Must do better

William MacAskill, *Doing Good Better: Effective Altruism and a Radical New Way to Make a Difference* (London: Faber and Faber, 2015). 336pp., £8.99 pb., 978 1 78335 051 3

Peter Singer, *The Most Good You Can Do: How Effective Altruism Is Changing Ideas About Living Ethically* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015). 272pp., £14.99 hb., £12.99 pb., 978 0 30018 027 5 hb., 978 0 30021 986 9 pb.

The Effective Altruism (EA) movement stresses cost-effective philanthropy over carelessly throwing effort or money behind any old cause. It is motivated by the laudable, selfless desire to maximise global happiness. It might have been called 'Consequential Altruism' or even 'Consequentialist Altruism': it demands that any intervention be judged not by its deontology nor by the agent's virtue or otherwise, but by its consequences, its effectiveness. EA thus inherits many of the problems that many readers of this journal will be familiar with in consequentialism as a moral philosophy.

While it is possible to deeply admire many of the motivations behind the movement, and recognise that well-targeted individual giving can certainly have demonstrable positive effects, EA falls far short of offering a solution to global poverty, let alone to still-bigger questions of global politics and ecology — or to questions of how to choose to live; that is, the true questions of ethics. In its quest for quantification, EA tends to overlook key, foundational areas of concern – perhaps most notably dangerous anthropogenic climate change – and fails to appreciate the fundamental role of global political-economy in the issues it seeks to address.

The discussions offered by Peter Singer and William MacAskill of anthropogenic climate change throws these doubts about EA into sharp relief. Start with MacAskill. In an important chapter of *Doing Good Better* entitled 'Poverty vs climate change vs …', MacAskill seeks to compare various causes and their scale, level of neglect and tractability. Of '2-4 degrees of climate change', he writes that its scale as a problem is 'fairly large'; the same level of scale he assigns to the issue of 'US criminal justice reform'. This is a catastrophic under-estimation. Four degrees of climate change would mean the end of the world as we know it; it would involve heat-waves in large land-masses for instance at 10 to 12 degrees centigrade above the hottest levels current. Of course, we don't know just how bad it would be; it could be much *worse* than this (or, indeed, less bad). It's simply not *measurable* in the way that EA prefers things to be. And it involves a constitutive time-lag; by the time the climate threat is fully measurable, it will be too late to stop it.

Now take Singer, who writes:

[C]ompare climate change and malaria. On the basis of what the overwhelming majority of scientists in the [field] tell us, the need for an international agreement to reduce greenhouse gases is extremely urgent. There are, however, already many governments and organisations working toward getting such an agreement. It is difficult for private donors to be *confident* that anything they can do will make that agreement more likely. In contrast, distributing mosquito nets to protect children from malaria is, at least from a global perspective, less urgent, but individuals can more easily make a difference to the number of nets distributed. (emphasis added)

Singer's conclusion: tackle malaria, leave climate change to governments. This again is an epic fail (as well as a truly perplexing thing for a former Australian Green Party senate candidate to say). Notice the way that what one can be *confident of* skews Singer's answer (and skewers the future). We can more easily show the *number* of mosquito nets distributed: therefore, we should give to charities distributing mosquito nets, and give up trying to influence the too-big-to-succeed issue of climate. We can bask in the confidence that 'already many governments and organisations [are] working toward [an international climate change] agreement'. Ignore the fact that Paris, the 'successful' international agreement that we now have, relies on non-existent negative-emissions technologies, barely *mentions* renewables or fossil fuels, doesn't mention animal agriculture or the vast downsides of large-scale agrofuels, commits us, even on its own

terms, to 3-4 degrees of global over-heat, and has literally no enforcement mechanisms.

The complacency of Singer's response to probably the greatest issue of our time makes one worry about what the effects of 'Effective Altruism' may actually be. The climate issue is *determinative*; it will either make possible or utterly undermine effective action on a host of other issues. The key methodological flaw here, and one that is common to much of EA, is the elision of 'effectiveness' with 'evidence-based'. It makes the EA methodology little better than the infamous drunk looking for his car keys where the streetlight happens to be shining. Lack of certainty should not be a reason to delay strong precautious action in the face of potential catastrophe; but EA cannot take the precautionary principle seriously, because of the dogmatic insistence upon evidence.

Focusing largely on health in the way that most EA does (a focus explicitly defended in MacAskill's book) is also hopelessly short-sighted; catastrophically so. EA largely occludes the systemic threats bearing down on us in favour of more visibly 'effective' interventions ultimately conceived of as interventions by individuals to help individuals. Consequently, EA tends to boil down largely to relatively short-term / manageable projects. (Life-projects are discussed, and I will come to this in a moment; but of course these are bound to be far harder to 'measure'.) Activities with long-term consequences tend to be eschewed in favour of such short-term projects. Failing to award climate change the premier global threat status it deserves, on the grounds of its being calculus-unfriendly, represents a grave discrimination against future generations. But perhaps this tacit 'moral future discount rate' is not entirely unexpected from a utilitarian model that is closely linked to classical economic theory.

Dealing only with extreme poverty as it exists *now* boils down to storing up a constant stream of emergent destitution into the future, rather than tackling its root causes. If philanthropy is solely focused on the most egregious manifestation of symptoms, then the underlying causes are allowed to fester and intensify. EA's fixation on the symptoms cre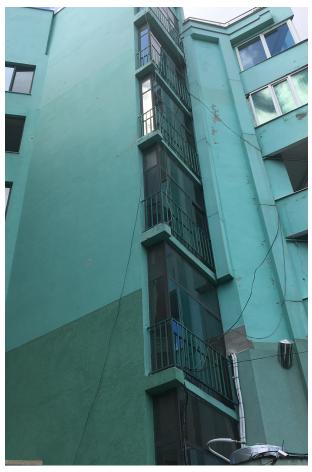ates the impression that they arise spontaneously, and are not reflective of structural problems of the neoliberal socio-economic imaginary. In fact, geo-political and historical forces are chief causes of ongoing poverty in the Global South. Whether we are talking about land grabs, toxic waste dumping, labour and consumer exploitation from Western multinationals, massive environmental degradation, health impacts of resource plundering, local government corruption, ongoing regional conflicts, and the escalating environmental consequences of Western economic activity, all of these deep causes of poverty are unresolvable through scientistic philanthropy and single-issue projects. They require a deeper (philosophical) look and a harder (political) struggle. MacAskill's defence of carbon-offsetting as an allegedly affordable, allegedly potentially effective way for caring Western individuals to help deal with the climate crisis evinces an almost total failure to be willing to take such a look.

The point is that most of the causes of deep poverty (including, strikingly, anthropogenic climate change) are *structural* and can therefore only hope to be alleviated through systemic (global) measures. Such systemic thinking is what (real) politics is all about. But being holistic in one's approach, unfortunately, seems in practice inimical to EA, which is necessarily balkanised because of its 'evidence-based' nature. Singer in particular focuses almost exclusively on charity (i.e. on charities), and virtually ignores the bigger frame: political change.

At this point an EA-advocate would doubtless say that we should have an 'evidence-based politics'. Yet, while it is true that it would be a good thing for evidence to be less blithely ignored in politics, it would be a depoliticising disaster to substitute 'evidence-based politics' for real politics. Many of the problems we face are rooted in systematic uncertainties, of a type that 'evidence' alone cannot possibly deal with *effectively*. Any need whose causes or solutions are complex or political is thus likely to come out badly from an EA approach. In this sense, it is not only the case that, say, love and fellow-feeling (as opposed to the spirit of calculation) are important dimensions missing from the EA analysis, but that there are also 'harder' political dimensions that EA systematically misses. For example, if responsibility for sharing

the 'burden' of refugees were more equitably shared then the political incentives to address the underlying drivers of displacement would be likely to increase – though not certainly so: there might be a political reaction instead, *à la* UKIP / Trump – regardless of how much fellow-feeling there was or is.

Perhaps the most crucial political lack in EA is its tendency not to question the overarching political-economic frame of (neo)liberal capitalist individualism. Singer's defence of capitalism on the grounds that it increases wealth misunderstands the grave consequences of inequality (on which, see Wilkinson and Pickett's 2010 book *The Spirit Level*); he ignores the value of community or society in itself. Instead, he likes a system which 'increases the ability of the rich to help the poor, and some of the world's richest people, including Bill Gates and Warren Buffett, have done precisely that, becoming, in terms of the amount of money given, the greatest effective altruists in human history.' Never mind that such wealth massively suborns democracy, nor that such inequality is intrinsically harmful. Similarly, con-

sider MacAskill's extraordinary support for the unbelievable level of inequality involved in what we allow to accrue to entrepreneurs: quoting ultra-neo-classicist William Nordhaus favourably, MacAskill praises entrepreneurs for allegedly generating $50 for society for every $1 they take themselves. The conventionality of MacAskill's economics is matched by the conventionality of his admiration for 'conventional' (sic) agriculture – that is, for industrialised agriculture dependent on pesticides, artificial fertilisers etc.; agriculture that is leading towards a situation in which we have only about two generations worth of soil left. MacAskill attacks the movement for local food, and issues ill-informed calls to substitute foreign-grown tomatoes for home-grown ones, ignoring the possibility of a system-change which would, for instance, once more re-centre our food-production on what is seasonably growable, where we live. He signs up uncritically to an agenda of 'developmentality', looking forward to the replacement of agrarian societies by a 'universal' mode of industrial growth.

If this perhaps allows us to understand better why it is impossible for the likes of MacAskill to get the threat and causes of human-induced dangerous climate-change into focus, it also makes it easier to understand how he can make the extraordinary claim that sweatshops are the most humane form of employment for many people in the '3rd world'. His '1st-world' narrow-mindedness cannot conceive of any other future for most people in the world than that set out by the path of the industrial revolution. He quotes standard pro-growth economists of capitalism such as Krugman and Sachs singing hymns of praise to standard industrial-growth pathways in general and to sweatshops in particular. The idea that people in 'developing countries' might conceivably have been sold a false prospectus about what life in cities is like – or real alternative possibilities such as a Gandhian culture of self-reliance, or outright political revolution – is simply not considered. Nor, of course, once again, is the straight line between industrial growthism and looming climatic cataclysm.

The extent to which EA is thoroughly in hock to something remarkably akin to the standard capitalist industrial-growth model perhaps helps to ex-

plain also something EA has become famous for: recommending many people to take high-earning jobs in business or finance and give away much of their earnings to charity. The consequences of the career-consequentialism of EA are more startlingly visible still at a revealing moment in Singer's book when he writes that 'on a plausible reading of the relevant facts, at least some of the guards at Auschwitz were not acting wrongly', for nastier people still would have taken their places, if they hadn't nobly stepped forward to kill Jews 'humanely'. We see at a moment like this the depths to which the logic of the lesser evil – the logic of consequentialism, the logic of EA – will take one. It seems a long journey from the utopian aspirations of EA to an apologia for serving as a Nazi guard at Auschwitz. But, for one who accepts the logic of EA, it is apparently no distance at all.

It is admirable to be willing to break social norms to improve the lot of other beings, and encouraging that significant numbers of people are willing to give selflessly and systematically to others far away, and that they care enough to work to check that their money is used effectively. And for comparing the effectiveness of a few commensurable charities, EA is, as I have said, of use. Yet there needs to be far more thinking here on the relationship between effective altruism and effective *democracy*. Rich people can choose what they give to. Bill and Melinda Gates are not technology-neutral: their charitable work focuses on techno-fixes and ignores anthropogenic climate change. Indeed, its only major climate-change dimension, worryingly, is Gates's interest in buying up geo-engineering patents. I am not encouraged by MacAskill's warm words for those looking into this. At the very least, it is alarming that MacAskill seems almost to pass over what is by far the most vital element of the climate issue – namely, cutting down on our GHG-pollution of the atmosphere – in favour of carbon offsets on the one hand and reckless technophiliac enthusiasm for geo-engineering on the other. Doing good better? I think that philosophy can help us do much better than this.

Rupert Read

Gender without identities

In queer theorist Annamarie Jagose's book, *Orgasmology* (2012), she argues that orgasm has been an overlooked aspect of queer critique. Part of a larger recent interrogation of queer theory's relationship to normativity, Jagose suggests that orgasm, often a seemingly normative aim of sex, has, for the most part, escaped the purview of queer thought. In turning to orgasm, Jagose also attempts to turn queerly to the stuff of sex without turning it into metaphors for queer kinship or sociality. Sticking with the material and literal orgasm, Jagose, in a challenging methodological move, insists that sexuality studies has difficulty thinking about sex outside of identity. There is a similar challenge in Judith Roof's recent rethinking of gender. In *What Gender Is, What Gender Does*, Roof suggests that gender is too tightly bound to identity – it is too often imagined as something that one can fashion, claim, or 'be'. She asks instead after what gender might be without subjectivity, offering readings of popular culture (television, film, celebrity) that decentre gender as a process of subjectification. She reads gender not through subjectivity but through a variety of other concepts, including the taxonomical, the ethical, the narratological, the temporal and the non-human. In this way, Roof aims to rearticulate gender away from 'masculinity and femininity', insisting on the non-binary, processual nature of gender. Genderings, for Roof, are 'infinite and perpetually changing'; not tied to 'any original theme or desire in subjects', nor in any way stable.

When Judith Butler published *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* in 1990, it was, as goes without saying, a game changer. It both challenged the foundations of a feminism that seemingly required 'woman' as its political referent and helped to inaugurate the field of queer theory. In