**The Good It Promises, The Harm It Does: Critical Essays on Effective Altruism**

Edited by Carol J. Adams, Alice Crary, and Lori Gruen.

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This book, a collection of chapters written by philosophers and activists, attacks both the philosophical foundations and the practical results of Effective Altruism (EA). EA is a social movement according to which we have reason to prefer more effective altruistic behavior, like donating to a charity which will help five people, rather than less effective altruistic behavior, like donating to an otherwise equivalent charity which will help one person. The more effective, the better. So, according to the Effective Altruist, charitable giving to the arts, to those with whom you share a bond, and even to decently effective causes all typically come out as suboptimal compared to the causes which most efficiently save lives or otherwise promote very important goals.

EA marries abstract philosophy with practical life advice, as exemplified by Peter Singer’s book *The Most Good You Can Do*: *How Effective Altruism Is Changing Ideas About Living Ethically* (Yale University Press, 2015), and the movement has become quite popular, commanding millions of charitable dollars and structuring numerous charitable organizations. EA’s main areas of focus are aiding animals, aiding present humans, ensuring the long-term survival of the human species, and evaluating whether and how to most effectively accomplish these things.

The main pedagogical uses of the book will likely be in courses focused on animal ethics, courses focused on the intersection of philosophy and practical questions, and courses that touch on EA or consequentialist approaches to morality more generally. The book’s chapters stand on their own and almost never reference other chapters, and so any parts of the book can be assigned individually and in any order. Because the chapters stand alone, a complete summary will be most useful for educators. Therefore below I briefly describe the contents of each chapter.

Eleven of the book’s seventeen chapters are focused on animal ethics. Seven focus entirely on EA’s approach to animal-related charities, and four others focus on criticisms that spring from EA’s animal ethics work.

The seven animal-focused chapters argue that EA has harmful effects with respect to farmed animals due to its collusion with factory farming (chapter 4), a bad approach to wild animals and conservation more generally (chapter 5), an undue focus on cultured meat and alternative proteins (chapters 10 and 11), and an insufficient appreciation of the value of individual animal lives (chapter 12), animal sanctuaries (chapter 13), and animals who liberate themselves from human dominion (chapter 14).

The four chapters informed by animal ethics are 1, 2, 3, and 7. Chapters 1 and 2 argue that EA upholds white supremacist ideas and has done bad things in the Global South, respectively. Both chapters substantiate these claims by drawing on EA’s effects in the animal charity space. Chapter 3 criticizes EA for lending support to a racist system specifically in the context of EA’s role in animal advocacy, and chapter 7’s claim that Christian ethics is superior to EA’s approach is limited to the topic of animal ethics.

The book is therefore a valuable source of readings for an animal ethics class, especially one in which EA shows up already. Many of the animal-focused chapters are short (like chapters 1, 11, and 14) or evocatively-written (like chapter 14, which tells the story of Fred, the goat who liberated himself and many other animals). These could be especially effective for general education courses where students may not have the patience for long, dry, technical pieces. The exceptions are chapters 4 and 5, which are longer. Chapter 5 includes a condensed history of animal ethics and its relation to wild animals and to conservation in America.

Unfortunately, even though many of the animal-centric chapters are short and invitingly written, they are somewhat scanty on philosophical content in ways that may make them pedagogically less useful than they might otherwise be. Chapter 1, for instance, claims that only someone who knows how activism works in Black communities can properly judge efficacy, and so Effective Altruists who are unfamiliar with Black communities cannot properly gauge how effective the advocacy efforts of the chapter’s author are. But it’s not clear exactly how effective the author takes her efforts to be, so it’s not clear whether there is a philosophical disagreement with EA’s main tenets, or an empirical disagreement about whether the author’s preferred tactics are in fact effective.

Similarly, chapters 12 and 14, about Esther the pig and Fred the goat, sometimes seem to agree that efficacy is an important way to evaluate charitable giving, as they list many ways in which EA ignores how effective it is to fund support for animals like Esther and Fred. However, other times they suggest that Effective Altruists are wrong to support effective causes over cases like Esther and Fred. So it is not clear precisely what the thrust of the objections are meant to be.

Chapters 10 and 11 are largely empirical critiques of the efficacy of promoting cultured meat or “alternative proteins” and collaboration with meat companies generally and of the Good Food Institute specifically. These are interesting but perhaps not great for a philosophy class, and as with the above chapters it is unclear if there is any disagreement with EA’s philosophical claim that we should prefer effective methods, so students may not be able to do much with these chapters.

Aside from chapter 3, none of these animal-centric chapters do a good job explaining what EA is, which means students will need at least some preparation before they can engage with these chapters. If this is accomplished by having students read something written by an Effective Altruist, then the somewhat unfocused argumentation in many of the animal-centric chapters may leave students less impressed with criticisms of EA than they might otherwise be.

Chapters 6, 8, 9, 15, 16, and 17 have a focus beyond just animal ethics and are also more philosophically substantive than most of the animal ethics chapters. Any of these chapters on their own could serve as readings in a unit or course about EA, or about the specific topics they cover.

Chapter 6 attacks EA as sometimes ineffective and sometimes a force for the entrenchment of systemic injustice. It is one of the few chapters to mention EA’s approach to longtermism, its consequent obsession with the possibility that an artificial intelligence will destroy humankind, and thus its allocation of millions of dollars in ostensibly effective charitable donations to highly educated, affluent people working on AI. It is also written in a relatively simple, engaging manner, and it includes some rather scattered thoughts about EA in the context of Black activism, higher education, and religious communities.

Chapter 8 is a very invitingly written chapter that runs through a laundry list of objections to EA, sometimes rather quickly and in minimal detail, touching on claims like EA’s lack of rigor, inability to handle complexity and ambiguity, its promotion of callousness, and many others. It (perhaps erroneously) conflates EA with utilitarianism (as do other chapters in the volume, like chapter 7) and suggests, *contra* some other chapters in the volume, that EA ignores incremental changes for the sake of big ones, and for these two reasons one may wish to exercise caution when assigning it.

Chapter 9 gives a vivid description of the “rational economic man” at the heart of the Effective Altruist viewpoint, and includes specific details of harms committed by sexual harassers in the Effective Altruist community, but in some places it is somewhat complicated or quick, and thus it may be best suited for advanced students.

Chapter 15 discusses capitalism, reification, and how EA is enmeshed with the former and a source of the latter. This is the only chapter in the volume to go into detail about longtermism, apart from the book’s coda. The chapter clearly explains its complicated subject matter and could serve as a decent introduction to these topics in a course that has nothing to do with EA.

Chapter 16 focuses on consequentialism’s relationship with EA, the “institutional critique” according to which Effective Altruists are insufficiently focused on institutional change, and a number of other topics as well, including some Effective Altruist replies to some of these objections.

Chapter 17 focuses on the distinction between reform and revolution and argues that EA is on the wrong side of the equation.

These six chapters are broader than the animal-focused chapters and also tend to be more precise in their argumentation. Any one of them, or any set of them, would be an excellent choice as a reading in a course that touches on EA in any capacity. (The same could be said of the book’s brief foreword, which levels some of its own critiques at EA.) Unfortunately many of them assume at least some degree of sophistication on the part of the reader, such that their criticisms go by rather quickly, presumably because they assume the reader can fill in the blanks. Students without a strong background in philosophy may have trouble understanding (e.g.) chapter 16’s discussion about the normativity attached to social categories.

Overall, any recommendation of the book must come with some reservations. Many of the essays barely engage with Effective Altruist arguments directly, and some hardly deign to provide arguments at all: sometimes it suffices to describe a position the Effective Altruist is ostensibly committed to, like not giving enough money to animal shelters, as if this constitutes a criticism. Whatever the efficacy of this approach, it is likely not the sort of model one wishes students to emulate in their writing, and so care perhaps should be taken to make sure students do not think that because these writers dismiss opposing viewpoints so readily, the same is acceptable in coursework.

There is for instance no mention in the book of the most sophisticated philosophical explorations of EA, like Theron Pummer’s “Whether and Where to Give” (*Philosophy & Public Affairs* Volume 44 Issue 1, 77-95), Brian Berkey’s “The Philosophical Core of Effective Altruism” (*Journal of Social Philosophy* Volume 52 Issue 1, 92-113), Gabriel Iason’s “Effective Altruism and its Critics” (*Journal of Applied Philosophy* Volume 34 Issue 4, 457-73), or Amy Berg’s “Effective Altruism: How Big Should the Tent Be?” (*Public Affairs Quarterly* Volume 32 Issue 4, 269-87), many of which anticipate objections in the book.

And there is nearly as little engagement with *Effective Altruism: Philosophical Issues* (edited by Hilary Greaves and Theron Pummer, Oxford University Press, 2019) or Jeff McMahan’s “Philosophical Critiques of Effective Altruism” (*The Philosophers’ Magazine*, Issue 73, 2nd Quarter 2016, 92-99) which again cover much of the ground debated in this volume. When the book does discuss Effective Altruist arguments the discussion is often brief and sometimes even uncharitable. The objections many of the chapters raise are (at least in my mind) important, but they are undercut by a near-universal lack of substantial engagement with Effective Altruist writings.

Finally, aside from chapters 6 and 15 and the book’s coda (which focuses entirely on longtermism, albeit in very broad terms) there is no discussion of EA’s focus on longtermism, which is both the most philosophically complicated and practically objectionable aspect of EA, nor is there any discussion at all of EA’s approach to aiding present humans. One would be forgiven, having read the book, if one thought that there is nothing at all wrong with the “helping present humans” aspect of EA (and perhaps there isn’t). Thus the book as a whole, and certainly any individual chapter, presents to students a rather limited picture of the debate.

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