

Against ‘Effective Altruism’

Alice Crary

Effective Altruism (EA) is a programme for rationalising charitable giving, positioning individuals to do the ‘most good’ per expenditure of money or time. It was first formulated – by two Oxford philosophers just over a decade ago – as an application of the moral theory consequentialism, and from the outset one of its distinctions within the philanthropic world was expansion of the class of charity-recipients to include non-human animals. EA has been the target of a fair bit of grumbling, and even some mockery, from activists and critics on the left, who associate consequentialism with depoliticising tendencies of welfarism. But EA has mostly gotten a pass, with many detractors concluding that, however misguided, its efforts to get bankers, tech entrepreneurs and the like to give away their money cost-effectively does no serious harm.

This stance is no longer tenable. The growth of EA has been explosive, with some affiliated organisations, such as Open Philanthropy, now recommending grants amounting to hundreds of millions of dollars annually. Partly building on congenial trends in development economics, and in tandem with movements like ‘impact investing’, EA has become a force capable of leaving its imprint on whole fields of public engagement. This is in evidence in the domain of animal advocacy, to which EA has brought substantial new attention and funding. One result of the windfall is that EA-guided ratings groups serve as king-makers, raising up pro-animal organisations deemed ‘effective’ by EA and denigrating and partly defunding many organisations deemed ‘ineffective’, while pressuring others to artificially shift their missions in order to conform to operative metrics of ‘effectiveness’ and secure funding. This has led to objections from animal advocates (often muted due to fear of alienating EA-admiring funders). Yet champions of EA, whether or not concerned with the cause of animals,

for the most part adopt the attitude that they have no serious critics and that sceptics ought to be content with their ongoing attempts to fine-tune their practice.

It is a posture belied by the existence of formidable critical resources both inside and outside the philosophical tradition in which EA originates. In light of the undisputed impact of EA, and its success in attracting idealistic young people, it is important to forcefully make the case that it owes its success primarily not to the – questionable – value of its moral theory but to its compatibility with political and economic institutions responsible for some of the very harms it addresses. The sincere dedication of many individual adherents notwithstanding, reflection on EA reveals a straightforward example of moral corruption.

Anatomy of EA

Consequentialist ideas inform the way EA is implemented by many EA-affiliated groups focusing largely on human outreach, such as Development Media International, GiveWell, and Giving What We Can. Such ideas also inform EA’s implementation by groups focusing largely on animals, such as Animal Charity Evaluators and Faunalytics, and by groups like Open Philanthropy that address both humans and nonhuman animals. Consequentialism is a rather big tent, accommodating a variety of EAs. Some advocates argue that it is not necessary for effective altruists to be consequentialists.¹ Others go further, claiming that EA is ‘independent of any theoretical commitments’.² This last claim is false, reflecting ignorance of competing ethical traditions from which criticism of EA arises. But it is fair to set aside the question of whether one can be an effective altruist without being a consequentialist. The consequentialist stances that have figured in the articulation and institutional actualisation

of EA presuppose a distinctive philosophical worldview, and it is possible to move from criticism of this worldview to a thoroughgoing attack on EA's most destructive aspects. The resulting non-consequentialist outlook makes it possible to expose as confused EA-style talk of doing 'most good', delegitimising evaluations of charitable organisations that presuppose such talk's coherence, and thus rendering moot the question of whether such evaluations are invariably consequentialist.

Consequentialism is the view that moral rightness is a matter of the production of the best consequences or best state of affairs. What is 'best' is what has the most value. So consequentialist stances are grounded in prior theories of value. Within this scheme, consequentialists can be very open about what things are assessed as right or wrong.³ They can talk about the rightness not only of actions but of anything that has consequences, including desires, beliefs, dispositions and sets of actions. While consequentialists can also be fairly open about what counts as values, they make epistemological assumptions that constrain what values can be like.

Effective altruists often demonstrate consequentialist commitments by locating themselves within consequentialism's spaces of alternatives. During EA's brief history, self-avowed effective altruists have tended to take as the objects of moral assessment particular actions, while also taking as their core value the sort of well-being capturable by the metrics of welfare economics. One instrument that some have recommended for assessing actions in terms of well-being is the quality-adjusted-life-year or QALY, an economic metric for health programmes, which integrates measures of the value of extending individuals' lives with measures of the quality of life over the relevant period, with one QALY standing for one year of life in perfect health.⁴ Some effective altruists use QALYs to determine which of a set of actions (say, intervening medically to prevent 'ten people from suffering from AIDs [versus intervening to prevent] one hundred people from suffering from severe arthritis') produces more well-being and does more good.⁵ The assessments often involve further steps such as randomised control trials to get reliable accounts of interventions' consequences, calculations of interventions' marginal utilities and counterfactual considerations of the value of outcomes that would be produced by different interventions that individuals are positioned to make.

There is a further respect in which effective altruists fly consequentialist colours. Consequentialists sometimes gloss their take on the moral enterprise by saying that moral reflection is undertaken from the 'point of view of the universe', accenting that they conceive such reflection as disengaged and dispassionate.⁶ This abstract moral epistemology is one of the marks of a moral radicalism that, although sometimes criticised for the extent of its demands, gets celebrated by consequentialists. The morally radical suggestion is that our ability to act so as to produce value anywhere places the same moral demands on us as our ability to produce value in our immediate circumstances. Consider here a famous case from the prominent philosopher and EA-advocate Peter Singer. If we take well-being as a value, our ability to act so as to address suffering in any spot on earth places the same moral demands on us as does our ability to address the suffering of an unaccompanied toddler drowning in a shallow pond next to the road on which we're walking.⁷

This radical twist on consequentialism's abstract moral epistemology underlies two of effective altruists' signature gestures. First, effective altruists inherit it when they exhort us to be guided by their recommendations in a way that treats as irrelevant the question of who is helped, without following our passions or favouring projects to which we have particular attachments.⁸ Second, effective altruists presuppose a radical take on an abstract moral epistemology in urging us to do the 'most good'. Their abstract approach excludes any virtue-oriented view on which the rightness of actions is appropriately engaged responsiveness to circumstances, and this makes it seem more natural to account for rightness by looking to the value of actions' consequences. Consequentialists may hold that there are multiple kinds of valuable things, and there has never been 'a consensus among [them] about the relative weights of any sets of values'.⁹ But it is the idea that rightness is a matter of the value of quantifiable consequences, allowing for difficulties of juggling different classes of values, that makes it seem coherent to speak of single judgments about how to do the most good.

EA's god's eye image of moral reflection constrains how we can conceive of ethical thought and practice, leaving no room for views intolerant of the idea that moral reflection proceeds from the standpoint of the universe.

Thereby excluded are views – e.g. some Kantian constructivisms – that combine accounts of moral reflection as essentially perspectival with understandings of theoretical reflection as maximally abstract.¹⁰ Also excluded are views that combine accounts of moral reflection as essentially engaged with understandings of theoretical reflection on which such reflection likewise goes unregulated by an ideal of abstraction. Under the latter heading are various outlooks, some associated with strands of virtue theory, that represent values as woven into the world’s fabric, so that we need particular sensitivities to recognise them.

Many effective altruists fail to register this last exclusion as an exclusion. EA’s Oxford-trained founders work in a philosophical tradition, indebted to classic empiricism, shaped by the assumption that subjective endowments have an essential tendency to obstruct our access to the world. Thinkers in this tradition often simply take it for granted that any genuine, objective aspects of the world are abstractly accessible. Acquaintance with local history suggests this posture is at least questionable. Twentieth century Oxonian philosophy featured high profile debates about whether subjective propensities internally inform our ability to bring the world into focus. Among the most outspoken participants were members of a set of women philosophers at Oxford during and after World War Two – including G.E.M. Anscombe, Philippa Foot and Iris Murdoch – who distanced themselves from the idea that subjective endowments invariably tend to block our view of things. These philosophers made room for views on which evaluative concepts trace out forms of regularity that, while objective, are only available from non-neutral standpoints.¹¹ To sideline this part of Anglophone philosophy is to overlook its most notable resources for criticising consequentialism and consequentialism’s EA-oriented offshoots.

EA’s guiding ideas should be considered alongside the work of groups that implement them. Focusing on animal advocacy, we might take a snapshot of the activity of a prominent EA-affiliated animal charity assessor, Animal Charity Evaluators. Nine pro-animal organisations received either Animal Charity Evaluator’s highest (‘top’) or second highest (‘stand out’) rating for 2019. Of these at least eight focus on farmed animals. (The one possible exception, Faunalytics, itself uses principles of EA to rate animal charities.) Animal Charity Evaluator’s

website explains that, for every dog or cat ‘euthanised’ in a shelter worldwide, 3,400 farm animals are killed, yet spending on organisations that address animals in industrial agriculture is a small fraction of pro-animal giving. Of the eight recommended organisations that deal with farmed animals, six – or 75% – are primarily concerned with welfare improvements within industrial animal agriculture (The Albert Schweitzer Foundation, Animal International, The Humane League, Compassion in World Farming, The Federation of Indian Animal Protection Organisations, Sinergia Animal), with the other two (The Good Food Institute and Sociedade Vegetariana Brasileira) focused more on structural transformation. Animal Charity Evaluator’s website explains that it has more confidence in assessments of the short term impact of welfarist interventions than in those of the long term impact of efforts at systems change.

The institutional critique

The most fully elaborated criticism of EA, developed largely by economists and political theorists, is sometimes referred to as the *institutional critique*.¹² This critique attacks effective altruists for operating with a damagingly narrow interpretation of the class of things that are assessable as right or wrong. It targets effective altruists’ tendency to focus on single actions and their proximate consequences and, more specifically, on simple interventions that reduce suffering in the short term. Advocates of the institutional critique are on the whole concerned to decry the neglect, on the part of EA, of coordinated sets of actions directed at changing social structures that reliably cause suffering. EA’s metrics are best suited to detect the short term impact of particular actions, so its tendency to discount the impact of coordinated actions can be seen as reflecting ‘measurability bias’. A leitmotif of the institutional critique of EA is that this bias is politically dangerous because it obscures the structural, political roots of global misery, thereby contributing to its reproduction by weakening existing political mechanisms for positive social change.¹³

The institutional critique of EA can be brought to bear on Animal Charity Evaluator’s 2019 ratings. Animal Charity Evaluator’s favouring of welfare improvements in the conditions of farmed animals can be taken to reflect forms of (‘measurement’) bias in its metrics, which



are best suited to detect the outcomes of simpler efforts with clear short term impacts. This orientation speaks for striving to change the methods of meat companies in ways that leave unquestioned the larger political context in which the companies operate. The result is that, despite its sincere pro-animal stance, Animal Charity Evaluator is at risk of strengthening an industrial agricultural system that reproduces horrific animal suffering on a massive scale.

A number of effective altruists have responded to the institutional critique. Responses generally allow that some EA programs have placed undue stress on quantitative tools for capturing short term effects of individual actions and that, in thus overemphasising ‘the importance of relying on quantifiable evidence of the kind that [randomized control trials] can provide’,¹⁴ they demonstrate measurability bias.¹⁵ 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. This is the

stance of two advocates who argue that EA obliges us to take seriously the role that coordinated actions and other tactics can play ‘within and across social movements’, where this involves being open to consulting fields such as ‘history and social, political and economic theory’ for instruments to measure their effects.¹⁶ While replies to the institutional critique bring out that there is room to include collective actions among EA’s objects of assessment, and to introduce new tools for capturing effects of such actions, they leave unexamined questions about whether it is confused to insist on causal effects as the standard for evaluating collective attempts to change the normative structure of society. 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.¹⁷

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 one. The institutional cri-

tique can and should be given a philosophical twist that transforms it into a direct challenge to EA's main philosophical tenets.

The philosophical critique

The *philosophical critique* is an apt moniker for a cluster of attacks on EA which target the god's eye moral epistemology that makes it seem possible to arrive at single judgments about how to do the most good. These attacks charge that it is morally and philosophically problematic to construe moral reflection as abstract. Critics leveling this charge often present themselves as building on a line of argument that Bernard Williams develops in publications in the 1970s and 1980s, about how efforts in ethics to look at our lives from an Archimedean point oblige us to abstract from even our most valued relationships and practices and accordingly represent a threat to our integrity.¹⁸ Effective altruists who respond to the philosophical critique take Williams to be urging us to protect our integrity even at the cost of doing the wrong thing.¹⁹ They regard this solicitude toward the self as misplaced and self-indulgent, and, because they assume that philosophical critics of EA operate with the same understanding of Williams, they dismiss these critics' gestures as without philosophical interest.

The stance of these effective altruists is understandable. The interpretation of Williams they favour is widely received, and it is difficult to find a philosophical critique of EA that is elaborated precisely enough to make clear that this take on it is inaccurate. At the same time, this is a major missed opportunity for critical reflection. It is not difficult to develop philosophical critics' worries about a god's eye morality so that they rise to the level of a devastating objection. All that is required is to combine worries about point-of-viewless moral reflection with views about values, like those championed by the group of mid twentieth-century women philosophers at Oxford, on which concepts of values determine neutrally unavailable worldly patterns.²⁰ The point of the philosophical critique is not that EA's abstract moral epistemology imposes integrity-threatening moral demands. The more telling charge is that an Archimedean view deprives us of the resources we need to recognise what matters morally, encouraging us to read into it features of whatever moral position we happen to favour.²¹

It might seem that effective altruists are justified in dismissing the charge. The target is EA's point-of-viewless moral epistemology, and this moral epistemology is at home within a larger philosophical outlook, itself a pivot of contemporary analytic philosophy, on which abstraction is a regulative ideal for all thought about the empirical world. Why should effective altruists take seriously an attack on a philosophical worldview that many of their colleagues take as an unquestioned starting point?

The late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries witnessed significant philosophical assaults on abstract conceptions of reason, and there is a notable philosophical corpus in which the merits of these assaults get debated.²² Although it is by no means obvious that those who favour abstract views have better arguments, and although their interlocutors raise fundamental questions about these views' tenability, abstract conceptions of reason have for more than half a century played an organising role in the discipline of philosophy, structuring research programmes in numerous subfields.²³ This suggests that the conceptions' staying power is at least partly a function of ideological factors independent of their philosophical credentials. That – the fact that these conceptions of reason are manifestly open to contestation – is one reason why effective altruists should attend to a philosophical critique that depends for its force on rejecting abstract images of reason. A second reason for effective altruists to attend to the philosophical critique has to do with the seriousness of the moral charge it levels against them. It alleges nothing less than that their image of the moral enterprise is bankrupt and that moral assessments grounded in this image lack authority.

The philosophical critique brings into question effective altruists' very notion of doing the 'most good' or having the 'greatest impact'. Effective altruists invite us to regard the rightness of a social intervention as a function of its consequences, with the outcome involving the best states of affairs counting as doing most good. This strategy appears morally confused when considered in terms of the ethical stance of the philosophical critique. To adopt this stance is to see the weave of the world as endowed with values that reveal themselves only to a developed sensibility. To see things this way is to make room for an intuitively appealing conception of actions as right insofar as they exhibit just sensitivity to

the worldly circumstances in question. This is consistent with allowing that right actions can have the end of promoting others' happiness or flourishing. Here acting rightly includes acting, when circumstances call for it, in ways that aim at the well-being of others, and, with reference to this benevolent pursuit of others' well-being, it makes sense to talk – in a manner that may seem to echo effective altruists – about good states of affairs. But it is important that, as Philippa Foot once put it, 'we have found this end within morality, forming part of it, not standing outside it as a good state of affairs by which moral action in general is to be judged'.²⁴ Here right action also includes acting, when circumstantially appropriate, in ways that aim at ends – e.g. giving people what they are owed – that can conflict with the end of benevolence. Apt responsiveness to circumstances sometimes requires acting with an eye to others' well-being and sometimes with an eye to other ends. In cases in which it is not right to attend to others' well-being, it is incorrect to say that, because we haven't thus attended, we achieve a morally worse result. Things only seem this way if we allow our understanding to be shaped by what now appears to be a confused understanding of morality. What we should say is that the result we wind up with is morally best. That is what it comes to to say that, within the context of the philosophical critique, there is no room for EA-style talk of 'most good'.²⁵

This critique alleges that EA's claim to be doing the most good founders on a misunderstanding of the nature of morality and that the enterprise needs to be either radically reconceived or abandoned altogether. It thus confronts EA with challenges that it cannot meet with mere internal adjustments.

The composite critique

The philosophical critique charges that EA's god's eye moral epistemology disqualifies it from authoritatively trafficking in values, and it thus casts new light on the institutional critique's charge that EA fails to do justice to sets of actions aimed at progressive social change. The resulting *composite critique* presupposes, in line with the philosophical critique, that values are essentially woven into the texture of the social world and that EA's Archimedean take on moral reflection deprives it of resources needed to describe – irreducibly normative –

social circumstances. The upshot of this new line of criticism is an update of the institutional critique, charging that EA cannot give accurate assessments of sets of actions because it forfeits capacities necessary for all social assessment. This means that the tendency of EA-affiliated organisations to wrongly prioritise evaluation of the proximate effects of particular actions is not a fixable methodological flaw. The organisations focus on these evaluations because it is only here that their image of the moral enterprise seems plausible. It is often right to act in ways that aim to improve the welfare of others. But recognising the instances in which this is (or isn't) right requires capacities for engaged social thought that EA disavows. Further, when it comes to evaluating actions coordinated with an eye to social transformation, EA's image of the moral enterprise is patently implausible. Such actions are efforts to restructure the normative organisation of society, and their relevant 'effects', far from obeying merely causal laws, are at home in the unpredictable realm of politics. Attempts to evaluate these efforts in EA's terms are manifestly confused.

This composite critique finds extensive support in philosophical reflection about the social sciences. At the critique's heart is an image of the social world as irretrievably normative such that understanding it requires non-neutral resources. A classic argument for this image within social philosophy centres on a conception of actions as conceptually articulated and constitutively normative. Granted that social concepts are categories for actions (or for character traits, practices and institutions that can themselves only adequately be understood in reference to actions), it follows that these concepts need to be understood as tracing out patterns in an irreducibly normative ground – patterns that only reveal themselves to an evaluatively non-neutral gaze.²⁶ Further arguments for conceiving social understanding as thus normative can be found in numerous discussions about methods and authority of the social sciences. This includes anti-positivist debates in sociology,²⁷ disputes in anthropology about the need for ethnographic methods alongside quantitative ones²⁸ and calls by Frankfurt School theorists to retain an ineluctably normative notion of social analysis.²⁹ These interrelated literatures supply additional backing for the verdict that EA, with its abstract methods, bars itself from responsibly dealing in social assessments.



Yet further support can be found in contemporary discourses of liberation. Anguish at the violence of being forced to live within ‘false universals’ is a rallying cry echoing through numerous strands of twentieth and twenty-first century emancipatory thought. What inspires the cry is the experience of being subjected to forms of social life that appear to conform to laudable social ideals (e.g. equality, freedom and non-violence) only when looked at from elite perspectives that are wrongly presented as neutral and universal. Expressions of this experience often go hand in hand with claims about how the route to a just understanding of a set of unjust social circumstances must involve, not a new supposedly neutral stance, but a stance shaped by an appreciation of the suffering of the marginalised. Such claims recur in a wide array of overlapping – feminist, anti-racist, anti-colonial, anti-ableist – liberating theories,³⁰ and, against the backdrop of this theoretical corpus, EA’s insistence on an abstract approach to evaluation assumes the aspect of a refusal to listen to demands for justice.

In practice, the composite critique suggests that, within any domain in which they operate, charities guided by EA-ratings will in general direct funds towards simple interventions capturable with metrics such as income levels or health outcomes, and in a manner relatively insensitive to whether these interventions contribute to perpetuating the institutions that reliably produce the ills they address, while also disparaging as less ‘effective’ systematic attempts to change these institutions. This is what typically happens with EA-oriented organisations that rate animal charities. In addition to emphasising welfare improvements in the treatment of animals caught up in industrial ‘farms’, these organisations tend to depreciate pro-animal organisations that are dedicated to transforming social attitudes toward animals and whose achievements aren’t demonstrable in EA’s terms. This includes vegan organisations in Black and Brown neighbourhoods in the U.S. that seek to address people not through easily quantifiable methods like leafleting but through outreach to churches and regular

participation in local markets and fairs; it includes many longstanding activist groups in the Global South working to contest the spread of factory farms; it includes many sanctuaries for domestic animals; and, more generally, it includes a vast array of grassroots pro-animal organisations and movements that, even when working in solidarity with larger networks, arrive at their methods in ways that are context-sensitive and bottom-up.

EA as moral corruption

EA is a movement based on a flawed conception of morality that encounters opposition not only from ethics, political theory and philosophy of the social sciences, but also from many critical theorists, organisers and activists who are committed to causes, such as animal protectionism, that effective altruists support. This raises the question of the source of its appeal. Effective altruists couch their moral assessments quantitatively in terms of doing the most good, trafficking in tropes of economic efficiency that align them with the institutions of neoliberal capitalism. It's no secret that EA urges its adherents to work within these institutions. Singer is openly dismissive of critiques of global capitalism in its current form,³¹ and, along with MacAskill and many other proponents of EA, he encourages the practice of 'earning to give', that is, taking high paying jobs in business and finance in order to be able to give more.³² Singer goes as far as to laud the billionaire philanthropists Bill Gates and Warren Buffett as 'the greatest effective altruists in human history'.³³ EA owes its success as a philosophical-philanthropic movement largely to its eagerness and ability to work within existing political-economic systems.

This source of EA's success is also its most grievous shortcoming. Effective altruists present their philanthropic program as the expression of an uncontextualised moral theory, in a manner that reflects no awareness of the significance of their situatedness within capitalist forms of life. How it happens that EA has at its disposal an audience of people with excess wealth is not a question that they take up. Within discussions of EA, it is difficult to find a hint of the plausible and well-grounded view – defended in the writings of many theorists of care, eco-feminists, ecological Marxists and other theorists of social reproduction – that the disproportionate material advantages of the wealthy in the global North depend on

continuously treating as 'free resources' not only animals and other aspects of the non-human natural environment, but also the reproductive labour of women and the subsistence and care work of marginalised people the world over.³⁴ It is equally hard to find mention of the now extensive literature on how practices of 'internalising' these things into capitalist markets displace without halting or slowing the devastation of nature and the oppression of vulnerable humans.³⁵ Critical outlooks in which these ideas are at home have played no discernible role in discussions of EA, where there is rarely any suggestion of a tie between the forms of misery we are enjoined to alleviate and the structures of global capitalism. What is foregrounded instead is a paternalistic narrative about how the relatively wealthy should serve as benefactors of relatively poor and precarious humans and animals, and thus 'do good'.

Granted this tendency towards ahistorical theorising, it is unsurprising that enthusiasts of EA tend to regard reliance on ideals of economic efficiency as in itself unproblematic. Among other things, they betray no worry that the reach of these discourses into domains in which EA operates will displace political discourses shaped by values not capturable in terms of the logic of exchange. This insouciance about depoliticisation – another expression for EA's lack of any meaningful response to the institutional critique – is the counterpart of an inability to recognise how the instrumentalisation of public space can produce outcomes, rational only from the standpoint of capital, that reliably generate the forms of suffering EA aims to stamp out.³⁶

This weakness is devastating when it comes to EA's capacity to make a positive contribution to animal protectionism. Effective altruists' pro-animal efforts are to a large extent devoted to attending to suffering visited upon animals in factory farms. But their characteristic theoretical stance prevents them from registering the significance of the fact that these 'farms' are capitalist phenomena. Alongside the unspeakable torments that factory farms visit on animals – bio-engineered for the growth-rates of their edible tissues, raised on unnatural diets, crammed mercilessly together with conspecifics, and slaughtered on assembly lines where they are all too often dismembered while still conscious – there are terrible costs to humans. The environmental impact of confined animal feeding operations is severe. They are

sources of air and water pollution that disproportionately harms members of the already socially vulnerable human populations living in proximity to them; they produce approximately fifteen percent of global greenhouse gas emissions; and the need they generate for grazing land is a major factor in deforestation world-wide, which itself produces not only around a fifth of global greenhouse gas emissions but significant soil erosion and related polluting run-off. Industrial animal agriculture also poses serious threats to public health. It is a breeding ground for zoonoses, and, because it relies on the mass prophylactic use of antibiotics to mitigate its own disease-causing conditions, it adds to the prevalence of deadly infections of antibiotic-resistant bacteria such as salmonella. Industrial slaughterhouses are well-documented sites of systematic violations of the rights of 'kill floors' workers, a group that, in the U.S., has since the 1990s been in large part made up of Latin American immigrant and African-American men, and whose poor conditions, economic precariousness and vulnerability to abuse was exposed during the COVID-19 pandemic in which many industrial abattoirs continued to operate even while those working in them suffered disproportionate rates of illness and death. Industrial animal agriculture is a raging social pathology, intelligible only in terms of the protection and growth of meat companies' profits.

To note that effective altruists aren't guided, in their forays into animal protectionism, by insight into the capitalist origins of the 'third agricultural revolution' that gave us confined animal feeding operations and industrial abattoirs is not to say that their interventions on behalf of farmed animals are bound to misfire.³⁷ There is no reason to doubt that the welfare adjustments to the treatment of farmed animals that are favoured by EA-affiliated groups can lessen the pain of many such animals. It is even possible that in calling for these adjustments, effective altruists will hasten the demise of the industrial system that torments and kills billions of creatures annually. But it is also possible that the interventions of effective altruists will, because they affirm this system's underlying principles, contribute to its perpetuation, perhaps even precipitating the arrival of a further, more horrific 'agricultural revolution'. What is certain is that effective altruists' theoretical commitments lead them to approach animal protectionism without proper reference to political and economic forces that

sustain factory farms. Anyone seeking substantial steps toward shutting down these 'farms' would be well advised to exchange EA for efforts informed by an understanding of these forces. Only such interventions have a shot at being more than accidentally effective.

Drawing on a flawed understanding of the moral enterprise, EA directs its followers to respond to human and animal suffering in a manner that deflects attention away from how an image of humans as *homo economicus* contributes to the reliable reproduction of such suffering. At the same time, EA as a movement benefits from its embrace of those who 'earn to give', accumulating wealth in the economic arena that it leaves critically untouched. It is a textbook case of moral corruption.³⁸

EA has not been wholly unresponsive to criticism. In addition to responding – unsatisfactorily – to the institutional critique, effective altruists have attempted to respond to the charge that EA has 'been a rather homogeneous movement of middle-class white men'³⁹ by placing new stress on inclusiveness. Two prominent effective altruists have urged effective animal altruists to 'consider how the history and demographics of the animal rights and effective altruist movements might be limiting their perspective',⁴⁰ and a number of EA-associated groups have made diversity a central institutional ideal. Animal Charity Evaluators, for instance, now includes diversity among the issues it considers both in its own staffing and in that of animal organisations it assesses, and Oxford EA has made a big push for diversity. These moves toward inclusiveness are typically presented as intended not just to bring in participants with different social identities, but to make room for their perspectives and ideas. Initially attractive as such gestures are, there is every reason to be sceptical about their significance. They come unaccompanied by any acknowledgment of how the framework of EA constrains available moral and political outlooks. That framing excludes views of social thought on which it is irretrievably perspectival – views associated with central strands of feminist theory, critical disability studies, critical race theory, and anti-colonial theory. Despite its signaling towards diversity of ideas, EA as it stands cannot make room for individuals who discover in these traditions the things they believe most need to be said. For EA to accommodate their voices, it would have to allow that their moral and political beliefs are in conflict with its guiding principles and that these

principles themselves need to be given up. To allow for this would be to reject EA in its current form as fatally flawed, finally a step towards doing a bit of good.⁴¹

Alice Crary teaches philosophy at the New School for Social Research in New York, and is Visiting Fellow at All Souls College, Oxford, 2021-22. Her current projects include two books, Animal Crisis, with Lori Gruen, and Radical Animal.

Notes

1. Magnus Vinding, *Effective Altruism: How Can We Best Help Others* (Durham, NC: The Neuroethics Foundation, 2018).
2. Jeff McMahan, 'Philosophical Critique of Effective Altruism', *The Philosopher's Magazine* 73:2 (2016), 93.
3. Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 25.
4. See, for example, William MacAskill, *Doing Good Better: Effective Altruism and How You Can Make a Difference* (New York: Gotham Books, 2015), 34.
5. MacAskill, *Doing Good Better*, 34.
6. Peter Singer, *The Most Good You Can Do: How Effective Altruism is Changing Ideas about Living Ethically* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 84–85; Peter Singer and Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek, *The Point of View of the Universe: Sidgwick and Contemporary Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); the original source of the gesture is Sidgwick.
7. Peter Singer, 'Famine, Affluence, and Morality', *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 1:3 (1972), 231.
8. See Singer, *The Most Good You Can Do*, ch. 8 and MacAskill, *Doing Good Better*, 41 and ch. 9.
9. Avram Hiller, 'Consequentialism in Environmental Ethics', in *Oxford Handbook of Environmental Ethics*, eds. Stephen Gardiner and Allen Thomas (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 270.
10. Christine Korsgaard, *Fellow Creatures: Our Obligations to the Other Animals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 9 and 95.
11. For discussion of the work of these philosophers, see the website of the research group '(In Parentheses)', accessed 10 April 2021, <https://www.womeninparenthesis.co.uk/about/>. See also G.E.M. Anscombe, 'On Brute Facts', *Analysis* 18:3 (1958), 69–72; Philippa Foot, 'Moral Arguments', *Mind* 268 (1958), 502–13; Iris Murdoch, 'Vision and Choice in Morality', in *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, ed. Peter Conradi (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 76–98. For the tradition's continuation, see Annette Baier, 'What Do Women Want in a Moral Theory', *Noûs* 19:1 (1985), 53–63; Cora Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy, and the Mind* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991) and "'We are perpetually moralists": Iris Murdoch, Fact and Value', in *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness*, eds. Maria Antonaccio and William Schweiker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 79–109; Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); John McDowell, *Mind, Value and Reality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), ch. 3, 6, 7 and 10; David Wiggins, *Needs, Values, Truth*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), ch. 5.
12. See, for example, Brian Berkey, 'The Institutional Critique of Effective Altruism', *Utilitas* 30:2 (2018), 143–171.
13. See especially Emily Clough, 'Effective Altruism's Political Blindspot', *Boston Review*, 14 July 2015, <http://bostonreview.net/world/emily-clough-effective-altruism-ngos>; Angus Deaton, 'The Logic of Effective Altruism', *Boston Review*, 1 July 2015, <http://bostonreview.net/forum/logic-effective-altruism/angus-deaton-response-effective-altruism>. For critiques of humanitarian trends in development work that in some ways anticipate the institutional critique of EA, see e.g. Mark Duffield, *Global Governance and the New Wars: The Merging of Development and Security* (New York: Zed Books, 2001); Didier Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).
14. Berkey, 'The Institutional Critique of Effective Altruism', 160.
15. Jeff Sebo and Peter Singer, 'Activism', in *Critical Terms for Animal Studies*, ed. Lori Gruen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 34–35.
16. Sebo and Singer, 'Activism', 40–41.
17. For talk of an internal critique, see Sebo and Singer, 'Activism', 40; for similar responses on behalf of EA, see Berkey, 'The Institutional Critique of Effective Altruism'; Hauke Hillebrandt, 'Effective Altruism, Continued: On Measuring Impact', *Boston Review*, 31 July 2015, <http://bostonreview.net/blog/hauke-hillebrandt-giving-what-we-can-effective-altruism-impact>; McMahan, 'Philosophical Critique of Effective Altruism'.
18. Bernard Williams, 'A Critique of Utilitarianism', in J.J.C. Smart and Bernard Williams, *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 77–150; 'Utilitarianism and Moral Self-Indulgence', in *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers 1973–1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 40–53; *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1985), ch. 2 and 8. For references to Williams in philosophical critiques of EA, see, e.g., Nakul Krishna, 'Add Your Own Egg: Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline', *The Point Magazine*, 13 January 2016, <https://thepointmag.com/examined-life/add-your-own-egg>; and Amia Srinivasan, 'Stop the Robot Apocalypse', *London Review of Books* 37:18, 24 September 2015.
19. See Berkey, 'The Institutional Critique of Effective Altruism', 169n67 and related text; McMahan, 'Philosophical Critique of Effective Altruism'; Singer, *The Most Good You Can Do*, 48–49, 85 and 102.
20. For evidence that these thinkers were an important source for Williams' attacks on point-of-viewlessness, see Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 141n7.
21. See Lisa Herzog, 'Can "effective altruism" really change the world?', *Open Democracy*, last modified 22 February 2016, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/transformation/can-effective-altruism-really-change-world/>; and Srinivasan, 'Stop the Robot Apocalypse' on how EA demands the wrong things.
22. Within the analytic tradition, Wittgenstein and Austin offer two of the most significant twentieth-century attacks on abstract conceptions of reason, and their efforts have been taken

up and elaborated by philosophers such as Stanley Cavell, Cora Diamond, John McDowell and Hilary Putnam. Wittgensteinian ideas have also resonated in debates about how to conceive of reason within history and philosophy of science. For one high-profile strike, from here, against conceiving reason abstractly, see Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (New York: Zone Books, 2007).

23. Alice Crary, 'Objectivity', in *Wittgenstein on Philosophy, Objectivity, and Meaning*, eds. James Conant and Sebastian Sunday (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 47–61.

24. Philippa Foot, 'Utilitarianism and the Virtues', *Mind* 94:374 (1985), 205.

25. For a satirical version of this argument, see Annette Baier, 'A Modest Proposal', *Report from the Center for Philosophy and Public Policy* 6:1 (1986), 4.

26. Peter Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science and Its Relation to Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2008), 99–99. For commentary, see e.g. Linda Zerilli, *A Democratic Theory of Judgment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), ch. 8.

27. See e.g. Theodor Adorno, et al., *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, eds. Glyn Adey and David Frisby (London: Heinemann, 1977).

28. See e.g. Veena Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), and *Textures of the Ordinary: Doing Anthropology After Wittgenstein* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020).

29. See e.g. Axel Honneth, *Freedom's Right: The Social Foundations of Democratic Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

30. For general discussions, see e.g. Charles Mills, 'Alternative Epistemologies', in *Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy and Race* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 21–39; and 'Ideology', in *The Routledge Handbook of Epistemic Injustice*, ed. Gaile Pohlhaus Jr., et al. (London: Routledge, 2020), 100–112. See also my article 'The Methodological is Political: What's the Matter with "Analytic Feminism"', *Radical Philosophy* 2.02 (2018).

31. See e.g. Singer, *The Most Good You Can Do*, 49–50.

32. Singer, *The Most Good You Can Do*, 39–40 and MacAskill, *Doing Good Better*, 76–77 and ch. 9.

33. Singer, *The Most Good You Can Do*, 50. Singer returns to these topics in a very recent interview, describing as merely 'realistic' the belief that we will continue to have billionaires and opining that 'it's much better to have billionaires like Bill and Melinda Gates or Warren Buffett who give away most of their fortune thoughtfully and in ways that are highly effective' ('Peter Singer is Committed to Controversial Ideas', an interview with Daniel A. Gross, *The New Yorker* (April 2021)). In this interview, Singer traces sources of many of his philosophical ideas, including his commitment to EA, to his sense of the lack of 'impact' of the ideas of an anti-capitalist Marxist group called Radical Philosophy that was at Oxford when he was a student there. Some of this group's members went on to found the current journal (see Chris Arthur et al., 'Reports', *Radical Philosophy* 1:1 (1972), 30–32). So, it is fitting to use this journal to observe that Singer owes his undeniable 'impact' substantially to his accommodating attitude toward neoliberal capitalism and that, far from vindicating his youthful impatience with radical philosophy, that

'impact' has been in large part a damaging one.

34. For some central treatments of these themes, see John Bellamy Foster, *Marx's Ecology: Materialism and Nature* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000); Joan Martinez-Alier, *The Environmentalism of the Poor: A Study of Ecological Conflicts and Valuation* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2002); Maria Mies and Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen, *The Subsistence Perspective: Beyond the Globalized Economy* (London: Zed Books, 2000); and Ariel Salleh, *Ecofeminism as Politics: Nature, Marx and the Postmodern* (London: Zed Books, 1997).

35. For a helpful overview, see Johanna Oksala, 'Feminism, Capitalism, and Ecology', *Hypatia* 33:2 (2018), 216–234, esp. 223–229.

36. See Rupert Read, 'Must Do Better', *Radical Philosophy* 2.01 (2018).

37. For discussion of this 'third agricultural revolution', see John Bellamy Foster, 'Marx's Theory of Metabolic Rift: Classical Foundations for Environmental Sociology', *American Journal of Sociology* 105:2 (1999), 366–405.

38. For an account of the relevant – classic – idea of moral corruption, see the writings of Stephen M. Gardiner, especially *A Perfect Moral Storm: the Ethical Tragedy of Climate Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), ch. 9. Gardiner describes 'corruption that targets our ways of talking and thinking, and so prevents us from even seeing the problem in the right way' (301). To speak of such corruption is not to 'vilify any particular individuals' (6) but to highlight forms of moral evasion to which we are especially susceptible – and to which we can succumb in 'good faith' (307) – when we face circumstances of great urgency traceable to practices or institutions in which we participate, and when a clear-sighted and responsible response would impose substantial demands. There is a particular danger in cases like these of sliding into reliance on distorting claims and methods that are themselves a 'manifestation of the underlying problem' (Stephen M. Gardiner, 'Geoengineering: Ethical Questions for Deliberate Climate Manipulators', in *Oxford Handbook of Environmental Ethics*, eds. Stephen M. Gardiner and Allen Thompson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 501–514, 511). EA is a perfect fit for this familiar notion of moral corruption.

39. Srinivasan, 'Stop the Robot Apocalypse'.

40. Sebo and Singer, 'Activism'.

41. This article was prompted by conversations with directors of animal advocacy organisations and other animal advocates, at a February 2020 Miami meeting of the Brooks Institute for Animal Law and Policy, at which many described damaging effects of EA on their work. Accounts of EA-driven disparagement and funding loss convinced me of the need for a thoroughgoing philosophical and political critique of EA. I am grateful for helpful feedback I received at workshops at Oxford Public Philosophy, the Freie Universität, the University of East Anglia and Åbo Akademi. I have benefited from helpful discussions of these topics over the last several years with Jay Bernstein, Cora Diamond, Lori Gruen, Timothy Pachirat and Amia Srinivasan. I owe thanks to Carol Adams, Victoria Browne, Robin Celikates, Joel de Lara, Diamond, Aaron Gross, Gruen, Nathaniel Hupert and Pachirat for insightful comments on an earlier draft.