic Structure and the Value of Equality," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 31 (2003): 321–55; Thomas Pogge, "'Assisting' the Global Poor?" in *The Ethics of Assistance*, ed. Deen K. Chatterjee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 260–88.

also tend to reside in countries recovering from legacies of colonialism and foreign predations of other kinds. But while these considerations might amplify the strength of our duties towards the global poor, they also seem to alter the nature of these duties and require a different orientation than the one that effective altruism recommends.

When I'm fully entitled to property, it's mine to transfer in whatever manner and to whomever I wish, and to impose conditions on how others use it. But if the property has come into my possession because of injustice, I no longer have the right to exercise discretion over its transfer. My principal duty is to cease or reform the behavior that's responsible for my unjust enrichment and to compensate my victims. In such cases, the resources that I possess are neither gifts for me to give away to my chosen recipients nor investments for me to manage strategically: they are more like taxes or debts to be paid immediately and unconditionally.⁵¹ And I'm not being altruistic by returning to others what is properly theirs. Thus, insofar as our duties to the global poor stem from our participation in institutional relationships, we are under a stringent obligation to reform the terms of these institutions and to provide unconditional recompense for their effects. Thinking of our duties to the global poor in terms of gift-giving or social engineering fundamentally mischaracterizes the nature of these relationships.

It's of course an open question just how much of the wealth that the global rich control can plausibly be described as unjust accumulation. Few thoughtful commentators would claim that all global resource inequalities are necessarily objectionable. Quite plausibly, *some* amount of wealth that the global rich control is rightly theirs and thus is fit to be consumed or transferred at the owner's discretion. Perhaps effective altruism could then be understood as a theory about how to think about our legitimate entitlements: resources that are conclusively our own and not

⁵¹ Brian Barry pointed this out several decades ago in his "Humanity and Justice in Global

already owed to anyone else.⁵² And if this is so, the justice-based critique would seem to miss the point. But the critic will reply that one cannot accurately think of most global wealth this way. When one reflects on the violent history of international development along with continuing institutional inequities, one is left to conclude that very little of what the global rich currently possess could rightly be described as unambiguously theirs.⁵³ One is left to think that preserving the philosophical coherence of effective altruism entails diminishing its practical relevance.

Mistaking the bases of our duties toward the distant needy is an invitation for the creation of new relationships of domination and subordination. If the global rich repay their moral debt to the global poor unconditionally, the rich retain no power to interfere with the affairs of the global poor and implicitly recognize the poor as social equals. However, if the rich impose conditions on repaying this debt (perhaps because they don't realize it's actually a debt), they may retain the power to withdraw the resources if they change their minds or they don't like the way the poor are managing these resources. In other words, the rich dominate the poor. Similarly, by imposing conditions on how the poor use donated resources, they indicate that they don't respect the poor's authority to use their property as they see fit—that the judgments of the rich on this question trump the judgments of the poor. In other words, the rich treat the poor as social inferiors.⁵⁴

Perspective," *Nomos* 24 (1982): 219–52.

⁵² I thank Desirée Lim and an anonymous reviewer for help with developing this point.

⁵³ But what if one concluded that the global rich were legitimately entitled to a more substantial amount of the wealth they now possess? Would this not reopen the door for them to consider guidance from effective altruism? The nonconsequentialist critic might respond that their primary concern should be redressing the injustice that taints the remainder of their wealth. This is because duties of justice take priority over duties of beneficence: we ought to respect others and right our wrongs before we think about spending resources on other valuable projects.

⁵⁴ One might wonder whether the phenomenon I describe here is better understood as paternalism rather than subordination. I accept that these two phenomena can sometimes overlap. Often, what makes paternalism objectionable is the fact that it's subordinating. However,

Surely, these concerns about fairness, domination, and subordination will fall on deaf ears if effective altruism is understood as an orthodox application of utilitarianism. Avoiding relationships of domination and subordination only factors into a utilitarian calculus if doing so has a net effect on total welfare. Insofar as nondomination and nonsubordination lack significant instrumental value, the arguments I've adduced may seem orthogonal to the utilitarian altruist. But as I've discussed earlier, effective altruists are eager to broaden their tent. If they are sincere about distancing their position from utilitarianism and accommodating moral pluralism, it's hard to see how they can reject these concerns out of hand.

From Effective Altruism to Effective Advocacy?

One reason why effective altruists may be skeptical of political engagement might be due to a narrow understanding of what it actually means. Some construe institutional reform as a naïve and dangerous utopianism. In an important passage defending effective altruism's tendency to work within existing political arrangements, Singer praises modern capitalism's record on poverty reduction and warns of the dangers of alternative political experiments.⁵⁵ This response risks mischaracterizing alternative perspectives. Though their rhetoric sometimes indicates deep dissatisfaction with the status quo,⁵⁶ few if any critics of effective altruism have suggested the abolition of markets and private property. Rather, institutionalist critics are best

interventions can also be subordinating without being paternalistic. Cash transfers, for instance, are thought to be non-paternalistic interventions. But when foreign philanthropists initiate a cash transfer program that circumvents democratic processes, they subordinate members of the local community.

⁵⁵ Singer, *Most Good*, 50.

⁵⁶ See, for example, Srinivasan, "Stop the Robot Apocalypse;" Pete Mills, Reply, "The Ethical Careers Debate," *Oxford Left Review* 7 (May 2012): 4–9.

understood as recommending improvements to existing institutions.⁵⁷

It's also tempting to read calls for political engagement as apologies for complacency. For instance, Brian Berkey charges proponents of the institutionalist critique with combining ambitious accounts of institutional change with paltry demands on individual action.⁵⁸ If voting or writing one's representative—both low-impact and low-sacrifice activities—exhaust the demands on political engagement, one should regard appeals to systemic change as hopelessly ineffectual and self-indulgent. While some critics may certainly be guilty of Berkey's charge, they don't represent the best interpretation of the institutionalist position.⁵⁹

The most compelling understanding of the call to political engagement is that individuals ought to deploy a wide range of ambitious tactics that operate within the confines of democratic norms. These tactics collectively fit under the heading of "political advocacy," which here refers to using strategies of persuasion to change policies, social norms, or the distribution of power. It includes attempts to recruit and elect officials who will champion reform, to lobby and contest officials already elected, to research policy alternatives, and to join and coordinate social movements. The target need not be the state for an action to count as political advocacy. Labor and community activists trying to solve collective action problems among the disempowered, consumer activists who challenge industry practices, public-interest groups that lobby intergovernmental organizations, and individuals who take to social media to call out forms of social discrimination in everyday life are all engaged in political advocacy.

⁵⁷ See the responses by Acemoglu, Deaton, and Rubenstein in "Forum: The Logic of Effective Altruism"; Clough, "Effective Altruism's Political Blind Spot"; Srinivasan, "Stop the Robot Apocalypse"; and Gabriel, "Effective Altruism and Its Critics."

⁵⁸ Brian Berkey, "The Institutional Critique of Effective Altruism," *Utilitas* 30 (2018): 143–71.

Under contemporary conditions, advocacy involves a highly articulated division of labor. Individuals can delegate much of their activism to professionalized organizations that identify issues, design strategies, and lead campaigns of various kinds. Ordinary individuals can support these organizations with donations and participate in calls to action, such as to attend protests, boycott practices, sign petitions, retweet, turn out to vote, and recruit their contacts to do the same.

One might suppose that advocacy offers a very promising avenue for effective altruism. Identifying what constitutes an effective campaign is a puzzle ripe for rigorous analysis. The world of social change is no less riddled with emotion-based reasoning and wishful thinking than the world of charity. Fortunately, some evidence suggests that effective altruism is becoming more sanguine about institutional reform, at least on a case-by-case basis. For instance, Singer himself now more openly embraces the reform proposals regarding sovereignty over natural resources.⁶⁰ William MacAskill provides a framework for deciding whether to pursue a career in electoral politics.⁶¹ The effective altruist charity evaluator GiveWell has spun off the Open Philanthropy Project in large part to study the prospects of advocacy for various causes within the United States.⁶²

The voices behind the palliative critique are likely to see these as encouraging developments. Those who regard direct interventions as counterproductive or misconceived should welcome the increasing openness of effective altruism's leaders to institutional reform. Those who worry that direct interventions mistreat their intended beneficiaries should also be

⁵⁹ See the responses by Acemoglu, Deaton, and Rubenstein in “Forum: The Logic of Effective Altruism”; Clough, “Effective Altruism’s Political Blind Spot”; Srinivasan, “Stop the Robot Apocalypse”; and Gabriel, “Effective Altruism and Its Critics.”

⁶⁰ Singer, *Most Good*, 161.

⁶¹ MacAskill, *Doing Good Better*, 89–93.

relieved to see efforts relocated to other settings. Indeed, some prominent critics who have been impressed with these developments now have become allies.⁶³ But there are also grounds for caution. Effective altruism's turn to advocacy risks running into some familiar traps.

The first risk is that the advocacy turn might fall prey to the very same measurability bias that it's in some sense attempting to correct. A preference for investments with predictable impacts limits effective altruists to strategies that are ill suited to systemic change. The second risk reflects a concern with unequal opportunities to advocate. Rather than eliminate or sidestep objectionable exercises of power, the shift to advocacy might simply relocate them to a different setting.

Singer's main example of how effective altruists might consider advocacy concerns Oxfam's Oil for Agriculture campaign in Ghana.⁶⁴ Oil for Agriculture was a successful campaign to convince the government of Ghana to allocate profits from its oil reserves to support small farmers. Comparing Oxfam's campaign expenditures with the government's increase in outlays to agricultural investment, Singer estimates that Oxfam's one-year return on investment was 580%. The example aims to show that investing in this campaign would have been a worthwhile choice for effective altruists, and it's meant as a model for thinking about other advocacy opportunities. But even as the example serves to allay doubts about effective altruism's capacity to contribute to systemic change, it also raises new doubts about whether the movement's methodological orientation is well suited to the challenges that advocacy presents.

⁶² Open Philanthropy Project: www.openphilanthropy.org.

⁶³ For instance, Thomas Pogge, who has been previously been sharply critical of Singer's views on global poverty, is now cited as a supporter of effective altruism; see Singer, *Most Good*, 187.

⁶⁴ Singer, *Most Good*, 158–60.

Steven Teles has distinguished between two general approaches to funding advocacy.⁶⁵ One attempts to secure specific measurable outcomes. This approach tends to confine investments to narrowly circumscribed issues with short time horizons and to enter the field at the final stages of the legislative process. The other approach focuses on building movements, by cultivating networks of innovative and well-run organizations. It tends to invest in organizations for the long haul, not specifically to achieve particular policy outcomes, but to shape public opinion and the political agenda which inform policy choices. In Teles's view, the latter approach is better suited to the nature of political competition. Maintaining a competitive advantage in politics requires the material and intellectual resources to adapt to circumstances that change rapidly and unfold in a nonlinear fashion. It also requires a willingness to make risky bets and accept some painful losses along the way. Teles contends that the capacity-building approach helps to explain both the emergence of the contemporary conservative movement in the United States and its relative dominance of the public agenda. Whereas liberal funders from the 1970s to 2000s became obsessed with measurement-based evaluation, conservative funders took a more hands-off approach that opted instead for developing organizational power. This strategy paid off in terms of a resilient and nimble movement, able to weather setbacks and adapt tactics to shifting circumstances.

These observations suggest that effective altruism's initial instincts about advocacy may not yield the benefits that both its leaders and its critics hope. Just as investing in individual development projects can undermine broader development goals, so too can investing in individual policy campaigns come at the expense of building viable reform movements. The Oil

⁶⁵ Steven Teles, "Foundations, Organizational Maintenance, and Partisan Asymmetry," *PS: Political Science & Politics* 49 (2016): 455–60; Steven Teles and Mark Schmitt, "The Elusive Craft of Evaluating Advocacy," *Stanford Social Innovation Review* (Summer 2011): 39–43.

for Agriculture campaign attracts the interest of effective altruism because it exhibited a sizeable measurable impact. But in my estimation, what allowed Oxfam to succeed in this particular case was the result of decades of work cultivating a global reputation, operational efficiency, seasoned expertise, and productive local partnerships, while learning from many bruising mistakes along the way.⁶⁶Oxfam could not have developed this organizational capacity if its donors had been fixated on quantifying the cost-benefit ratio of each campaign and each campaign tactic.

Fixating on the return on investment of particular campaigns fails to appreciate the supporting factors necessary for waging successful campaigns.⁶⁷ It also fails to appreciate the significance of protecting victories from future challenges and of using individual events to build momentum. A one-year, 580% return wouldn't be very impressive if the policy were to be reversed in the next budgeting cycle; a much more modest rate of return that stands up to countervailing pressure over time may ultimately prove more valuable. Likewise, even a negative return could be counted as a valuable investment, particularly if one is ultimately concerned with systemic change. A conspicuous and well-reported failure to alter the budget in Ghana might nevertheless have helped to solidify an international norm of popular sovereignty over natural resources, creating pressure on resource-rich countries to distribute resource wealth fairly.

Thus, one risk of effective altruism's turn to advocacy lies in a failure to adapt its metrics to the circumstances of the political setting. Because effective altruism is a movement predicated on evidence-based practical reasoning, it's poised to fall into the trap of investing in individual

⁶⁶ Somewhat ironically, the Life You Can Save, a meta-charity founded by Peter Singer himself, defends Oxfam's overall effectiveness on similar grounds. See "Oxfam," <https://www.thelifeyoucansave.org/where-to-donate/oxfam> (accessed July 11, 2019).

legislative victories at the cost of more robust institutional reforms. To be clear, nothing in the movement's official commitments prevents it from adapting its methods to new contexts. But as we've seen, the movement's leaders evince a predilection for methods that promise statistical certainty.

The second risk of effective altruism's advocacy turn is that regardless of its ultimate efficacy, advocacy isn't altogether immune from moral costs. It can also subject others to objectionable treatment in the way in which it transmits inequalities in power.

Consider that many of the reforms that effective altruists might want to advocate are subject to considerable disagreement. People disagree about the moral basis for institutional reform, while those who agree on the moral basis may disagree on the best strategy. Many of these disagreements are reasonable. Thoughtful, well-motivated individuals with access to the same information reach wildly different conclusions. Now consider that effective altruists are likely in many cases to enjoy greater resources for advocating their positions than their opponents do. This is true even within affluent countries, where supporters of effective altruism are not only usually drawn from wealthy circles but also often encouraged to earn as much income as possible for the sake of maximizing their philanthropic potential. Hence, effective altruists have the potential to drown out the voices of persons with opposing views who have fewer financial resources to publicize their positions.

The recent history of philanthropist-led interventions in policy change in the United States offers a cautionary tale. Donors with concentrated wealth to support good intentions have shown themselves able and willing to overpower their opponents. Take the movement for reform of public education, a movement spearheaded by a consortium of large foundations that most

⁶⁷ Gabriel, "Effective Altruism and Its Critics," 469.

prominently includes the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation, and the Walton Family Foundation.⁶⁸ In the late 1990s, leaders at several foundations reached similar conclusions about an agenda for education reform—an agenda that calls for integrating features of contemporary business management such as choice, competition, and performance-based evaluation into public schooling. For nearly two decades, this consortium has been experimenting with ways to deploy concentrated wealth in the service of getting these initiatives adopted, through creating and coordinating advocacy groups, lobbying and electing sympathetic officials, making conditional grants to cash-strapped public schools, and creating parallel school systems that embody the reform agenda’s aims.⁶⁹ Survey research continues to show that wealthy elites and the general public profess systematically different education policy priorities—with ordinary individuals much less likely to support market-oriented reforms.⁷⁰ Nonetheless, because those who oppose the elite reform agenda lack access to the same political finance and organizational infrastructure, their voices have been relatively muted in debates on public education.

Commonsense morality holds that treating someone fairly in a debate requires affording that person the same opportunities to make their position known as one affords oneself. A helpful way of understanding this, according to Daniel Viehoff, is a willingness to set aside certain arbitrary advantages one may have.⁷¹ It would be wrong of someone with a loud voice to shout

⁶⁸ For a critical overview of this movement, see Joanne Barkan, “Plutocrats at Work: How Big Philanthropy Undermines Democracy,” *Social Research* 80 (2013): 635–52.

⁶⁹ For a systematic overview of these strategies, see Sarah Reckhow, “More than Patrons: How Foundations Fuel Policy Change and Backlash,” *PS: Political Science & Politics* 49 (2016): 449–54.

⁷⁰ See, e.g., Benjamin Page, Larry Bartels, and Jason Seawright, “Democracy and the Policy Preferences of Wealthy Americans,” *Perspectives on Politics* 11 (2013): 51–73, 59–60.

⁷¹ Daniel Viehoff, “Democratic Equality and Political Authority,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 42 (2014): 337–75.

down their opponents in a town hall meeting. It would be wrong of someone to threaten their friend with a knife in the course of an argument about where to order takeout food. And it would be wrong for a spouse to claim authority over household decisions on the basis of their superior salary. A loud voice, a capacity to inflict bodily harm, and a high-paying job don't make one's opinions more credible or one's interests more valuable than those of others. To the extent that they can influence the outcomes of a debate, these properties count as arbitrary advantages. Using these features to one's benefit in a debate is to mistreat one's opponent—to treat one's opponent as an object to be overcome, rather than as an equal person to be reasoned with.

Viehoff's argument is meant to explain why democracy enjoys special authority as a form of collective decision making. Obeying democratic procedures, in his view, prevents us from relying on these kinds of arbitrary advantages. But I think the argument also contains a general point about the ethics of advocacy. That is, under conditions of radical economic inequality, leveraging one's superior wealth for the sake of political influence can be a way of mistreating one's opponents. It attempts to win extra influence by relying on an arbitrary source of strength. In so doing, one objectionably subordinates one's opponents.

The problem of social subordination can seem even more troubling in transnational cases. Effective altruists from affluent countries may be especially inclined to advocate for the reform of international rules or institutional conditions in developing countries. As the history of popular resistance to the International Monetary Fund's structural adjustment program illustrates, residents of developing countries may not agree with all reform proposals from abroad.⁷² And yet residents of developing countries are likely to have access to vastly fewer resources for

⁷² See, for example, Paul D. Almeida, "Defensive Mobilization: Popular Movements against Economic Adjustment Policies in Latin America," *Latin American Perspectives* 34 (2007): 123–39.

making their voices heard. The transnational case is troubling not only because the differences in the means of expression may be greater, but also because the effects of such reforms weigh more heavily on the persons with fewer resources. This cuts against a common intuition that persons should enjoy power over outcomes in proportion to the extent to which they are affected by those outcomes.⁷³ Although the perspectives of well-intentioned outsiders may sometimes be helpful, the advice of outsiders should generally not displace the voices of those who must grapple directly with the outcomes of the decisions in question. Effective altruists from affluent countries who engage in transnational advocacy risk running afoul of this principle.

These considerations allow us to appreciate more fully what I mean by “the effective altruist’s political problem.” Critics of effective altruism challenge that direct assistance programs are at best inefficient and at worst harmful. They urge relatively affluent individuals to channel their resources into political advocacy. While some doubt whether effective altruism has the philosophical flexibility to support this shift, others are more optimistic about the movement’s capacity to engage in politics.⁷⁴ But optimists fail to appreciate that, without a change in orientation, redeploying effective altruism’s efforts toward policy change might be equally inefficient and not obviously less harmful.

Toward an Ethics of Political Philanthropy

There are a variety of ways of working out this problem, though none of them offers a completely satisfying resolution. One might insist that effective altruism’s ability to identify

⁷³ Harry Brighouse and Marc Fleurbaey, “Democracy and Proportionality,” *Journal of Political Philosophy* 18 (2010): 137–55.

⁷⁴ Thoroughgoing skeptics include Acemoglu (“The Logic of Effective Altruism: Response”), Deaton (“The Logic of Effective Altruism: Response”), and Srinivasan (“Stop the Robot Apocalypse”). Critics who encourage effective altruism to invest in political advocacy

successful but underfinanced programs of direct aid offers distinct advantages. If so, effective altruists could address elements of the palliative critique by treating these programs as temporary demonstrations. If the programs meet with a positive reception from affected parties in the regions in which they operate, effective altruists could work to transfer their control (and eventually their finance) to local authorities. The idea here may be familiar from Rob Reich’s attempt to reconcile philanthropic foundations with democratic legitimacy.⁷⁵ Reich contends that foundations are legitimate insofar as they serve to pilot social programs that then apply for public approval. One may wish to add a stronger criterion that makes the public audition process more explicit and inclusive, a move suggested by Waheed Hussain’s discussion of how the use of economic power for political ends can be legitimate.⁷⁶ Hussain argues that private initiatives to promote a social agenda can be permissible when they serve as “waiting rooms” for democracy, essentially by modeling democratic principles in their internal governance and preparing themselves for future incorporation into formal legislation.⁷⁷ In turn, if direct aid programs were to audition for the approval of, and incorporation by, their host publics, they would mitigate some of the risk that direct aid poses to local autonomy and institutional development.

Another option is for effective altruists to embrace the turn to advocacy, but to avoid the temptation to advocate for substantive issues. Instead, they could focus on strengthening the *voices* of the persons they aim to assist, so that those who have most to gain and lose are able to advocate for themselves. This is obviously not a new idea. It was particularly popular among an

include Clough (“Effective Altruism’s Political Blind Spot”) and Gabriel (“Effective Altruism and Its Critics”).

⁷⁵ Rob Reich, “Repugnant to the Whole Idea of Democracy? On the Role of Foundations in Democratic Societies,” *PS: Political Science & Politics* 49 (2016): 466–72.

⁷⁶ Waheed Hussain, “Is Ethical Consumerism an Impermissible Form of Vigilantism?” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 40 (2012): 111–43.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 132.

earlier generation of philanthropists who funded the civil rights and community organizing movements in the United States. It's also a controversial idea. Development scholars point out that external support for grassroots organizing can taint a movement's perceived legitimacy.⁷⁸ Belying the aim of empowering the poor, participatory initiatives are also susceptible to capture by local elites.⁷⁹ But there is now a wealth of information on different attempts to mobilize poor communities in the global South. (A recent report by the World Bank cites nearly 500 studies of development projects with a participatory element.)⁸⁰ Effective altruists could bring their analytical tools to bear on identifying successful organizing tactics and projects.⁸¹ However, doing this well would require accustoming themselves to longer time horizons and alternative ways of assessing progress.

A third option is to restrict substantive advocacy efforts to particular kinds of causes in order to avoid subordinating one's opponents. One way to do this is to engage in efforts to counteract the undue influence of other powerful forces.⁸² The idea may be familiar from

⁷⁸ Mick Moore, "Empowerment at Last?" *Journal of International Development* 13 (2001): 321–29, at 325.

⁷⁹ Susan Cotts Watkins, Ann Swidler, and Thomas Hannan, "Outsourcing Social Transformation: Development NGOs as Organizations," *Annual Review of Sociology* 38 (2012): 285–315, at 296.

⁸⁰ Ghazala Mansuri and Vijayendra Rao, "Localizing Development: Does Participation Work?" *World Bank Policy Research Report* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2012). For critical discussion of subsequent research developments, see Stephen D. Krasner and Jeremy M. Weinstein, "Improving Governance from the Outside In," *Annual Review of Political Science* 17 (2014): 123–45, at 140–1.

⁸¹ Helpful examples here may be Solidaire (www.solidairenetwork.org) in the domestic context and Grassroots International (www.grassrootsonline.org) and Slum Dwellers International (www.sdinet.org) in the transnational context. For an illuminating case study of the latter organization, see Monique Deveaux, "Beyond the Redistributive Paradigm: What Philosophers Can Learn from Poor-Led Politics," in *Ethical Issues in Poverty Alleviation*, ed. H. P. Gaisbauer et al. (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2016), 225–45.

⁸² I thank Iason Gabriel for this idea.

Michael Walzer's discussion of military intervention in civil wars.⁸³ Walzer holds that, as a general matter, foreign states are not permitted to intervene in a society divided by civil war. Resolving the conflict is an internal affair. However, a foreign state may permissibly intervene in order to counteract another foreign power's intervention. Similarly, one might think that effective altruists are not justified in meddling in a country's development disputes when they reflect real internal disagreement. Conversely, however, effective altruists *could* be justified in bringing resources to bear to counteract the meddling of other powerful forces, such as the marketing efforts of tobacco corporations in developing countries or the distorting influence of energy corporations on perceptions about climate change.⁸⁴

Conclusion: Beyond "Beyond Good Intentions"

Effective altruism deserves great credit for trying to infuse philanthropy with sophisticated moral reasoning. It forces us to countenance that good intentions alone may not make acts of philanthropy justifiable. We ought to think carefully about our duties to others and appeal to evidence to discover how best to discharge them. Even those who find effective altruism's approach deficient should welcome its stimulation of greater reflection about, and energy toward, caring for the needs of others.

I've argued, however, that adding effectiveness to noble intentions isn't a sufficient corrective. When we attempt to assist the distant needy, we inevitably implicate ourselves in complex political phenomena. Failing to appreciate these complexities can at best blunt the impact of our assistance efforts; at worst it serves to further entrench poverty's causes. The

⁸³ Michael Walzer, "The Moral Standing of States: A Response to Four Critics," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 9 (1980): 209–29, at 217.

illusion that philanthropy somehow operates outside of politics also blinds donors to the possibility that beneficent initiatives may expose recipients to objectionable exercises of power.

Those who have voiced versions of this palliative critique of private charity have often presumed that institutional reform efforts provide an obviously superior alternative. I've tried to complicate this story, particularly with respect to effective altruism. Though effective altruists might be well-advised to engage in political advocacy, doing this well may require them to abandon the methodology that makes their position unique. By relocating from policy to politics, they also risk reinscribing the objectionable power relationships that dog their approach.

I've also suggested some ways in which effective altruists might make progress on resolving these challenges. Integrating procedural values into their interventions, exploring grassroots advocacy strategies, and expanding the criteria on which they select causes would work to address some of the problems that I raised above.⁸⁵

In closing, I want to stress that although the foregoing arguments are directly concerned with effective altruism, the issues they raise have much wider relevance. The concerns behind the palliative critique are hardly specific to effective altruism. The objections that it raises recur again and again in the history of moral and political thought. Likewise, many commentators have thought that the obvious alternative to direct assistance is to try to change political institutions. Less frequently and less clearly have critics of almsgiving noted the ethical challenges that lie in attempts to fund institutional change.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ On the latter, see, for example, Riley E. Dunlap and Aaron M. McCright, "Climate Change Denial: Sources, Actors, and Strategies," in *Routledge Handbook of Climate Change and Society*, ed. Constance Lever-Tracy (Abingdon, U.K.: Routledge, 2010), 240–59.

⁸⁵ For some additional recommendations, see Jennifer Rubenstein, "The Lessons of Effective Altruism," *Ethics & International Affairs* 30 (2016): 511–26.

⁸⁶ One important exception is Archon Fung, "Deliberation before the Revolution: Toward an Ethics of Deliberative Democracy in an Unjust World," *Political Theory* 33 (2005): 397–419.

The absence of critical reflection on these challenges has become more important in light of recent shifts in the organization of civil society. Theda Skocpol and others have documented a transformation in the balance of power between advocacy groups and their donors.⁸⁷ Once mass-based and membership-driven, the United States' powerful advocacy groups are now more likely to be elite-based and driven by their donors. Individuals with means are increasingly turning to politics as a way to advance their philanthropic goals. Whether and how they can do this ethically is a matter worth careful analysis.

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Another is INCITE!, *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

⁸⁷ Theda Skocpol, "Why Political Scientists Should Study Organized Philanthropy," *PS: Political Science & Politics* 49 (2016): 433–36.