



Effective Altruists and Their Critics: Where Could They Find Common Ground?

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abstract

Effective altruism is a collaborative effort to research and find the best ways individuals can help reduce the suffering and increase the wellbeing in the world. This master's thesis identifies and describes (in a way that is by no means exhaustive) three general critiques of effective altruism, as well as some responses to them, before discussing possible and underexplored common ground between effective altruists and their manifold critics. The three critiques suggest, in short, that effective altruism is respectively too capitalist, too colonial or too undemocratic. Rejoinders that will be discussed in this work include an appeal to pragmatism (we have to act now), co-existence (effective altruism can co-exist with other projects that may complement it) and the force of effective altruist self-criticism (democratic debate within the effective altruist movement). Finally, potential common ground that will be explored in this document includes a comparison between calls for reparations to former colonies and charities providing direct, unconditional cash donations to some of the world's poorest people, as well as reflections on the potentially emancipatory and decolonizing effects of evidence-based charity, advocating for international labor mobility (which many effective altruists support) and effective altruist self-criticism.

Het effectief altruïsme is een gezamenlijke inspanning om te onderzoeken en achterhalen wat de beste manieren zijn waarop individuen het leed kunnen verminderen en het welzijn kunnen verhogen in de wereld. Deze masterproef identificeert en beschrijft (op geenszins volledige wijze) drie algemene kritieken op het effectief altruïsme, alsook enkele antwoorden op die kritieken, gevolgd door een bespreking van mogelijke en onderbelichte overeenkomsten tussen effectief altruïsten en hun diverse critici. De drie kritieken stellen, kort gezegd, dat het effectief altruïsme respectievelijk te kapitalistisch, te koloniaal of te ondemocratisch is. In dit werk komen de volgende effectief altruïstische antwoorden op die kritieken aan bod: pragmatisme (we moeten nu eenmaal nu iets doen), co-existentie (effectief altruïsme kan bestaan naast andere projecten, die het kunnen aanvullen) en de kracht van effectief altruïstische zelfkritiek (democratisch debat binnen de effectief altruïstische beweging). Dit werk behandelt ook de volgende mogelijke overeenkomsten tussen voorstanders en critici: een vergelijking tussen oproepen tot herstelbetalingen en goede doelen die rechtstreeks onvoorwaardelijk geld doneren aan mensen in extreme armoede, alsook reflecties over de potentieel emanciperende en dekoloniserende effecten van effectieve liefdadigheid, open grenzen en vrije arbeidsmigratie (gesteund door vele effectief altruïsten) en effectief altruïstische zelfkritiek.

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Introduction: aim and contents of this work

The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it. – Karl Marx¹

Effective altruism is an intellectual and social movement ‘that aims to find the best ways to help others, and put them into practice’, as the Centre for Effective Altruism describes it.² Peter Singer, one of the most famous effective altruists, writes that “effective altruism is based on a very simple idea: we should do the most good we can.”³ There is of course more to effective altruism than that, and the specific ways effective altruists try to ‘do the most good they can’ have attracted sharp critique from a wide range of voices. The debate over effective altruism gains significance when we consider the huge amounts of influence and money the movement has at its disposal.

The present master’s thesis is an examination of some critical debates surrounding effective altruism. The aim of this work is twofold.

On the one hand, I wish to present a coherent overview of three criticisms of effective altruism, as well as of some ways effective altruists have responded to them. The first two of these criticisms are concerned by effective altruism’s relationship to the realities of capitalism and (neo)colonialism. The third criticism questions the potential democratic deficit of the effective altruism movement. I have selected these three critiques rather than others because of their prevalence in the literature critical of effective altruism, because they concern effective altruism as a whole (rather than specific aspects of it), and because of their moral and political relevance.

¹ Karl Marx, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*, ed. Friedrich Engels (1888; repr., Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1946), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/engels.htm>.

² Centre for Effective Altruism, “What Is Effective Altruism?,” effectivealtruism.org, accessed May 18, 2023, <https://effectivealtruism.org/articles/introduction-to-effective-altruism>.

³ Peter Singer, *The Most Good You Can Do: How Effective Altruism Is Changing Ideas about Living Ethically* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015), vii.

On the other hand, I aim to examine potential common ground between effective altruists and their critics. This may get us to far more interesting conclusions than if we had merely defended or criticized effective altruism. This document is meant to be critical in the sense that Bruno Latour put it:

The critic is not the one who debunks, but the one who assembles. The critic is not the one who lifts the rugs from under the feet of the naïve believers, but the one who offers the participants arenas in which to gather.⁴

The goal here is not a compromise between effective altruism and its critics. If it had been that simple, we would already have such a synthesis, and effective altruism would no longer be debated. Instead, I hope that both effective altruists and their critics come to better understand one another, and realize that, while they surely still have their disagreements, these may have been smaller than previously thought. Possibly, one's basic view on effective altruism will be retained, but it will become much better justified after properly confronting its negation. This greater mutual understanding can ultimately only benefit the causes championed by both effective altruists and the many diverse voices that have criticized effective altruism.

The novelty of this work is threefold. First, although the critique of effective altruism has already received quite some attention, this work is, to the author's knowledge, one of the first documents to offer a structured review of criticisms of effective altruism *and* their rejoinders. Second, this document is most likely one of the first to identify the anti-capitalist, decolonizing and antidemocratic critiques as distinct critiques of effective altruism. And third, as far as the author knows, this document is one of the first attempts at encouraging more understanding and dialogue between effective altruists and their critics by pointing out common ground which had thus far received little to no attention.

In the first part of this work, effective altruism will be defined. The second part describes three critiques of effective altruism. The third part examines how effective altruists have thus far responded to such criticisms. In the final chapter of this work,

⁴ Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (2004): 246, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1344358>.

potential common ground between effective altruists and their critics will be outlined. But before we move onto the first section of this document, I wish to clarify and justify the selection of critiques that I will discuss.

Which critiques of effective altruism this work *does* and *does not* contain, and why

It would be far beyond the scope of this work to provide a comprehensive overview of all possible criticisms of effective altruism – let alone include all the rebuttals. In any case, it seems more than appropriate to justify why some criticisms of effective altruism will not be covered here and why others will be.

First off, this master's thesis will *not* discuss 'longtermism', the concept of 'global catastrophic risk' or 'existential risk' – which all focus on preventing and mitigating global disasters in the far future. This has several reasons. First, the recent focus on longtermism – which William MacAskill defines as 'the view that we should be doing much more to protect future generations'⁵ – and its critique, I believe, has downplayed other debates surrounding effective altruism. These other debates are more pressing precisely because they, unlike the controversies surrounding longtermism, mainly concern things we do to change the world in the present and near future. Second, it is true that longtermist organizations are steadily receiving a growing amount of effective altruist-directed funds⁶, which raises concerns that, overall, funds might get distributed away from more immediate, urgent causes like extreme poverty, animal welfare and climate change. However, these concerns, I believe, are better treated as part of the broader debate on the role of super rich philanthropy in effective altruism, which *will* receive great attention in this work. After all, most of the funding of effective altruist causes (including longtermist causes) comes from the ultra wealthy. Additionally, these concerns over excessive funding of

⁵ William MacAskill, "Longtermism," [williammacaskill.com](https://www.williammacaskill.com/longtermism), accessed May 19, 2023, <https://www.williammacaskill.com/longtermism>.

⁶ See for example the charts in the article by Tyler Maule, "Historical EA Funding Data," Effective Altruism Forum, August 14, 2022, <https://forum.effectivealtruism.org/posts/ZbaDmowkXbTBsxvHn/historical-ea-funding-data>. While the share of funding for organizations that focus on preventing and mitigating future major disasters has remained more or less constant (one third) since 2017, the overall amount of funding has increased greatly, meaning that longtermist funding has also grown in absolute terms.

longtermist organizations can be considered within the debate over the potential lack of democratic control over effective altruist funds, which will also be covered in this document.

In any case, it must be emphasized that effective altruism and longtermism are *not* identical. Longtermism is just one faction within the effective altruism movement – much like how, for instance, communism is but one strand of left-wing thought. Participants in an online survey conducted in 2020 via the Effective Altruism Forum did not, on average, rate causes that are primarily potentially relevant in the (far) future (such as artificial intelligence risk mitigation) as significantly more important than more near-term causes (such as extreme poverty alleviation).⁷

Second, this work will not discuss purely meta-ethical, epistemological or metaphysical criticisms of effective altruism. This is because such critiques often amount to a critique of utilitarianism, a major influence on effective altruism. There is already plenty of literature on objections against utilitarianism⁸ so I will not be covering that here. Furthermore, because effective altruism and utilitarianism are not identical^{9,10}, someone who rejects utilitarianism can still accept effective altruism – and conversely, an effective altruist does not necessarily have to be a utilitarian, with nearly a third of participants in an online survey of effective altruists indicating that utilitarianism is not their (primary) normative ethical view.¹¹

What, then, *will* this work cover? There are three objections to effective altruism that I will be discussing: an anti-capitalist critique, a decolonizing critique and a democratic critique. The first one accuses effective altruism of being so sympathetic

⁷ David Moss, “EA Survey 2020: Cause Prioritization,” Effective Altruism Forum, July 29, 2021, <https://forum.effectivealtruism.org/posts/83tEL2sHDTiWR6nwo/ea-survey-2020-cause-prioritization>.

⁸ For a good overview of critiques of utilitarianism, see Richard Yetter Chappell, Darius Meissner, and William MacAskill, “Objections to Utilitarianism and Responses,” in *An Introduction to Utilitarianism*, 2023, <https://utilitarianism.net/objections-to-utilitarianism/>.

⁹ William MacAskill, “The Definition of Effective Altruism,” in *Effective Altruism: Philosophical Issues*, ed. Hilary Greaves and Theron Pummer (Oxford University Press, 2019), 19–20, https://www.williammacaskill.com/s/The_Definition_of_Effective_Altruism.pdf.

¹⁰ Jeff McMahan, “Philosophical Critiques of Effective Altruism,” *Philosophers’ Magazine*, no. 73 (2016): 92–93, <https://doi.org/10.5840/tpm20167379>.

¹¹ Neil Dullaghan, “EA Survey 2019 Series: Community Demographics & Characteristics,” Effective Altruism Forum, December 5, 2019, <https://forum.effectivealtruism.org/posts/wtQ3XCL35uxjXpwjE/ea-survey-2019-series-community-demographics-and%23Politics#Morality>.

to the capitalist economy that it merely perpetuates its worst excesses. The second claims that effective altruism does not fight, but probably worsens the injustices caused by colonialism. And the third alleges that the effective altruism movement is currently insufficiently democratic and that this is detrimental to the movement's goals.

Why these three critiques in particular?

There are three reasons I will be focussing on the aforementioned three critiques, rather than other possible criticisms of effective altruism.

First, the author of this work has a strong impression that these three critiques are simply very common in academic articles, opinion pieces and other media that criticize effective altruism. It seems that these critiques are compelling to many, often to the extent that effective altruism is rejected altogether by those who agree with the critiques. It is difficult to express just how often these three critiques are uttered, and how many people reject effective altruism because of them, but, as a rule, if one encounters a publication that criticizes effective altruism, the chances are very high that at least one of these critiques will be present in some form. This is especially true if the publication seeks to argue why effective altruism ought to be rejected rather than improved.

Beyond this sociological observation, a second reason for highlighting these three critiques is that they concern effective altruism as a whole and not (only) specific aspects of it (such as longtermism or effective altruist animal advocacy). Effective altruists, even if they are not immediately impressed by any of these three critiques, should take note of them anyhow. Indeed, even if even only one of them is true, this would still imply that effective altruism has to be changed, perhaps drastically.

A third reason for selecting these three critiques is their great moral and political importance. How should we understand capitalism, (neo)colonialism or democracy? What should we do to them, and how? The three critiques each ask such crucial

moral and political questions, and the three critiques each critically examine the answers effective altruism has (or has not) given to these questions.

Who is articulating these critiques?

It is very important to emphasize that these three critiques, although they are strongly related to each other, have not been expressed by some sort of united front against effective altruism. There are a myriad of academics, activists, journalists and others who have voiced at least one of the three critiques covered in this work. Broadly speaking, however, many, if not most of these critics, could be considered to be left-wing, progressive and/or left-liberal. This still does not mean that they form a single anti-effective altruism camp, much in the same way that ‘the left’ is not a single entity but in fact consists of many related, different perspectives.

To the author’s knowledge, there has thus far been little (critical) interest in effective altruism from right-wing and/or conservative circles. This is interesting, because two large online surveys on the Effective Altruism Forum found that most (over 70%) effective altruists who completed the survey identify as ‘left’ or ‘center left’^{12,13}. This also means that effective altruists are of a similar political orientation as some of their harshest critics. This makes finding common ground between effective altruists and their critics – which is one of the two main goals of this work – a realistic project.

Disclaimer: this work does not offer an exhaustive overview of each of the three critiques discussed in it

It is true that these three critiques of effective altruism are quite broad, and it is far beyond the scope of this work to discuss every aspect and detail of these critiques.

¹² Neil Dullaghan, “EA Survey 2019 Series: Community Demographics & Characteristics,” Effective Altruism Forum, December 5, 2019, <https://forum.effectivealtruism.org/posts/wtQ3XCL35uxjXpwjE/ea-survey-2019-series-community-demographics-and%23Politics#Politics>.

¹³ David Moss and Willem Slegers, “EA Survey 2022: Demographics,” Effective Altruism Forum, May 15, 2023, <https://forum.effectivealtruism.org/posts/AJDgnPXqZ48eSCjEQ/ea-survey-2022-demographics#Politics>.

Rather, the purpose here is to first identify and describe each of the three critiques, and then illustrate by mentioning just a few more specific examples of each of them (eg. the criticism of effective altruism's support for rich philanthropy as one of the possible examples of the anti-capitalist critique). A wide variety of citations will be used to demonstrate that the three critiques are distinct – with each of them having a shared basic assumption (eg. basically, that effective altruism is too capitalist) which can then be applied to more specific cases (eg. effective altruism's support for rich philanthropy). One could thus also speak of anti-capitalist critiques, decolonial critiques and democratic critiques of effective altruism, but I have not chosen such terminology because it creates the false impression that this master's thesis would cover every possible example of the anti-capitalist, decolonizing and democratic critiques of effective altruism.

Although completeness is not a realistic goal for this work, accurate representation of views certainly is. Throughout this document, a rich variety of quotes from various sources will hopefully ensure that misrepresentation of debates is kept to a minimum.

What is effective altruism?

A minimal definition of effective altruism

What can you, as an individual, do to help fight huge and complex problems like extreme poverty, climate change, animal suffering and future threats to human civilization? Arguably, what we call ‘effective altruism’ was created during the past decade in response to that question.

William MacAskill, a prominent advocate of effective altruism, says that “there is no ‘official’ definition of effective altruism”, but that he has nevertheless collaborated with many other effective altruists to create a definition which has “been formally endorsed by the large majority of leaders in the effective altruism community.”¹⁴ This consensus-driven, self-described definition of effective altruism is as follows:

Effective altruism is about using evidence and reason to figure out how to benefit others as much as possible, and taking action on that basis.¹⁵

This definition, MacAskill adds, is mainly meant to introduce effective altruism to those who have never heard of it. He says that it is a simplified version of his own more elaborate definition of effective altruism, which is the following¹⁶:

Effective altruism is:

- (i) an intellectual project (or ‘research field’) [involving] the use of evidence and careful reasoning to work out how to maximize the good with a given unit of resources, tentatively understanding ‘the good’ in impartial welfarist terms, and
- (ii) a practical project (or ‘social movement’) [involving] the use of the findings from (i) to try to improve the world.

¹⁴ William MacAskill, “The Definition of Effective Altruism,” in *Effective Altruism: Philosophical Issues*, ed. Hilary Greaves and Theron Pummer (Oxford University Press, 2019), 13, https://www.williammacaskill.com/s/The_Definition_of_Effective_Altruism.pdf.

¹⁵ MacAskill, 13, 2019.

¹⁶ MacAskill, 14, 2019. The definition shown on this page has been slightly edited from the original for increased readability, but otherwise contains the same words used in MacAskill’s definition.

The first part of this definition refers to the ‘effective’ in ‘effective altruism’, while the second part refers to the ‘altruism’ in ‘effective altruism’.

However, this definition is still quite general. After all, who doesn’t ‘use evidence and reason to figure out how to benefit others’? Just about everyone tries to do this in one way or another (which certainly doesn’t mean they always succeed at it): parents, doctors, therapists, engineers, scientists, politicians, socialists, liberals, priests, teachers, fierce opponents of effective altruism, ... Additionally, few of us would be happy to just do the bare minimum to help others with the skills, knowledge, time, money and relationships we have. Nearly all of us at least try to do the most good we can do.

While MacAskill’s general, consensus-based definition of effective altruism certainly has its merits in promoting effective altruism towards those who are new to it, it does not say that much about what effective altruism specifically is. In order to more properly appreciate what effective altruism is, we must expand MacAskill’s definition with some traits (beyond a stated commitment to using evidence to do the most good) that are typical of effective altruism.

Characteristics of effective altruism

Exceptionally strong commitment to well-researched, highly effective interventions

As the Centre for Effective Altruism puts it: effective altruists “try to find *unusually* good ways of helping, such that a given amount of effort goes an unusually long way.”¹⁷ Furthermore, they write that “it seems important to think hard about how to take action effectively, because most people don’t consciously make a choice to be as effective as possible.”¹⁸ MacAskill opens his introductory book on effective altruism, *Doing Good Better*, with an example of an exceptionally ineffective

¹⁷ Centre for Effective Altruism, “What Is Effective Altruism?,” effectivealtruism.org, accessed May 18, 2023, <https://effectivealtruism.org/articles/introduction-to-effective-altruism>.

¹⁸ Centre for Effective Altruism, “Frequently Asked Questions and Common Objections,” [effectivealtruism.org](https://www.effectivealtruism.org), accessed May 27, 2023, <https://www.effectivealtruism.org/faqs-criticism-objections#isnt-effective-altruism-obvious>.

intervention to help the extremely poor, one that failed due to lack of ‘evidence and careful reasoning’, and he then proceeds to describe a spectacularly efficient intervention (deworming) to benefit people in extreme poverty, one that succeeded, of course, thanks to trial-and-error and research demonstrating that the intervention works.¹⁹ Effective altruists attach great value to interventions that are not only supported by good research, but that are also shown to be far better than similar interventions that also work. MacAskill writes that “the best charities are hundreds of times more effective at improving lives than merely ‘good’ charities”²⁰. Peter Singer also suggests that “some areas of charitable activity provide hundreds or even thousands of times greater benefits per dollar than others—[...] comparing one genuine charity with another genuine charity.”²¹ Effective altruist Brian Tomasik, however, claims that the contrast between more and less effective charities is smaller than that, suspecting differences between charitable organizations to be ‘at most ~10 to ~100 times, and within a given field, the multipliers are probably less than a factor of ~5’.²²

In order to help individuals select one or more highly cost-effective charities to donate to, a number of effective altruist charity evaluators have been set up (either by effective altruists themselves, or by those who have later come to support the movement). These organizations independently research and/or recommend charities they assess to be particularly cost-effective. The charity evaluators are committed to regularly updating their lists of most recommended charities based on the latest research. Some notable effective altruist charity evaluators include GiveWell, Giving What We Can, The Life You Can Save, Animal Charity Evaluators and Effective Altruism Funds. They offer individuals the choice to donate to one or more charitable organizations and/or donate to a fund managed by experts who then distribute all the fund’s donations across charities. Another notable organization is

¹⁹ William MacAskill, *Doing Good Better: Effective Altruism and a Radical New Way to Make a Difference* (London: Faber & Faber, Guardian Books, 2015), 11–20.

²⁰ MacAskill, 2015, 20.

²¹ Peter Singer, *The Life You Can Save: How to Do Your Part to End World Poverty: 10th Anniversary Edition* (Bainbridge Island, WA: The Life You Can Save, 2019), 104, <https://www.thelifeyoucansave.org/the-book/>.

²² Brian Tomasik, “Why Charities Usually Don’t Differ Astronomically in Expected Cost-Effectiveness,” *Essays on Reducing Suffering*, January 5, 2015, <https://reducing-suffering.org/why-charities-dont-differ-astronomically-in-cost-effectiveness/>.

Open Philanthropy, an effective altruist philanthropic foundation that donates millions of dollars per year to a wide and continuously changing variety of nonprofits working in various fields, including extreme poverty alleviation, animal welfare, policy advocacy and global catastrophic risk prevention and mitigation.²³ Additionally, a number of effective altruist nonprofits have been set up for outreach and tax deduction on donations in countries other than the United States. These include Doneer Effectief (The Netherlands), Effektiv Spenden (Germany and Switzerland), Giv Effektivt (Denmark), Gi Effektivt (Norway) and Ayuda Efectiva (Spain). Many of the charitable organizations endorsed by effective altruists work in the world's poorest countries, where they distribute vitamin A supplements to prevent infections and blindness (eg. Helen Keller International), provide insecticide-treated nets (eg. Against Malaria Foundation) and medicine (eg. Malaria Consortium) to prevent malaria, help treat parasitic worm infections (eg. Deworm the World Initiative), give cash incentives to promote childhood vaccinations (eg. New Incentives), spread important health information (eg. Development Media International) or directly give the poor cash they can use however they want (eg. GiveDirectly), among other interventions.²⁴

Philosophical methods

However, while donating to well-researched, highly cost-effective charities is certainly effective altruism's method of choice for improving the world, effective altruism is more than just a campaign to promote evidence-based charity. Effective altruism is *means neutral*²⁵ and *cause neutral*²⁶: any method to fight any world problem is open to consideration, as long as the method is as cost-effective as can be, and as long as the problem is at least somewhat large in scale (in terms of how many are affected by it), at least somewhat conceivably solvable, and is not already receiving all the resources it could reasonably use.

²³ Nuño Sempere, "Some Data on the Stock of EA™ Funding," nunosempere.com, November 20, 2022, <https://nunosempere.com/blog/2022/11/20/brief-update-ea-funding/>.

²⁴ MacAskill's book *Doing Good Better* listed many of these charities as highly cost-effective 'top charities' (see MacAskill, 2015, 133–36), as does GiveWell (see GiveWell, "Our Top Charities," GiveWell, December 2022, <https://www.givewell.org/charities/top-charities>.)

²⁵ Pablo Stafforini and an anonymous editor, "Means Neutrality," Effective Altruism Forum, June 6, 2022, <https://forum.effectivealtruism.org/topics/means-neutrality>.

²⁶ Stephan Schubert, "Understanding Cause-Neutrality," Effective Altruism Forum, March 10, 2017, <https://forum.effectivealtruism.org/posts/6F6ix64PKEmMuDWJL/understanding-cause-neutrality>.

The way that effective altruists word it, is that the more a problem is currently of great *importance*, *tractability* and *neglectedness*, the more urgent it is we focus on it.²⁷ The problems (or ‘causes’, as effective altruists often call them) that effective altruists primarily wish to address are extreme poverty²⁸, animal suffering and future threats to humanity or human civilization. The effective altruism movement has selected these causes because it currently assesses them to be at least somewhat tractable, of at least some importance and, in some cases, at least somewhat neglected. The criteria of importance, tractability and neglectedness also explain, for example, why effective altruism is focused on extreme poverty (the type of poverty rampant in Sub-Saharan Africa) rather than poverty in rich countries: extreme poverty is considered to be far, far more tractable and neglected and of greater importance than poverty in wealthy nations.

After comparing different causes and means, effective altruists make recommendations as to what individuals should do. Effective altruists always look for the most cost-effective means to advance a cause, and quite often, this leads them to advocate donating to, promoting, or working for particularly cost-effective charitable organizations. However, as mentioned earlier, evidence-based charity is not the only method that effective altruists advocate. What is truly characteristic of effective altruism, is the intensity of its insistence on exploring not only alternative goals, but also alternative means to achieve these goals. MacAskill wrote that ‘the open question of how we can use resources to improve the world as much as possible’ is ‘the most distinctive aspect of effective altruism’²⁹ Similarly, Stijn Bruers notes that “perhaps the most striking characteristic of the effective altruism

²⁷ Pablo Stafforini et al., “ITN Framework,” Effective Altruism Forum, December 7, 2020, <https://forum.effectivealtruism.org/topics/itn-framework>.

²⁸ Effective altruists generally use the term ‘global health and development’ or simply ‘global health’ to refer to extreme poverty alleviation. However, I will not be using these terms here, as I find them somewhat misleading: poverty is of course not just a health problem. Effective altruists use ‘global health’ and ‘extreme poverty alleviation’ interchangeably because the concept of ‘global health and development’ in theory refers to any intervention to improve health and ‘development’ anywhere (see Pablo Stafforini et al., “Global Health & Development,” Effective Altruism Forum, n.d., <https://forum.effectivealtruism.org/topics/global-health-and-development?tab=wiki>.)

²⁹ William MacAskill, “The Definition of Effective Altruism,” in *Effective Altruism: Philosophical Issues*, ed. Hilary Greaves and Theron Pummer (Oxford University Press, 2019), 16, https://www.williammacaskill.com/s/The_Definition_of_Effective_Altruism.pdf.

movement, that differentiates it from other social movements, is its high degree of openness.”³⁰

Like Socrates, the effective altruist starts out by assuming ignorance, they ‘know that they know nothing’ about how to do the most good they can. And like Socrates, the effective altruist seeks insight and knowledge by asking question upon question: if I do this or that, how many people benefit, and by how much? Which cause should I focus on? Which charity should I donate to? Is this the most effective thing I can do for that cause? How much of a difference do I make ? What are the chances of succeeding, and how good would success be? MacAskill’s book *Doing Good Better* explains effective altruism through answers to such philosophical questions. The Centre for Effective Altruism claims that effective altruists are ‘not united by any particular solution to the world’s problems, but by a way of thinking’³¹ – a way of thinking that is highly philosophical. Trying to remain cause neutral and means neutral and assessing the importance, tractability and neglectedness of a problem are all *at least* as much philosophical endeavors as they are scientific ones. We can thus say that the use of philosophical methods, in addition to scientific ones, is crucial to effective altruism.

Utilitarian influence

Although effective altruism asks very open, philosophical questions, it answers these questions in a fairly distinct way. Effective altruism is (in theory) so open-ended that it is debatable whether it is to be considered an ideology, but there are nonetheless a few background assumptions or biases taken for granted by many in the effective altruism movement. One of these is already revealed in MacAskill’s expanded definition of effective altruism: namely, that effective altruism seeks to “work out how to maximize the good, [...] tentatively understanding ‘the good’ in impartial welfarist terms”.³² This means that, to an effective altruist, ‘good’ means ‘wellbeing’, and we

³⁰ Stijn Bruers, “The Openness of Effective Altruism,” Stijn Bruers, the rational ethicist, September 13, 2019, <https://stijnbruers.wordpress.com/2019/09/13/the-openness-of-effective-altruism/>.

³¹ Centre for Effective Altruism, “What Is Effective Altruism?,” [effectivealtruism.org](https://effectivealtruism.org/articles/introduction-to-effective-altruism), accessed May 18, 2023, <https://effectivealtruism.org/articles/introduction-to-effective-altruism>.

³² William MacAskill, “The Definition of Effective Altruism,” in *Effective Altruism: Philosophical Issues*, ed. Hilary Greaves and Theron Pummer (Oxford University Press, 2019), 14, https://www.williammacaskill.com/s/The_Definition_of_Effective_Altruism.pdf.

must maximize the good (wellbeing), in a way that values everyone's wellbeing equally (hence 'impartialist') – utilitarianism's influence on effective altruism is well-known.

Concepts from economics

Another background assumption is that problems are best approached using concepts from (mainstream) economics. MacAskill notes that “effective altruism has made the progress it has by combining concepts from moral philosophy and economics.”³³ Effective altruists like to answer questions about the outcome of various altruist actions in terms of how many additional quality-adjusted life years (QALY's – years of life lived in perfect health), how much income and spending or how much marginal utility can be expected. This approach is perfectly legitimate, but it does probably bias effective altruism in favor of interventions that don't challenge existing (political) power structures.³⁴

Individualism

Another bias typical of effective altruism is its individualism.

On the one hand effective altruism is individualist when it comes to moral *agents*: the focus is on which course of action individual moral agents (rather than collectives) should pursue. As a result, effective altruism usually attempts to get individuals to promote, donate to or work for highly cost-effective charities, and to a lesser extent, make career choices, promote political change and buy things in a way that could advance effective altruist causes. Effective altruists have created 80,000 Hours, a

³³ William MacAskill, *Doing Good Better: Effective Altruism and a Radical New Way to Make a Difference* (London: Faber & Faber, Guardian Books, 2015), 184.

³⁴ According to Monique Deveaux, the use of conventional economics has led effective altruism to unjustly neglect anti-poverty organizations led by poor people. Deveaux wrote: “Reflecting their adherence to monetary and “poverty lines” approaches to defining deprivation, effective altruists require that charities’ effectiveness (including cost effectiveness) be quantifiable. [...] Helping donors to “accomplish as much good as possible, on a per-dollar basis”—using a “cost per life saved” formula—means that movements or organizations focused on removing structures that disempower the poor—such as informal settlement or slum dwellers’ groups—would not meet GiveWell’s funding criteria.” (source: Monique Deveaux, *Poverty, Solidarity, and Poor-Led Social Movements* (Oxford University Press, 2021), 62, <https://fdslive.oup.com/www.oup.com/academic/pdf/openaccess/9780190850289.pdf>.)

non-profit organization that intends to help individuals make career choices that further the causes effective altruists champion.

On the other hand, effective altruism is individualist when it comes to moral *patients*: the interventions effective altruists advocate are given to individual moral patients (humans or non-humans), not to collectives (such as communities or ecosystems).

Amia Srinivasan denounces effective altruism as ‘profoundly individualistic’.³⁵ Responding to this charge, Jeff McMahan claims that “although it [individualism] is presented as an objection, this seems to me exactly right: individuals must decide what to do against the background of what others will in fact do.”³⁶ In any case, although effective altruists no doubt recognize that collaboration is necessary and are aware of the associated challenges³⁷, the primary focus of effective altruism is on actions undertaken by individuals, for individuals.

Strong online presence

A final aspect that in part determines effective altruism is its strongly online nature. Of course, there are many effective altruist books, lectures and discussion groups which (also) exist offline, and the action that effective altruists advocate obviously takes place in the real world. But it is highly unlikely that effective altruism would have ever arisen if the internet did not exist. Much of the discussion among effective altruists takes place online, on the Effective Altruism Forum³⁸, the internet facilitates donating to charities recommended by effective altruists, and local effective altruist discussion groups strongly rely on social media. We could thus say that while

³⁵ Amia Srinivasan, “Stop the Robot Apocalypse: The New Utilitarians,” *London Review of Books*, September 24, 2015, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v37/n18/amia-srinivasan/stop-the-robot-apocalypse>.

³⁶ Jeff McMahan, “Philosophical Critiques of Effective Altruism,” *Philosophers’ Magazine*, no. 73 (2016): 95, <https://doi.org/10.5840/tpm20167379>.

³⁷ The fact that ‘EA Meta’, or ‘meta effective altruism’ – a catch-all term for organizations that aim to set up new charities or improve and expand the effective altruism movement – is one of the main cause areas of the effective altruism movement, is a reflection of this awareness of social dynamics. For more information on ‘EA Meta’, see Vaidehi Agarwalla, “What Is Meta Effective Altruism?,” *Effective Altruism Forum*, June 2, 2021, <https://forum.effectivealtruism.org/posts/Wx7LuMHbABrtYrv9/what-is-meta-effective-altruism>.

³⁸ Centre for Effective Altruism, “EA Forum,” *Effective Altruism Forum*, n.d., <https://forum.effectivealtruism.org/>.

effective altruism is not purely online, it is more internet-based compared to other social or intellectual movements.

An expanded definition of effective altruism

Combining MacAskill's minimal definition of effective altruism with the additional, more determinate aspects, gives us the following more comprehensive, new definition of effective altruism. This definition could be said to define effective altruism as an ideology, or an actually existing movement, rather than merely as a general idea:

Effective altruism is a global, internet-based *collaborative* effort to use *high-quality scientific research, philosophical methods and concepts from (mainstream) economics* to determine what *individuals* can and should do to *improve the world in the best way they possibly can – that is, what individuals can and should do to best increase wellbeing and reduce suffering in the world*. The recommendations that result from this effort are mainly to donate to charities deemed the most cost-effective, and to a lesser extent, to make career choices, change what one buys and/or promote political change.

The scale of the effective altruism movement

It is difficult to quantify exactly how much effective altruism has changed the world so far. The following comments MacAskill made in 2019, however, give a rough idea of its impact:

There are now thousands of people around the world who have chosen their careers, at least in part, on the basis of effective altruist ideas: individuals have gone into scientific research, think tanks, party politics, social entrepreneurship, finance (in order to do good through donating), and non-profit work. [...] Over 3,500 people have taken Giving What We Can's pledge to give at least 10 per cent of their income for the rest of their lives [...]. Individuals donate over \$90 million per year to GiveWell's top recommended

charities, and GoodVentures [...] is committed to effective altruist principles and is distributing over \$200 million each year in grants, advised by the Open Philanthropy Project. [...] In 2016 alone, the effective altruism community was responsible for protecting 6.5 million children from malaria by providing longlasting insecticide treated bednets, sparing 360 million hens from living in caged confinement, and providing significant impetus and support in the development of technical AI safety as a mainstream area of machine learning research.³⁹

Astronomical as the sums mentioned here may sound, the amount of money that has been committed (ie. reserved for future use) to effective altruism-aligned causes is far greater: in 2021, it was about \$46 billion according to Benjamin Todd.⁴⁰ At the time, about \$24 billion of these pledged funds came from Sam Bankman-Fried.⁴¹ This means that after the collapse of Bankman-Fried's company FTX, the total amount of funds pledged to effective altruist causes must have dropped to roughly \$22 billion – still quite a lot, in fact it is roughly twice the total amount of money American billionaires donated to philanthropy in 2018.⁴²

Regardless of how much good all these funds have achieved or can achieve, the picture is clear: effective altruism influences thousands upon thousands of people and hundreds of millions of dollars per year. For a social movement that is still fairly little known among general audiences and won't often be seen holding protests in the streets, this is quite a tremendous amount of power. This should be seen as yet another reason why the debate over effective altruism is of great importance. In the rest of this work, I hope to contribute to this crucial debate. I hope this may be valuable to critics and supporters of effective altruism alike.

³⁹ William MacAskill, "The Definition of Effective Altruism," in *Effective Altruism: Philosophical Issues*, ed. Hilary Greaves and Theron Pummer (Oxford University Press, 2019), 10–11, https://www.williammacaskill.com/s/The_Definition_of_Effective_Altruism.pdf.

⁴⁰ Benjamin Todd, "Is Effective Altruism Growing? An Update on the Stock of Funding vs. People," Effective Altruism Forum, July 29, 2021, <https://forum.effectivealtruism.org/posts/zA6AnNnYBwuokF8kB/is-effective-altruism-growing-an-update-on-the-stock-of>.

⁴¹ William MacAskill, "EA and the Current Funding Situation," Effective Altruism Forum, May 10, 2022, https://forum.effectivealtruism.org/posts/cfdnJ3sDbCSkShiSZ/ea-and-the-current-funding-situation#The_current_situation.

⁴² Theodore Schleifer, "America's Most Generous Billionaires Gave Half as Much to Charity in 2018 as in the Previous Year," Vox, February 12, 2019, <https://www.vox.com/2019/2/12/18222403/tech-philanthropy-rankings-bezos-gates-zuckerberg>.

Three criticisms of effective altruism

In this section I will elaborate on three important critiques of effective altruism which I have identified in existing literature. One critique is anti-capitalist, while the second is decolonizing, and the third is democratic. Before I describe the three critiques at some length, however, I wish to discuss two broader considerations on the critique of effective altruism: first, why it is worthwhile to differentiate between what I call ‘constructive’ and ‘deconstructive’ criticism of effective altruism, and second, why the so-called ‘institutional critique’ of effective altruism is too broad to be treated as a distinct critique of effective altruism.

Constructive vs. deconstructive critique

In the debate over effective altruism, I broadly distinguish between two types of criticism of effective altruism. What characterizes each of the two types is not so much the arguments used, but rather the conclusions drawn from them: should we try to improve effective altruism, or reject it altogether? If the critic claims their critique implies that the praxis of effective altruism must be reformed so that it may better meet its goals and ideals, then the criticism is what I call *constructive critique*. Conversely, if one claims one’s critique demonstrates that effective altruism is beyond repair and must therefore be rejected, then the criticism is what I refer to as *deconstructive critique*. I have chosen the terms ‘constructive’ and ‘deconstructive’ because constructive critique is often effective altruist self-criticism, aimed at providing constructive feedback to fellow effective altruists, whereas deconstructive critique seeks to deconstruct – ie. critically examine in order to reject – the beliefs and practices of effective altruism.

It is very important to realize that depending on one’s level of sympathy towards effective altruism, one and the same critique may be considered a constructive critique (if the critic supports effective altruism) or a deconstructive critique (if the critic does not support effective altruism). For example, the charge that effective altruism neglects political change and is too fixated on philanthropy by the ultra-wealthy, is sufficient grounds for rejecting effective altruism to some, while it is a

reason for reforming it to others. It is important to be aware that any of the critiques discussed in this document can be seen as deconstructive or constructive.

One typical example of someone characterizing a critique of effective altruism as constructive, is MacAskill's response to the charge that 'effective altruism neglects systemic change', in which he writes that

it's perfectly plausible that there are 'systemic' interventions that those in the effective altruism community are neglecting [...] Perhaps campaigning to create an international law banning the purchase of natural resources from dictatorships is an even more effective activity than any of the current activities of effective altruists. But this is an in-house dispute, rather than a criticism of effective altruism per se.⁴³

Alice Crary, one of the most vocal critics of effective altruism, however, is unlikely to be convinced by MacAskill's rejoinder. In response to claims such as those made by MacAskill in the above quote, Crary writes:

A number of effective altruists have responded to the institutional critique. Responses generally allow that some EA [effective altruism] programs have placed undue stress on quantitative tools for capturing short term effects of individual actions and that [...] they demonstrate measurability bias. The responses also mostly claim that, properly understood, EA calls on us to evaluate anything with relevant consequences, including collective efforts to produce institutional change. [...] The general idea is that EA can treat the institutional critique as an internal critique that calls for more faithfully realising, not abandoning, its core tenets. Although this rejoinder to the institutional critique is to some extent valid, it would be wrong to conclude that effective altruists can simply treat the institutional critique as a merely internal

⁴³ William MacAskill, "The Definition of Effective Altruism," in *Effective Altruism: Philosophical Issues*, ed. Hilary Greaves and Theron Pummer (Oxford University Press, 2019), 24, https://www.williammacaskill.com/s/The_Definition_of_Effective_Altruism.pdf.

one. The institutional critique can and should be given a philosophical twist that transforms it into a direct challenge to EA's main philosophical tenets.⁴⁴

The distinction between constructive and deconstructive critique was also described in the introduction section of a collection of essays by various authors criticizing effective altruism:

Although all of the authors in the book agree in wanting to talk about substantial harms of EA [effective altruism], they present a range of—sometimes overlapping, sometimes divergent—views about what the problem with EA is and how to address the damage it continues to do. [...] The most substantial differences aired here include those that separate the authors who maintain that EA could be a force for good if it were radically reconceived and implemented in socially responsible ways and the authors who believe that EA is irredeemably confused and corrupt, and thus call for jettisoning it altogether.⁴⁵

Critics and supporters of effective altruism alike are all too quick to dismiss criticism of effective altruism as yet another reason to reject and condemn or support and reform effective altruism, depending on their degree of sympathy towards it. But the debate over whether the criticisms of effective altruism should lead us to abolish or ameliorate effective altruism is a worthwhile debate of its own. However, it is not a debate that will be discussed in this document – on the one hand, because it falls outside its scope, and on the other, because nearly nothing has thus far been written on the matter anyway. Perhaps the latter can be attributed to the lack of continued dialogue between effective altruists and their critics. It is the author's hope that this work, and particularly its final chapter and conclusion, may help change that.

⁴⁴ Alice Crary, "Against 'Effective Altruism,'" *Radical Philosophy*, no. 210 (2021): 36–37, <https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/article/against-effective-altruism>.

⁴⁵ Carol J. Adams, Alice Crary, and Lori Gruen, "Introduction," in *The Good It Promises, the Harm It Does*, ed. Carol J. Adams, Alice Crary, and Lori Gruen (Oxford University Press, 2023), 25.

The institutional critique: a distinct critique? Why we need to differentiate

In the literature on criticism of effective altruism, some write of an ‘institutional critique’ of effective altruism. Brian Berkey is one of the first to discuss ‘the institutional critique’ of effective altruism, and claims to have identified it in as many as fifteen different articles critical of effective altruism⁴⁶. According to Berkey, the institutional critique holds that “effective altruists cannot, given their core commitments, support individuals directing resources and/or time to at least some of the efforts to promote institutional change to which there are in fact good moral reasons to devote resources/time”⁴⁷. Crary writes that this institutional critique “[decries] the neglect, on the part of EA [effective altruism], of coordinated sets of actions directed at changing social structures that reliably cause suffering”⁴⁸. MacAskill also addresses the claim that ‘effective altruism ignores systemic change’⁴⁹ and the Centre for Effective Altruism lists this objection as well.⁵⁰

However, I argue that the so-called ‘institutional critique’ is too general to be meaningfully discussed as a single, distinct criticism of effective altruism. Just which ‘institutional’ or ‘systemic’ change are effective altruists allegedly ignoring or neglecting? Surely, the institutional critique of effective altruism doesn’t just ask effective altruists to join or influence political institutions such as the government, central banks or supranational organizations for the sake of it. What, then, are these ‘social structures that reliably cause suffering’ that effective altruism supposedly leaves unchanged? The answer many of effective altruism’s critics seem to give to this question is: capitalism and (neo)colonialism.

⁴⁶ Brian Berkey, “The Institutional Critique of Effective Altruism,” *Utilitas* 30, no. 2 (August 7, 2017): 143, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0953820817000176> – see footnote 7 of the article.

⁴⁷ Berkey, 2017, 151.

⁴⁸ Alice Crary, “Against ‘Effective Altruism,’” *Radical Philosophy*, no. 210 (2021): 35, <https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/article/against-effective-altruism>.

⁴⁹ William MacAskill, “The Definition of Effective Altruism,” in *Effective Altruism: Philosophical Issues*, ed. Hilary Greaves and Theron Pummer (Oxford University Press, 2019), 23–25, https://www.williammacaskill.com/s/The_Definition_of_Effective_Altruism.pdf.

⁵⁰ Centre for Effective Altruism, “Frequently Asked Questions and Common Objections,” [effectivealtruism.org](https://www.effectivealtruism.org/faqs-criticism-objections#does-effective-altruism-neglect-systemic-change), accessed May 18, 2023, <https://www.effectivealtruism.org/faqs-criticism-objections#does-effective-altruism-neglect-systemic-change>.

The anti-capitalist critique: ‘how can philanthropy – effective altruist or otherwise – do good when it depends upon capitalist exploitation?’

Ruben Östlund’s satirical film *Triangle of Sadness* (2022) partially takes place on a luxury yacht full of billionaires. Somewhere halfway through the movie, the ship’s captain and one of the billionaires get drunk together and start airing their unfiltered thoughts into the ship’s intercom for all passengers to hear. The captain says into the microphone: “You’re so rich, so you’re a philanthropist, so you can cure your conscience of not paying enough in tax. Not contributing enough to society.”⁵¹

This critique of charity captures quite a bit of what the anti-capitalist critique of effective altruism is saying. But there is more to it. In the broadest sense, the anti-capitalist critique of effective altruism is any criticism of effective altruism which claims, in some way or the other, that effective altruism facilitates and/or exacerbates undesirable features of the capitalist economy as part of its attempts at doing good. The anti-capitalist critics of effective altruism often allege that effective altruism contributes (intentionally or not, directly or indirectly) to the ugly aspects of capitalism and draws attention away from them, thus *facilitating* them. Some critics even go as far to suggest that effective altruism (directly or indirectly) encourages and thus *exacerbates* these aspects. Anti-capitalist critics of effective altruism suggest that because of all these problems, effective altruism cannot meaningfully further the causes it advocates, and might even work against them instead.

For example, many anti-capitalist critics of effective altruism suggest that wealthy philanthropy is immoral because the acquisition of the philanthropist’s wealth is possible only by exploiting workers and thus facilitating capitalism. The anti-capitalist critique of charity is not new: it is as old as anti-capitalism and arguably even as old as capitalism itself. In his 1845 *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, Friedrich Engels wrote:

⁵¹ Ruben Östlund, *Triangle of Sadness (Screenplay)* (Deadline, 2023), 59, <https://deadline.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Triangle-Of-Sadness-Read-The-Screenplay.pdf>.

[You, the wealthy English] have founded philanthropic institutions, such as no other country can boast of! [...] Your self-complacent, pharisaic philanthropy [...] [places] yourselves before the world as mighty benefactors of humanity when you give back to the plundered victims the hundredth part of what belongs to them!⁵²

That Engels criticized charity so harshly should not be surprising when we consider that philanthropy has historically been used as an alternative to changing or abolishing capitalism (something which, depending on one's views on the matter, still very much happens today). This must be why Karl Marx once appears to have claimed that the philanthropists of his time 'preach the necessity of a ruling and an oppressed class, and for the latter all they have to offer is the pious wish that the former may be charitable', writing in a newspaper article in 1847.⁵³

The criticism of effective altruism's support for philanthropy by the super rich is just one expression of this anti-capitalist critique. But before we briefly discuss a few other examples, it would be wise to give some sort of definition of capitalism.

What is (market) capitalism? A definition

Whole volumes could be written on what 'capitalism' even is. There is certainly not just one correct definition. Nevertheless, the term is often thrown around without any attempt whatsoever to define it. However, any discussion of capitalism may benefit from an explicit statement on which understanding of capitalism is being used. This work is no exception.

Typically, the term 'capitalism' is used as a shorthand for market capitalism (in which the state does not actively seek to acquire most or all of the means of production), rather than state capitalism (in which the state does do this). In this work, I will be

⁵² Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working-Class in England in 1844*, trans. Florence Moltrop Kelley (1845; repr., London: George Allen & Unwin, Ltd., 1892), 278, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/17306/17306-h/17306-h.htm>.

⁵³ Karl Marx, "The Communism of the Rheinischer Beobachter," in *Karl Marx Frederick Engels: Collected Works: Volume 6: Marx and Engels 1845-48*, ed. Lawrence & Wishart (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976), 231, <https://lwbooks.co.uk/marx-engels-collected-works/read-and-search-online>.

using the term ‘capitalism’ in its common usage as a synonym for market capitalism. That being said: what is capitalism?

Typically, definitions of capitalism state that capitalism is an economic system characterized by markets, the profit motive and private ownership of the means of production. Interestingly, it seems that nearly every definition of capitalism mentions private property first, and the profit incentive last.⁵⁴ This is perhaps to clarify the difference with communism, which is typically defined as an economic system in which the means of production are no longer privately owned by capitalists, but democratically owned and controlled by everyone involved.⁵⁵

These definitions of capitalism are true, but they perhaps do not fully bring out the aspects of capitalism that effective altruism, according to its anti-capitalist critics, problematically enables. This is why I find it helpful to turn here to the definition of capitalism devised by the sociologists Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello. They define capitalism as:

*an imperative to unlimited accumulation of capital by formally peaceful means.*⁵⁶

⁵⁴ For examples of this, see the following websites’, dictionaries’ or encyclopedias’ definitions of capitalism:

- Ivan Ascher, “Capitalism,” in *The Encyclopedia of Political Thought*, ed. Michael T. Gibbons (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, September 15, 2014), <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/9781118474396.wbept0123>.
- Jonathan Law, ed., “Capitalism,” in *A Dictionary of Business and Management* (Oxford University Press, 2016), <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/acref/9780199684984.001.0001/acref-9780199684984-e-958?rskey=9lbiKa&result=981>.
- Sarwat Jahan and Ahmed Saber Mahmud, “What Is Capitalism?,” International Monetary Fund, June 2015, <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/fandd/2015/06/basics.htm>.
- The editors of Encyclopædia Britannica, “What Is Capitalism?,” in *Encyclopædia Britannica*, accessed May 18, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/question/What-is-capitalism>.
- Cambridge Dictionary, “CAPITALISM,” in *Cambridge Dictionary*, January 8, 2020, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/capitalism>.

⁵⁵ In the second chapter of the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, Marx and Engels famously wrote that “the theory of the Communists may be summed up in the single sentence: Abolition of private property.” (source: Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, ed. Andy Blunden and Brian Baggins, trans. Samuel Moore (1848; repr., Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/ch02.htm>.)

⁵⁶ Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2018), ebook version, 66 (chapter ‘General Introduction: On the Spirit of Capitalism and the Role of Critique’).

This definition suggests that capitalism is an economic system in which the primary goal (*'imperative'*) of economic production is the *'unlimited accumulation of capital'*. Capital consists of surplus value (profits, money), means of production (machines, vehicles, buildings, ...) and goods (such as bread or steel), is owned by capitalists and is impossible without labor power of workers (which capitalists buy on the so-called 'labor market').⁵⁷ Under market capitalism, it is the case that capital, which is by definition the private property of capitalists, can be sold as a commodity on markets. Capital is to be distinguished from other things (such as land conquered by an empire) which can also be accumulated in a non-capitalist (eg. feudal) society. In effect, private property, wage labor and markets are implied in the term 'capital' in the definition.

'Unlimited' in the definition is best understood not as aimless, physically infinite or unrestrained, but rather as indefinite: to capitalists ('all those who possess a property income' according to Boltanski and Chiapello⁵⁸) there is no point at which there is no more need to accumulate capital. That this unlimited accumulation must happen 'by formally peaceful means' refers to how, the role of slavery and violence in capitalism's history notwithstanding, the accumulation of capital does not always happen 'by any means necessary' but generally strives to comply with currently applicable laws.

Boltanski and Chiapello's definition of capitalism is more than just a restatement of the conventional definitions of capitalism. First, Boltanski and Chiapello's definition foregrounds the profit incentive (*'imperative to unlimited accumulation'*) rather than private property and markets. Second, unlike most more standard definitions of capitalism, Boltanski and Chiapello's definition brings out the fact that the profit incentive is not some optional or temporary feature of the capitalist economy, but that it is essential to capitalism: under capitalism, the accumulation of profits is 'unlimited', or indefinite: it continues to exist as long as the economy is capitalist.

⁵⁷ Marx describes this phenomenon in a 1865 lecture, which was written down as the seventh chapter of Karl Marx, *Value, Price and Profit*, ed. Eleanor Marx Aveling, Mike Ballard, and Brandon Poole (1898; repr., New York: International Co., Inc., 1969),

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1865/value-price-profit/ch02.htm#c7>.

⁵⁸ Boltanski and Chiapello, 68.

Third, the phrase ‘by formally peaceful means’ suggests that even if the profits are made without violating any laws, this can still be violently exploitative.

These aspects of capitalism are important to anti-capitalist critics of effective altruism. Generally, their critique does not target effective altruism’s supposed contribution to the existence of private property and markets. It is probably more accurate to state that these critics fear that effective altruism facilitates capitalists’ accumulation of profits, and that in doing so, it exacerbates the undesirable aspects of capitalism. Additionally, anti-capitalist critics suggest that effective altruism’s beneficial impact on the world serves to distract from effective altruism’s harmful facilitation and/or exacerbation of capitalism, much like how the ‘formal peacefulness’ of capital accumulation can deflect attention from any great harms that it does.

What is the anti-capitalist critique of effective altruism?

As mentioned before, the anti-capitalist critique of effective altruism is any criticism that claims effective altruism facilitates and/or exacerbates the excesses of capitalism, viewing these as lesser evils or valid means of changing the world for the better. If we were to describe this critique using Boltanski and Chiapello’s definition of capitalism, we would say that the anti-capitalist critics of effective altruism argue that effective altruism merely (directly and indirectly) contributes to ‘the unlimited accumulation of capital by formally peaceful means’ and/or exacerbates the collateral damage done by this capital accumulation process. These critics claim that effective altruism is little more than an instance of ‘the spirit of capitalism’, a concept Boltanski and Chiapello define as *‘ideology that justifies engagement in capitalism’*.⁵⁹

The anti-capitalist critics of effective altruism argue that, by supporting philanthropy by the ultra rich (and charity more generally – the anti-capitalist critics contend that philanthropists’ extreme wealth is impossible without exploitation and oppression), sweatshops (because according to some effective altruists, no longer being able to

⁵⁹ Boltanski and Chiapello, 70.

work in a sweatshop would be an even worse outcome for sweatshop workers⁶⁰) and ‘earning to give’ (deliberately seeking high-paying work in order to donate more to effective charities⁶¹), effective altruists perpetuate the injustices of capitalism, in particular social-economic inequality and poor labor conditions. Wealthy philanthropy, charity (even if it is evidence-based), sweatshops (even if they are supported with the best of intentions) and working in finance (even if it is to earn more money to donate) all contribute to the suffering caused by capitalism and therefore cannot be legitimate means of improving the world, argue many anti-capitalist critics of effective altruism. Another potential problem is that although reducing extreme poverty is one of effective altruism’s current main cause areas, directly improving working conditions in poor countries is not⁶² – causing the movement to potentially contribute to characteristically capitalist injustices.

Far from being bad in its own right (because it contributes to suffering right now), many of these critics have argued that effective altruism’s compliance with capitalism ensures that effective altruism cannot meaningfully help advance the causes it champions, including extreme poverty, animal welfare, climate change and global catastrophic risks. The Centre for Effective Altruism has aptly worded this aspect of the anti-capitalist critique: “Many people believe unfettered capitalism, wealth inequality, [...] contribute significantly to the amount of suffering in the world, and that attempts to make the world better that don’t address these root causes are meaningless or misguided.”⁶³ Rupert Read wrote that “dealing only with extreme

⁶⁰ In the eighth chapter (‘The Moral Case for Sweatshop Goods’) of *Doing Good Better*, MacAskill argues that boycotting sweatshops (by buying similar goods from companies that only have factories in high-income countries) is worse than continuing to buy sweatshop goods.

⁶¹ ‘Earning to give’ is probably one of the most controversial actions some effective altruists defend. However, MacAskill has claimed that 80,000 Hours only recommends ‘earning to give’ to a relatively small number of people. (source: William MacAskill, “80,000 Hours Thinks That Only a Small Proportion of People Should Earn to Give Long Term,” 80,000 Hours, July 6, 2015, <https://80000hours.org/2015/07/80000-hours-thinks-that-only-a-small-proportion-of-people-should-earn-to-give-long-term/>.)

⁶² András Miklós and Leila Janah suggest that effective altruists should also focus on creating dignified working conditions for the world’s poorest people. (see András Miklós, “Response to Effective Altruism,” Boston Review, July 1, 2015, https://www.bostonreview.net/forum_response/response-andras-miklos/ and Leila Janah, “Response to Effective Altruism,” Boston Review, July 1, 2015, https://www.bostonreview.net/forum_response/response-leila-janah/.) Their articles were published nearly eight years ago, and it is unclear whether the effective altruism movement has made meaningful progress in this direction during that time.

⁶³ Centre for Effective Altruism, “Frequently Asked Questions and Common Objections,” effectivealtruism.org, accessed May 18, 2023,

poverty as it exists *now* boils down to [...] [not] tackling its root causes [...] [Effective altruism tends] not to question the overarching political-economic frame of (neo)liberal capitalist individualism.”⁶⁴ Some critics might go as far to suggest that effective altruism, if applied on a grand scale over a longer term, could actually work against these causes. It could, in other words, lead to more extreme poverty, more animal suffering, worse climate change and/or higher global catastrophic risk. Alice Crary, for instance, writes that

Effective Altruists aren’t guided [...] by insight into the capitalist origins of the “third agricultural revolution” that gave us confined animal feeding and industrial abattoirs [...] There is no reason to doubt that the welfare adjustments to the treatment of farmed animals that are favored by EA [effective altruism]-affiliated groups can lessen the pain of many such animals [...] But it is also possible that the interventions of Effective Altruists will, because they affirm this [factory farming] system’s underlying principles, contribute to its perpetuation, perhaps even precipitating the arrival of a further, more horrific ‘agricultural revolution’.⁶⁵

Read similarly suggests that by practicing effective altruist charity, “the underlying causes are allowed to fester and intensify.”⁶⁶

In many cases, anti-capitalist critics of effective altruism refer to wealth taxation as a superior alternative to effective altruism. Nathan J. Robinson, for example, argued that “if EA [effective altruism] had been serious about directing money toward the worthiest cause, it would have been much more interested from the start in the state’s power to redistribute wealth from the less to the more worthy.”⁶⁷ Similarly, Josette Daemen wrote:

<https://www.effectivealtruism.org/faqs-criticism-objections#does-effective-altruism-neglect-systemic-change>.

⁶⁴ Rupert Read, “Must Do Better,” *Radical Philosophy*, no. 201 (2018): 108,

<https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/reviews/individual-reviews/must-do-better>.

⁶⁵ Alice Crary, “Against ‘Effective Altruism,’” *Radical Philosophy*, no. 210 (2021): 41,

<https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/article/against-effective-altruism>.

⁶⁶ Read, 107.

⁶⁷ Nathan J. Robinson, “Defective Altruism,” *Current Affairs*, September 19, 2022, <https://www.currentaffairs.org/2022/09/defective-altruism>.

How desirable is it anyway that the rich use their billions, with an effective altruism score card in their hands, to improve the world to their own liking? [...] Call me old-fashioned, but I'd rather have a government to seriously tax those guys and then democratically decide how all that tax money can be best used for the common good.⁶⁸

“If the super rich nicely paid their taxes, we wouldn't need as many food banks”, Sophie van Gool concluded an op-ed in which she characterized effective altruism as ‘the latest trend among billionaires’⁶⁹ (a description which is in fact misleading, as I will demonstrate in the section on the present state of effective altruist billionaire philanthropy). Rather than getting the wealthy to donate more to (effective) charities, these critics demand, we should get them to pay more taxes.

Responding to the charge that taxation should replace charity, Maarten Boudry argues that even if governments successfully acquired a significant degree of the wealth of the world's billionaires through taxes, then these governments would use it all on their own (already relatively well-off) citizens, rather than to help those who are really most in need (such as poor people in Africa or animals in factory farming).⁷⁰ Nonetheless, wealthy philanthropy (especially billionaire philanthropy) has serious limitations and issues, which will be discussed in the section on what I call the democratic critique of effective altruism.

An important variable in the debate: attitudes towards capitalism

But wait, how could effective altruism possibly facilitate or exacerbate capitalism? Isn't striving to impartially and optimally reduce suffering and increase wellbeing in the world (effective altruism's stated goal) radically different from maximizing profits (the goal of capitalist economic activity according to Boltanski and Chiapello)?

⁶⁸ Josette Daemen, “Wees gewaarschuwd voor al te effectieve altruïsten,” Bij Nader Inzien, October 4, 2022, <https://bijnaderinzien.com/2022/10/04/wees-gewaarschuwd-voor-al-te-effectieve-altruïsten/>. Own translation from the original in Dutch.

⁶⁹ Sophie van Gool, “Betaal liever gewoon belasting,” Het Financieele Dagblad, April 16, 2023, https://nl.linkedin.com/posts/sophievangool_effectiefaltruisme-10procentclub-doneren-activity-7053666427999809536-J8n6. Own translation from the original in Dutch.

⁷⁰ Maarten Boudry, “Over de ongezonde obsessie met extreme rijkdom,” maartenboudry.be, February 13, 2023, <https://maartenboudry.be/2023/02/over-de-ongezonde-obsessie-met-extreme-rijkdom.html>. Own translation from the original in Dutch.

Couldn't donating to charity and trying to get rich for the sake of it be more different from one another?

Many effective altruists would probably maintain that effective altruism is something rather different from engagement in capitalism. And even if effective altruists engage in capitalism as a mere means to 'do good', this is probably innocuous to many effective altruists. The anti-capitalist critics, of course, disagree. Perhaps the key difference between many effective altruists and many anti-capitalist critics of effective altruism, is their degree of sympathy towards capitalism, in other words, their answer to the question: how good or bad is capitalism? The anti-capitalist critics are skeptical of capitalism, whereas many effective altruists seem to view it more favorably or neutrally. One could argue that, as a rule, the more critical one is of capitalism, the more things one denounces as instances of capitalism, excesses of capitalism, or facilitation thereof. Additionally, the more recognizably something is involved in capitalist economic activity, the more likely it is to become a target of anti-capitalist critique. This explains why anti-capitalist critics seem to be more focused on criticizing effective altruism (which makes no secret of the fact that it has the support of a number of billionaires⁷¹, and which – particularly in the movement's early years – explicitly advocates 'earning to give') than on, say, criticizing professional football (which is arguably just as capitalist as effective altruism, if not much more so, but which is much less openly and visibly organized around the accumulation and investment of profits).

Who is expressing the anti-capitalist critique? A selection

Even if effective altruists dismiss the anti-capitalist critique outright, they cannot deny that this critique convinces many that effective altruism is not worthy of support. In the literature criticizing effective altruism, there is indeed no shortage of anti-capitalist critique (although there have thus far been almost no attempts to articulate this critique in a structured way). The quotations offered below should

⁷¹ Although the fact that effective altruism has the support from billionaires is occasionally brought up, there is rarely any mention of the fact that only a tiny proportion of the world's billionaires support effective altruism: about four out of the world's 2,668 billionaires, according to the anonymous effective altruist blogger writing under the pseudonym 'Bentham's Bulldog'. (see Bentham's Bulldog, "Replying to Jacobin's Hitpiece about Effective Altruism, That Mentions Me by Name," Substack, January 19, 2023, <https://benthams.substack.com/p/replying-jacobins-hitpiece-about>.)

illustrate that the anti-capitalist critique can in fact be identified as a distinct type of criticism of effective altruism, and that it is often voiced with great confidence.

Amia Srinivasan writes that “perhaps [MacAskill] thinks [...] [that] capitalism, as always, produces the means of its own correction, and effective altruism is just the latest instance.”⁷² In the foreword to *The Good It Promises, the Harm It Does*, a collection of essays by various authors criticizing effective altruism, she writes that “[other social movements] have pushed us to think about a world beyond, for example, capitalism [...] Effective altruism [...] calls us back from [this exercise] of radical political imagination.”⁷³ In that same volume, Carol J. Adams writes of “*rational-economic man*, a construct that drives capitalism”⁷⁴, which she claims “lurks behind and within the problems with Effective Altruism.”⁷⁵ Michele Simon argues that effective altruism’s approach to animal advocacy is excessively capitalist, writing that “EA [effective altruism]’s current focus on markets to save animals is doomed to failure because it does nothing to address the political and economic engine of the meat and dairy industries.”⁷⁶ In his contribution, Elan Abrell holds that “the Effective Altruist model of charitable investment reinforces the same capitalist system that produced the current mega-crisis of mutually intensifying ecological and social disasters in the first place.”⁷⁷

Similarly, in an early debate on 80,000 Hours, Pete Mills declared the following

As a banker, or a corporate lawyer, or a management consultant, what enriches you is your position in a set of profoundly exploitative social relations, which we might label capitalism. [...] The good that a professional

⁷² Amia Srinivasan, “Stop the Robot Apocalypse: The New Utilitarians,” *London Review of Books*, September 24, 2015, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v37/n18/amia-srinivasan/stop-the-robot-apocalypse>.

⁷³ Amia Srinivasan, “Foreword,” in *The Good It Promises, the Harm It Does*, ed. Carol J. Adams, Alice Crary, and Lori Gruen (Oxford University Press, 2023), 8.

⁷⁴ Carol J. Adams, “A Feminist Ethics of Care Critique of Effective Altruism,” in *The Good It Promises, the Harm It Does*, ed. Carol J. Adams, Alice Crary, and Lori Gruen (Oxford University Press, 2023), 143.

⁷⁵ Adams, 2023, 157.

⁷⁶ Michele Simon, “How ‘Alternative Proteins’ Create a Private Solution to a Public Problem,” in *The Good It Promises, the Harm It Does*, ed. Carol J. Adams, Alice Crary, and Lori Gruen (Oxford University Press, 2023), 181.

⁷⁷ Elan Abrell, “The Empty Promises of Cultured Meat,” in *The Good It Promises, the Harm It Does*, ed. Carol J. Adams, Alice Crary, and Lori Gruen (Oxford University Press, 2023), 169.

philanthropist does depends on perpetuating a system which immiserates a vast portion of the world's population.⁷⁸

Benjamin Todd and Sebastian Farquhar (both effective altruists) responded by pointing out that Friedrich Engels also engaged in capitalism (as a factory manager) in order to strive for emancipation from capitalism, and they said that “to work towards socialism, it might be best to do things that won't be necessary in a socialist future.”⁷⁹ This did not impress Mills, who replied that “Engels worked to expose the intolerable nature of capitalism; 80k works to paper over its cracks [...] The freedom graduates from elite universities have to choose a career is predicated on the lack of choice for the many.”⁸⁰ ‘Earning to give’ was also criticized by Catherine Tumber, who wrote in response to Peter Singer, that ‘work in the debased financial sector furthers the suffering of global have-nots’. She suggests that wealthy philanthropists should ‘[share their] staggering wealth through decent wages and working conditions’ rather than merely through charity.⁸¹

John Sanbonmatsu's essay articulates the anti-capitalist critique more explicitly than the others in *The Good it Promises, the Harm it Does*. He argues that “once we examine the matter closely, we find extensive homologies between capitalist institutions and norms, on the one hand, and the epistemic and normative structures of Effective Altruism, on the other.”⁸² To Sanbonmatsu, “EA [effective altruism] can in fact be seen as a symptom of *reification*—the process under advanced capitalism by which thought and culture come to resemble the commodity form.”⁸³

Sanbonmatsu claims, in effect, that effective altruism is unaware of the existence and injustices of capitalism⁸⁴, which leads effective altruists to mistakenly support its

⁷⁸ Benjamin Todd et al., “The Ethical Careers Debate,” ed. Tom Cutterham, *The Oxford Left Review*, no. 7 (May 2012): 5, <https://oxfordleftreview.files.wordpress.com/2012/07/issue-7-new.pdf>.

⁷⁹ Todd et al., 2012, 8.

⁸⁰ Todd et al., 2012, 8.

⁸¹ Catherine Tumber, “Response to Effective Altruism,” *Boston Review*, July 1, 2015, https://www.bostonreview.net/forum_response/response-catherine-tumber/.

⁸² John Sanbonmatsu, “Effective Altruism and the Reified Mind,” in *The Good It Promises, the Harm It Does*, ed. Carol J. Adams, Alice Crary, and Lori Gruen (Oxford University Press, 2023), 214.

⁸³ Sanbonmatsu, 2023, 214.

⁸⁴ Sanbonmatsu, 2023, 223: “that MacAskill fails even to mention capitalism [...] is hardly an accident” “Effective Altruists are unable to “connect the dots” between the capitalist system and its manifest consequences [...]”

excesses as valid means of doing good: “MacAskill’s morally repugnant call for an *increase* in the number of sweatshops [...] is merely the artifact of a utilitarian ideology incapable of recognizing *exploitation* as a moral or social problem.”⁸⁵ Crary seems to agree with this line of thought, suggesting that “in discussions of EA [effective altruism], [there is] rarely any suggestion of a tie between the forms of misery we are enjoined to alleviate and the structures of global capitalism.”⁸⁶ She writes that effective altruism has “an inability to recognize [...] outcomes, rational only from the standpoint of capital, that reliably generate the forms of suffering EA [effective altruism] aims to stamp out.”⁸⁷

Matthew Doran is one of the very few to articulate the anti-capitalist critique to an audience of effective altruists. He posted an essay on the Effective Altruism Forum in which he provides a fairly explicitly anti-capitalist critique of effective altruism. In his post, Doran argues that effective altruism is a ‘facilitator of capitalism’: “EA [effective altruism] makes it easier for the capitalist system to obscure the real causes of its crises”, he writes. He adds that “ultimately the EA community must face up to its role in creating a tool through which capitalism can apply the most efficient sticking plasters to its wounds.” According to Doran, effective charities fighting extreme poverty are no different from food banks in high-income countries: they both reduce suffering, but they also both fail to address the reasons why charities or food banks are needed in the first place, Doran maintains.

Doran continues in his essay post:

Most problematically, philanthropic pledges justify the benevolent existence of billionaires. A wealth cap would be one of the most important pieces of progressive legislation for reducing income inequality and climate breakdown,

Sanbonmatsu, 2023, 226: “MacAskill thus misidentifies the biggest problems today as global health, factory farming and existential threats [...] However, the global poor suffer from adverse health outcomes because of *capitalist social relations*”

Sanbonmatsu, 2023, 232 (footnote 9): “Mistaking the effect for the cause, MacAskill depicts sweatshops as the consequence of extreme poverty, rather than of a world capitalist system whose economic laws generate a perpetual need for cheap labor.”

⁸⁵ Sanbonmatsu, 2023, 230.

⁸⁶ Alice Crary, “Against ‘Effective Altruism,’” *Radical Philosophy*, no. 210 (2021): 40,

<https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/article/against-effective-altruism>.

⁸⁷ Crary, 2021, 40.

because it removes the incentive and ability of the ultra-wealthy to pollute and accumulate (see Monbiot, 2021). In contrast, EA provides the ultrawealthy with an ideologically compatible shield to deflect critiques of private wealth, thus sanctioning the existence of massive income inequality.⁸⁸

Mathew Snow, writing for Jacobin, similarly claims that effective altruist philanthropy distracts from capitalism, the true cause of extreme poverty and inequality. He suggests that according to effective altruism, “the problem, apparently, isn’t that [capitalism] [...] ends up leaving billions in poverty [...] Instead, the problem becomes that relatively affluent individuals haven’t bought those necessities from the capitalist class for the hundreds of millions that need them”. Snow accuses effective altruists of not listening to the anti-capitalist critique when he writes that

this critique of consumer purchases is theoretically compatible with a corollary critique of capital makes no practical difference. The target market of Effective Altruism, i.e. the relatively affluent, generally won’t move from the former to the latter without an argument.⁸⁹

Despite their objections, some anti-capitalist critics still support charities recommended by effective altruists. In his topic on the Effective Altruism Forum, Doran conceded that he’ll “praise EA [effective altruism] for helping make dents in extreme poverty and mortality, and for operating more effectively than many other developmentalist charities. [...] I’ll still be consulting EA advice on how to give money well.”⁹⁰ In her review of *Doing Good Better*, Srinivasan also admitted that “halfway through reading the book I set up a regular donation to GiveDirectly, one of the charities MacAskill endorses for its proven efficacy. It gives unconditional direct cash

⁸⁸ Matthew Doran, “Capitalism, Power and Epistemology: A Critique of EA,” Effective Altruism Forum, August 22, 2022, <https://forum.effectivealtruism.org/posts/xWFhD6uQuZehrDKeY/capitalism-power-and-epistemology-a-critique-of-ea>.

⁸⁹ Mathew Snow, “Against Charity,” Jacobin, August 25, 2015, <https://jacobin.com/2015/08/peter-singer-charity-effective-altruism/>.

⁹⁰ Matthew Doran, “Capitalism, Power and Epistemology: A Critique of EA,” Effective Altruism Forum, August 22, 2022, <https://forum.effectivealtruism.org/posts/xWFhD6uQuZehrDKeY/capitalism-power-and-epistemology-a-critique-of-ea>.

transfers to poor households in Uganda and Kenya.”⁹¹ This provides a good starting point for the search for common ground between effective altruists and their (anti-capitalist) critics, which will be the topic of the last chapter of this work.

Questions from and questions about the anti-capitalist critique

To conclude this section, the anti-capitalist critique of effective altruism raises interesting questions in two ways.

First, it leads to questions about effective altruism’s place in a capitalist world. The anti-capitalist critics may have a point if they imply that it is unwise for effective altruists to never examine how capitalism affects their interventions, and vice versa. “If the EA [effective altruism] community is serious about self-critique”, Doran wrote, “it must [ask] the following questions: What forms of oppression, destruction, and violence does EA participate in by abetting capitalism? How much potential for good does EA ignore and suppress by not challenging the exploitative foundations of capitalism?”⁹² Or, as Joshua Kissel put it: “EA will be less effective insofar as it fails to recognize that capitalism restricts the good we can do.”⁹³

Conversely, the anti-capitalist critique, in its present form, generates many questions about itself. So far, the anti-capitalist critics of effective altruism have been very vague and general about *how exactly* effective altruism is problematically capitalist. How exactly does effective altruism’s supposed facilitation and exacerbation of capitalism cause problems? What are these problems specifically? How does this render effective altruism unable to meaningfully advance the causes it advocates? How does effective altruism allegedly distract from the real causes of the problems that it tries to fight? And how could all these issues best be addressed?

⁹¹ Amia Srinivasan, “Stop the Robot Apocalypse: The New Utilitarians,” *London Review of Books*, September 24, 2015, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v37/n18/amia-srinivasan/stop-the-robot-apocalypse>.

⁹² Matthew Doran, “Capitalism, Power and Epistemology: A Critique of EA,” *Effective Altruism Forum*, August 22, 2022, <https://forum.effectivealtruism.org/posts/xWFhD6uQuZehrDKeY/capitalism-power-and-epistemology-a-critique-of-ea>.

⁹³ Joshua Kissel, “Effective Altruism and Anti-Capitalism: An Attempt at Reconciliation,” *Essays in Philosophy* 18, no. 1 (2017): 2, <https://doi.org/10.7710/1526-0569.1573>.

These and many other questions are currently left unanswered by the anti-capitalist critics of effective altruism. The critics are, of course, most welcome to clarify.⁹⁴ Perhaps they have not done this out of fear that effective altruists wouldn't listen anyway: "there is every possibility, then, that Effective Altruists will ignore what these voices [the authors of the essays in this book] have to say—or fail to take the time to understand what their significance might be", Srinivasan wrote in the foreword to *The Good it Promises, the Harm it Does*.⁹⁵ However, there have been, as of writing this, four topics on the Effective Altruism Forum that discuss *The Good it Promises, the Harm it Does*. One of these threads is a discussion of the book with a total of 43 comments (as of writing this),⁹⁶ another is about organizing a reading group for the book⁹⁷, another is a critical review,⁹⁸ and yet another was meant to call attention to the book before it was even published.⁹⁹ Members of the Effective Altruism Forum have made the commendable move of upvoting the comment by Matthew C. Halteman, one of the book's authors, to the top of the discussion section under the

⁹⁴ Already in 2015, Peter Singer wrote in response to Catherine Tumber's article criticizing effective altruism, that "Tumber asserts that Matt Wage's work [in the financial sector, where he 'earns to give'] 'furthers the suffering of global have-nots.' Wage himself doesn't think this is the case, so if Tumber knows better, she should tell us how she knows it." (source: Peter Singer, "Reply to Effective Altruism Responses," Boston Review, July 1, 2015, https://www.bostonreview.net/forum_response/response-peter-singer-reply/.) Singer's tone is a bit snarky, but I think he raises a reasonable question. I do not know if Tumber attempted to further clarify her critique. Possibly, one reason she has not done so is because Singer concluded his article by insinuating (in what to me seems rather like a misunderstanding of Tumber's piece) that she is somehow opposed to the idea of helping people as much as you can? Tumber, on her part, could also have chosen for something more nuanced than to end her piece with the claim that effective altruism is a 'counterpart to global market fundamentalism'. (source: Catherine Tumber, "Response to Effective Altruism," Boston Review, July 1, 2015, https://www.bostonreview.net/forum_response/response-catherine-tumber/.) If anything, this exchange highlights the importance of respectful debate.

⁹⁵ Amia Srinivasan, "Foreword," in *The Good It Promises, the Harm It Does*, ed. Carol J. Adams, Alice Crary, and Lori Gruen (Oxford University Press, 2023), 11.

⁹⁶ Kyle J. Lucchese, "Book Post: The Good It Promises, the Harm It Does: Critical Essays on Effective Altruism," Effective Altruism Forum, February 8, 2023, <https://forum.effectivealtruism.org/posts/YFGkyDjKvsr9tHzkS/book-post-the-good-it-promises-the-harm-it-does-critical>.

⁹⁷ Kaleem Ahmid, "Reading Group: 'the Good It Promises, the Harm It Does,'" Effective Altruism Forum, February 18, 2023, <https://forum.effectivealtruism.org/posts/7pMvc3dHN5GXy8c8x/reading-group-the-good-it-promises-the-harm-it-does>.

⁹⁸ Richard Yetter Chappell, "Review of the Good It Promises, the Harm It Does," Effective Altruism Forum, May 2, 2023, <https://forum.effectivealtruism.org/posts/ZKYpu4WAiwTXDSrX8/review-of-the-good-it-promises-the-harm-it-does>.

⁹⁹ Manuel Del Río Rodríguez, "Book Critique of Effective Altruism," Effective Altruism Forum, January 17, 2023, <https://forum.effectivealtruism.org/posts/Ny3v2Qe4LfaYJYKcq/book-critique-of-effective-altruism>.

critical review.¹⁰⁰ Conversely, as far as the author of this work is aware, there have been no attempts by any of the anti-capitalist critics cited above (with the exception of Doran) to engage in discussion with adherents of effective altruism (on the Effective Altruism Forum or elsewhere).¹⁰¹ The ball of critique, it seems, is in the court of the anti-capitalist critics.

The decolonizing critique: effective altruism as just another ‘white savior’?

The basic confrontation which seemed to be colonialism versus anticolonialism, indeed capitalism versus socialism, is already losing its importance. What matters today, the issue which blocks the horizon, is the need for a redistribution of wealth. Humanity will have to address this question, no matter how devastating the consequences may be. – Frantz Fanon¹⁰²

In 2012, economists Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson published *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty*. The Dutch translation of this 546-page tome received the more straightforward title *Waarom sommige landen rijk zijn en andere arm*, which means ‘Why some countries are rich and others poor’.

¹⁰⁰ Richard Yetter Chappell, “Review of the Good It Promises, the Harm It Does,” Effective Altruism Forum, May 2, 2023, <https://forum.effectivealtruism.org/posts/ZKYpu4WAiwTXDSrX8/review-of-the-good-it-promises-the-harm-it-does>. Halteman’s comment, posted on May 4, 2023, can be found by scrolling down to the comment section under Chappell’s review.

¹⁰¹ Perhaps effective altruists have engaged with the anti-capitalist critique of their movement, but have, to use Srinivasan’s words from the foreword to *The Good It Promises, the Harm It Does*, ‘failed to take the time to understand what its significance might be’. David Thorstad seems to suggest as much when he writes that “traditions such as Marxism have a lot to say about capitalism. EAs [effective altruists] don’t read and talk about Marxist theory very much. Then EAs find themselves baffled by how they could be supporting capitalism, or what would be wrong with capitalism. Here one is tempted to ask in response whether they have read any Marxists.” (David Thorstad, comment under post, Reflective altruism, February 26, 2023, <https://ineffectivealtruismblog.com/2023/02/25/the-good-it-promises-the-harm-it-does-part-1-introduction/comment-page-1/#comment-90>.) This may well be true, but can one really expect many effective altruists, given their educational backgrounds, to read up on Marx and then develop a Marxian critique of effective altruism out of their own accord? The debate on effective altruism’s relationship to capitalism would probably be better advanced if the anti-capitalist critics made greater efforts to explain their critique to effective altruists, who may have little to no background in Marxian social critique.

¹⁰² Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961; repr., New York City, NY: Grove Atlantic, Inc., 2007), 55.

What is Acemoglu and Robinson's answer to this question? As the publisher explains on the back of the Dutch translation of the book: "Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson convincingly demonstrate that it is political and economic institutions that determine the economical success or failure of a country; institutions that encourage innovation and economic growth and guarantee wealth and peace."¹⁰³ But this is begging the question. More interesting is the question (which admittedly is also addressed in Acemoglu and Robinson's book) why some countries end up with institutions that generate untold destitution in the first place.

The answer is clear: the history of colonialism. It is certainly no coincidence that, as researchers at The Brookings Institution pointed out, "[in] 2016 [...] Africa accounted for just over 60 percent of global poverty. Today [in 2018] it is over 70 percent."¹⁰⁴ It is no coincidence that about 35% of the Sub-Saharan African population¹⁰⁵, which amounts to roughly 389 million people¹⁰⁶, still live in extreme poverty as of 2019. This is *far* higher than the share of the entire world population living in extreme poverty (approximately 8.5% as of 2019)¹⁰⁷. It is not as if the Sub-Saharan African countries all coincidentally happen to be this poor, as if by sheer bad luck. No, the extreme poverty we are seeing today is largely a legacy of colonialism; a result of dysfunctional institutions created after decades of relentless slavery, conquest and exploitation by Western countries at the expense of Sub-Saharan African people.

¹⁰³ Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson, *Waarom sommige landen rijk zijn en andere arm*, trans. Chiel van Soelen and Pieter van der Veen, Google Books (Amsterdam: Nieuw Amsterdam, 2012), https://www.google.be/books/edition/Waarom_sommige_landen_rijk_zijn_en_ander/il8eCgAAQBAJ?hl=nl&gbpv=0. Own translation from the original in Dutch.

¹⁰⁴ Homi Kharas, Kristofer Hamel, and Martin Hofer, "Rethinking Global Poverty Reduction in 2019," Brookings, December 13, 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2018/12/13/rethinking-global-poverty-reduction-in-2019/>.

¹⁰⁵ Our World in Data, "Share of Population Living in Extreme Poverty," Our World in Data, October 3, 2022, <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/share-of-population-in-extreme-poverty?tab=chart&country=~Sub-Saharan+Africa>.

¹⁰⁶ Our World in Data, "Number of People Living in Extreme Poverty," Our World in Data, October 3, 2022, <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/total-population-in-extreme-poverty?tab=chart&country=~Sub-Saharan+Africa>.

¹⁰⁷ Our World in Data, "Share of Population Living in Extreme Poverty," Our World in Data, October 3, 2022, https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/share-of-population-in-extreme-poverty?tab=chart&country=Sub-Saharan+Africa~Middle+East+and+North+Africa~Latin+America+and+the+Caribbean~Europe+and+Central+Asia~East+Asia+and+Pacific~OWID_WRL~South+Asia.

One major reason why the debate on how we tackle extreme poverty is so important, is the sheer severity of such poverty. Rather than just staying with these abstract numbers, it might help to briefly get an idea of what living in extreme poverty is like. Extreme poverty is when people have to survive on a very limited income, that is, an income below the extreme poverty line – which the World Bank determines as \$2.15 per day as of 2022.¹⁰⁸ What does it actually look like when your income is this low and you are thus considered to be living in extreme poverty? Peter Singer offers the following description:

It is also essential that we listen to the people living in extreme poverty, and find out what they are experiencing, and what they would like to change. [...] [Researchers commissioned by the World Bank] were able to document the experiences of 60,000 women and men in 73 countries. Over and over, in different languages and on different continents, poor people said what poverty meant to them, and what poverty prevented them from doing:

- You are short of food for all or part of the year [...]
- [...] you have to borrow from a local moneylender and he will charge you so much interest as the debt continues to mount that you may never be free of it.
- You can't afford to send your children to school [...]
- You live in an unstable house, made with mud or thatch, that you need to rebuild every two or three years after severe weather [...]
- You have no nearby source of safe drinking water. [...] ¹⁰⁹

For people having lived in wealthy countries all their lives, such outrageously horrible living standards are fortunately unimaginable. And yet, in 2019, nearly 650 million people still lived in extreme poverty – well over half of them in Sub-Saharan Africa.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ Joe Hasell, "From \$1.90 to \$2.15 a Day: The Updated International Poverty Line," Our World in Data, October 26, 2022, <https://ourworldindata.org/from-1-90-to-2-15-a-day-the-updated-international-poverty-line>.

¹⁰⁹ Peter Singer, *The Life You Can Save: How to Do Your Part to End World Poverty: 10th Anniversary Edition* (Bainbridge Island, WA: The Life You Can Save, 2019), 25, <https://www.thelifeyoucansave.org/the-book/>.

¹¹⁰ Our World in Data, "Number of People Living in Extreme Poverty," Our World in Data, October 3, 2022, <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/total-population-in-extreme-poverty?tab=chart&country=Sub-Saharan>

So the fact that effective altruism has made tackling global poverty a central cause deserves nothing but praise. However, since the cost of approaching this in an ineffective or even counterproductive way is so immense – and the decolonizing critics claim that this ineffectiveness or harmfulness is precisely the problem with effective altruism – it would be wise for effective altruists to take note of the decolonizing critique. What does this critique claim?

The decolonizing critique of effective altruism is any critique that holds that, in some way or another, effective altruism is neocolonial. What do I mean by ‘neocolonial’? Let us review some definitions of colonialism and neocolonialism first.

What is (neo)colonialism?

In their entry for the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Margaret Kohn and Kavita Reddy write that “colonialism is a practice of domination, which involves the subjugation of one people to another.” They add that their entry “will use colonialism as a broad concept that refers to the project of European political domination that began in the early sixteenth century.”¹¹¹ Reviewing several definitions of colonialism, Hans-Peter Müller and Patrick Ziltener note that they “follow these definitions insofar as we define political domination as crucial: Without a significant reduction of the level of political sovereignty, we would not speak of colonialism.”¹¹²

We could thus say that colonialism is when the elites of one people significantly reduce the political sovereignty of another people. What, then, is neocolonialism?

According to Oseni Taiwo Afisi, who wrote an entry on neocolonialism for the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy,

the term “neocolonialism” generally represents the actions and effects of certain remnant features and agents of the colonial era in a given society.

[an+Africa~Europe+and+Central+Asia~Latin+America+and+the+Caribbean~Middle+East+and+North+Africa~East+Asia+and+Pacific~South+Asia~OWID_WRL.](https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/colonialism/)

¹¹¹ Margaret Kohn and Kavita Reddy, “Colonialism,” in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2017, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/colonialism/>.

¹¹² Hans-Peter Müller and Patrick Ziltener, “Definition of Colonialism,” University of Zurich, accessed May 18, 2023, <https://www.worlddevelopment.uzh.ch/en/research/defi.html>.

Post-colonial studies have shown extensively that despite achieving independence, the influences of colonialism and its agents are still very much present in the lives of most former colonies.¹¹³

Sandra Halperin's entry on the topic for Encyclopedia Britannica claims that the term 'neocolonialism' "was first used after World War II to refer to the continuing dependence of former colonies on foreign countries", and "is widely used to refer to a form of global power in which transnational corporations and global and multilateral institutions combine to perpetuate colonial forms of exploitation of developing countries."¹¹⁴

So, the difference between 'colonialism' and 'neocolonialism' turns out to be mainly historical: 'colonialism' generally refers to oppression that took place in territories that were officially considered 'colonies' by other countries, whereas 'neocolonialism' refers to similar oppression, but after these colonies became independent countries. Put simply, neocolonialism is just unofficial colonialism. It is colonialism that pretends it does not exist.

What is the decolonizing critique of effective altruism?

As I mentioned earlier, the decolonizing critique of effective altruism is any critique that holds that effective altruism, in one way or another, is neocolonial. This would mean that effective altruism contributes to the reduction of political sovereignty of certain peoples at the hands of the elites of other peoples. More specifically, the decolonizing critique holds that effective altruism damages the autonomy of the very Sub-Saharan African peoples it seeks to help.

There are two common and related claims decolonizing critics of effective altruism make. First, that the type of charity effective altruism advocates keeps the people it seeks to help poor and dependent on aid, thus reducing their sovereignty and making effective altruism neocolonial. Second, that effective altruism does not listen

¹¹³ Oseni Taiwo Afisi, "Neocolonialism," in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2022, <https://iep.utm.edu/neocolon/>.

¹¹⁴ Sandra Halperin, "Neocolonialism," in Encyclopædia Britannica, May 6, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/neocolonialism>.

to, or otherwise does not involve the people it is trying to help, again reducing their sovereignty in a neocolonial way. Decolonizing critics probably would say that the first problem exacerbates the second: poor and disempowered people are less likely to participate in decisionmaking over how they will be helped. Additionally, the second problem contributes to the first: if you don't listen to the people you're trying to benefit, then how could you effectively help them?

In a sense, the decolonizing critique combines aspects of the anti-capitalist critique and the democratic critique. The decolonizing critique is implicitly anti-capitalist, because, as Halperin notes, "neocolonialism has been broadly understood as a further development of capitalism that enables capitalist powers (both nations and corporations) to dominate subject nations through the operations of international capitalism rather than by means of direct rule."¹¹⁵ Probably, many decolonizing critics would agree that the neocolonialism of effective altruism is just one particularly infuriating instance of its contribution to capitalist economic activity. The decolonizing critique is also a democratic critique insofar the lack of involvement of people in extreme poverty is considered to be highly undemocratic.

Decolonizing claim 1: effective altruism is neocolonial because its favored poverty alleviation charities keep poor people (in Sub-Saharan Africa or elsewhere) poor and dependent on aid

Many critics of effective altruism have argued that charity (in general, or specifically the type of charities that effective altruism recommends) keeps poor people poor and dependent on aid. The very concept of charity and development aid implies dependence: the beneficiaries depend on the goodwill of wealthy donors and non-profit workers for the fulfillment of basic needs. Perhaps this can be justified as a temporary emergency solution, much like how a stay in the hospital is helpful even if it puts one in a situation of great dependence. But it is perverse to keep others in dependence forever, when they have the capacity for freedom and autonomy. Everyone will agree that the ultimate goal of charity should be a situation where charity is no longer needed and is thus abolished. Decolonizing critics claim,

¹¹⁵ Sandra Halperin, "Neocolonialism," in Encyclopædia Britannica, May 6, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/neocolonialism>.

however, that effective altruism treats charity not like a means to this goal, but rather as a goal in itself.

One example of this radical critique of aid was given by an anonymous critic and development aid worker who goes by the pseudonym Carneades. In an early post on the Effective Altruism Forum, he wrote that charities which hand out things (like insecticide-treated bednets or money) and which are favored by effective altruists ‘take jobs away from communities’, [do] not allow for communities to decide what they need’ and that they

do the work for a community, instead of building capacity and increasing autonomy and dependence [sic]. This is great for the [charitable] organization, since it ensures that the community will need aid forever, by destroying the infrastructure that the community previously used to make a living.¹¹⁶

Another example is Cecelia Lynch, who wrote that “neither the new philanthropy nor effective altruism counters the neocolonial and paternalistic practices of the aid industry. Indeed, both threaten to reinscribe them more forcefully”.¹¹⁷

There have also been a number of authors who have argued that most development aid has been mostly ineffective or even counter effective, making it neocolonial. Some books where these authors in one way or another make this claim include Dambisa Moyo’s *Dead Aid: Why Aid Is Not Working and How There Is a Better Way for Africa*, William Easterly’s *The White Man’s Burden: Why the West’s Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good*, Angus Deaton’s *The Great Escape: Health, Wealth and the Origins of Inequality*, Anand Giridharadas’ *Winner Takes All: The Elite Charade of Changing the World*, Arturo Escobar’s *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World* and Jason Hickel’s *The*

¹¹⁶ Carneades, “We Must Reassess What Makes a Charity Effective,” Effective Altruism Forum, December 24, 2016, <https://forum.effectivealtruism.org/posts/57fB4dWcXenheyxas/we-must-reassess-what-makes-a-charity-effective>.

¹¹⁷ Cecelia Lynch, “Reconceptualizing Charity: The Problem with Philanthropy and ‘Effective Altruism’ by the World’s Wealthiest People,” Critical Investigations into Humanitarianism in Africa, January 11, 2016, <https://www.cihablog.com/reconceptualizing-charity-the-problem-with-philanthropy-and-effective-altruism-by-the-worlds-wealthiest-people/>.

Divide: A Brief Guide to Global Inequality and its Solutions. Olivia Rutazibwa also holds such views: “the main reason to have development cooperation [...] is about securing our [Western] presence [in Africa]”, she maintains.¹¹⁸ “To me, development cooperation is the literal continuation of a colonial system”, she added.¹¹⁹ Rutazibwa argues that a paradigm shift is needed: for example, a course on ‘development cooperation’ could be renamed to ‘Global Justice and Reparations’.¹²⁰ (The similarities and differences between reparations and unconditional cash transfers is one of the topics of the last chapter of this work).

Effective altruists have responded to such critique in two ways. *First*, Holden Karnofsky (GiveWell)¹²¹ and MacAskill¹²² have argued that while the critics are right insofar they denounce previous global poverty alleviation efforts, the kind of charitable interventions favored by effective altruists are thoroughly researched and checked for unintended negative side-effects, meaning they will not (or at least far less) repeat the past mistakes of aid. Karnofsky argues that simple health and cash transfer programs cannot cause the aid dependency and lack of societal progress that previous aid has contributed to. Ideally, such effective altruist actions are what Koen Stroeken, Jennifer Sesabo and Christina Shitima have termed ‘accessible development’, which “goes beyond simply the availability of a service, to include, rights of use, actual use, an enabling environment, and decision-making power or autonomy of use (permitting self-steering implementation).”¹²³ *Second*, Peter Singer has pointed out that a major reason why aid for the world’s poorest people has been overall ineffective so far is that there is according to him simply not enough money and labor being dedicated to it: in *The Life You Can Save: 10th Anniversary Edition*, Singer points out that only seven countries meet the United Nations target of using 0.7% of gross national income for foreign aid, with no country using more than

¹¹⁸ Olivia Rutazibwa, Tom Mahy, and Anthony Bosschem, “Racisme dient een doel,” *Zwijgen is geen optie*, September 18, 2019, <https://zwijgenisgeenoptie.be/olivia-rutazibwa/>: 40:38 in the video. Quote is based on the English subtitles of the video.

¹¹⁹ Rutazibwa, Mahy, and Bosschem, 2019, 41:52 in the video. Quote is based on the English subtitles of the video.

¹²⁰ Rutazibwa, Mahy, and Bosschem, 2019, 38:05–39:19 in the video.

¹²¹ Holden Karnofsky, “The Lack of Controversy over Well-Targeted Aid,” GiveWell, November 6, 2015, <https://blog.givewell.org/2015/11/06/the-lack-of-controversy-over-well-targeted-aid/>.

¹²² William MacAskill, “Aid Scepticism and Effective Altruism,” *Journal of Practical Ethics*, accessed May 18, 2023, <https://www.jpe.ox.ac.uk/papers/aid-scepticism-and-effective-altruism/>.

¹²³ Koenraad Stroeken, Christina Shitima, and Jennifer Sesabo, “@Ccessible Development: An Introduction,” *Afrika Focus* 31, no. 1 (2018): 7, <https://doi.org/10.21825/af.v31i1.9028>.

1.10% of its national income for this purpose.¹²⁴ Singer also notes that the amounts of money spent on aid are relatively small in the world economy: he claims that of every \$100 earned in the five decades before 2006, only 30 cents has gone to aid, and that in 2017, “we [spent] more than three times as much on beauty products as the governments we elect spend on ending extreme poverty.”¹²⁵ He adds that in the past “much of the aid was based on political or defense priorities”, further reducing its effectiveness.¹²⁶ The rejoinder that we don’t spend enough on helping the poorest people in the world has also been picked up by Giving What We Can¹²⁷, who go a step further and claim not only that “foreign aid and international giving have helped make significant progress in global health and development”¹²⁸, but also that “effective aid programs can help strengthen local institutions, create opportunities for long-term growth, and reduce the dependence on foreign aid in recipient countries”¹²⁹ and thus “we should seek to improve foreign aid, not end it.”¹³⁰ Strikingly, anthropologist China Scherz (not affiliated with effective altruism) has studied nonprofits in Uganda and found that some recipients of charity actually prefer programs that give them money or other things – which is what effective altruists generally advocate – rather than programs which directly seek to improve the community’s independence by helping people build institutions.¹³¹

Admittedly, I have worded the first claim of the decolonizing critique in its strongest possible form. Not all decolonizing critics have gone as far as to claim that effective

¹²⁴ Peter Singer, *The Life You Can Save: How to Do Your Part to End World Poverty: 10th Anniversary Edition* (Bainbridge Island, WA: The Life You Can Save, 2019), 48, <https://www.thelifeyoucansave.org/the-book/>. Singer’s tenth anniversary edition of *The Life You Can Save*, which was released in 2019, he used foreign aid statistics from 2018. As of 2023, the situation appears to be largely unchanged: [according to statistics for 2022](#), six countries met the 0.7% target, with one country being extremely close to it (0.698%).

¹²⁵ Peter Singer, *The Life You Can Save: How to Do Your Part to End World Poverty: 10th Anniversary Edition* (Bainbridge Island, WA: The Life You Can Save, 2019), 118, <https://www.thelifeyoucansave.org/the-book/>.

¹²⁶ Singer, 2019, 119.

¹²⁷ M. F. Mika and Giving What We Can Team, “Don’t We Spend Too Much on Foreign Aid Already?,” Giving What We Can, April 22, 2021, <https://www.givingwhatwecan.org/blog/dont-we-spend-too-much-on-foreign-aid-already>.

¹²⁸ Surbhi Bharadwaj, Faiz Surani, and Giving What We Can Team, “Can Foreign Aid and International Charity Make a Difference?,” Giving What We Can, April 12, 2021, <https://www.givingwhatwecan.org/blog/can-foreign-aid-and-international-charity-make-a-difference>.

¹²⁹ Surbhi Bharadwaj and Giving What We Can Team, “Does Aid Make Low-Income Countries Dependent on Handouts?,” Giving What We Can, June 13, 2021, <https://www.givingwhatwecan.org/blog/does-aid-make-low-income-countries-dependent-on-handouts>.

¹³⁰ Bharadwaj, Surani, and Giving What We Can Team, 2021.

¹³¹ Anne E. Bromley, “‘Teaching a Man to Fish’ More Complicated than It Sounds,” UVA Today, May 8, 2015, <https://news.virginia.edu/content/teaching-man-fish-more-complicated-it-sounds>.

altruist charity (or even charity in general) is always neocolonial. Many decolonizing critics appear to take less extreme views than the claim that aid and charity (effective altruist or otherwise) are almost always neocolonial. These critics more often see the risk of keeping poor people poor and dependent on aid as one that effective altruists currently do not sufficiently take into account, even if not all of the interventions they advocate are neocolonial.

Emily Clough, for example, has argued that effective altruist development charities may have the unintended negative side-effect of reducing government service quality in the area where the charity operates. This could happen if a charity providing high-quality service (education, healthcare, ...) causes the state to reduce the quality and quantity of similar services provided in the same region. This would then negatively impact poor people who do not find their way to the NGO's services: they are deprived of the services previously offered to them by local governments (or they suffer from a reduction in government service quality). It would also make those who do have access to the NGO's services dependent on foreign aid.¹³² Referencing Clough's piece, Jeff McMahan writes that

developmental economists have, for example, indicated ways in which the efforts of philanthropists, acting through the agency of NGOs, have conflicted with and partly undermined the potentially more effective activities of other agents, particularly representatives of states. [...] [By] supplying much of what the local government should be providing for its people, foreign aid, whether from NGOs or other states, may enable dictators to [...] resist pressures to change the practices and institutions that perpetuate extreme poverty. [Effective altruists] should not ignore these [serious empirical claims].¹³³

Daron Acemoglu was also concerned by the risk of effective altruist charity taking over services that local governments should be providing when he wrote the following in an article critical of effective altruism:

¹³² Emily Clough, "Effective Altruism's Political Blind Spot," Boston Review, July 14, 2015, <https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/emily-clough-effective-altruism-ngos/>.

¹³³ Jeff McMahan, "Philosophical Critiques of Effective Altruism," *Philosophers' Magazine*, no. 73 (2016): 99, <https://doi.org/10.5840/tpm20167379>.

What's not to like about charitable giving based on quantitative evidence and aimed at maximum impact? Actually, I have a few misgivings. [...] When key services we expect from states are taken over by other entities, building trust in the state and developing state capacity in other crucial areas may become harder.¹³⁴

Larry S. Temkin has also written an article on the subject of

possible unintended negative consequences that may occur elsewhere in a society when aid agencies hire highly qualified local people to promote their agendas; the possibility that foreign interests and priorities may have undue influence on a country's direction and priorities, negatively impacting local authority and autonomy; and the related problem of outside interventions undermining the responsiveness of local and national governments to their citizens.¹³⁵

Monique Deveaux appears to share these concerns, writing that

[Peter Singer's famous comparison of people in extreme poverty to strangers drowning in a pond, both of whom we should rescue whenever and however we can – this image is sometimes used to introduce effective altruism] fails to grapple with the most basic risks of adverse “unintended effects” that can result from well-meaning but poorly designed development and humanitarian aid interventions: the creation of black markets, the disruption of labor markets, and the undermining of certain local institutions.¹³⁶

Other decolonizing critics have argued that even if effective altruist charity helps people right now, it makes little difference in the long term. For example, Angus Deaton wrote that

¹³⁴ Daron Acemoglu, “Response to Effective Altruism,” Boston Review, July 1, 2015, https://www.bostonreview.net/forum_response/response-daron-acemoglu/.

¹³⁵ Larry S. Temkin, “Being Good in a World of Need: Some Empirical Worries and an Uncomfortable Philosophical Possibility,” *Journal of Practical Ethics* 7, no. 1 (June 1, 2019), <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3413574>.

¹³⁶ Monique Deveaux, *Poverty, Solidarity, and Poor-Led Social Movements* (Oxford University Press, 2021), 57, <https://fdslive.oup.com/www.oup.com/academic/pdf/openaccess/9780190850289.pdf>.

however counterintuitive it may seem, children are not dying for the lack of a few thousand dollars to keep them alive. If it were so simple, the world would already be a much better place. Development is neither a financial nor a technical problem but a political problem, and the aid industry often makes the politics worse. [...] Lack of money is not killing people. The true villains are the chronically disorganized and underfunded health care systems about which governments care little, along with well-founded distrust of those governments and foreigners, even when their advice is correct.¹³⁷

Others have articulated even more modest decolonizing critiques of effective altruism. They see effective altruist neocolonialism primarily as a potential problem in the future. Emma Saunders-Hastings, for example, wrote in her article on effective altruism that

the charities most supported by effective altruists target low-hanging fruit in global health. [...] They do not pose significant tradeoffs between welfare promotion and respect for beneficiary choice. However, this does not eliminate the possibility of such tradeoffs. When the few top-rated health charities reach funding capacity, where do we turn? [...] Articulating moral constraints on the exercise of donor power will become more important as the effective altruism movement grows, especially if its adherents occupy high-paying jobs that at once permit increased philanthropic impact and greater influence over recipients and policymakers. As effective altruists begin to target policy change as a way of doing good, and if they begin more often to impose conditions on their gifts as a strategy for promoting welfare, they likely will face more objections about interventions that look undemocratic, manipulative, or paternalizing.¹³⁸

Arguably, some form of this decolonizing critique has also been advanced by effective altruists themselves. Hauke Hillebrandt and John G. Halstead wrote a

¹³⁷ Angus Deaton, "Response to Effective Altruism," Boston Review, July 1, 2015, https://www.bostonreview.net/forum_response/response-angus-deaton/.

¹³⁸ Emma Saunders-Hastings, "Response to Effective Altruism," Boston Review, July 1, 2015, https://www.bostonreview.net/forum_response/response-emma-saunders-hastings/.

popular essay on the Effective Altruism Forum. They argued that the type of interventions favored by many effective altruists do little to promote economic growth that low-income countries need to become wealthier, and that thus effective altruists should research how they can contribute to economic growth.¹³⁹ Although Hillebrandt and Halstead have not described it as such, one could say that they argue that if effective altruism neglects economic growth, it keeps poor people poor and dependent on aid. In other words, Hillebrandt and Halstead suggest effective altruists might be failing to help poor countries grow economically, which would keep those countries poor and dependent and thus make effective altruism something neocolonialist.

Decolonizing claim 2: effective altruism is neocolonial because its favored poverty alleviation charities do not listen to the people they are trying to help

Another, strongly related claim of the decolonizing critique is that effective altruists fail to meaningfully listen to and cooperate with the people they want to help. These critics argue that rather than carefully listening to poor people's demands and proposed solutions, effective altruists just propose whatever intervention they think is most effective, and then try to affect as many people as possible. These critics suggest that this is not only ineffective – who is in a better position than the poor themselves to know what could help them? – but also unjust and paternalistic. They may point out how all the charities effective altruists favor are run by people from high-income countries. They denounce what they perceive to be effective altruism's unjustified lack of support for organizations run by poor people themselves.

As I mentioned before, this claim is strongly related to the first claim of the decolonizing critique: if you don't even listen to the people you're trying to help, then it's no wonder you're keeping them poor and dependent on your aid. This, again means effective altruism is neocolonial, argue the critics. For example, Monique Deveaux argues that “some forms of aid can actively undermine grassroots efforts to

¹³⁹ Hauke Hillebrandt and John G. Halstead, “Growth and the Case against Randomista Development,” Effective Altruism Forum, January 16, 2020, <https://forum.effectivealtruism.org/posts/bsE5t6qhGC65fEpzN/growth-and-the-case-against-randomista-development>.

bring about transformative social change by diverting resources and short-circuiting community-led development processes”¹⁴⁰.

Another example is the anonymous critic with the pseudonym Carneades, who wrote that

[effective altruism] promotes organizations that [...] focus on projects which apply across communities regardless of need. They do not build projects from the bottom up, they drop things from the top down. This harms developing democracies, and it does not allow for communities to decide what they need. Yes, systematically bottom up work is harder to do, but the effects are worth it.¹⁴¹

Similarly, Jennifer Rubenstein denounced effective altruism as ‘a movement that excludes poor people’. She clarifies her position:

[as] the low-hanging fruit of basic health programs and cash transfers are exhausted, saving lives and alleviating suffering will require more complicated political action, such as reforming global institutions. Undertaking this action will require outsiders to work with, and follow the lead of, activists in poor countries. Yet the effective altruism movement as Singer describes it does not cultivate the expectations, attitudes, or relationships necessary for this kind of work.¹⁴²

Rubenstein suggests that effective altruists should consider establishing “a database of effective social movements. This database would direct donors’ attention outward, toward *existing* social movements, especially those based in the global South, that want external support for their efforts to promote individual welfare, inclusion, equality, or rights.” Similarly, Jennifer Wineke writes that

¹⁴⁰ Monique Deveaux, *Poverty, Solidarity, and Poor-Led Social Movements* (Oxford University Press, 2021), 57, <https://fdslive.oup.com/www.oup.com/academic/pdf/openaccess/9780190850289.pdf>.

¹⁴¹ Carneades, “We Must Reassess What Makes a Charity Effective,” Effective Altruism Forum, December 24, 2016, <https://forum.effectivealtruism.org/posts/57fB4dWcXenheyxas/we-must-reassess-what-makes-a-charity-effective>.

¹⁴² Jennifer Rubenstein, “Response to Effective Altruism,” Boston Review, July 1, 2015, https://www.bostonreview.net/forum_response/response-jennifer-rubenstein/.

the EA [effective altruism] movement's ability to attract wealthy people who have the privilege to be seen and heard, and who are willing to devote their life to an ethical movement, could enormously strengthen the efforts of those already fighting for radical systemic change across the globe.¹⁴³

Matthew Doran also claims that effective altruism ignores the voices of people in poverty. "EA's [effective altruism]'s interventions are only the most effective options according to the priorities and epistemology of its gatekeepers. They are not necessarily the most effective interventions according to the people who receive them", he wrote. Combining an anti-capitalist and a decolonizing critique, Doran claims that "many Global South perspectives on problems, solutions, and sources of evidence will be inadmissible or even un-hearable within EA [effective altruism] because they conflict with capitalist epistemology."¹⁴⁴

Perhaps the most striking articulation of the decolonizing critique of effective altruism comes from Anthony Kalulu, a farmer and activist from Uganda. He argues that effective altruism is even worse than existing development cooperation:

Moreover, for traditional philanthropy, albeit being a sector (or a community) that almost never supports the poor directly, there are countless occasions where even organizations like the Gates Foundation have funded the smallest grassroots organizations in the global south. Not the case with effective altruism.¹⁴⁵

Kalulu laments how when he reached out to effective altruists, they refused to raise awareness about his work. He claims that "many of the things that effective altruists call "effective" — from mosquito nets, to \$100 business grants that are provided to groups of 3 people — are the same short-term, disposable solutions that have [kept]

¹⁴³ Jennifer Wineke, "Actually Helping Some Poor People: Global Philanthropy, Sustainability & Privilege," *Voices in Bioethics* 6 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.7916/vib.v6i.6083>.

¹⁴⁴ Matthew Doran, "Capitalism, Power and Epistemology: A Critique of EA," Effective Altruism Forum, August 22, 2022, <https://forum.effectivealtruism.org/posts/xWFhD6uQuZehrDKeY/capitalism-power-and-epistemology-a-critique-of-ea>.

¹⁴⁵ Anthony Kalulu, "EA Is Worse than Traditional Philanthropy in the Way It Excludes We the Poor.," *dear-humanity.org*, December 3, 2022, <http://dear-humanity.org/effective-altruism-worse-for-poor/>.

their recipients in abject poverty”. To conclude, Kalulu writes that “this all means one thing: now really is the time for humanity to accept that the best way to end global poverty, is by putting the world’s ultra poor directly at the helm.”¹⁴⁶

Even if effective altruists can successfully demonstrate that their favored interventions do not keep poor people poor and dependent on aid, and that critics like Kalulu are thus wrong in that respect, we might still find it objectionable if effective altruist poverty alleviation does not meaningfully involve the poor. The paternalism of interventions – even successful ones – to help people without listening to them when it is possible to do so strikes us as unjust and disrespectful. The worry that effective altruism excludes the voices of the people it is trying to benefit could also be seen as just one of the many concerns raised by what I call the ‘democratic critique’ of effective altruism. Indeed, paternalism is not exactly very democratic. In the following section, I will elaborate on the democratic critique of effective altruism, a critique that questions effective altruism’s potential lack of democracy – both within the movement and with regards to the interventions, organizations and people that effective altruism does (or does not) engage with.

The democratic critique: problems of participation, representation and bureaucratization in the effective altruism movement

MacAskill and Ord write a lot about progress and humanity’s potential, but they say almost nothing about who gets to define those concepts. Who gets seen as an expert? Who decides what counts as evidence? [...] In my opinion, those aren’t side-questions to hide in the footnotes. They’re core to the whole project. – Abigail Thorn¹⁴⁷

Effective altruism, like anything else, has changed over time. As Vox journalist Dylan Matthews wrote in 2022:

¹⁴⁶ Kalulu, 2022.

¹⁴⁷ Abigail Thorn and F1nn5ter, “The Rich Have Their Own Ethics: Effective Altruism & the Crypto Crash (Ft. F1nn5ter),” *YouTube*, February 24, 2023, <https://youtu.be/Lm0vHQYKI-Y?t=2066>: 34:26 in the video.

It's safe to say that effective altruism is no longer the small, eclectic club of philosophers, charity researchers, and do-gooders it was just a decade ago. It's an idea, and group of people, with roughly \$26.6 billion in resources behind them, real and growing political power, and an increasing ability to noticeably change the world.¹⁴⁸

In a 2022 longread about MacAskill, one of the founders of effective altruism and still one of its most influential figures, The New Yorker journalist Gideon Lewis-Kraus wrote the following:

MacAskill, who still does his own laundry, was deeply ambivalent about the deterioration of frugality norms in the community. The Centre for Effective Altruism's first office had been in an overcrowded firetrap of a basement beneath an estate agent's office. "I get a lot of joy thinking about the early stages—every day for lunch we had Sainsbury's baguettes with hummus, and it felt morally appropriate," MacAskill told me. "Now we have this nice office with catered vegan lunches. We could hire a hedge-fund guy at market rates, and that makes sense! But there's an aesthetic part of me that feels really sad about these compromises with the world."¹⁴⁹

Why does MacAskill seem to feel somewhat melancholic looking back on the enormous growth of the power of the effective altruism movement? Might he feel some regret at how this power is currently being distributed across the movement? That is somewhat unlikely, but in any case, the effective altruism movement's massive increase in money and influence should have us question how the effective altruism movement is using that power. After all, power can corrupt. In other words, we should ask ourselves: how democratic is effective altruism?

¹⁴⁸ Dylan Matthews, "How Effective Altruism Went from a Niche Movement to a Billion-Dollar Force," Vox, August 8, 2022, <https://www.vox.com/future-perfect/2022/8/8/23150496/effective-altruism-sam-bankman-fried-dustin-moskovitz-billionaire-philanthropy-cryptocurrency>.

¹⁴⁹ Gideon Lewis-Kraus, "The Reluctant Prophet of Effective Altruism," The New Yorker, August 8, 2022, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/08/15/the-reluctant-prophet-of-effective-altruism>.

A very brief definition of democracy

The term ‘democracy’ “is derived from the Greek *dēmokratia*, which was coined from *dēmos* (“people”) and *kratos* (“rule”)”, writes Robert A. Dahl for the *Encyclopædia Britannica*¹⁵⁰. So literally, democracy is power exercised by the people. Which people? We could say, in general, when relatively more people are involved in decisionmaking over important matters, this is more democratic. Indeed, the antonym of democracy is ‘autocracy’, which is ‘government by a single person or small group that has unlimited power or authority’, according to the online Cambridge Dictionary.¹⁵¹

What is the democratic critique of effective altruism?

What I call the ‘democratic critique’ of effective altruism refers to any criticism which claims that effective altruism is somehow insufficiently democratic. I believe there are at least two senses in which the movement could be undemocratic. These two meanings of the democratic deficit¹⁵² of effective altruism appear to be the two main claims of the democratic critique. First, the democratic critique claims that decisionmaking within the effective altruism movement is excessively in the hands of a relatively small group of people. In other words, they worry that the effective altruism movement is undemocratically organized. Second, democratic critics are concerned over how democratically effective altruists have acted towards those outside of the movement. These critics may claim that effective altruists support potentially undemocratic interventions (in particular, wealthy philanthropy) and exclude all too many interventions, ideas, movements, scholars and activists from outside of the effective altruism movement. In both cases, the effective altruism movement is undemocratic in the sense described above: the decisionmaking over actions – either within the effective altruism movement or in relation to those outside of it – is controlled by a relatively small and disproportionately powerful group.

¹⁵⁰ Robert A. Dahl, “Democracy,” in *Encyclopædia Britannica*, February 8, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/democracy>.

¹⁵¹ Cambridge Dictionary, “AUTOCRACY,” in *Cambridge Dictionary*, November 27, 2019, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/autocracy>.

¹⁵² According to Natalia Letki’s article for *Encyclopædia Britannica*, a ‘democratic deficit’ is ‘an insufficient level of democracy in political institutions and procedures in comparison with a theoretical ideal of a democratic government.’ (source: Natalia Letki, “Democratic Deficit,” in *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/democratic-deficit>.)

The democratic critique of effective altruism is especially important to effective altruists themselves. Even if they were wholly unconvinced by the anti-capitalist and decolonizing critiques, they might still find it highly problematic if effective altruism is undemocratic – perhaps to the point of leaving the movement, as Carla Zoe Cremer, one of the most outspoken democratic critics of effective altruism, has done. Indeed, whereas the previous two critiques discussed in this work are nearly always voiced by those outside of the effective altruism movement, the democratic critique is increasingly expressed by those who are current or former effective altruists.

Democratic claim 1: the effective altruism movement is undemocratic towards its own members (internal democratic deficit)

Cremer is an AI (artificial intelligence) researcher whose story and views magnificently illustrate the first aspect of the democratic critique I identify. In 2017, Cremer was still a convinced supporter of the effective altruism movement.¹⁵³ As the number of effective altruist organizations grew and their funds did too, Cremer became increasingly skeptical. In 2020, she wrote a popular essay on the Effective Altruism Forum, entitled ‘Objections to Value-Alignment between Effective Altruists’. There, she criticized what she perceived to be the inegalitarian tendencies and lack of intellectual diversity in the movement. She called the latter ‘value-alignment’, a term which, according to her, “means to agree on a fundamental level. It means to agree with the most broadly accepted values, methodologies, axioms, diet, donation schemes, memes and prioritisations of EA [effective altruism].”¹⁵⁴

Nearly a year and a half later, Cremer and her fellow researcher Luke Kemp published a peer-reviewed paper that criticizes the present state of the study of ‘global existential risks’ – potential future catastrophes that could destroy or severely damage humanity. Preventing and mitigating ‘global existential risks’, or ‘x-risks’ for

¹⁵³ Linda Kinstler, “The Good Delusion: Has Effective Altruism Broken Bad?,” *The Economist*, October 15, 2022,

<https://www.economist.com/1843/2022/11/15/the-good-delusion-has-effective-altruism-broken-bad>.

¹⁵⁴ Carla Zoe Cremer, “Objections to Value-Alignment between Effective Altruists,” *Effective Altruism Forum*, July 15, 2020,

<https://forum.effectivealtruism.org/posts/Dxfgi9hwwwLCf5iQ/objections-to-value-alignment-between-effective-altruists>.

short, is currently one of the four main cause areas of effective altruism, along with extreme poverty alleviation, animal welfare advocacy and 'EA Meta' (also known as 'meta effective altruism', ie. strengthening the effective altruism movement and its research¹⁵⁵). The study of 'x-risks' is thus of great importance to many influential effective altruists. In their paper, Cremer and Kemp argue, among other things, that the research domain of existential risk studies is currently excessively techno-utopian and that we should 'diversify' it and '[democratise] its policy recommendations'.¹⁵⁶

While not a critique of effective altruism as such, Cremer and Kemp's paper nonetheless sharply criticizes a research field which currently significantly determines the identity and funding allocation of the effective altruism movement – even as not all effective altruists are interested in x-risks, with participants in a 2020 survey on the Effective Altruism Forum on average not rating problems in the far future as significantly more important than problems in the near future.¹⁵⁷ It is thus concerning that the paper Cremer co-authored with Kemp was (at least initially) very poorly received by the effective altruism movement. Cremer wrote that

It has been the most emotionally draining paper we [Cremer and Kemp] have ever written. We lost sleep, time, friends, collaborators, and mentors because we disagreed on: whether this work should be published, whether potential EA [effective altruist] funders would decide against funding us and the institutions we're affiliated with, and whether the authors whose work we critique would be upset.¹⁵⁸

Cremer admits that “[many effective altruists we showed this paper to] assessed the paper’s merits on the basis of its arguments rather than group membership, engaged

¹⁵⁵ Vaidehi Agarwalla, “What Is Meta Effective Altruism?,” Effective Altruism Forum, June 2, 2021, <https://forum.effectivealtruism.org/posts/Wx7LuMHbhABrtYrv9/what-is-meta-effective-altruism>.

¹⁵⁶ Carla Zoe Cremer and Luke Kemp, “Democratising Risk: In Search of a Methodology to Study Existential Risk,” *Social Science Research Network*, December 28, 2021, 1, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3995225.

¹⁵⁷ David Moss, “EA Survey 2020: Cause Prioritization,” Effective Altruism Forum, July 29, 2021, <https://forum.effectivealtruism.org/posts/83tEL2sHDTiWR6nwo/ea-survey-2020-cause-prioritization>.

¹⁵⁸ Carla Zoe Cremer, “Democratising Risk - or How EA Deals with Critics,” Effective Altruism Forum, December 28, 2021, <https://forum.effectivealtruism.org/posts/gx7BEkoRbctjkyTme/democratising-risk-or-how-ea-deals-with-critics-1>.

in dialogue, disagreed respectfully, and improved our arguments with care and attention.” But she also wrote that others were highly dismissive and “tried to prevent this paper from being published. They did so largely out of fear that publishing might offend key funders”.¹⁵⁹ Cremer concludes that

EA [effective altruism] needs to diversify funding sources by breaking up big funding bodies and by reducing each orgs’ reliance on EA funding and tech billionaire funding, it needs to produce academically credible work, set up whistle-blower protection, actively fund critical work, allow for bottom-up control over how funding is distributed, diversify academic fields represented in EA, make the leaders' forum and funding decisions transparent, stop glorifying individual thought-leaders, stop classifying everything as info hazards...amongst other structural changes.¹⁶⁰

Cremer, who now no longer considers herself a member of the effective altruism movement, reached out to MacAskill with these concerns and proposals, and while he did acknowledge these problems, she felt that he did not sufficiently take action^{161,162}. Cremer later said she was

entirely unsuccessful in inspiring EAs [effective altruists] to implement any of my suggestions. EAs patted themselves on the back for running an essay competition on critiques against EA, left 253 comments on my and Luke Kemp’s paper, and kept everything that actually could have made a difference just as it was.¹⁶³

Perhaps Cremer could have been more successful at her attempts to encourage reform if she had proposed more specific, detailed interventions (for example,

¹⁵⁹ Cremer, 2021.

¹⁶⁰ Cremer, 2021.

¹⁶¹ Linda Kinstler, “The Good Delusion: Has Effective Altruism Broken Bad?,” *The Economist*, October 15, 2022, <https://www.economist.com/1843/2022/11/15/the-good-delusion-has-effective-altruism-broken-bad>.

¹⁶² Carla Zoe Cremer, comment under post, Effective Altruism Forum, January 4, 2023, <https://forum.effectivealtruism.org/posts/SzNpP3zPWz5aA98YH/if-ea-community-building-could-be-negative-what-follows?commentId=EJkuTyiwFAz3C8vye>.

¹⁶³ Carla Zoe Cremer, “How Effective Altruists Ignored Risk,” *Vox*, January 30, 2023, <https://www.vox.com/future-perfect/23569519/effective-altruism-sam-bankman-fried-will-macaskill-ea-risk-decentralization-philanthropy>.

running effective altruist organizations democratically as cooperatives) that should be undertaken to make the effective altruism movement more democratic. Additionally, while MacAskill holds leading positions in four effective altruist organizations¹⁶⁴ and although he is one of the effective altruism movement's founders and most recognizable figures, his power to personally impact the movement's many organizations may be smaller than it seems. Nonetheless, we may understand Cremer's disappointment that one of the most influential figures in effective altruism has seemingly not done more to spread the word about critiques like Cremer's upon hearing of them.

Adding insult to injury, the sort of concerns raised by the anti-capitalist, decolonizing and democratic critiques appear to be distressingly absent among the winners of the 'EA Criticism and Red Teaming Contest' held on the Effective Altruism Forum in 2022 – which awarded a total of \$120,000 to 31 of the contest's 341 entries.¹⁶⁵ (Interestingly, Cremer's article on value-alignment did win a \$200 prize in an unrelated contest on the forum two years earlier.¹⁶⁶) "If you believe EA [effective altruism] is epistemically healthy, you must ask yourself why your fellow members are unwilling to express criticism publicly", Cremer wrote nearly a year before the contest.¹⁶⁷ Strikingly, four of the criticism contest's winning entries were published anonymously, and an additional entry – which criticized a specific organization – was hidden from public view, seemingly at the request of the entry's author.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁴ William MacAskill, "Nonprofits," [williammacaskill.com](https://www.williammacaskill.com/nonprofits), accessed May 19, 2023, <https://www.williammacaskill.com/nonprofits>.

¹⁶⁵ Owen Cotton-Barratt and Lizka Vaintrob, "Winners of the EA Criticism and Red Teaming Contest," Effective Altruism Forum, October 1, 2022, <https://forum.effectivealtruism.org/posts/YgbpxJmEdFhFGpqi/winners-of-the-ea-criticism-and-red-teaming-contest>. Among the entries that did not win was a critique of effective altruism's support for Sam Bankman-Fried and FTX. This critique, which warns of conflict of interest that 'raises obvious questions regarding the trustworthiness of 80,000 Hours' coverage of Sam Bankman-Fried and of topics his interests are linked with (quantitative trading, cryptocurrency, the FTX firm...)', was written under a pseudonym out of 'fear of reputational damage'. (source: Sven Rone, "The Effective Altruism Movement Is Not above Conflicts of Interest," Medium, September 1, 2022, https://medium.com/@sven_rone/the-effective-altruism-movement-is-not-above-conflicts-of-interest-25f7125220a5.) Strikingly, the criticism contest's submissions deadline was September 1, 2022 – well over a month before the bankruptcy of FTX and over two months before Bankman-Fried's arrest.

¹⁶⁶ Aaron Gertler, "EA Forum Prize: Winners for July 2020," Effective Altruism Forum, October 8, 2020, <https://forum.effectivealtruism.org/posts/3hwHbWcbBjd7Wh9hS/ea-forum-prize-winners-for-july-2020>.

¹⁶⁷ Carla Zoe Cremer, "Democratising Risk - or How EA Deals with Critics," Effective Altruism Forum, December 28, 2021, <https://forum.effectivealtruism.org/posts/gx7BEkoRbctjkyTme/democratising-risk-or-how-ea-deals-with-critics-1>.

¹⁶⁸ Cotton-Barratt and Vaintrob, 2022.

Cremer is not alone with her objections. In early 2023, a group of about ten anonymous authors using the pseudonym 'ConcernedEAs' published a very long essay on the Effective Altruism Forum. In this essay, entitled 'Doing EA Better', they argue for points similar to Cremer's and explicitly reference her work.¹⁶⁹ Among other things, 'ConcernedEAs' write that "EA [effective altruist] decision-making is highly centralised, opaque, and unaccountable, but there are several evidence-based methods for improving the situation" and that "EA [effective altruism] is very open to shallow critiques, but not deep critiques." Why did 'ConcernedEAs' publish their post anonymously? They write the following:

Experience indicates that it is likely many EAs [effective altruists] will agree with significant proportions of what we say, but have not said as much publicly due to the significant risk doing so would pose to their careers, access to EA [effective altruist] spaces, and likelihood of ever getting funded again. Naturally the above considerations also apply to us: we are anonymous for a reason.¹⁷⁰

In her 2020 essay on value-alignment, Cremer already critically described such bureaucracy and technocracy of the effective altruism movement:

EA [effective altruism] is hierarchically organised via central institutions. They donate funds, coordinate local groups, outline research agenda, prioritise cause areas and give donation advice. These include the Centre for Effective Altruism, Open Philanthropy Project, Future of Humanity Institute, Future of Life Institute, Giving What We Can, 80.000 Hours, the Effective Altruism Foundation and others. Earning a job at these institutions comes with earning a higher reputation. [...] I'm not aware of data about job traffic in EA, but it would be useful both for understanding the situation and to spot conflicts of

¹⁶⁹ ConcernedEAs, "Doing EA Better," Effective Altruism Forum, January 17, 2023, <https://forum.effectivealtruism.org/posts/54vAiSFkYszTWWWv4/doing-ea-better-1>. In the introduction to 'Doing EA Better', the authors write of 'the ~10 people that helped to write this post'.

¹⁷⁰ ConcernedEAs, "Doing EA Better," Effective Altruism Forum, January 17, 2023, <https://forum.effectivealtruism.org/posts/54vAiSFkYszTWWWv4/doing-ea-better-1>.

interest. Naturally, EA organisations will tend towards intellectual homogeneity if the same people move in-between institutions.¹⁷¹

It is to be noted that, much like traditional non-profits, none of these central effective altruist organizations are organized democratically, even though one could reasonably imagine that this would increase effectiveness through greater quality of decisionmaking, involvement of more (diverse) relevant expertise and views, and greater intrinsic motivation among participants who feel seen and heard. Perhaps it is the case that more hierarchical, less democratic non-profit organizations are nonetheless better at ‘doing good’, but this would have to be strongly backed by research. At present, major effective altruist organizations have not even considered democratic organization. Worker cooperatives^{172,173}, mutual aid organizations^{174,175} and participatory funding (‘democratic control of philanthropic organizations by those who are impacted by the organizations’ endeavors¹⁷⁶) might provide some inspiration for how a democratic non-profit could be organized, and how that could be beneficial. It is true that slower decisionmaking is usually a drawback of democracy, but this may be less of a problem to nonprofits, which are relatively small organizations who rarely need to respond extremely quickly to new events.

¹⁷¹ Carla Zoe Cremer, “Objections to Value-Alignment between Effective Altruists,” Effective Altruism Forum, July 15, 2020, <https://forum.effectivealtruism.org/posts/Dxfgi9hwwLcf5iQ/objections-to-value-alignment-between-effective-altruists>.

¹⁷² International Cooperative Alliance, “Cooperative Identity, Values & Principles,” ICA, 2018, <https://www.ica.coop/en/cooperatives/cooperative-identity>.

¹⁷³ As Bob Jacobs wrote: “Given the recent discussion surrounding the structuring and transparency of EA [effective altruist] organizations, perhaps the community could consider turning their EA organizations into co-ops.” (source: Bob Jacobs, “Democratizing the Workplace as a Cause Area,” Effective Altruism Forum, November 26, 2022, <https://forum.effectivealtruism.org/posts/pQs6bAq4BjHDpSYb/democratizing-the-workplace-as-a-cause-area-1>.)

¹⁷⁴ Sabryna Coppola, “Should Solidarity Replace Charity?: Critiquing Effective Altruism and Considering Mutual Aid as an Alternative” (Thesis, 2022), https://ida.mtholyoke.edu/bitstream/handle/10166/6350/_Coppola%20Thesis%20Final%20Draft.pdf?sequence=1.

¹⁷⁵ Savannah Pearlman, “In Tension: Effective Altruism and Mutual Aid,” Blog of the American Philosophical Association, June 23, 2022, <https://blog.apaonline.org/2022/06/23/in-tension-effective-altruism-and-mutual-aid/>.

¹⁷⁶ Táíwò, Olúfemi O. and Joshua Stein, “Is the Effective Altruism Movement in Trouble?,” The Guardian, November 16, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/nov/16/is-the-effective-altruism-movement-in-trouble>.

ConcernedEAs also argue that the Effective Altruism Forum ‘structurally discourages deep critique’.¹⁷⁷ They point out how on the Effective Altruism Forum, users who have amassed larger amounts of likes (‘karma’) on all their posts and comments combined have more voting power, that is, they can give more likes (or dislikes) to an individual comment or post than users who have received less likes overall can do. For example, those who have a grand total of 1,000 likes or more on all their posts and comments on the forum combined can give a post or comment two likes or dislikes (rather than one) by clicking the like button, and can give it six (!) likes or dislikes by clicking and holding the like button. As of writing this, there are also a handful of forum users who have amassed over 10,000 karma, which grants them the ability to give nine likes by clicking and holding the like button. By contrast, users who have a grand total of less than 100 likes can give the same post or comment no more than two likes by clicking and holding the like button.¹⁷⁸ This extremely undemocratic website design is not too different from the plural voting systems of the 19th century, in which the wealthy were allowed to have multiple votes per person. However, despite the small programming effort it would presumably take to make the voting system democratic (one vote per person), the Effective Altruism Forum still uses the unequal voting system as of writing this. Additionally, comments with a total score of less than about -5 are seemingly displayed at the bottom of the page and are hidden from view by default, and have to be clicked on to become visible. By default, it appears to be the case that the forum’s front page – which is the starting page for users who want to explore new posts and discussions on the forum – does not display topics or comments that have negative scores, even if the score is only a few points below zero. Though this is presumably intended to filter out low-quality content, in practice it could be used as an informal method of silencing dissent and (radical) critique – particularly in tandem with the unequal voting system.

¹⁷⁷ ConcernedEAs, “Doing EA Better,” Effective Altruism Forum, January 17, 2023, <https://forum.effectivealtruism.org/posts/54vAiSFkYszTWWVv4/doing-ea-better-1>.

¹⁷⁸ Marek Duda, “EA Forum 2.0 Initial Announcement,” Effective Altruism Forum, July 19, 2018, https://forum.effectivealtruism.org/posts/gNHFRWyo58cTQ8pe8/ea-forum-2-0-initial-announcement-1#A_reworked_karma_system – see the section ‘A reworked karma system’. Note how, although getting there would take several years or even decades, in theory a user of the Effective Altruism Forum can gather 500,000 likes on their account, granting them the ability to give sixteen likes or dislikes to the same comment or post. Forum users who have (as of writing this) over 10,000 karma, include Aaron Gertler, Nathan Young, Lizka, Larks and Kirsten.

Bob Jacobs has empirically documented how under this skewed system, the score ('karma') of posts and comments can be highly misleading. For some time, he registered the like count of a comment of his every time a user voted on it, and found that the comment's score quickly lowered from -8 to -15, even though only four additional votes had been cast on it during that time. Strikingly, half of these two votes were positive (as they caused an increase of the comment's score).¹⁷⁹ On another occasion, he found that a comment by him, which previously had three likes, acquired a negative net score as a result of one (!) dislike. (As of writing, eight users have voted on the comment, resulting in a net score of three).¹⁸⁰ On the forum, it is not possible to view how many points each vote has increased or decreased the score of a post or comment, which further reduces the meaningfulness of the score displayed on top of comments and posts.

With this unfair voting system, the largest and by far most important effective altruist discussion space does a disservice not only to its own aspiring members, but also to outsiders who seek to bring in potentially highly valuable perspectives. That effective altruism is undemocratic to those outside of the movement is the charge of the second aspect of the democratic critique of effective altruism.

Democratic claim 2: the effective altruism movement is undemocratic towards those outside of it (external democratic deficit)

Who should effective altruists listen to? That is a crucial question raised by the second claim of the democratic critique. Of course, for two reasons, effective altruism cannot accept literally everyone and anything. First, this would mean accepting all sorts of extreme and immoral ideas, like fascism or conspiracy theories. And second, if effective altruism would include nearly all possible beliefs and movements, it would be completely meaningless. On the other hand, it is clear that if the effective altruism movement only accepted an excessively narrow set of people, beliefs and interventions, it would be undemocratic, and, ironically, ineffective.

¹⁷⁹ Bob Jacobs, comment under post, Effective Altruism Forum, December 5, 2022, <https://forum.effectivealtruism.org/posts/CnAhPPsMWAxBm7pii/what-specific-changes-should-we-as-a-community-make-to-the?commentId=pkKec2jZrGpHkAzS>.

¹⁸⁰ Bob Jacobs, comment under post, Effective Altruism Forum, December 4, 2022, <https://forum.effectivealtruism.org/posts/NhSBgYq55BFs7t2cA/ea-forum-feature-suggestion-thread?commentId=vnTReJBF4WsaErboK>.

Effective altruism – like any social movement – must listen to voices who have potentially refreshing and emancipatory perspectives to offer, or whose participation is crucial in achieving morally desirable goals, while not becoming so all-encompassing that it becomes meaningless, ineffective or immoral. It must strike a balance between diversity and selectiveness. As Cremer put it:

It remains to be empirically analysed how value-aligned the community really is or should be. This data, paired with a theoretical examination of how much diversity is useful, can verify or refute whether my worries are justified. I would of course not have written this article if I was under the impression that EA [effective altruism] occupies the sweet spot between homogeneity and heterogeneity. If others have similar impressions it might be worth trying to identify that sweet spot.¹⁸¹

In other words, to use a famous saying: effective altruists should be open-minded, but not so open-minded that their brains fall out. As Amy Berg put it: “EA [effective altruism] must be a little tent rather than a big tent [in order to be] a distinct movement [...] rather than [just] a cheerleader for instrumental rationality”.¹⁸² But if what critics like Cremer and ConcernedEAs say is true, then it seems like the problem the effective altruism movement is facing right now is not too much but too little intellectual diversity.

Broadly speaking, the democratic critics identify three ways the effective altruism movement can act undemocratically towards outsiders: (1) excluding or ignoring certain academic fields, ideologies, scholars, activists, movements or interventions that are in fact quite promising, (2) not listening to the people they are trying to help, (3) giving too much power to the wealthy through philanthropy, which means less power for the less wealthy.

¹⁸¹ Carla Zoe Cremer, “Objections to Value-Alignment between Effective Altruists,” Effective Altruism Forum, July 15, 2020, <https://forum.effectivealtruism.org/posts/Dxfgi9hvwvLCf5iQ/objections-to-value-alignment-between-effective-altruists>.

¹⁸² Amy Berg, “EFFECTIVE ALTRUISM: HOW BIG SHOULD THE TENT BE?,” *Public Affairs Quarterly* 32, no. 4 (2018): 284, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26910000>.

Exclusion of valuable views from outside of the movement

First, some critics claim that effective altruism excludes or ignores certain perspectives that could in fact be valuable and relevant to the movement.

For example, Cremer appears to suggest that effective altruists are ignoring valuable alternative views. She wrote that “in my own experience, EAs [effective altruists] have strikingly similar political and philosophical views, similar media consumption and leisure interests.”¹⁸³ ConcernedEAs also claimed that “EA [effective altruism] mistakes value-alignment and seniority for expertise and neglects the value of impartial peer-review.” They add that “EA reading lists are typically narrow, homogenous, and biased, and EA has unusual social norms against reading more than a handful of specific books.” They argue that effective altruists have generally neglected many academic domains relevant to their endeavors, including ‘Disaster Risk Reduction, Futures Studies, and Science & Technology Studies’ and ‘the Humanities & Social Sciences in general’ – and in particular, philosophy of science, and history. (“Understanding how people have historically failed at the task of profoundly improving the world is vital if we want to avoid replicating those failures at larger scales.”)¹⁸⁴

Similarly, John Sanbonmatsu claims that “within EA’s [effective altruism’s] cramped intellectual rooms, there is no space for Marx or Freud, or for feminism, critical race theory, or any other historicist framework”.¹⁸⁵ ConcernedEAs, who had written that the Effective Altruism Forum ‘structurally discourages deep critique’, claim that ‘shallow’ (ie. not ‘deep’) critiques of effective altruism are ‘not critical of capitalism’.¹⁸⁶ Like Sanbonmatsu, they thus also suggest effective altruists are dismissing criticism

¹⁸³ Cremer, 2020.

¹⁸⁴ ConcernedEAs, “Doing EA Better,” Effective Altruism Forum, January 17, 2023, <https://forum.effectivealtruism.org/posts/54vAiSFkYszTWWWv4/doing-ea-better-1>. The underrepresentation of certain fields is particularly visible when we look at public lists of members of major effective altruist organizations. Usually, one will find that only a handful of these members have backgrounds in philosophy, history, sociology or anthropology, virtually always at Anglo-American universities (particularly Oxford), which may introduce a bias towards utilitarian ethics and analytical philosophy. (See, for example, the following web pages: Centre for Effective Altruism, “Team,” Centre for Effective Altruism, accessed May 19, 2023, <https://www.centreforeffectivealtruism.org/team>, GiveWell, “Our People,” GiveWell, accessed May 19, 2023, <https://www.givewell.org/about/people>, Open Philanthropy, “Team,” Open Philanthropy, accessed May 19, 2023, <https://www.openphilanthropy.org/team/>.)

¹⁸⁵ John Sanbonmatsu, “Effective Altruism and the Reified Mind,” in *The Good It Promises, the Harm It Does*, ed. Carol J. Adams, Alice Crary, and Lori Gruen (Oxford University Press, 2023), 226.

¹⁸⁶ ConcernedEAs, 2023.

of capitalism and debates on the relationship between effective altruism and capitalism.

Besides being more inclusive towards new and valuable ideas, effective altruism also needs to become more accessible to people from minority groups, according to some critics. A majority of effective altruists appear to be white, male, university-educated¹⁸⁷ and Anglo-American¹⁸⁸, and this holds especially true for those who work for effective altruist organizations.¹⁸⁹ David Thorstad argues that in order to become more inclusive, effective altruism should consider affirmative action¹⁹⁰ and respond more strongly to cases of racism, sexism and sexual harassment in the effective altruism movement.¹⁹¹ Dylan Matthews has claimed that

[effective altruism] is not a replacement for movements through which marginalized peoples seek their own liberation. If EA [effective altruism] is to have any hope of getting more buy-in from women and people of color, it has to at least *acknowledge* that.¹⁹²

Besides being more just, a more inclusive effective altruism movement would also be more effective because not excluding certain groups means raising the chances of attracting new members who may bring in valuable perspectives and ideas on how to do good effectively.

¹⁸⁷ Moss, David, and Willem Slegers. "EA Survey 2022: Demographics." Effective Altruism Forum, May 15, 2023.

<https://forum.effectivealtruism.org/posts/AJDgnPXqZ48eSCjEQ/ea-survey-2022-demographics>.

¹⁸⁸ David Moss, "EA Survey 2020: Geography," Effective Altruism Forum, October 6, 2021,

<https://forum.effectivealtruism.org/posts/zMKxgK4wbSywnkFrn/ea-survey-2020-geography>.

¹⁸⁹ When one looks at the public lists of employees at major effective altruist organizations, women appear to be somewhat more represented there than they are in the rest of the effective altruism movement, but people from outside the Anglo-American world appear to be nearly absent among the members of effective altruist organizations, many of whom have degrees from prestigious universities like Oxford, Cambridge or Stanford. (For good examples of these trends, see: Centre for Effective Altruism, "Team," Centre for Effective Altruism, accessed May 19, 2023, <https://www.centreforeffectivealtruism.org/team>, GiveWell, "Our People," GiveWell, accessed May 19, 2023, <https://www.givewell.org/about/people>, Open Philanthropy, "Team," Open Philanthropy, accessed May 19, 2023, <https://www.openphilanthropy.org/team/>.)

¹⁹⁰ David Thorstad, "Belonging (Part 3: Reform)," Reflective altruism, January 21, 2023,

<https://ineffectivealtruismblog.com/2023/01/21/belonging-part-3-reform/>.

¹⁹¹ David Thorstad, "Belonging (Part 4: TIME's Up?)," Reflective altruism, March 4, 2023,

<https://ineffectivealtruismblog.com/2023/03/04/belonging-part-4-times-up/>.

¹⁹² Dylan Matthews, "I Spent a Weekend at Google Talking with Nerds about Charity. I Came Away ... Worried.," Vox, August 10, 2015, <https://www.vox.com/2015/8/10/9124145/effective-altruism-global-ai>.

In addition, some authors who have contributed to *The Good It Promises, the Harm it Does*, a compilation of critical essays on effective altruism, are concerned by effective altruism's supposed neglect of 'community organizing' and 'grassroots' (bottom-up) activism. For example, Simone de Lima argues that 'what keeps the most vulnerable afloat' is not 'large systems', but

it's the community organizers countering fake news and doing outreach in different languages to immigrants; [...] in Brazil, it's the Movimento dos Sem Terra (Landless Workers' Movement) providing thousands of tons to produce to those unemployed and disenfranchised by the pandemic; it's the Indigenous communities and allies working to protect their lands from miners, land grabbers, and the virus; it's the communities in the favelas self-organizing and sharing knowledge, food, and aid. [...] Again, these are exactly the kinds of initiatives Effective Altruists would frown upon, with their "objective" calculations of lives saved per dollar.¹⁹³

The essay by Andrew deCoriolis, Aaron S. Gross, Joseph Tuminello, Steve J. Gross and Jennifer Channin espouses similar views: "Effective Altruists have more or less dedicated that community organizing is "not effective", and that has put a chill on support for certain organizations even when they could, if given the right opportunity, empirically demonstrate high levels of effectiveness."¹⁹⁴ They also suggest that effective altruists should engage in "the messy work of listening to a wide range of strategic thinking to really suss out the limits and potentials of diverse forms of activism."¹⁹⁵

In the introduction to the book, Carol J. Adams, Alice Crary and Lori Gruen write that

The Good It Promises, The Harm It Does is, in real part, a project of recovery: there are voices and projects much older than EA [effective altruism], keenly needed activist traditions that EA lacks the resources to assess and so

¹⁹³ Simone de Lima, "Effective Altruism's Unsuspecting Twenty-First-Century Colonialism," in *The Good It Promises, the Harm It Does*, ed. Carol J. Adams, Alice Crary, and Lori Gruen (Oxford University Press, 2023), 45–46.

¹⁹⁴ Andrew deCoriolis et al., "Animal Advocacy's Stockholm Syndrome," in *The Good It Promises, the Harm It Does*, ed. Carol J. Adams, Alice Crary, and Lori Gruen (Oxford University Press, 2023), 74.

¹⁹⁵ deCoriolis et al., 2023, 77.

threatens to squelch. We seek to recover, positively, what we are in danger of losing.¹⁹⁶

Amia Srinivasan similarly writes in the foreword that

liberation struggles and justice movements that operate outside Effective Altruism's terms [long predate] Effective Altruism, and it is striking that Effective Altruism has not found anything very worthwhile in them: in the historically deep and ongoing movements for the rights of working-class people, nonhuman animals, people of color, Indigenous people, women, incarcerated people, disabled people, and people living under colonial and authoritarian rule. For most Effective Altruists, these movements are [...] not political formations from which to learn, with which to create coalition, or to join.¹⁹⁷

patrice jones even claims that “by seeking to advantage some charitable endeavors, EA [effective altruism] seeks to disadvantage others. I can attest that EA has succeeded in that aim, causing both fiscal and emotional distress to activists engaged in truly useful work.”¹⁹⁸ John Sanbonmatsu writes that effective altruists have the worldview of ‘a technocratic managerial elite’, which according to him inevitably ‘leads to the over-valorization of billionaires and financiers in EA [effective altruist] discourse, and a corresponding under-valorization of grass-roots activists and radicals.’¹⁹⁹ Here one could think of how effective altruist organizations grant wealthy individuals (eg. Sam Bankman-Fried) far more influence than volunteers who help organize local effective altruist groups.

By ignoring other movements for positive change, the critics argue, effective altruists also ignore certain potentially effective interventions. According to Alice Crary, effective altruists exclude ‘a vast array of grass-roots pro-animal organizations and

¹⁹⁶ Carol J. Adams, Alice Crary, and Lori Gruen, “Introduction,” in *The Good It Promises, the Harm It Does*, ed. Carol J. Adams, Alice Crary, and Lori Gruen (Oxford University Press, 2023), 28–29.

¹⁹⁷ Amia Srinivasan, “Foreword,” in *The Good It Promises, the Harm It Does*, ed. Carol J. Adams, Alice Crary, and Lori Gruen (Oxford University Press, 2023), 8–9.

¹⁹⁸ patrice jones, “Queer Eye on the EA Guys,” in *The Good It Promises, the Harm It Does*, ed. Carol J. Adams, Alice Crary, and Lori Gruen (Oxford University Press, 2023), 137.

¹⁹⁹ John Sanbonmatsu, “Effective Altruism and the Reified Mind,” in *The Good It Promises, the Harm It Does*, ed. Carol J. Adams, Alice Crary, and Lori Gruen (Oxford University Press, 2023), 219–20.

movements'.²⁰⁰ Matthew C. Halteman writes that effective altruists insufficiently consider 'food systems education mainstream in colleges and universities and efforts to engage and educate religious communities'²⁰¹, while Kathy Stevens laments effective altruism's 'persistent disinterest in evaluating the impact of sanctuaries', ie. spaces where animals are taken care of for the rest of their lives and can be visited. The type of animal sanctuary advocated by several authors of *The Good It Promises, the Harm It Does* is mainly inhabited by escaped farm animals and is run by animal advocates who want to raise awareness about farmed animal suffering and veganism. Stevens continues:

How can such a heady, mathematical approach to giving be embraced when it minimizes, misunderstands, and misrepresents—indeed virtually *dismisses*—the entire sanctuary movement, inarguably a leading contributor to veganism, and therefore a leading force for change for farm animals?"²⁰²

To the extent that – to paraphrase Sanbonmatsu's article from *The Good It Promises, the Harm It Does* – effective altruism is technocratic (because it trusts and uses the knowledge of scientists and experts more than others – particularly if these experts are affiliated with effective altruism), it may also be at odds with democracy. In the effective altruism movement, the views of donors and activists are sometimes seen as less relevant than expert judgment, especially in the case of funds, pools of donations that are managed by experts, who periodically distribute the fund's money across nonprofits (eg. GiveWell's Top Charities Fund, Animal Charity Evaluators' Movement Grants Fund, Founders Pledge's Climate Change Fund, the Effective Altruism Infrastructure Fund, ...). Besides donating to these funds, effective altruist organizations strongly encourage donating to charities ('high-impact', 'top' charities – a classic example of this is the Against Malaria Foundation, which distributes

²⁰⁰ Alice Crary, "Against 'Effective Altruism,'" *Radical Philosophy*, no. 210 (2021): 40, <https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/article/against-effective-altruism>.

²⁰¹ Matthew C. Halteman, "Diversifying Effective Altruism's Long Shots in Animal Advocacy: An Invitation to Prioritize Black Vegans, Higher Education, and Religious Communities," in *The Good It Promises, the Harm It Does*, ed. Carol J. Adams, Alice Crary, and Lori Gruen. (Oxford University Press, 2023), 107.

²⁰² Kathy Stevens, "Our Partners, the Animals: Reflections from a Farmed Animal Sanctuary," in *The Good It Promises, the Harm It Does*, ed. Carol J. Adams, Alice Crary, and Lori Gruen (Oxford University Press, 2023), 203.

insecticide-treated bednets in Africa to prevent malaria) that the effective altruist researchers have closely examined and approved.²⁰³

Of course, in many cases, the increased cost-effectiveness of donations guided by expert judgment is laudable, but effective altruists should beware not to discourage the donor's critical thinking too much. For example, someone may wonder whether it is a good idea to donate to Oxfam. Effective altruists have generally advocated against donating to 'mega-charities', large and well-known non-profits that run a wide variety of programs. The objection generally refers to two of the criteria of the ITN framework: importance (the charge that the mega-charity does not sufficiently work on the biggest problems) and neglectedness (the claim that the issues the mega-charity focuses on are not that neglected, and/or that the mega-charity itself is not so neglected because it already receives more donations than smaller and more effective NGOs). For example, MacAskill wrote that

[‘Mega-charities’ like WorldVision or Oxfam or UNICEF] run a variety of programmes, and for that reason they are very difficult to evaluate. I also think it’s unlikely that, even if we were able to evaluate them in depth, we would conclude that [mega-charities] are as effective as the charities I list here [GiveDirectly, Deworm the World Initiative, Against Malaria Foundation, ...]. If a charity implements a variety of programmes, inevitably some of these programmes will be more effective than others. In which case, we should simply focus on funding those very best programmes. For example we argued

²⁰³ The donation page of Giving What We Can – which can also be easily accessed via [effectivealtruism.org](https://www.effectivealtruism.org), on the website's home page, by clicking 'Take Action' and then 'Find the best charities' – first mentions their recommended expert-managed funds and then individual charitable organizations. No information is provided on how to critically evaluate nonprofits on your own. Another article, which is about 'the best charities to donate to' and which features slightly less prominently on the Giving What We Can website, does mention the option of 'donating based on your own research', but this is mentioned all the way near the bottom of the article, and is discouraged: "in general, we recommend most donors focus their efforts on finding an evaluator that aligns with their values and who they can trust. This is because directly evaluating charities takes a substantial amount of time and expertise", they write. (sources: Centre for Effective Altruism, "Effective Altruism," [effectivealtruism.org](https://www.effectivealtruism.org/), accessed May 20, 2023, <https://www.effectivealtruism.org/>, Giving What We Can, "Donate to High-Impact Charities and Nonprofits with Giving What We Can," Giving What We Can, accessed May 20, 2023, <https://www.givingwhatwecan.org/donate/organizations>, Michael Townsend and Sjr Hoeijmakers, "What Are the Best Charities to Donate to in 2023?," Giving What We Can, January 1, 2023, <https://www.givingwhatwecan.org/best-charities-to-donate-to-2023>.)

earlier that disaster relief is generally not the most effective use of funding, but many mega-charities spend a large portion of their energies on just that.²⁰⁴

However, even if we accept that one often should not donate to disaster relief nonprofits (which is debatable), it is still possible that some of the other programs the mega-charity runs (about 60% of the programs Oxfam supports are not focused on humanitarian aid, according to their website²⁰⁵) are highly cost-effective, perhaps even so much that it may compensate for the fact that a portion of our donation to Oxfam goes to the ‘less effective’ cause of disaster relief. GiveWell, one of the most well-known effective altruist charity evaluators, does not recommend Oxfam. This judgment is based on research that is nearly fourteen (!) years old as of writing this, according to GiveWell themselves:

The last time we examined Oxfam International was in 2009. In our latest open-ended review of charities [conducted in 2011], we determined that it was unlikely to meet our criteria based on our past examination of it, so we did not revisit it.²⁰⁶

However, both GiveWell’s effectiveness criteria and the cost-effectiveness of Oxfam’s programs may change over time. Additionally, Oxfam claims to spend about a tenth of its program expenditure on ‘advocacy and influencing’.²⁰⁷ This can be very high-impact and yet is hard to measure using criteria such as those used by GiveWell. Finally, as Judith Lichtenberg pointed out:

GiveWell’s judgments of effectiveness would seem to depend on background conditions that include the operations of large charities like Oxfam and Doctors Without Borders. If contributions to those organizations declined

²⁰⁴ William MacAskill, *Doing Good Better: Effective Altruism and a Radical New Way to Make a Difference* (London: Faber & Faber, Guardian Books, 2015), 132.

²⁰⁵ Oxfam International, “Our Finances and Accountability,” Oxfam International, accessed May 20, 2023, <https://www.oxfam.org/en/what-we-do/about/our-finances-and-accountability>.

²⁰⁶ GiveWell, “Oxfam,” GiveWell, March 2010, <https://www.givewell.org/international/charities/Oxfam>.

²⁰⁷ Oxfam International, “Our Finances and Accountability,” Oxfam International, accessed May 20, 2023, <https://www.oxfam.org/en/what-we-do/about/our-finances-and-accountability>.

significantly, it seems likely that serious consequences would ensue for poor people around the world.²⁰⁸

For example, the Against Malaria Foundation claims to have previously collaborated with the Red Cross, UNICEF, Save the Children and World Vision, among many other smaller organizations.²⁰⁹

This all by no means invalidates the very thorough and well-informed recommendations GiveWell and other effective altruist charity evaluators make, which truly can increase how much good a donation does. However, donors ought to be made aware of nuances like those I have just described.²¹⁰ Otherwise, effective altruists risk being undemocratic towards donors, subtly concentrating power over donations into the hands of (influential) effective altruists.

Excluding the beneficiaries of charity

Second, some critics are worried that effective altruists do not meaningfully cooperate with the people they are trying to help.

I have already discussed this objection in the context of extreme poverty alleviation, with some decolonizing critics suggesting that effective altruism may be paternalist, trying to help people in extreme poverty while not listening to them or involving them in decisionmaking. The concern that effective altruism excludes the people it is trying to help – in this case, extremely poor people – is also present in *The Good it*

²⁰⁸ Judith Lichtenberg, “Peter Singer’s Extremely Altruistic Heirs,” *The New Republic*, November 30, 2015, <https://newrepublic.com/article/124690/peter-singers-extremely-altruistic-heirs>.

²⁰⁹ Against Malaria Foundation, “Distribution Partners,” Against Malaria Foundation, accessed May 20, 2023, https://www.againstmalaria.com/Distribution_Partners.aspx.

²¹⁰ Interestingly, Peter Singer, one of the most convinced and famous effective altruists, seems to be much more willing to give Oxfam the benefit of doubt. He praises Oxfam’s support for women’s rights movements in Mozambique, which he says “isn’t possible to quantify [but] appears to have contributed to improving the lives of millions of women who had been denied basic rights we take for granted.” (Peter Singer, *The Life You Can Save: How to Do Your Part to End World Poverty: 10th Anniversary Edition* (Bainbridge Island, WA: The Life You Can Save, 2019), 139, <https://www.thelifeyoucansave.org/the-book/>.) He also writes favorably of an Oxfam campaign to partially redistribute the revenue from newfound oil to poor farmers in Ghana (Singer, 2019, 139). Singer writes that he is “open-minded about the best way to combat poverty. Some organizations—Oxfam for example—are engaged in emergency relief, development aid, and advocacy work for a fairer deal for low-income countries.” (Singer, 2019, 51)

Promises, the Harm it Does. In the book's introduction, Carol J. Adams, Alice Crary and Lori Gruen write that

[the] fact that EA [effective altruism] is part of a tradition that adopts a top-down approach to complex social problems, and that does not treat listening to people's voices, such as those of participants in social movements, as a fundamental methodological precept, is another reason that this book is necessary. [...] We believe in the importance of listening to people who are on the ground and engaged in struggle, and in learning from the harms that they have experienced.²¹¹

In her contribution to the volume, patrice jones argues that "EA [effective altruism] within animal advocacy has consistently steered funds toward organizations run by white men, thereby compounding the structural difficulties in raising funds faced by organizations run by people of color as well as by women-led organizations."²¹² Indeed, most of the world's poorest people are not white²¹³, and extreme poverty may affect women more intensely²¹⁴ – so excluding organizations by them almost by definition means not sufficiently listening to extremely poor people. (Although jones specifically mentions effective altruist animal advocacy, I imagine that she would have similar concerns over effective altruism in general.)

Some have argued that effective altruism's focus on charity causes it to disregard the perspectives of poor people. Contradicting my earlier critical remarks on effective altruism's technocratic attitude towards donors, Ailie Ross-Oliver claims that

²¹¹ Carol J. Adams, Alice Crary, and Lori Gruen, "Introduction," in *The Good It Promises, the Harm It Does*, ed. Carol J. Adams, Alice Crary, and Lori Gruen (Oxford University Press, 2023), 23–24.

²¹² patrice jones, "Queer Eye on the EA Guys," in *The Good It Promises, the Harm It Does*, ed. Carol J. Adams, Alice Crary, and Lori Gruen (Oxford University Press, 2023), 138.

²¹³ In 2019, the majority of people living in extreme poverty was from Sub-Saharan Africa (source: Our World in Data, "Number of People Living in Extreme Poverty," Our World in Data, October 3, 2022, https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/total-population-in-extreme-poverty?tab=chart&country=Sub-Saharan+Africa~Europe+and+Central+Asia~Latin+America+and+the+Caribbean~Middle+East+and+North+Africa~East+Asia+and+Pacific~South+Asia~OWID_WRL.)

²¹⁴ Carolina Sánchez-Páramo and Ana Maria Munoz-Boudet, "No, 70% of the World's Poor Aren't Women, but That Doesn't Mean Poverty Isn't Sexist," World Bank Blogs, March 8, 2018, <https://blogs.worldbank.org/developmenttalk/no-70-world-s-poor-aren-t-women-doesn-t-mean-poverty-isn-t-sexist>.

EA [effective altruism] places donors at the fore of decision making as it is designed to ensure that donors money is used in the most effective manner. The donor-centrism within the EA approach renders it largely unhelpful in increasing global justice.²¹⁵

Jennifer Rubenstein similarly writes that “the effective altruism movement retains members by directing their emotional energies and commitments toward *each other*, not the people they aim to assist”, which causes it to “[fail] to meet normative criteria of democracy and equality.”²¹⁶

Too much support for philanthropy by the rich

Third, some democratic critics of effective altruism argue that effective altruism excessively supports wealthy philanthropy, which may be undemocratic as it means that the rich have more of a say in how the world must be changed.

Even if one is not against the existence of billionaires, and even if one supports the actions of (some) billionaire philanthropists, one may still be concerned that billionaire philanthropy concentrates too much power in the hands of the wealthy. According to David Thorstad, such concerns were in fact the reason why, in the nineteenth century, governments refused the super wealthy to set up philanthropic foundations. Although he is not against their existence, Thorstad argues that philanthropic foundations are not accountable to anybody and may draw attention away from tax avoidance or insufficiently high wealth taxes.²¹⁷ Additionally, Thorstad warns, if no limit is put upon how long a philanthropic foundation may exist, that may worsen these issues – by concentrating more and more power in the hands of the rich in the long term.²¹⁸

²¹⁵ Ailie Ross-Oliver, “How Helpful Is ‘Effective Altruism’ as an Approach to Increasing Global Justice?,” E-International Relations, April 5, 2021, <https://www.e-ir.info/2021/04/05/how-helpful-is-effective-altruism-as-an-approach-to-increasing-global-justice/>.

²¹⁶ Jennifer Rubenstein, “Response to Effective Altruism,” Boston Review, July 1, 2015, https://www.bostonreview.net/forum_response/response-jennifer-rubenstein/.

²¹⁷ David Thorstad, “Billionaire Philanthropy (Part 2: Philanthropy and Democracy),” Reflective altruism, December 29, 2022, <https://ineffectivealtruismblog.com/2022/12/29/philanthropy-and-democracy/>.

²¹⁸ David Thorstad, “Billionaire Philanthropy (Part 3: Patient Philanthropy),” Reflective altruism, February 11, 2023, <https://ineffectivealtruismblog.com/2023/02/11/patient-philanthropy/>.

Responding to such critiques, effective altruist Scott Alexander has argued that billionaire philanthropy can be a force for good if it counteracts problems created in part by poor government decisions. For example, if a billionaire donates money to a good cause (criminal justice reform, animal welfare advocacy, immigration policy reform, ...), then that is a donation which, if it had been collected by the government as tax, might have instead gone to a less effective cause or even work against a good cause (mass incarceration, subsidizing animal agriculture, detaining refugees and letting them die at sea, ...). Alexander also argues that the scale of billionaire philanthropy isn't that big anyway: "The yearly [United States] federal budget is \$4 trillion. The yearly billionaire philanthropy budget is about \$10 billion, 400 times smaller."²¹⁹

However, even if billionaire philanthropy can do good, it remains problematic. First, wealthy philanthropy can lower the pressure on the rich to pay more taxes, provide better working conditions, better pay and more environmentally friendly policies: "I am already donating millions to charity, what else do you want from me?", billionaires might reason. In the United States – where over a fourth of the world's billionaires live – philanthropy already reduces the amount of taxes paid by the rich, who have to pay higher taxes and thus also get bigger returns on tax deducted charitable donations.²²⁰ Second, it is misleading to compare philanthropy only to government spending. Even if the annual philanthropic budget in the United States is 400 times smaller than the government budget, that is still absolutely massive, considering how tiny the group of people controlling that wealth is. In effect, in the United States, about 700 people (mostly older, white men) allocate billions of dollars per year to impact society in all kinds of ways. Any of the roughly 700 American billionaires²²¹ could donate millions to charity per year, whereas the vast majority of the hundreds of millions of Americans who are not billionaires could probably donate no more than a few hundred dollars per year without getting into financial problems. It is not

²¹⁹ Scott Alexander, "Against Against Billionaire Philanthropy," Slate Star Codex, July 29, 2019, <https://slatestarcodex.com/2019/07/29/against-against-billionaire-philanthropy/>.

²²⁰ Liz Scheltens et al., "How Tax Breaks Help the Rich," YouTube, Vox, October 9, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k1vE_LVBx4s.

²²¹ Chase Peterson-Withorn, "Forbes' 37th Annual World's Billionaires List: Facts and Figures 2023," Forbes, April 4, 2023, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/chasewithorn/2023/04/04/forbes-37th-annual-worlds-billionaires-list-facts-and-figures-2023/?sh=1617f7177d76>.

exactly democratic that in a country with roughly 332 million inhabitants, about 700 people each have hundreds of thousands of times more power over the non-profit industry than everybody else in the country does. As economic inequality increases and the amount of money that charities could productively use also grows, this massive power imbalance between the very richest and almost everybody else could further worsen. The problem becomes even more severe the more the total amount of wealth owned by philanthropists exceeds the amount of money non-profits could realistically use. Effective altruists are rightly dissatisfied with the moral effectiveness of current billionaire philanthropy, but unless effective altruists are personally billionaires, there is very, very little they can hope to change about this situation in which the world's wealthiest donate hundreds of millions of dollars to, ahem, rather ineffective causes, such as elite universities, art galleries, concert halls, mansions or yachts.

A defender of billionaire philanthropy could now point out that if billionaires spend their fortunes on morally and socially just causes, this is still much better than them keeping their money to themselves. This holds true even if only a few billionaires donate effectively. (This is what I will refer to as the 'pragmatism' in the next chapter of this work). As Dylan Matthews wrote, "we will live in a world of extreme wealth inequality for the foreseeable future, and the best we can likely hope is for the winners in that rigged game to donate their winnings justly."²²² However, as of writing this, only roughly four of the world's 2,668 billionaires support effective altruism²²³, meaning that a world where all billionaires gave according to enlightened effective altruist principles may be less feasible than one where wealth taxes on the world's richest are significantly raised. (One effective altruist estimated that by 2027, there will be two additional effective altruist billionaires.²²⁴) Additionally, wealth taxes would probably be more durable than support for effective altruism from individual

²²² Dylan Matthews, "If You're Such an Effective Altruist, How Come You're so Rich?," Vox, August 23, 2022, <https://www.vox.com/future-perfect/2022/8/23/23313081/effective-altruism-billionaires-tax-inequality-dustin-moskovitz-sam-bankman-fried>.

²²³ Bentham's Bulldog, "Replying to Jacobin's Hitpiece about Effective Altruism, That Mentions Me by Name," Substack, January 19, 2023, <https://benthams.substack.com/p/replying-jacobins-hitpiece-about>.

²²⁴ Erich Grunewald, "How Many EA Billionaires Five Years from Now?," Effective Altruism Forum, August 20, 2022, <https://forum.effectivealtruism.org/posts/Ze2Je5GCLBDj3nDzK/how-many-ea-billionaires-five-years-from-now>.

billionaires. Such taxes may sound unrealistic to some, but getting a significant number of billionaires to set aside their own interests and biases in order to give effectively instead, sounds to me even less probable.

Effective altruists must reckon with the hard question if and when the good billionaires (can) do through philanthropy outweighs the social harms billionaires (can) do. They must also not create a false dilemma between government and philanthropy. These are certainly not the only possible means for effectively distributing large amounts of resources to those who need them the most. Staying true to the principle of means neutrality (any means for doing good are in principle open to consideration), effective altruists should consider alternatives (for example, referendums on major government spending decisions).

Last but not least, if becoming too dependent on ultra wealthy funders is a bad idea for society in general (I wouldn't trust a government consisting solely of billionaires), it is detrimental to the effective altruism movement too. As Cremer put it: "Having a handful of wealthy donors and their advisors dictate the evolution of an entire field is bad epistemics at best and corruption at worst."²²⁵ Or, as ConcernedEAs wrote:

Relying on a small number of ultra-wealthy members of the tech sector incentivises us to accept or even promote their political, philosophical, and cultural beliefs, at the expense of the rigorous critical examination EA [effective altruism] prides itself on. This may undermine even the most virtuous movement over the long term.²²⁶

ConcernedEAs continue:

Most of the proposed interventions [in popular books by effective altruists] also reflect the interests of Silicon Valley. [...] [Priority] concerns for the long-term future focus on economic elite interest areas [...] over other issues

²²⁵ Carla Zoe Cremer, "Democratising Risk - or How EA Deals with Critics," Effective Altruism Forum, December 28, 2021, <https://forum.effectivealtruism.org/posts/gx7BEkoRbctjkyTme/democratising-risk-or-how-ea-deals-with-critics-1>.

²²⁶ ConcernedEAs, "Doing EA Better," Effective Altruism Forum, January 17, 2023, <https://forum.effectivealtruism.org/posts/54vAiSFkYszTWWWv4/doing-ea-better-1>.

that are at least as critical but would undermine the power and/or status of wealthy philanthropists, like workplace democratisation or wealth redistribution. Again, it is not that any of these positions are inherently wrong because they align with elite interests, just that this is a bias we really need to be aware of.²²⁷

Case study: the current state of billionaire effective altruist philanthropy

The problems with ultra rich philanthropy discussed in the previous sections become all the more visible when we examine the actual state of effective altruist philanthropy by the wealthy. As I have mentioned before, there are (as of writing this) about 2,668 billionaires in the world, and only four of them plan to donate their wealth according to effective altruist principles.²²⁸ Of course, rich people who own less than a billion dollars could also do philanthropy. Suppose you are a wealthy individual and besides your annual or monthly donations – perhaps you have already taken the Giving What We Can pledge to donate (at least) 10% of your income to effective causes²²⁹ – you want the rest of your accumulated capital to go to highly effective causes as well. One of your better options would probably be to sign a Founders Pledge, which is managed by an effective altruism-influenced²³⁰ charitable organization of the same name that encourages capitalists to donate a portion of the revenue from the sale of their financial assets or business.²³¹ Although the Founders Pledge is legally binding, the minimum pledge percentage is only 5%, with the average being 7.5% (according to Founders Pledge themselves)²³² and even this is not strictly guaranteed, because:

²²⁷ ConcernedEAs, 2023.

²²⁸ Bentham's Bulldog, "Replying to Jacobin's Hitpiece about Effective Altruism, That Mentions Me by Name," Substack, January 19, 2023, <https://benthams.substack.com/p/replying-jacobins-hitpiece-about>.

²²⁹ Giving What We Can, "Our Pledge," Giving What We Can, accessed May 20, 2023, <https://www.givingwhatwecan.org/pledge>.

²³⁰ William MacAskill and David Goldberg, "One of the Most Exciting New Effective Altruist Organisations: An Interview with David Goldberg of the Founders Pledge," 80,000 Hours, November 26, 2015, <https://80000hours.org/2015/11/one-of-the-most-exciting-new-effective-altruist-organisations-an-interview-with-david-goldberg-of-the-founders-pledge/>.

²³¹ Founders Pledge, "Home," Founders Pledge, accessed May 20, 2023, <https://founderspledge.com/>.

²³² Founders Pledge, "Faq," Founders Pledge, accessed May 20, 2023, <https://founderspledge.com/faq>.

If you don't exit your business or make money by liquidating your shares, your pledge is void and nothing is owed. The pledge only means that you will donate *if and when* you make money from a liquidity event.²³³

Still, the Founders Pledge seems like a 'good deal' for rich philanthropists who want to change the world for the better. Although "you can donate to any non-profit organisations (NPOs) of your choosing, anywhere in the world, to fulfill your Founders Pledge"²³⁴, the organization nonetheless advises signatories on where they could best donate their capital, to organizations working in 'classic' effective altruist cause areas like extreme poverty alleviation and animal welfare, but also their 'less-discussed causes', like housing affordability, 'evidence-based policy', psychedelic-assisted mental health treatments and mitigating the risks presented by autonomous weapon systems and military use of artificial intelligence.²³⁵

Founders Pledge claims (as of writing this) that \$9.32 billion has thus far been pledged in total, of which nearly \$900 million has been donated already.²³⁶ Not bad, right? Recall how the total amount of money American billionaires donate to charity was roughly \$10 billion in 2018 – about the same amount of capital that has ever been promised by Founders Pledge signatories. Strikingly, Founders Pledge has not attracted the interest of the world's very wealthiest. That feat has instead been accomplished by The Giving Pledge, a charitable organization founded by Bill Gates and Warren Buffett. Although Peter Singer once infamously described Bill and Melinda Gates and Warren Buffett as 'the most effective altruists in history'²³⁷, the philanthropic pledge non-profit founded by Gates and Buffett is not, in fact, significantly influenced by effective altruism. Both the Giving Pledge and the

²³³ Founders Pledge, "Faq," Founders Pledge, accessed May 20, 2023, <https://founderspledge.com/faq>.

²³⁴ Founders Pledge, "Faq," Founders Pledge, accessed May 20, 2023, <https://founderspledge.com/faq>.

²³⁵ Founders Pledge, "High Impact Giving," Founders Pledge, accessed May 20, 2023, <https://founderspledge.com/high-impact-giving>.

²³⁶ Founders Pledge, "Home," Founders Pledge, accessed May 20, 2023, <https://founderspledge.com/>.

²³⁷ Peter Singer, "The Why and How of Effective Altruism," TED, 2013, https://www.ted.com/talks/peter_singer_the_why_and_how_of_effective_altruism/transcript: 5:08 in the video.

Founders Pledge let signatories freely choose what to donate to.^{238,239} However, unlike the Founders Pledge²⁴⁰, The Giving Pledge is ‘not a legally binding [commitment].’²⁴¹ The Giving Pledge also does not (to the author’s knowledge) advise signatories on how to donate as effectively as possible and does not (as far as the author knows) collaborate with effective altruist researchers or organizations to determine which non-profits signatories should donate to. Although it is praiseworthy that The Giving Pledge places greater demands on its signatories (they are encouraged to donate at least half of their wealth²⁴², rather than at least 5%), it also gives them a problematically large degree of freedom of choice. As it is explained on The Giving Pledge’s website:

Signatories fulfill their pledge at different times and in a variety of ways: through traditional charities, foundations, and non-profits, including their own foundations or philanthropic vehicles; through Donor-Advised Funds (DAFs); through collaborative philanthropy or co-funding, or through other charitable vehicles.

The Giving Pledge does not solicit support for any specific philanthropic foundation, cause, or organization. The Pledge encourages signatories to support issues that inspire them personally and benefit society. Giving Pledge signatories are focused on a wide array of causes, from medical research to poverty alleviation, disaster relief, climate change and arts and culture. Some signatories focus on their local communities, while others focus on national or global issues.²⁴³

²³⁸ Founders Pledge, “Faq,” Founders Pledge, accessed May 20, 2023, <https://founderspledge.com/faq>.

²³⁹ The Giving Pledge, “FAQ,” The Giving Pledge, accessed May 20, 2023, <https://givingpledge.org/faq>.

²⁴⁰ Founders Pledge, “Faq,” Founders Pledge, accessed May 20, 2023, <https://founderspledge.com/faq>.

²⁴¹ The Giving Pledge, “FAQ,” The Giving Pledge, accessed May 20, 2023, <https://givingpledge.org/faq>.

²⁴² The Giving Pledge, “FAQ,” The Giving Pledge, accessed May 20, 2023, <https://givingpledge.org/faq>.

²⁴³ The Giving Pledge, “FAQ,” The Giving Pledge, accessed May 20, 2023, <https://givingpledge.org/faq>.

That The Giving Pledge’s signatories are apparently free to donate to their own foundations, or to causes which may include medical research, disaster relief and ‘arts and culture’ – which effective altruists have often criticized for being ineffective – and that they may ‘focus on their local communities’ if they so wish, should all lead us to at least strongly question how effective altruist The Giving Pledge really is.

Although Founders Pledge has more signatories (1,776 as of writing this)²⁴⁴, they are far less wealthy than the 236 individuals (as of December 2022)²⁴⁵ who signed The Giving Pledge. The wealthiest among these 236 signatories are some of the world’s richest people, including²⁴⁶ Elon Musk (net worth of more than \$170 billion as of writing this²⁴⁷), Larry Ellison, Bill Gates and Warren Buffett (each of whom have net worths of over \$100 billion²⁴⁸), Mark Zuckerberg and Priscilla Chan (who share a net worth of \$70 billion²⁴⁹). Combined, several hundreds of billions of dollars are owned by The Giving Pledge’s signatories. Gates has openly stated that his own philanthropic foundation is his ‘top philanthropic priority’²⁵⁰, whereas Musk, Buffett, Ellison, Zuckerberg and Chan make little to no mention of which causes or organizations they will be supporting, or how they plan to decide which particular causes or organizations will be receiving their donations.²⁵¹ Effective altruists rightly attach great importance to detailed communication from non-profits about what they are actually doing, but The Giving Pledge offers no such information. The foundation does not disclose much information on how its signatories intend to donate, or on what they have donated thus far, or on the track record of these donations. Instead, it “hosts a private annual gathering for signatories in addition to smaller gatherings and

²⁴⁴ Founders Pledge, “Home,” Founders Pledge, accessed May 20, 2023, <https://founderspledge.com/>.

²⁴⁵ The Giving Pledge, “FAQ,” The Giving Pledge, accessed May 20, 2023, <https://givingpledge.org/faq>.

²⁴⁶ The Giving Pledge, “Pledger List,” The Giving Pledge, accessed May 20, 2023, <https://givingpledge.org/pledgerlist>.

²⁴⁷ Forbes, “Real Time Billionaires,” Forbes, accessed May 20, 2023, <https://www.forbes.com/real-time-billionaires/>.

²⁴⁸ Forbes, accessed May 20, 2023.

²⁴⁹ Forbes, accessed May 20, 2023.

²⁵⁰ Bill Gates, “Pledge Letters,” The Giving Pledge, October 30, 2021, <https://givingpledge.org/pledger?pledgerId=429>.

²⁵¹ See Warren Buffett, “Pledge Letter,” The Giving Pledge, 2010, <https://givingpledge.org/pledger?pledgerId=177>, Larry Ellison, “Pledge Letter,” The Giving Pledge, accessed May 20, 2023, <https://givingpledge.org/pledger?pledgerId=192>, and Mark Zuckerberg and Priscilla Chan, “Pledge Letter,” The Giving Pledge, October 9, 2015, <https://givingpledge.org/pledger?pledgerId=314>. Elon Musk does not have a page on the The Giving Pledge’s website.

learning sessions throughout the year, also including family and staff who are engaged in philanthropy”, according to The Giving Pledge’s website.²⁵²

Interestingly, Peter Singer has expressed some healthy skepticism of The Giving Pledge, only to immediately brush his doubts aside by what seems to me like a rather bad argument. Singer wrote:

Would I be willing, they asked, to be quoted in a press release in support of their approach, called The Giving Pledge? I had to think about that, because The Giving Pledge is very broad: it covers “philanthropy or charitable causes,” which could include not only helping the poor, but also building an opera house that bears the donor’s name. I asked why, given that the Gateses and Buffett themselves were focused on improving the lives of people in extreme poverty, that wasn’t part of the pledge. I was told that while it was hoped that many of those pledging would follow the example set by the Gateses and Buffett, they feared that making that requirement part of the pledge would shrink the number of people willing to take it. I accepted that answer, and in my comment, emphasized the importance of a public pledge in changing the culture of giving.²⁵³

Imagine if effective altruism decided to drop the ‘effective’ part of their philosophy out of fear that the goal and ideal of cost-effectiveness ‘would shrink the number of people’ willing to join their movement. If they did that, then Amia Srinivasan would have been completely right to claim that effective altruism ‘leaves everything just as it is’.²⁵⁴ Singer merely goes on to note that “The Giving Pledge is an example of how the public actions of one’s peers can motivate others to give, and give effectively.”²⁵⁵ However, even if it is true that ‘leading by example’ is a good way to get more people

²⁵² The Giving Pledge, “FAQ,” The Giving Pledge, accessed May 20, 2023, <https://givingpledge.org/faq>.

²⁵³ Peter Singer, *The Life You Can Save: How to Do Your Part to End World Poverty: 10th Anniversary Edition* (Bainbridge Island, WA: The Life You Can Save, 2019), 81–82, <https://www.thelifeyoucansave.org/the-book/>.

²⁵⁴ Amia Srinivasan, “Stop the Robot Apocalypse: The New Utilitarians,” *London Review of Books*, September 24, 2015, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v37/n18/amia-srinivasan/stop-the-robot-apocalypse>.

²⁵⁵ Singer, 2019, 82.

to donate more to charity – and this is all but certain²⁵⁶ – then it does not follow that they will also be donating effectively. Of course, it may very well be the case that a significant portion of the donations from the 236 signatories of The Giving Pledge will turn out to be effective by effective altruism’s standards. But the fact that The Giving Pledge – which is not legally binding, gives signatories near unlimited control over their donations, and appears to care little about ensuring the transparency or effectiveness of donations – has apparently convinced a far greater number of far richer philanthropists than the more clearly effective altruist Founders Pledge has, should have us strongly question the feasibility and desirability of billionaire philanthropy, even from an effective altruist point of view.

Effective altruists should take critique seriously

Perhaps the picture Cremer and other critics paint of the effective altruism movement is overly dark. Additionally, as Abigail Thorn said: “effective altruists could come back and say that these are organizational problems that a lot of movements have, but the *ideas* are still good.”²⁵⁷ Still, it would be unwise for effective altruists to just sweep the democratic critique (or any other serious critique) under the rug. In the long term, that would do the movement – or those that it tries to help – no good, let alone ‘the most good’. Cremer has summarized quite nicely how effective altruists might respond to the democratic critique: “The mistakes made by EAs are surprisingly mundane, which means that the solutions are generalizable and most organizations will benefit from the proposed measures [for real innovation in institutional decision-making].”²⁵⁸

²⁵⁶ In September 2022, Forbes reporter Rachel Sandler noted that “most members of The Forbes 400 [ie. the list of the 400 richest United States citizens] [...] have donated less than 5% of their fortune to charity so far. Only nine have given away more than 20% [...]: Bill Gates, Melinda French Gates, MacKenzie Scott, Warren Buffett, George Soros, Gordon Moore, Amos Hostetter Jr., Lynn Schusterman and John Arnold.” (source: Rachel Sandler, “The Forbes Philanthropy Score 2022: How Charitable Are the Richest Americans?,” Forbes, September 27, 2022, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/rachelsandler/2022/09/27/the-forbes-philanthropy-score-2022-how-charitable-are-the-richest-americans/?sh=2308d18ba098>.)

²⁵⁷ Abigail Thorn and F1nn5ter, “The Rich Have Their Own Ethics: Effective Altruism & the Crypto Crash (Ft. F1nn5ter),” *YouTube*, February 24, 2023, <https://youtu.be/Lm0vHQYKI-Y?t=863>: 14:22 in the video.

²⁵⁸ Carla Zoe Cremer, “How Effective Altruists Ignored Risk,” *Vox*, January 30, 2023, <https://www.vox.com/future-perfect/23569519/effective-altruism-sam-bankman-fried-will-macaskill-ea-risk-decentralization-philanthropy>.

Three effective altruist responses to these criticisms

In this chapter, I describe what appears to me as three of the most common responses effective altruists have given to (among others) the anti-capitalist, decolonizing and democratic critiques of effective altruism. The literature on the critique of effective altruism is still very new, and sources on responses to these critiques written by effective altruists are even rarer for now. This explains why this chapter will be quite a bit shorter than the previous two.

I identify the following three rejoinders: pragmatism, co-existence and self-criticism. The first argues that even if the critics are right, we still have to do something, and something is better than nothing, so you might as well donate at least 10% of your income to the world's most effective charities right now. The second points out how effective altruism is not meant to replace other movements and can thus co-exist with them, indeed even complement them. The third invests its hope in the promise of good effective altruist self-criticism: effective altruists can and should listen to the critiques as well as they can, and try to do whatever they can to learn from them.

These three responses can be applied to all three of the critiques discussed in the previous chapter. For example, responding to the charge that effective altruism is overly capitalist, an effective altruist might argue that even if capitalism is bad, a world with effective altruism and capitalism is still better than a capitalist world without effective altruism. This effective altruist might then add that effective altruism is not meant to replace socialism or other movements critical of capitalism, and that they might even learn from them. The effective altruist could conclude by saying that if the anti-capitalist critics have some truly good points to make, effective altruists should try their best to take them into account.

These three counter arguments are of course not the only ones possible, nor the best ones. But they appear to be the most common and most general.

Pragmatism: we *have* to act *now*

The appeal to pragmatism is a simple yet powerful rejoinder: there are others suffering right now, and thus we *must* do whatever we can to help them *now*. Even if our movement is still more capitalist, neocolonial and undemocratic than we'd like, we still have to do the most good we can right now. The appeal to pragmatism was perhaps most famously worded in Peter Singer's influential essay 'Famine, Affluence and Morality', first published in 1972. In 2019, Singer summarized the core argument (the 'Rescue Principle'²⁵⁹) from his 1972 essay as follows: "if it is in your power to prevent something bad from happening, without sacrificing anything nearly as important, it is wrong not to do so."²⁶⁰

According to effective altruists who appeal to pragmatism, criticism of effective altruism – no matter how valid – never implies that we should no longer prevent something bad (such as people dying from malaria) from happening without sacrificing anything of similar importance. Singer brought up this objection when journalist Daniel A. Gross raised a rather anti-capitalist question to him:

Gross: It seems to me that the movement that has grown up around your philosophical work has ended up being very compatible with capitalism, in the sense that some of its practitioners are people who set out to earn a lot of money—some of them are billionaires who have decided to give away the money that they've amassed. Was that something you expected, for capitalism to almost be incorporated into your philosophical work?

Singer: I don't think capitalism is incorporated into my philosophical work. I think my philosophical work is neutral about what is the best economic system—but it's also realistic, and I think we're stuck with capitalism for the foreseeable future. We are going to continue to have billionaires, and it's much better that we have billionaires like Bill and Melinda Gates or Warren

²⁵⁹ Richard Yetter Chappell and Darius Meissner, "Study Guide: Peter Singer's 'Famine, Affluence, and Morality,'" in *An Introduction to Utilitarianism*, 2023, <https://utilitarianism.net/peter-singer-famine-affluence-and-morality/>.

²⁶⁰ Peter Singer, *The Life You Can Save: How to Do Your Part to End World Poverty: 10th Anniversary Edition* (Bainbridge Island, WA: The Life You Can Save, 2019), 33, <https://www.thelifeyoucansave.org/the-book/>.

Buffett, who give away most of their fortune thoughtfully and in ways that are highly effective, than billionaires who just build themselves bigger and bigger yachts.²⁶¹

Although Singer admits he thinks “it would be better if you had an economic system in which we didn’t have billionaires”²⁶², he here appeals to pragmatism by pointing out that no matter your views on effective altruism, a world where billionaires donate effectively is still far better than one where they keep all their wealth to themselves. Additionally, he emphasizes that the more short-term poverty relief that does not address ‘root causes’ of global poverty can still be life-changing for beneficiaries:

In those circumstances [where we are unable to know or change the root causes of extreme poverty], treating the symptoms of poverty will be the best we can do—and we should not forget that this will mean saving lives, alleviating hunger or chronic malnutrition, eliminating parasites, providing education, helping women to control their fertility, and preserving sight.²⁶³

To put it more negatively, effective altruists who appeal to pragmatism may see a world with effective altruism as the ‘lesser evil’ compared to one without effective altruism. Interestingly, such a negatively framed appeal to pragmatism seems also to have convinced Slavoj Žižek to some extent. Žižek, who will not be seen speaking out in favor of effective altruism anytime soon, exclaimed the following in a talk where he otherwise criticized philanthropy:

[This] is for me, the last desperate attempt to make capitalism work for socialism. Let’s not discard the evil. Let’s make the evil itself work for the good. [...] I’m not against charity. My God, in an abstract sense, of course, it’s better than nothing. [...] Of course we should help the children.²⁶⁴

²⁶¹ Daniel A. Gross, “Peter Singer Is Committed to Controversial Ideas,” *The New Yorker*, April 25, 2021, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/the-new-yorker-interview/peter-singer-is-committed-to-controversial-ideas>.

²⁶² Gross, 2021.

²⁶³ Peter Singer, “Reply to Effective Altruism Responses,” *Boston Review*, July 1, 2015, https://www.bostonreview.net/forum_response/response-peter-singer-reply/.

²⁶⁴ Slavoj Žižek et al., “RSA ANIMATE: First as Tragedy, Then as Farce,” July 28, 2010, <https://youtu.be/hpAMbpQ8J7g?t=433>: 7:13–10:19 in the video.

We may find the appeal to pragmatism in a more humorous version on Scott Alexander's blog:

I have an essay that my friends won't let me post because it's too spicy. It would be called something like *How To Respond To Common Criticisms Of Effective Altruism (In Your Head Only, Definitely Never Do This In Real Life)*, and it starts:

Q: I don't approve of how effective altruists keep donating to weird sci-fi charities.

A: Are you donating 10% of your income to normal, down-to-earth charities? [...]

Q: Separate from any questions about my personal obligations, I just think it's important to call out the ways effective altruism as a movement is doing harm.

A: Separate from any callouts of effective altruism as a movement, I just think it's important to confront the question of whether you personally should be donating 10% of your income to the poorest people in the world. [...]

Q: You're just doing a sneaky equivocation thing where you conflate "effective altruism", a specific flawed community, with the idea of altruism itself, thus deflecting all possible criticism!

A: You caught me. Are you donating 10% of your income to the poorest people in the world? Why not?²⁶⁵

²⁶⁵ Scott Alexander, "Effective Altruism as a Tower of Assumptions," Substack, August 24, 2022, <https://astralcodexten.substack.com/p/effective-altruism-as-a-tower-of>.

Or, as another effective altruist put it: “please, regardless of what you think about politics, philosophy, utilitarianism, effective altruism, etc — give some money to give directly or the against malaria foundation or any other top givewell charities [sic].”²⁶⁶

The appeal to pragmatism seems to convince at least some critics of effective altruism to donate to effective charities anyway, despite the serious objections they have to effective altruism. I previously mentioned Srinivasan and Doran as two examples of this. Does this mean the appeal to pragmatism proves that the critics are wrong? No, of course not. The appeal to pragmatism is not a logical rebuttal of the critiques of effective altruism. It is perhaps better considered a rhetorical device that effective altruists use to call attention away from the critique and towards what really matters most to effective altruists: helping others as effectively as you can. This may seem rather misleading, but it is also understandable: someone who reads criticisms of effective altruism may get the false impression that the critics have shown that donating to non-profit organizations – one of the key activities advocated by effective altruism – can never be good. But this would be a far stronger claim than whatever the anti-capitalist, decolonizing and democratic critics of effective altruism have generally argued for, and would have to be backed with equally strong arguments and evidence. As MacAskill has put it:

In order to show that Singer’s argument is not successful, one would need to show that for *none* of these [social and animal welfare] problems can we make a significant difference at little moral cost to ourselves. This is a very high bar to meet. In a world of such suffering, of such multitudinous and variegated forms, often caused by the actions and policies of us in rich countries, it would be a shocking and highly suspicious conclusion if there were simply nothing that the richest 3% of the world’s population could do with their resources in order to significantly make the world a better place.²⁶⁷

²⁶⁶ Bentham's Bulldog, “You Don’t Have to Call Yourself an Effective Altruist or Fraternize with Effective Altruists or Support Longtermism, Just Please, for the Love of God, Help the Global Poor,” Substack, December 15, 2022, <https://benthams.substack.com/p/you-dont-have-to-call-yourself-an>.

²⁶⁷ William MacAskill, “Aid Scepticism and Effective Altruism,” Journal of Practical Ethics, accessed May 18, 2023, <https://www.jpe.ox.ac.uk/papers/aid-scepticism-and-effective-altruism/>.

The appeal to pragmatism is not so much a counterargument to the critics as much as it is a move to draw attention to what is at stake in the debate and what is not, or less.

Co-existence: effective altruism can coexist with other projects

Effective altruism is not a cult. It is not meant to replace other social, political or religious ideologies and movements. It is not meant to become the sole most important thing in the lives of its adherents. As Dylan Matthews wrote: “[effective altruism] is not a replacement for movements through which marginalized peoples seek their own liberation.”²⁶⁸ If effective altruism has flaws, these flaws can be compensated by the world outside of it. Conversely, effective altruism could ideally make up for the flaws of other social movements.

Not only can effective altruism co-exist with other social movements, it is also not meant to replace the welfare state with charity. In *Doing Good Better*, MacAskill introduces the factor ‘neglectedness’ of the effective altruist ITN framework for evaluating the cost-effectiveness of a cause area, by asking, among others, the following question: “Is there reason to expect this problem can’t be solved by markets or governments?”²⁶⁹ While the idea that world problems can be ‘solved’ ‘by’ the free market is decidedly capitalist and liberal, MacAskill is no libertarian: he does not advocate letting charitable organizations take over state services. Instead, he appears to favor working together with governments, by asking what they are not doing (enough of) and how we could change that.

Recall how Carol J. Adams, Alice Crary and Lori Gruen wrote that their book is “in real part, a project of recovery” of “voices and projects much older than EA [effective

²⁶⁸ Dylan Matthews, “I Spent a Weekend at Google Talking with Nerds about Charity. I Came Away ... Worried.” Vox, August 10, 2015, <https://www.vox.com/2015/8/10/9124145/effective-altruism-global-ai>. Matthews wrote this to criticize a statement by Kerry Vaughan, one of the organizers of the 2015 Effective Altruism Global conference. Vaughan triumphantly declared that “effective altruism could be the last social movement we ever need”. Although it is from years ago, this very awkward and arrogant quote apparently continues to be repeated in articles critical of effective altruism. It is however absolutely not representative of the views of effective altruists.

²⁶⁹ William MacAskill, *Doing Good Better: Effective Altruism and a Radical New Way to Make a Difference* (London: Faber & Faber, Guardian Books, 2015), 193.

altruism]” which effective altruism supposedly “threatens to squelch.”²⁷⁰ Similarly, in her contribution to that volume, pattrice jones had claimed that effective altruists “[cause] both fiscal and emotional distress to activists engaged in truly useful work.”²⁷¹ Perhaps they hold these views because of effective altruists’ professed ‘cause neutrality’ and ‘means neutrality’, which means that effective altruists are, in principle, open to considering any goal and any means that can effectively help others. What if this also means that these effective altruist technocrats are plotting to take over all the political struggles in the world? However, there are no strong reasons for believing that effective altruism is intentionally or unintentionally harming other projects for justice, at least not according to effective altruists themselves – unless one takes ‘not funding’ to be identical to ‘harming’. (But in that case, everyone would be doing harm: nobody can fund and support everything).

The critics might now say that the massive amount of wealth controlled by effective altruist organizations gives them an unfair advantage over others who are also trying to do good, and I think there is some truth to this. But there is, at least in theory, no reason why one could not be both an effective altruist *and* a socialist, or a climate activist, or an anti-racism activist, a unionist, a soup kitchen volunteer, an animal sanctuary owner, a human rights advocate, ... Just because effective altruists have not massively discussed or funded these things does not mean they are somehow against them. Claiming that they are would be sort of like claiming that someone who donates a lot to animal welfare charities by definition does not care about climate change. As Habiba Islam (former 80,000 Hours employee) said: “people contain multitudes, you may have multiple different things that are important to you, [...] there are things you can do with your [career, donations, volunteering time, political advocacy], [...] expressing the values that are important to you.”²⁷²

²⁷⁰ Carol J. Adams, Alice Crary, and Lori Gruen, “Introduction,” in *The Good It Promises, the Harm It Does*, ed. Carol J. Adams, Alice Crary, and Lori Gruen (Oxford University Press, 2023), 28–29.

²⁷¹ pattrice jones, “Queer Eye on the EA Guys,” in *The Good It Promises, the Harm It Does*, ed. Carol J. Adams, Alice Crary, and Lori Gruen (Oxford University Press, 2023), 137.

²⁷² Garrison Lovely and Habiba Islam, “33 - Habiba Islam on the Left and Effective Altruism,” Listen Notes, October 26, 2022, <https://www.listennotes.com/podcasts/the-most/33-habiba-islam-on-the-left-dkyEMLzNTHi/>: 1:01:40 in the podcast.

Additionally, the appeal to co-existence may point out that not only is it possible to support both effective altruism and other projects, but also that doing so could in fact be quite valuable. As one commenter on the Effective Altruism Forum wrote:

I strongly agree with concerns about EAs [effective altruists] rarely seeking expert evaluations or any evaluations from outside the community. [...] I suspect the people adding the most value to this area are the people who are just quietly a part of multiple communities - people who are academics or Quakers or another group and also EA.²⁷³

Or, as another put it:

Political system change certainly isn't a focus of EA [effective altruism] from what I've seen, but that is mostly because EA folks tend to like numbers and statistics, which can't be leveraged in quite such interesting ways when working with grassroots organizations. That said, this says something about the personal preferences of the EA community, but it does not render EA opposed to other communities doing grassroots work. In specific cases where EA gets in the way of another community, of course they should communicate and try to resolve the issue, but generally I think the best solution is pretty clearly to live and let live. Some people like doing good with statistics, some people like doing good with organizing, those preferences lend themselves to different cause areas, and I am very grateful to both groups of people.²⁷⁴

Jennifer Wineke has argued that, rather than merely peacefully co-existing with other social movements, effective altruists should use their power to help them:

[It is] hard to avoid the fact that those with the social and economic capital who are attracted to EA [effective altruism] are precisely those who are in the unique position to challenge the power structures that have given them that

²⁷³ Kirsten, comment under post, Effective Altruism Forum, July 16, 2020, <https://forum.effectivealtruism.org/posts/DxfpGi9hwvwlCf5iQ/objections-to-value-alignment-between-effective-altruists?commentId=m3Y95wfiyyYwYXDnQ>.

²⁷⁴ tclferact, comment under post, Effective Altruism Forum, August 22, 2022, <https://forum.effectivealtruism.org/posts/xWFhD6uQuZehrDKeY/capitalism-power-and-epistemology-a-critique-of-ea?commentId=78o4xs7gEy7qqAt77>.

capital in the first place. The world's marginalized cannot be expected to shoulder the burden of systemic reform when they are working from a place of fewer resources and smaller platforms for change. [...] [The effective altruism movement] [...] could enormously strengthen the efforts of those already fighting for radical systemic change across the globe.²⁷⁵

Modesty, open mindedness and cooperation can only benefit the causes effective altruists and others champion, as Pascal-Emmanuel Gobry has pointed out:

making the world a better place is an inherently speculative behavior — if we knew how to do it we'd have already done it. Therefore the most prudent collective thing to do is to try a very wide swath of different approaches rather than a single one. As one approach in the menu, Effective Altruism is great, but don't think it's the single approach.²⁷⁶

Or as, Iason Gabriel argued:

[Effective altruists] should recognise that there is deep uncertainty about how to do good, [and thus they should partner] with [other] organisations [with whom they share goals] [in order to] build the kind of political alliances that support large-scale institutional change.²⁷⁷

As the following quotes from *The Good it Promises, the Harm it Does* should show, critics of effective altruism have also appealed to co-existence:

[Accept] that there are lots of good answers to where money should go to benefit animals. Farm animal sanctuaries, campaigns for improvements to farmed animal welfare, and the promotion of plant-based diets all merit support, together with conservation efforts to protect wild animals, care for

²⁷⁵ Jennifer Wineke, "Actually Helping Some Poor People: Global Philanthropy, Sustainability & Privilege," *Voices in Bioethics* 6 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.7916/vib.v6i.6083>.

²⁷⁶ Pascal-Emmanuel Gobry, "Can Effective Altruism Really Change the World?," *The Week*, March 16, 2015, <https://theweek.com/articles/542955/effective-altruism-really-change-world>.

²⁷⁷ Iason Gabriel, "Effective Altruism and Its Critics," *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 34, no. 4 (February 12, 2016): 469–70, <https://doi.org/10.1111/japp.12176>.

abandoned companion animals, protests about laboratory experimentation, and so on, and so on. – David L. Clough²⁷⁸

[There's] literally “something for everyone” in terms of things that need to be done. [...] We need researchers with the patience to spend hours finding and compiling information. [...] We need botanists, economists, and agronomists to work out how to transition regions now dependent on animal agriculture to plant-based agricultural economies. We need lobbyists to convince state and federal government to quit subsidizing big “meat” and “dairy” [...] We need courageous people to engage in direct action of all kinds, whether it be undercover investigations or just walking in the woods with a booming radio during hunting season. And we always need artists and other creative thinkers to come up with new ways of awakening empathy, sparking imagination, and inspiring action. – pattrice jones²⁷⁹

I am less interested than most of my EA [effective altruist] friends in debating which theory of change is the right one. I'm of the persuasion that none of us knows what the right one is or even if there is just one. Letting a thousand flowers bloom in our approaches to advocacy (or at least a hundred reasonably well-tended ones?) can be a good way to meet folks where they are and get as many people into the movement (with their diverse outlooks, motivations, talents, and gifts) as we can. – Matthew C. Halteman²⁸⁰

Much like the appeal to pragmatism, the appeal to co-existence is perhaps best understood not as a logical counterargument, but as a move to draw the boundaries of the debate: what is at stake is (according to the effective altruists at least) what problems effective altruism may have, not how effective altruism may be oppressing other movements.

²⁷⁸ David L. Clough, “A Christian Critique of the Effective Altruism Approach to Animal Philanthropy,” in *The Good It Promises, the Harm It Does*, ed. Carol J. Adams, Alice Crary, and Lori Gruen (Oxford University Press, 2023), 126.

²⁷⁹ pattrice jones, “Queer Eye on the EA Guys,” in *The Good It Promises, the Harm It Does*, ed. Carol J. Adams, Alice Crary, and Lori Gruen (Oxford University Press, 2023), 140–41.

²⁸⁰ Matthew C. Halteman, “Diversifying Effective Altruism's Long Shots in Animal Advocacy: An Invitation to Prioritize Black Vegans, Higher Education, and Religious Communities,” in *The Good It Promises, the Harm It Does*, ed. Carol J. Adams, Alice Crary, and Lori Gruen. (Oxford University Press, 2023), 100–116.

Effective altruist Stijn Bruers has a very nice metaphor that shows that effective altruism co-exists with other things in life. He asks us to imagine three jars full of ‘resources (money, time, ...)’. One of these jars is just for yourself (‘egoism’), another is for others with whom you have personal relationships (‘partial altruism’), and a third is for helping others you don’t necessarily have any personal connection to (‘impartial altruism’). Bruers says that your third jar (the one for ‘impartial altruism’) is not empty when you are an effective altruist. In other words, beyond caring about themselves and significant others, effective altruists also do the best they can to aid others with whom they have no personal, close contact. But Bruers does not say that as an effective altruist, impartial altruism should be the main concern (or even a major one) in your life.²⁸¹

Effective altruist self-criticism: ‘we will try to get better at doing good better’

A third common response to all sorts of critique of effective altruism – including anti-capitalist, decolonizing and democratic critique – is to admit that the critics have a point, but that effective altruists are working on it, or plan to do so. In other words, the effective altruist concedes the critique, but proceeds to point out that it is not really a reason for rejecting effective altruism, but rather for improving it instead. Recall the distinction I made earlier between ‘constructive’ and ‘deconstructive’ critique. If a criticism of effective altruism is ‘constructive’, it is a reason to reform and ameliorate effective altruism, whereas a ‘deconstructive’ critique should lead us to reject or even abolish and condemn effective altruism. What effective altruists do when they appeal to self-criticism, is basically saying: ‘your critique is valid, and it is something we can and should work on’ – in other words, ‘your critique is a constructive critique (rather than a deconstructive one, as you might think)’.

A characteristic example of the appeal to self-criticism is how effective altruists have responded to the charge that they ignore ‘systemic change’ or ‘institutional change’

²⁸¹ Stijn Bruers, *Effective Altruism (Infographic)*, December 27, 2022, *Stijn Bruers, the rational ethicist*, December 27, 2022, <https://stijnbruers.wordpress.com/2022/12/27/effective-altruism-infographic/>.

(ie. the so-called ‘institutional critique’, which I have argued is in fact not really a single distinct critique) by pointing out effective altruists’ efforts to enact such ‘systemic change’ . MacAskill, for example, claims that

[Effective altruism] is clearly open to systemic change in both principle and practice. [...] An incomplete list of examples is as follows:

- International labour mobility has been a focus area of members of the effective altruism community for some time [...]
- The Center for Election Science promotes alternative voting systems [...]
- The animal welfare wing of the effective altruism community [...] has had astonishing success by lobbying large retailers and fast food chains to get them to pledge to no longer use eggs from caged hens in their supply chain. [...]
- The Open Philanthropy Project has made numerous grants within the areas of land use reform, criminal justice reform, improving political decisionmaking, and macroeconomic policy. [...]

Of course, it’s perfectly plausible that there are ‘systemic’ interventions that those in the effective altruism community are neglecting. [...] But this is an in-house dispute, rather than a criticism of effective altruism per se.²⁸²

Robert Wiblin (80,000 Hours) adds to MacAskill’s list:

We’re not done though. I’m working on 80,000 Hours’ research. Here are some other systemic changes that I and some of my colleagues think would have real potential if they could be easily achieved:

- Significantly more spending on development aid, assuming it is being spent in ways that work, such as delivering primary health care.

²⁸² William MacAskill, “The Definition of Effective Altruism,” in *Effective Altruism: Philosophical Issues*, ed. Hilary Greaves and Theron Pummer (Oxford University Press, 2019), 23–24, https://www.williammacaskill.com/s/The_Definition_of_Effective_Altruism.pdf.

- Improved regulation to crack down on illicit financial flows from the poor to rich world.
- Changes to financial regulations to prevent banks from deliberately externalising the cost of systemic risks to governments by being ‘too big to fail’. [...]

Having learned from that [experience researching interventions where the empirical evidence was strongest] we are in a better position to evaluate approaches to systemic change, which are usually less transparent or experimental, and compare them to non-systemic options. This is very clear from the case of the Open Philanthropy [Project], which is branching out from GiveWell and is more open to high-risk and ‘unproven’ approaches like political advocacy than GiveWell itself.²⁸³

Similarly, Singer writes that

if large-scale reform offers some prospect of reducing poverty, then effective altruists will try to assess its chance of doing good, and if the expected value of such action is higher than the expected value of more limited interventions, they will advocate working for the large-scale reforms.²⁸⁴

Another example of the appeal to self-criticism can be found at the start of the Centre for Effective Altruism’s list of objections against effective altruism, where it is noted that “many of these objections capture important points that can help us be more effective.”²⁸⁵

In the best case, the appeal to effective altruist self-criticism is a genuine promise to take valid critique into account and improve the effective altruist movement. In the worst case, it is a cheap rhetorical trick to quickly deflect serious criticism of effective altruism, and then change nothing. That is what happens when effective altruists

²⁸³ Robert Wiblin, “Effective Altruists Love Systemic Change,” 80,000 Hours, July 8, 2015, <https://80000hours.org/2015/07/effective-altruists-love-systemic-change/>.

²⁸⁴ Peter Singer, “Reply to Effective Altruism Responses,” Boston Review, July 1, 2015, https://www.bostonreview.net/forum_response/response-peter-singer-reply/.

²⁸⁵ Centre for Effective Altruism, “Frequently Asked Questions and Common Objections,” effectivealtruism.org, May 27, 2023, <https://www.effectivealtruism.org/faqs-criticism-objections>.

engage in too much of what Michael Nielsen has called ‘EA judo’, which is according to Nielsen when effective altruists basically claim that “strong critique of any particular “most good” strategy improves EA [effective altruism], it doesn't discredit it”.²⁸⁶

Real self-improvement or shutting down necessary debates? It is perhaps too early to say which of these courses effective altruism is taking, but I think effective altruists could do better anyhow. Why are there four, and only four cause areas that receive nearly all the funding? Surely, even if some of the most evidence-based ways of improving the world are all to be found in the domains of extreme poverty alleviation, future global disaster prevention and mitigation, animal welfare advocacy and building a movement to help achieve all of this, then that does not imply that other cause areas are not worth funding or researching, or even that they are by definition less effective. Can effective altruists really claim that the anti-capitalist, decolonizing and democratic critics have a point (or even that these critics do not), but then proceed in just the same way they had before? Perhaps they can do this for the anti-capitalist critique in case they are truly convinced capitalism is mostly good, and perhaps they can do it for the decolonizing critique if they are truly convinced effective altruism is not and cannot be neocolonial. But even if they take these positions, they cannot simply take note of the democratic critique and then do nothing – it is unlikely that this is in the best interest of the effective altruism movement or those it tries to help.

On the Effective Altruism Forum, Helen Toner wrote a popular essay – which was awarded a \$1,000 cash prize by the Centre for Effective Altruism²⁸⁷ – entitled ‘Effective Altruism is a Question (not an Ideology)’.²⁸⁸ But is that title really true if

²⁸⁶ Michael Nielsen, “Notes on Effective Altruism,” Michael’s Notebook, June 2, 2022, <https://michaelnotebook.com/eanotes/>.

²⁸⁷ Lizka Vaintrob, “Results from the First Decade Review,” Effective Altruism Forum, May 13, 2022, https://forum.effectivealtruism.org/s/HSA8wsaYiqdt4ouNF/p/FEFEvC6BzswR4oQqm#Second_prizes_1000_each.

²⁸⁸ Helen Toner, “Effective Altruism Is a Question (Not an Ideology),” Effective Altruism Forum, October 16, 2014, <https://forum.effectivealtruism.org/posts/FpjQMYQmS3rWewZ83/effective-altruism-is-a-question-not-a-ideology>. For a good critique of this post, see James Fodor, “Effective Altruism Is an Ideology, Not (Just) a Question,” Effective Altruism Forum, June 28, 2019, <https://forum.effectivealtruism.org/posts/uxFvTnzSgw8uakNBp/effective-altruism-is-an-ideology-not-just-a-question>.

effective altruists so narrowly stick to their four present cause areas (with existential risk becoming increasingly prominent under the influence of ‘longtermism’, which is according to MacAskill ‘the view that we should be doing a lot more to protect future generations’²⁸⁹)? Interestingly, *Doing Good Better*, MacAskill’s 2015 introductory book on effective altruism, actually mentions the following cause areas as well: US criminal justice reform, international labor mobility and climate change.²⁹⁰ Additionally, there are even more cause areas not discussed in MacAskill’s book where, at least in theory, effective altruists could do a lot of good: mental health, improving democracy, tax justice, increasing development cooperation, international supply chain accountability (that is, ‘fair trade’ and better working conditions) and workplace democratization, to name but a few. All of these cause areas have been mentioned or discussed by users on the Effective Altruism Forum.²⁹¹ Many of them must be what Iason Gabriel and Brian McElwee referred to in 2019 when they wrote that “EA [effective altruism] should give stronger support to efforts to bring about some of the large-scale systemic reforms needed to address persistent severe global poverty.”²⁹² However, one nowadays rarely hears prominent effective altruists or their organizations communicate about these topics. If effective altruists are really as cause neutral and means neutral as they claim they are, then they had better reconsider these ‘less-discussed causes’²⁹³.

²⁸⁹ William MacAskill, “Longtermism,” [williammacaskill.com](https://www.williammacaskill.com/longtermism), accessed May 19, 2023, <https://www.williammacaskill.com/longtermism>.

²⁹⁰ William MacAskill, *Doing Good Better: Effective Altruism and a Radical New Way to Make a Difference* (London: Faber & Faber, Guardian Books, 2015), 192–207.

²⁹¹ See Nuño Sempere, “Big List of Cause Candidates,” Effective Altruism Forum, December 25, 2020, <https://forum.effectivealtruism.org/posts/SCqRu6shoa8ySvRAa/big-list-of-cause-candidates> and Bob Jacobs, “Democratizing the Workplace as a Cause Area,” Effective Altruism Forum, November 26, 2022, <https://forum.effectivealtruism.org/posts/pQs6bAg4BjHDpSYb/democratizing-the-workplace-as-a-cause-area-1>, among other topics and comments on the Effective Altruism Forum.

²⁹² Iason Gabriel and Brian McElwee, “Effective Altruism, Global Poverty, and Systemic Change,” in *Effective Altruism: Philosophical Issues*, ed. Hilary Greaves and Theron Pummer (Oxford University Press, 2019), 4, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/336787380_Effective_Altruism_Global_Poverty_and_Systemic_Change.

²⁹³ The Effective Altruism Forum has a tag for discussions on topics that receive comparably little attention in the effective altruism movement: see Aaron Gertler, Pablo Stafforini, and an anonymous editor, “Less-Discussed Causes,” Effective Altruism Forum, July 28, 2020, <https://forum.effectivealtruism.org/topics/less-discussed-causes>. As of writing, there are 165 topics under this tag.

The underexplored potential common ground between effective altruists and their critics

Effective altruism is a collaborative effort to figure out what individuals can do to help improve the world. As I have shown in the previous chapters, the ways effective altruists have attempted to do this, have been criticized from a variety of perspectives, including anti-capitalist, decolonizing and democratic views. Effective altruists have largely replied to such critique by pointing out that no critique invalidates the significance and urgency to act now, that effective altruism is not meant to replace other projects and that there is potential for self-improvement of the effective altruism movement.

In the final chapter of this work, I wish to explore points where effective altruists and their critics may, perhaps somewhat to their own surprise, agree with each other. Effective altruism itself is fairly recent, the literature criticizing it is small and even more recent, and responses to these criticisms from effective altruists are even newer and even less abundant still. Currently, there does not appear to be much continued dialogue between effective altruists and their critics – eg. replying to replies to each other’s criticisms and so on. This explains why this brief chapter is perhaps the most original section of this document: as far as its author is aware, almost nothing has to date been written on what effective altruists and their diverse critics may in fact agree upon. It is the author’s hope that this work may inspire dialogue between effective altruists and their critics, because, as one user on the Effective Altruism Forum put it:

[Sitting down] and *talking* to one another is usually more productive than writing articles/blog posts/etc. at the other group (although the latter has its place). [...] [I think] it would be fruitful to have some of these authors [who criticize effective altruism] on an EA [effective altruism] podcast for a mutual attempt at understanding perspectives and cruxes.²⁹⁴

²⁹⁴ Jason, comment under post, Effective Altruism Forum, May 9, 2023, <https://forum.effectivealtruism.org/posts/ZKYpu4WAiwTXDSrX8/review-of-the-good-it-promises-the-harm-it-does?commentId=vaYcccugC7QxRoc36>.

This chapter is exploratory in nature. It is certainly not the goal to make grand statements about what effective altruists and their critics both believe. Nor do I mean to end the debate with some ridiculous demand for effective altruists and their critics to set aside all differences and join forces as one. Perhaps some of my proposed points of agreement will in fact turn out to be mistaken. Perhaps effective altruists and their critics really do hold deeply incompatible views on the issues discussed in this chapter. But, for the sake of the causes effective altruists and their critics both find important (social justice, reducing suffering, ...) – themselves possible points of agreement²⁹⁵ – we should at least consider the possibility of unknown common ground between the proponents and critics of effective altruism.

There are good reasons for believing that effective altruists and (at least some of) their critics can and do agree with each other on some relatively important matters. As I had pointed out in the introduction of this work, a majority of effective altruists and critics of effective altruism appear to be left-wing or progressive. In general, the ideological clash that appears to be the driving force behind much of the critique of effective altruism is not disagreements between the left and the right or between conservatives and progressives, but perhaps more accurately tensions between capitalist and anti-capitalist ideology, between ‘developmentalist’ and decolonizing paradigms and between technocracy and democracy. As Joshua Kissel wrote already in 2017, “I think [the core debate] among leftists and effective altruists [is] whether or not capitalism is overall a net-negative”²⁹⁶. In other words, the differences between effective altruists and their critics concern not fundamental political ideals (like equality, freedom, justice...) but rather how these values are to be realized – specifically, whether effective altruism really is contributing to their realization. This does not mean, as some effective altruists have claimed, that the critics of effective altruism usually truly disagree with effective altruism, but merely with some parts of it. That view relies on an overly sharp distinction between the philosophy of effective altruism (‘using evidence and reason to figure out how to benefit others as much as

²⁹⁵ In one of the essays in *The Good It Promises, the Harm It Does*, one can read the following: “We write this essay as allies. Like us, Effective Altruists are especially animated by the immense and multidimensional suffering caused by factory farms. [...] We even share a concern to impact as many animals as possible per dollar”. (source: Andrew deCoriolis et al., “Animal Advocacy’s Stockholm Syndrome,” in *The Good It Promises, the Harm It Does*, ed. Carol J. Adams, Alice Crary, and Lori Gruen (Oxford University Press, 2023), 67.)

²⁹⁶ Joshua Kissel, “Effective Altruism and Anti-Capitalism: An Attempt at Reconciliation,” *Essays in Philosophy* 18, no. 1 (2017): 6, <https://doi.org/10.7710/1526-0569.1573>.

possible, and taking action on that basis') and its actually existing manifestations (eg. the Centre for Effective Altruism, GiveWell, influential figures such as MacAskill and Singer, charities that effective altruists have promoted, ...).

But what this does mean, is that effective altruists and their diverse critics do not have totally incompatible worldviews and ideals, and that this may provide a starting point for the search for common ground. For example, both effective altruists and their decolonizing critics believe we should do everything we can to end extreme poverty. Both effective altruists and their anti-capitalist critics find sweatshops terrible places to work in and maintain that everyone deserves good labor conditions. Effective altruists and their democratic critics agree that autocracy is bad, and that at least up to some point, more democratic decisionmaking leads to better outcomes.

These points of agreement are somewhat trivial, but if they are explicitly acknowledged, the debate is likely to be more fruitful and constructive. Effective altruism and other movements may perhaps learn more from each other if they focus not only on their differences, but also on their similarities. It is hard to take critique from someone else into account if you (mistakenly) believe they are totally different from you, and all the easier to do it if you acknowledge beliefs held in common.

I suggest four points for both effective altruists and their critics to consider. First, examine the differences and similarities between reparations to former colonies – a popular policy proposal among decolonizing critics – and direct, unconditional cash transfers through NGOs like GiveDirectly – a classic example of an intervention favored by effective altruists. Second, discuss if, and how, international immigration policy reform with the goal of more open borders – advanced by some effective altruists, though seemingly far less popular in the movement than cash transfers – can be decolonizing rather than neocolonial. Third, consider if, and how, evidence-based charities advocated for by effective altruists can be emancipatory: might they (indirectly) politicize and empower poor people and contribute to the fight against social justice? Fourth, debate if, and to what extent, the self-criticism so important to effective altruists can really prevent effective altruism from being a force that works against, rather than for the causes it champions.

Cash transfers or reparations?

Decolonizing critics think that the solution to global inequality and extreme poverty must first and foremost be political, rather than caritative. Reparations are a prime specific example of such a policy favored by decolonizing critics. Because Western societies have historically derived a lot of wealth from colonial slavery and exploitation in Sub-Saharan African countries, and continue to benefit from neocolonial unfair international trade agreements²⁹⁷, developing-world debt²⁹⁸ and Western agricultural subsidies that disadvantage African farmers^{299,300}, many decolonizing authors hold that Western countries should, among other things, give substantial financial compensation to Sub-Saharan African countries. The underlying idea is one of compensatory justice: if you harm someone else, you owe them compensation in order to minimize the effects of the harm done. That is why, a decolonizing critic might argue, Sub-Saharan Africa is entitled to reparations from the West. One example of such an argument comes from an article written by six scholars in conflict and development studies:

[In order] to redistribute global wealth and end growing inequality reparations have to be made. The North has to take responsibility for the wealth it has built over centuries *at the expense* of the South. These reparations are not about compensating victimhood, rather they constitute the radical claim of a growing number of individuals and movements globally for social justice. Targeting tax havens and striving towards a just taxation worldwide would be a first, although still very modest, step towards a financial model for reparations. Thus, if we abolish [the position of European Union Commissioner for Development], why not replace it with a commissioner for reparations?³⁰¹

²⁹⁷ Jason Hickel, *The Divide: A Brief Guide to Global Inequality and Its Solutions* (London: Windmill Books, 2017).

²⁹⁸ Stephen R. Hurt, "Third World Debt," in Encyclopædia Britannica, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Third-World-debt>.

²⁹⁹ Richard Mshomba, "How Northern Subsidies Hurt Africa," *Africa Renewal*, September 2002, <https://www.un.org/africarenewal/magazine/september-2002/how-northern-subsidies-hurt-africa>.

³⁰⁰ Max Borders and H. Sterling Burnett, "Farm Subsidies: Devastating the World's Poor and the Environment," National Center for Policy Analysis, March 24, 2006, <http://www.ncpathinktank.org/pub/ba547>.

³⁰¹ Koenraad Bogaert et al., "'Justice' Not 'Aid' for the Global South," ed. Christiane Kliemann, *Debating Development Research*, October 9, 2019, <https://www.developmentresearch.eu/?p=512>.

As the above quote illustrates, reparations do not necessarily have to consist (solely) in the transfer of money to the party which was harmed. If policies other than financial compensation are capable of meaningfully undoing the currently existing harm done by the legacies of colonialism, then these would equally count as reparations.

Thus far, reparations in the form of financial compensation for former colonies have occasionally been proposed and discussed (for example by – among others in the United States – the writer Ta-Nehisi Coates³⁰² and the philosopher Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò³⁰³, by a group of Dutch activists who calculated how much a local foundation for parks and recreation would owe a single enslaved woman from colonized Suriname³⁰⁴, or in Belgian political discussions related to Congo³⁰⁵), but no government has actually paid any reparations to former colonies. Besides the fact that such a policy is very hard to sell to voters (and to politicians), there are a number of as of yet unsolved questions about reparations. Who shall pay them: governments, companies, or both? Who shall receive them: governments or citizens of receiving countries, or both? Which particular countries must pay – only former colonizers, or also adjacent nations that have indirectly benefited from the wealth extracted by colonialism? And on the receiving end of the reparations, what shall we do with a country like Ethiopia, which was never colonized (with the exception of a brief period of occupation under Mussolini, from 1935 to 1941) but is now nevertheless one of the world's poorest countries? Will the reparations consist of a one-time or an annual payment, and in the latter case, over how many years will the payments be spread? How should the reparations' size be determined? Should reparations replace development cooperation? These are some very tough questions that the advocates of reparations will have to deal with.

³⁰² Ta-Nehisi Coates, "The Case for Reparations," *The Atlantic*, May 22, 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/>.

³⁰³ Táíwò, Olúfẹ́mi O., *Reconsidering Reparations* (Oxford University Press, 2022).

³⁰⁴ Mitchell Esajas et al., "Rekening voor koloniale dwangarbeid: 9,5 miljoen," *OneWorld*, November 4, 2022, <https://www.oneworld.nl/lezen/discriminatie/sociaal-onrecht/rekening-voor-koloniale-dwangarbeid-95-miljoen/>.

³⁰⁵ Fabian Lefevere and Rik Arnoudt, "Geen excuses of herstelbetalingen voor Congo, parlement gaat stemmen over afgezwakte aanbevelingen Congo-commissie," *VRT NWS*, December 28, 2022, <https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2022/12/28/geen-excuse1s-voor-congo-aanbevelingen-congocommissie-als-resolu/>.

However, here I wish to focus not on the feasibility or desirability of reparations, but on their striking similarities to (and differences with) direct cash transfers, which the effective altruism movement has since many years praised as one of the most cost-effective interventions against extreme poverty.

As the name implies, a direct, unconditional cash transfer is simply a donation of money directly to the bank account (typically managed using a mobile phone) of a person in extreme poverty, who is then free to use the money however they wish. The biggest non-profit organization giving unconditional sums of money to people in extreme poverty is GiveDirectly, which runs several programs as of writing this: the large transfer (gives large, one-time donations to households, primarily in Liberia, Kenya, Malawi, Rwanda and Uganda), basic income (an experimental program – which also happens to be the world’s largest basic income experiment – providing small daily donations, mostly in Liberia and Kenya), emergency relief (a fund to aid victims of major disasters), a similar program to help victims of natural disasters strongly related to climate change, donations to refugees in Uganda, cash transfers to strengthen food security in Yemen, and even a program to donate to poor people in the United States.³⁰⁶ A newer and smaller organization providing cash transfers is Eight, which gives monthly direct and unconditional cash transfers to villages in Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo, for a period of two years.³⁰⁷ Because people in Sub-Saharan African countries are so poor, even small donations from those in high-income countries can help beneficiaries quite a bit.

But wait, what if poor people just waste their money on things they don’t really need? Or what if the donations don’t end up with the people who actually need them? And even if they do, don’t they make people dependent on charitable donations? What if villages or households who don’t get cash transfers grow envious of their neighbors who do, and this leads to conflict or even violence? These understandable fears are unfounded, GiveDirectly argues, because thorough research indicates cash transfers

³⁰⁶ GiveDirectly, “GiveDirectly: Send Money Directly to People in Poverty,” GiveDirectly, accessed May 20, 2023, <https://www.givedirectly.org/>. More information on each of the programs GiveDirectly runs can be found by clicking ‘Programs’ on the top of the GiveDirectly website, and then clicking the name of any of the programs, such as ‘Large Transfer’.

³⁰⁷ Eight, “Eight,” Eight, accessed May 20, 2023, <https://www.eight.world/>.

have a positive impact and are associated with few negative outcomes and also because nonprofits ensure the donations happen in such a way as to minimize unintended negative consequences. Reviewing hundreds of studies, GiveDirectly concludes that the effect of cash transfers is generally positive^{308,309}. The NGO claims that corruption related to cash transfers is prevented by the organization “through a comprehensive audit process, using multiple independent checks to ensure that recipients are eligible and have not been charged bribes to get on the list [of donation recipients]” and “through identity-matching between our records and those of our payment providers, through comprehensive follow-up calls to ensure money is reaching the intended recipients, and in some cases through direct staff monitoring of cash-out points.”³¹⁰ GiveDirectly estimates that about 90% of every dollar of donations they get ends up with the recipient, the rest being used by the non-profit to support its operations.³¹¹ They note that beneficiaries use their money for ‘food, medical and education expenses, durables, home improvement, and social events’ and “asset holdings, in particular livestock, furniture, and iron roofs. In addition to this research on GiveDirectly’s transfers, there is a large body of research from around the world documenting the impacts of cash transfers on low-income households”, the nonprofit writes.³¹² Rather than creating tensions between recipients and non-recipients of donations, direct cash transfers may actually reduce conflict, GiveDirectly argues.³¹³ The NGO adds that rather than creating dependence on handouts, direct cash transfers empower recipients, who may start a business or get more education, reducing future need for more donations.³¹⁴

Many effective altruists love cash transfers: already in 2015, MacAskill praised GiveDirectly as ‘fairly cost-effective’ and supported by ‘extremely robust’ evidence, making it an ‘extremely well implemented’ program.³¹⁵ From 2012 to 2022, GiveWell,

³⁰⁸ GiveDirectly, “Overview on Existing Research on Cash Transfers,” GiveDirectly, December 22, 2020, <https://www.givedirectly.org/research-on-cash-transfers/>.

³⁰⁹ GiveDirectly, “Large Transfer Program,” GiveDirectly, accessed May 20, 2023, <https://www.givedirectly.org/large-transfer/>, section ‘Research shows this money can be transformative’.

³¹⁰ GiveDirectly, “FAQ,” GiveDirectly, accessed May 20, 2023, <https://www.givedirectly.org/faq/>.

³¹¹ GiveDirectly, “Financials,” GiveDirectly, November 7, 2022, <https://www.givedirectly.org/financials/>.

³¹² GiveDirectly, “FAQ,” GiveDirectly, accessed May 20, 2023, <https://www.givedirectly.org/faq/>.

³¹³ GiveDirectly, “FAQ,” GiveDirectly, accessed May 20, 2023, <https://www.givedirectly.org/faq/>.

³¹⁴ GiveDirectly, “FAQ,” GiveDirectly, accessed May 20, 2023, <https://www.givedirectly.org/faq/>.

³¹⁵ William MacAskill, *Doing Good Better: Effective Altruism and a Radical New Way to Make a Difference* (London: Faber & Faber, Guardian Books, 2015), 133.

one of the big effective altruist charity evaluators, also recommended GiveDirectly as a ‘top charity’³¹⁶ (they still support cash transfers and GiveDirectly, but claim there are even more effective interventions out there, which are found in GiveWell’s list of their four ‘top charities’).^{317,318}

The similarities and differences between reparations and cash transfers

The biggest similarity between cash transfers and reparations – which is at once a massive advantage of both approaches – is that they ideally respect the autonomy of people in extreme poverty. Whether global wealth is redistributed through reparations or charity, beneficiaries can use their newfound wealth however they wish – there are no conditions placed upon them. In the best case, this avoids paternalism and neocolonialism.

At first glance, the biggest difference between the two approaches may be its justification: compensatory justice in the case of reparations, and some kind of utilitarianism in the case of cash transfers. Additionally, it may appear that reparations are only meant for people in extreme poverty who are poor due to the history of (neo)colonialism, whereas cash transfers are meant for poor people regardless of the cause of their poverty.

This is true, but in practice it may turn out not to make a huge difference, because (as far as I can tell) many decolonizing critics will argue that (nearly) all extreme poverty in the world is related to the history of (neo)colonialism, even if the country in question was never part of a colony (eg. Ethiopia). Decolonizing critics might note that a country that has never been colonized may still have been negatively affected by large-scale colonization in the region or by colonial involvement in its (inter)national politics. I think differences between reparations and cash transfers may be less important than they seem, because the justifications of reparations and of cash transfers show great similarities: both are driven by a concern to end

³¹⁶ GiveWell, “GiveDirectly – November 2020 Version,” GiveWell, November 2020, <https://www.givewell.org/charities/give-directly/November-2020-version>.

³¹⁷ GiveWell, “GiveDirectly – November 2020 Version,” GiveWell, November 2020, <https://www.givewell.org/charities/give-directly/November-2020-version>.

³¹⁸ GiveWell, “Our Top Charities,” GiveWell, December 2022, <https://www.givewell.org/charities/top-charities>.

preventable suffering, both are appalled by the injustice of global inequality, and both seek to do whatever they can to help end extreme poverty. One may get the impression that reparations are driven by indignation while cash transfers are merely done out of pity, but I argue that, generally, both approaches are motivated by genuine outrage at social injustice. The ideal outcome envisioned by advocates of reparations and proponents of cash transfers is the same: an end to extreme poverty, neocolonialism and global inequality. Also, recipients will not by definition feel degraded, but may instead experience the cash transfers or reparations they get as much-deserved compensations for global inequality and injustice for which people in extreme poverty are not responsible at all.

The biggest difference between cash transfers and reparations is thus not the ideal goal but rather how it is to be achieved, in other words, how the wealth redistribution from high-income to low-income countries is to happen: through formal political decisionmaking and diplomacy in the case of reparations, and through charity in the case of cash transfers (although Rory Stewart, the CEO of GiveDirectly, has suggested that cash transfers should also become part of governments' development cooperation programs, which would make them a more official political intervention³¹⁹).

Of course, there is no clear reason why one couldn't opt for both cash transfers and reparations, and this is a position I believe both effective altruists and decolonizing critics ought to explore. Even if one (or both) of the approaches fail to convince some, I still think a quick comparison between cash transfers and reparations demonstrates meaningful similarities and offers a great starting point for debates.

I admit that what I have written here on the differences and similarities between reparations and cash transfers may be one of the most debatable parts of this entire work. But even if one is fully convinced that reparations and cash transfers are fundamentally different and incompatible, I would still encourage debate on the

³¹⁹ Mark Leon Goldberg, "Just Giving People Money Is Really Effective at Ending Extreme Poverty. So Why Aren't Big Aid Agencies Embracing Cash Transfers? | Rory Stewart," UN Dispatch, April 3, 2023, <https://www.undispatch.com/just-giving-people-money-is-really-effective-at-ending-extreme-poverty-so-why-arent-big-aid-agencies-embracing-cash-transfers-rory-stewart/>.

matter, and ask for arguments why these differences might be so great and insurmountable.

Advocating international labor mobility: an instance of effective altruist decolonization?

Although we now live in a world where migration is perhaps more strictly controlled and regulated than ever, a number of authors have argued in recent years that we should let go of these restrictions and, in other words, open national borders. Books by these authors include *Open Borders: The Case Against Immigration Controls* by Teresa Hayter, *Open grenzen? De economie en ethiek van vrije migratie* by Stijn Bruers, *Het opengrenzenmanifest* by Naima Charkaoui and even a graphic novel, *Open Borders: The Science and Ethics of Immigration* by Bryan Caplan and Zach Weinersmith. It is important to note that ‘open borders’ don’t imply totally uncontrolled migration (without registration and efforts to involve immigrants in society and so on), but rather the removal of the current strong restrictions on who is allowed to immigrate, and how many immigrants will be allowed.

Typically, the case for open borders, which is found in the books I listed in the previous paragraph, uses some or all of the following arguments:

- Closed borders (the current situation) are unjust because they prevent people from poor countries from getting their fair share of the great wealth found in rich countries. Open borders would end this injustice, by enabling people from the poorest countries to move to high-income countries to work and earn much higher pay (up to four times higher³²⁰) than they would in their home countries and send money they’ve earned back to friends and family who live in their countries of origin (remittances). This would also indirectly benefit citizens who don’t emigrate from the country of origin.
- To compensate ‘brain drain’ (when the emigration of talented, skilled and educated people negatively affects society in the emigrants’ country of origin),

³²⁰ Stijn Bruers, “The Large Income Benefits of Migration,” Stijn Bruers, the rational ethicist, June 23, 2019, <https://stijnbruers.wordpress.com/2019/06/23/the-large-income-benefits-of-migration/>.

a policy could be implemented where emigrants with more specialized skills and education must send back part of their relatively high incomes to the country of origin³²¹ – if the emigrants don't already send enough remittances. Additionally, open borders make it much easier to migrate back to one's home country, and when emigrants choose to do so, the 'brain drain' is undone.

- Open borders may also have benefits for the countries where people migrate to: immigrants do important jobs that local people do not want to do as much (such as care work, agricultural work and cleaning) and, like anyone else who works, contribute to society by, among other things, helping finance the welfare state. Immigrants create jobs in government organizations and nonprofits that intend to help immigrants find their way in society, for example by learning the local language.
- Although migrants from poor countries generally have more socially conservative worldviews, their confrontation with the liberal, egalitarian society in the host countries may lead the immigrants to become more socially progressive as well.
- Open borders would also end the humanitarian crisis refugees and undocumented migrants are facing all over the world.

It is because of arguments like these that some effective altruists have taken an interest in advocating for open (or at least less closed) borders. In *Doing Good Better*, MacAskill defended open borders and included 'international labour mobility' in a list of seven cause areas for effective altruists to focus on.³²² Four years later, he once again referred to advocacy to decrease immigration restrictions.³²³ But I doubt that only effective altruists find open borders appealing: one could also make a good case for open borders from a decolonizing point of view. After all, what is more neocolonial than a world in which the poorest peoples are not allowed to benefit from the wealth that (former) colonizers have made (and continue to make) at their

³²¹ Stijn Bruers, "Waarom we landsgrenzen moeten openen," Stijn Bruers, the rational ethicist, March 6, 2016, <https://stijnbruers.wordpress.com/2016/03/06/waarom-we-landsgrenzen-moeten-openen/>.

³²² William MacAskill, *Doing Good Better: Effective Altruism and a Radical New Way to Make a Difference* (London: Faber & Faber, Guardian Books, 2015), 198–200, 204, 205–6.

³²³ William MacAskill, "The Definition of Effective Altruism," in *Effective Altruism: Philosophical Issues*, ed. Hilary Greaves and Theron Pummer (Oxford University Press, 2019), 23–24, https://www.williammacaskill.com/s/The_Definition_of_Effective_Altruism.pdf.

expense? This is why I think effective altruists and their decolonizing critics may find some common ground in the case for open borders.

It should also be noted that, the support from some effective altruists notwithstanding, open border advocacy is rather neglected in the effective altruism movement. In 2019, MacAskill mentioned the following things to show how effective altruists are involved in open border advocacy: the informative website openborders.info (which is ‘run by a member of the effective altruist community’, writes MacAskill) and relevant grants by Open Philanthropy to the Center for Global Development, the US Association for International Migration and ImmigrationWorks.³²⁴ However, this is, all else equal, a rather small commitment. Openborders.info, for all its merits, is just a website, which is not exactly easy to navigate, even though the great amount of dedication behind the site’s content is easy to see.³²⁵ Of the hundreds of millions of dollars in grants that it allocates each year³²⁶, Open Philanthropy has generally given only a relatively small fraction (typically less than \$2 million per year) to organizations working for immigration policy reform.³²⁷ As of writing this, there are only 20 topics tagged ‘immigration reform’ on the Effective Altruism Forum.³²⁸

Not much information about ImmigrationWorks can be retrieved online, other than the fact that de facto, it seems to have been disbanded in 2019.³²⁹ Strikingly, ImmigrationWorks was apparently meant to represent the interests of US businesses who sought to be able to more easily hire migrant workers. Although the nonprofit’s website had a bullet point list of six principles which they claimed to adhere to, and

³²⁴ William MacAskill, “The Definition of Effective Altruism,” in *Effective Altruism: Philosophical Issues*, ed. Hilary Greaves and Theron Pummer (Oxford University Press, 2019), 23, https://www.williammacaskill.com/s/The_Definition_of_Effective_Altruism.pdf.

³²⁵ Vipul Naik et al., “Openborders.info,” Open Borders: The Case, accessed May 20, 2023, <https://openborders.info/>.

³²⁶ Nuño Sempere, “Some Data on the Stock of EA™ Funding,” nunosempere.com, November 20, 2022, <https://nunosempere.com/blog/2022/11/20/brief-update-ea-funding/>.

³²⁷ Open Philanthropy, “Grants,” Open Philanthropy, accessed May 20, 2023, <https://www.openphilanthropy.org/grants/?q&focus-area%5B0%5D=immigration-policy&sort=recent#categories> – this link displays all of Open Philanthropy’s grants in the area of immigration policy to date.

³²⁸ Aaron Gertler, Pablo Stafforini, and other anonymous editors, “Immigration Reform,” Effective Altruism Forum, March 15, 2021, <https://forum.effectivealtruism.org/topics/immigration-reform>.

³²⁹ ProPublica, “Immigrationworks Usa,” ProPublica, accessed May 20, 2023, <https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/organizations/262033929>. No tax filings after 2019 were found, meaning the organization has most likely ceased operations.

one of these was that ‘all workers should enjoy the same labor protections’, a review by GiveWell claimed that

in practice, [ImmigrationWorks] focuses primarily on the first of these bullet points [ie. ‘bringing America's annual legal intake of foreign workers more realistically into line with the country's labor needs’], and its advocacy efforts tend to be oriented towards Republicans.³³⁰

Evidently, the goal of open borders should not be to allow businesses in high-income countries to more efficiently exploit immigrant workers, which strongly seems to have been more or less the actual goal of ImmigrationWorks.

Of course, the effective altruism movement’s brief period of support for ImmigrationWorks can be forgiven as a mistake, as can the relatively small scale and intensity of effective altruist open border advocacy. After all, there is little hope of achieving any great progress in this area anytime soon: there is now almost no popular or political support in high-income countries for decreasing immigration restrictions, and even if immigration to these countries was increased, this might lead to even more backlash against the idea of opening borders. However, abolishing slavery in the United States was also once considered politically inconceivable, and it happened nonetheless. If effective altruists claim to adhere to longtermism – defined by MacAskill as ‘the view that we should be doing a lot more to protect future generations’³³¹ – then they might also have to consider how the difficult work of changing the public’s attitudes about immigration and open borders could be extraordinarily beneficial in the long run, because it is a precondition to actually creating open border policies. In this struggle to win hearts and minds for the ideal of a world without borders, effective altruists and (decolonizing) critics may find each other unexpected allies.

³³⁰ GiveWell, “ImmigrationWorks Grant,” GiveWell, July 2014, <https://web.archive.org/web/20140808042914/http://www.givewell.org/labs/causes/labor-mobility/ImmigrationWorks#sources1016>.

³³¹ William MacAskill, “Nonprofits,” williammacaskill.com, accessed May 19, 2023, <https://www.williammacaskill.com/nonprofits>.

The potentially emancipatory effects of effective charity

Much of the debate on effective altruism and charity is driven by justified concerns over their potential unintended negative consequences. Indeed, the three critiques covered in this work are very much focused on that. However, why might there not also be unintended positive consequences of (some of) the types of interventions favored by effective altruists? In other words, can effective altruism be a force for emancipation? In 2013, effective altruist Holden Karnofsky (co-founder of GiveWell and co-CEO of Open Philanthropy) wrote that

a substantial part of the good that one does may be indirect: the people that one helps directly (by e.g. funding distribution of bednets) become more empowered to contribute to society, and this in turn may empower others, etc. If one believes that, on average, people tend to accomplish good when they become more empowered, it's conceivable that the indirect benefits of one's giving swamp the first-order effects.³³²

He also noted that “increased wealth and improved technology often improves people’s ability to coordinate around, and concentrate on, movements whose effects go beyond their personal lives.”³³³ Indeed, it is much easier to unionize, or enter politics, or become a climate activist, or engage in advocacy for fair international trade agreements or tax justice, or fight for other (socially) just causes if one does not have to worry about getting enough to eat, or dying from preventable and treatable infectious diseases, and it is even easier for one to engage in liberatory politics if escaping extreme poverty enables one to get more education. People who do not live in the deepest misery are more likely to be radical and critical, as Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello pointed out:

We believe that anything that makes it possible to diminish the insecurity of wage-earners even marginally is better than nothing – first because suffering will thereby be reduced, [...] but also because, as the whole history of the

³³² Holden Karnofsky, “Flow-through Effects,” GiveWell, May 15, 2013, <https://blog.givewell.org/2013/05/15/flow-through-effects/>.

³³³ Karnofsky, 2013.

working-class movement has shown, it is when insecurity diminishes that conditions conducive to a revival of critique develop.³³⁴

Lori Gruen, one of the authors of an essay for *The Good it Promises, the Harm it Does*, has argued that we need reforms. Borrowing a concept from André Gorz, Gruen specifically advocates ‘non-reformist reforms’, which ‘must be designed to [...] empower people to work in solidarity to bring about transformation of social/political systems.’³³⁵ Gruen goes on to claim that “Effective Altruism doesn’t have the tools to do the necessary analysis of the system in order to help think about strategies for non-reformist reforms, as many of the essays in this volume have argued.”³³⁶ Indeed, Andrew deCoriolis, Aaron S. Gross, Joseph Tuminello, Steve J. Gross and Jennifer Channin argue that “effective altruist donors do not presently appear to have a good way of distinguishing [whether] they are supporting [*suffering reduction that entrenches the status quo*]”.³³⁷

However, effective altruists might respond that the politicizing side-effects of effective charity make it into a prime example of a ‘non-reformist reform’. If they are right, then their anti-capitalist and decolonizing critics might suddenly have a good reason to support at least some of the anti-poverty interventions that effective altruists have advocated for. The critics rightly want to address the root causes of extreme poverty and global inequality, but what if engaging in highly effective charity is in fact one great way to do so, thanks to politicization of donation recipients, which is facilitated by the living standards improvements associated with donations to effective causes? Of course, this argument may be criticized, and I would encourage effective altruists and their critics to debate the potentially emancipatory effects of cost-effective nonprofits.

³³⁴ Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2018), ebook version, 32 (chapter ‘Preface: to the English Edition’).

³³⁵ Lori Gruen, “The Change We Need,” in *The Good It Promises, the Harm It Does*, ed. Carol J. Adams, Alice Crary, and Lori Gruen (Oxford University Press, 2023), 264.

³³⁶ Gruen, 2023, 265.

³³⁷ Andrew deCoriolis et al., “Animal Advocacy’s Stockholm Syndrome,” in *The Good It Promises, the Harm It Does*, ed. Carol J. Adams, Alice Crary, and Lori Gruen (Oxford University Press, 2023), 68.

Effective altruist self-criticism: a defense mechanism against contributing to social injustice?

In the wake of the controversy surrounding Sam Bankman-Fried, an effective altruist who ‘earned to give’ by allegedly fraudulently making billions of dollars in an industry of questionable social value (cryptocurrency), many hoped that the Bankman-Fried scandal would be a wake-up call to reform effective altruism. “I hope this is a critical juncture that forces effective altruism to reform itself”, said Luke Kemp³³⁸, who co-authored the paper criticizing existential risk studies with Carla Zoe Cremer. Similarly, The Economist wrote that:

The hope is this may be the fiasco to get effective altruism to finally change, says one adherent: “If EA is willing to suffer public criticism over this, I think that is a totally viable pathway to reform.” Effective altruists do not just need new funding. They also need new ideas.³³⁹

In the chapter on effective altruist responses to critique, I have mentioned that effective altruists sometimes point out that their movement strives to constantly improve, using critique to do so. Critical mistakes, such as the support for Bankman-Fried, may also be cited as a reason to improve rather than reject effective altruism, as the above quotes illustrate.

But how much credence should we give to effective altruist promises to engage in much needed self-criticism? Of course, there are a few strengths of effective altruism that make it plausible that the appeal to self-criticism is not completely empty. David Thorstad mentions a few, including the effective altruism’s support for, and engagement with academic research, the movement’s youth-driven nature (younger people may be more open to drastic reconsiderations of means and goals) and the

³³⁸ Linda Kinster, “The Good Delusion: Has Effective Altruism Broken Bad?,” The Economist, October 15, 2022,

<https://www.economist.com/1843/2022/11/15/the-good-delusion-has-effective-altruism-broken-bad>.

³³⁹ The Economist, “What Sam Bankman-Fried’s Downfall Means for Effective Altruism,” The Economist, November 17, 2022,

<https://www.economist.com/briefing/2022/11/17/what-sam-bankman-frieds-downfall-means-for-effectiv-e-altruism>.

fact effective altruists are open to critique at all.³⁴⁰ Additionally, the ideals of cause neutrality and means neutrality may make the effective altruism movement more open to critique, at least as long as effective altruists manage to construe critique as criticism of particular causes and means effective altruists could or should focus on. As Habiba Islam (former 80,000 Hours staff member) said:

One of the things that EAs [effective altruists] are pretty good at is caring about harm wherever it occurs, regardless of [its causes]. I think EAs have this unusual view where they [care] very much about [harm], and it sort of leads people in the effective altruism community to work on [or consider] some more unusual issues, like the suffering of animals in the wild.³⁴¹

Additionally, effective altruists already have done a lot of good: as Peter Singer pointed out, they genuinely have helped with “saving lives, alleviating hunger or chronic malnutrition, eliminating parasites, providing education, helping women to control their fertility, and preserving sight”, among other good deeds.³⁴²

But effective altruists should not think that their strengths and successes automatically guarantee that the promise of effective altruist self-criticism will be enough to prevent the movement from becoming a force that, rather than fighting (social) injustice, collaborates with it, or even exacerbates it. The critics are right to remind effective altruists of their moral duty to engage with criticisms like the anti-capitalist, decolonizing and democratic critiques, which I have discussed in this work. If they fail to do so, their promise to get better at doing good better may be empty.

³⁴⁰ David Thorstad, “What I like about Effective Altruism,” Reflective altruism, November 30, 2022, <https://ineffectivealtruismblog.com/2022/11/30/what-like/>.

³⁴¹ Garrison Lovely and Habiba Islam, “33 - Habiba Islam on the Left and Effective Altruism,” Listen Notes, October 26, 2022, <https://www.listennotes.com/podcasts/the-most/33-habiba-islam-on-the-left-dkyEMLzNTHi/>, 2:30:10 in the podcast.

³⁴² Peter Singer, “Reply to Effective Altruism Responses,” Boston Review, July 1, 2015, https://www.bostonreview.net/forum_response/response-peter-singer-reply/.

Conclusion: the common ground between effective altruists and their critics, and the future of the effective altruism movement

In this work, I hope to have provided a good overview of what effective altruism is, followed by a review of three general critiques of effective altruism, effective altruist responses to such critique, and finally, an exploration of possible common ground between effective altruists and their diverse critics. To do so, I have tried to rely on a collection of relevant literature that is as diverse and representative as possible.

As I have indicated in the introduction, the novelty of this work is threefold. First, this thesis is one of the first attempts at providing a structured review of some common and general criticisms of effective altruism *and* of effective altruist responses to them. Second, this document is one of the first to identify and name the anti-capitalist, decolonizing and democratic critiques of effective altruism, using a wide variety of quotes that demonstrate their existence. The third and perhaps most original contribution of this work is its attempt to explore potential common ground between effective altruists and their many diverse critics.

What has been the outcome of this document's search for these shared views that had thus far received little to no attention? I have identified *four possible similarities between the views of effective altruists and their critics*:

1. *Potential similarities between cash transfers and reparations to formerly colonized countries*: cash transfers – favored by effective altruists – and reparations – most likely advocated by a considerable number of decolonizing scholars and activists who may also be critical of effective altruism – are both driven by indignation at global inequality and social injustice and both desire to see an end to extreme poverty and neocolonialism.
2. *Liberated migration*: in their vision of a world with open borders, where people may freely move and settle across the planet, where ‘nobody is illegal’, some

decolonizing critics and effective altruists might find each other unexpected allies.

3. *Emancipatory nonprofits and charity*: activists and scholars who are passionate about the fight against (social) injustice may consider if and how at least some of the evidence-based nonprofits advocated for by effective altruists – in particular those that distribute direct, unconditional cash transfers to people in poverty – can actually politicize and emancipate the beneficiaries of charity, rather than oppressing them.
4. *Critique as a force for positive social change*: effective altruists and their critics could debate the strengths and limitations of self-criticism as a tool for not just improving the effective altruism movement, but also preventing it from becoming a force that contributes to social injustice. If effective altruists are truly as open to critique as they say they are, then their movement could avoid becoming oppressive.

Of course, these points are not the only nor the most likely places where effective altruists and their critics might unexpectedly find themselves in agreement. But they offer great starting points for debates and dialogue between effective altruists and their critics – a conversation that I hope will become more lively, engaged and reciprocal than it currently is. As I have pointed out in this work, there is considerable overlap between the political views of effective altruists and their critics. Both of these groups tend to be left-wing, egalitarian and/or progressive. This makes the prospect of finding common ground a realistic one.

I must once again clarify that ‘common ground’ does not mean ‘compromise’ or ‘the best of both worlds’. Both morally and practically, it is probably for the better that differences in worldviews and opinions, even fundamental and incompatible ones, continue to exist. It is in no way the author’s aim to change anything about that. The greatest ideological differences between effective altruists and their critics concern not so much clashes between the left and the right or between progressives and conservatives, but rather differences between defenses of capitalism and anti-capitalism, decolonization and utilitarian development cooperation, democracy and technocracy.

At the same time, I think an honest, open and mutual acknowledgement of real similarities between effective altruists and their critics can only benefit the causes they may both champion, including an end to extreme poverty and associated discrimination and injustice, preventable animal suffering, harmful climate change and diverse forms of social and political oppression. Effective altruism and other movements speak to different characters, some may feel attracted to both, many more appear to be drawn to only one of these two approaches to changing the world, and yet others may find neither very appealing. At the risk of sounding somewhat moralizing, I want to point out that this is a good thing, because many different and sometimes incompatible views, approaches and movements are needed to really change the world for the better. Nothing is perfect, nobody has all the answers, so we must at least try to listen to and learn from each other.

For all these reasons, I want above all to emphasize that I would like to see effective altruists and their critics engage in conversation, and I would love to see them use the debates discussed in this work – and others like them – as starting points. Besides such continued dialogue, what may also advance the debate over effective altruism is more research on critique of topics that this work has not focused on: longtermism, the effective altruist approach to a specific cause area (eg. extreme poverty, animal welfare, climate change, ...), the ‘measurability bias’ or ‘quantification bias’ of effective altruism, ... I believe more dialogue and more research will lead us to far more interesting results than if I would just continue to speculate here on the critique of effective altruism or on where effective altruists and their critics have better points.

Perhaps one outcome of the conversation between effective altruists and critics might be a schism in the effective altruism movement, a development that does not seem entirely undesirable to the author of this work. Many social movements have undergone divisions over (internal) ideological debates, and it is unlikely that, at least in the long term, effective altruism would be an exception to this tendency. The effective altruism movement might eventually split up, perhaps into a more longtermist, technocratic and techno-utopian current that focuses on global catastrophic risks on the one hand, and on the other hand, a more democratic, anti-capitalist and politics-oriented faction. Or perhaps there might simply be more

pronounced differences between the ‘longtermist’ (focus on future causes) and ‘nearertermist’ (emphasis on present and near future problems) wing of the movement, a division that is arguably already taking place. Responding to ‘Doing EA Better’, one commenter wrote:

Portions of this reform package sound to my ears like the dismantling of EA [effective altruism] and its replacement with a new movement, Democratic Altruism ("DA"). It seems unlikely that much of classic EA would be left after at least radical democratization – there are [sic] likely to be a flood of incoming people, many with prior commitments, attracted by the ability to vote on how to spend \$500MM of Uncle (Open) Phil's money every year.³⁴³

Only time will tell if effective altruism will stay united, or whether we will see something like ‘democratic altruism’ become its spin-off. In the meantime, I believe the debate on effective altruism is one of the most morally and politically worthwhile ones of our age.

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³⁴³ Jason, comment under post, Effective Altruism Forum, January 18, 2023, <https://forum.effectivealtruism.org/posts/54vAiSFkYszTWWWv4/doing-ea-better-1?commentId=jpau6FTPLFfpzn3aQ>.

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