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RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Is Effective Altruism Anti-political?

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## Abstract

*Some critics contend that effective altruism is objectionably anti-political; they claim that by prioritizing individual action, effective altruism ignores the moral significance of political institutions. I argue that the prevailing versions of the political or institutional critique of effective altruism are mistaken. I begin by addressing the objection that effective altruism neglects the root causes of suffering. I then turn to a broadly rule-consequentialist argument from Brian Leiter alleging that an individual effective altruist ought to pursue institutional reform rather than private giving because more good would be done if all effective altruists pursued institutional reform instead of private giving. Next, I take up Julia Maskivker's claim that engaging in private altruism is not enough to honor our duty to help others, because we also have a Samaritan duty to vote well. Lastly, I consider an objection from Alexander Dietz, namely, that a focus on doing the most good they can as individuals will cause effective altruists to fail to coordinate on collective philanthropic projects that would produce more good than their uncoordinated individual philanthropic projects would. I argue that none of these objections succeed and close by exploring what sorts of institutional reforms effective altruists should consider pursuing.*

**Keywords:** effective altruism; beneficence; collective obligations; team reasoning; longtermism

## Introduction

Effective altruism is, roughly, the view that you should deploy your philanthropic resources in the way that does the most good possible.[1] Suppose you have a spare bottle of water that you are looking to give away. Allen asks whether you would give him the water to slick back his hair. Beth asks whether you would give her the water so that she will not die of thirst. Clearly, you are obligated to give

[1] See, e.g., William MacAskill, *Doing Good Better: How Effective Altruism Can Help You Make a Difference* (New York: Penguin, 2015); Peter Singer, *The Most Good You Can Do* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015).

the water to Beth rather than Allen. Why? One plausible answer is that giving it to Beth does the most good; more specifically, the water improves Beth's well-being far more than it would improve Allen's well-being.[2]

Effective altruists often argue that earning money to donate to effective charities does the most good possible. For example, you should give your $5,000 donation to the Against Malaria Foundation to save a person's life rather than to an opera house to slightly improve the aesthetic experience of a rich opera-goer.

This essay addresses one of the most persistent criticisms of effective altruism, namely, that it is objectionably anti-political. As Paul Gomberg puts it, private giving "promotes political quietism" by shifting "our focus from political, social, and economic issues."[3] By emphasizing individual action, effective altruism ignores the moral significance of political institutions. For example, some defenders of this objection allege that we should focus more of our attention on the structural problems that cause suffering and less of our attention on directly alleviating that suffering. Others argue that we can accomplish more by contributing to collective efforts than by taking it upon ourselves to maximize the good we do as individuals.

I will argue that the prevailing versions of the political or institutional critique of effective altruism are mistaken. First, though, a note of clarification. I am defending the view that effective altruism supplies the best account of the duty of beneficence in particular rather than the view that effective altruism provides the best account of all of our moral duties. For instance, it is plausible that you have a duty to keep your promises even when keeping a promise does not do as much good as possible. Along these lines, you might have moral reasons to pursue political change that have little or nothing to do with beneficence. Maybe you are obligated to reciprocate the political participation of others with political participation of your own.[4] Maybe you should instead work to reform unjust political institutions to avoid complicity in the injustices committed by those institutions.[5] I will leave these arguments to the side to focus on those alleging that individuals are obligated to make at least some contribution to institutional change as part of their efforts to benefit others.

Moreover, I will draw on Theron Pummer's work on a conditional obligation of effective altruism to defend effective altruism as an account of the *quality* of aid we are obligated to give rather than the *quantity* of aid we are obligated to give.[6] For the purposes of this essay, I will stay agnostic about how much of your life should be spent helping others. The claim I will defend is that, all else being equal, insofar as you are acting beneficently, it is wrong to do less good than you can.

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[2] This case is from Christopher Freiman, *Why It's OK to Ignore Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 8.

[3] Paul Gomberg, "The Fallacy of Philanthropy," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 32, no. 1 (2002): 64.

[4] For an argument in this spirit, see Jeremy Waldron, "Participation: The Right of Rights," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 98 (1998): 307–37.

[5] See, e.g., Eric Beerbohm, *In Our Name: The Ethics of Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).

[6] See Theron Pummer, "Whether and Where to Give," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 44, no. 1 (2016): 77–95.

To make the point artificially precise, suppose 10 percent of your resources should be allocated to helping others. In that case, it is morally obligatory to spend that 10 percent in the way that does the most good possible. If you donate 5 percent to the Against Malaria Foundation and 5 percent to an opera with a $300 million endowment, you have done something wrong because the entire 10 percent should go to malaria relief.

In support of this claim, consider a thought experiment that I will return to throughout this essay. It is a modified version of Peter Singer's case of the child drowning in a shallow pond.[7] Suppose there are hundreds of children drowning in an enormous lake. Because fencing off the lake would prevent children from drowning in it, the community decides to organize a fence-building effort. You may volunteer as a fence builder or a lifeguard to save some of the children who are drowning while the fence is being built. If you join the fence-building effort, you will have an inconsequential impact on its success either because there will be more than enough fence builders without your help or because there will be too few fence builders even with your help. If you volunteer as a lifeguard, you will save the lives of several children.

In this scenario, it is clear that you should allocate all of your time as a volunteer to saving the children who continue to drown in the lake. To do otherwise would be to allow needless death and suffering for the sake of making an inconsequential contribution to the fence. In short, it would be wrong for the marginal individual to volunteer as a fence builder rather than a lifeguard. I take no stand on how much time you are obligated to spend as a volunteer at the lake. My claim is that the hours you *do* spend volunteering at the lake should be spent as a lifeguard rather than a fence builder.

Turning back to the institutional critique of effective altruism, time spent by the marginal individual earning money to give to effective charities such as the Against Malaria Foundation is analogous to time spent volunteering as a lifeguard at the lake, whereas time spent pursuing political change is analogous to time spent volunteering as a fence builder. The former prevents needless harm, but the latter—as even its advocates usually admit—typically makes no difference to the success of a large-scale collective project. Making an inconsequential contribution to political change instead of funding effective charities is wrong for the same reason why volunteering as a fence builder instead of a lifeguard is wrong.

Again, I take no stand on how much of your time and resources ought to be allocated to helping others. My claim is that the time and resources you *do* allocate to helping others should be allocated in the way that helps them as much as possible. Crucially, then, my view implies that even those critics who adopt a moderate position recommending that only some portion of an individual's "beneficence budget" go toward contributions to political change instead of effective charities would still have that individual do something wrong.

With that being said, there are plausibly some cases where the most good an individual can do involves making a contribution to efforts to bring about

[7] The original case can be found in Peter Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 1, no. 3 (1972): 229–43.

institutional change. In these cases, though, effective altruism need not be revised to accommodate an individual obligation to pursue institutional change given that the unrevised version straightforwardly implies such an obligation. Thus, prevailing institutional critiques of effective altruism miss the mark in one of two ways. Either they imply that effective altruists should re-route their efforts toward inconsequential political activism, in which case such critiques should be rejected for the reason given above, or they imply that the most good an individual can do involves pursuing institutional change, in which case they are consistent with effective altruism.

I begin by discussing a version of the institutional critique of effective altruism advanced by a number of theorists, namely, that effective altruism neglects the root causes of suffering. Then, I consider a broadly rule-consequentialist argument from Brian Leiter that an individual effective altruist should act in the way that would do the most good if all, or nearly all, effective altruists acted similarly. Because (let us assume) more good would be done if all effective altruists were to pursue institutional reform instead of private giving, individual effective altruists ought to pursue institutional reform. Next, I take up Julia Maskivker's argument that engaging in private altruism is not enough to honor our duty to help others, because we also have a Samaritan duty to vote well. An objection from Alexander Dietz alleges that a focus on doing the most good they can as individuals will cause effective altruists to fail to coordinate on collective philanthropic projects that would produce more good than their uncoordinated individual philanthropic projects would. I argue that none of these objections succeed and close by exploring what sorts of institutional reforms effective altruists should consider pursuing.

## The institutional critique of effective altruism

The first version of the institutional or political critique alleges that we should direct our charitable resources to addressing the root causes of poverty and suffering via institutional change rather than alleviating the symptoms via charitable donations. For instance, a number of economists have objected that "micro-interventions at the local level" do "little to change the systems that produce the problems in the first place. What we need instead is to tackle the real root causes of poverty, inequality and climate change."[8] Variations of this argument have been made by Lisa Herzog, Brian Leiter, Judith Lichtenberg, and Amia Srinivasan, among others.[9]

[8] Sabina Alkire et al., "Buzzwords and Tortuous Impact Studies Won't Fix a Broken Aid System," *The Guardian*, July 16, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2018/jul/16/buzzwords-crazes-broken-aid-system-poverty.

[9] See Lisa Herzog, "(One of) Effective Altruism's Blind Spot(s), or: Why Moral Theory Needs Institutional Theory," *Justice Everywhere*, October 23, 2015, http://justice-everywhere.org/international/one-of-effective-altruisms-blind-spots-or-why-moral-theory-needs-institutional-theory/; Brian Leiter, "Why Marxism Still Does Not Need Normative Theory," *Analyse & Kritik* 37, nos. 1–2 (2015): 23–50; Judith Lichtenberg, "Peter Singer's Extremely Altruistic Heirs," *New Republic*, November 30, 2015, https://newrepublic.com/article/124690/peter-singers-extremely-altruistic-heirs; Amia Srinivasan, "Stop the Robot Apocalypse," *London Review of Books*, September 24, 2015, http://www.lrb.co.uk/v37/n18/amia-srinivasan/stop-the-robot-apocalypse.

The "root causes" objection, in brief, alleges that private giving is—at best—a Band–Aid. Many defenders of this critique argue that capitalist institutions in particular are responsible for suffering and poverty and, therefore, anti-capitalist action should be prioritized over donations to effective charities that merely alleviate the symptoms of capitalism. Herzog, for instance, writes: "For change to be effective, we need to change the institutions and practices of today's world... . One of our greatest responsibilities is to try to change the structures of capitalism-gone-wild that does [*sic*] so much harm."[10]

I will differentiate between an extreme and a moderate version of the "root causes" objection. The extreme version asserts that *all* of your philanthropic resources should be allocated to institutional change to fix the root cause of the relevant harms. But this view is clearly implausible and, as far as I can tell, no one endorses it, so I will not spend much time on it.

Consider the absurdities that follow from it as a general principle. It would, for instance, forbid releasing a wrongfully convicted prisoner on the grounds that doing so does not fix the institutional causes of wrongful conviction.[11] Clearly you should release this individual prisoner; that doing so helps that particular person is justification enough. Plus, this version of the objection would also rule out political action that reduces suffering but fails to fix the root cause of a problem. A free school-lunch program, like private giving, provides resources directly to those in need. Both address the symptoms rather than the causes of poverty, but both are worthwhile.

Lastly, anti-capitalist proponents of the extreme version of the root causes objection would likely reject its implications for individual action within a capitalist system. Presumably, they would argue that a particular employer has an obligation to pay a fair wage and provide decent working conditions for a particular employee even if this does not create any political change that brings us closer to a socialist regime. G. A. Cohen—a political philosopher with impeccable anti-capitalist credentials—argues that we ought to alleviate suffering that results from structural injustice even if the structural injustice is fundamental. He asks: Why shouldn't someone "address the accessible injustice that he can address, even if it is a secondary one, by using his surplus income in the requisite way? It would be grotesque for him to say to those who lose from the unjust power division: 'I won't succour you, since what I deplore is, at root, not your poverty, but the system that makes you poor.'"[12]

The moderate version of the root causes objection asserts that you are obligated to direct at least some of your charitable efforts toward fixing the cause of the suffering rather than alleviating the suffering. So if you allocate all of your resources toward the symptoms, you are doing something wrong.

[10] Herzog, "(One of) Effective Altruism's Blind Spot(s)." See also Leiter, "Why Marxism Still Does Not Need Normative Theory"; Srinivasan, "Stop the Robot Apocalypse."

[11] For more on this, see Jason Brennan and Christopher Freiman, "If You're an Egalitarian, You Shouldn't Be So Rich," *Journal of Ethics* 25, no. 3 (2021): 332.

[12] G. A. Cohen, "If You're an Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich?" *Journal of Ethics* 4, nos. 1–2 (2000): 19.

However, even the moderate version of the root causes objection should be rejected.[13] Consider the modified version of Singer's shallow pond case that I introduced above. Hundreds of children are drowning in a lake. The root cause of the harm can be ameliorated by building a fence around the lake, but children continue to drown while the fence is being built. You can either make an inconsequential contribution to the fence-building effort or you can save individual children who continue to drown. As I argued above, you should spend *all* of your time as a volunteer lifeguard saving lives instead of making an inconsequential contribution to the collective effort to ameliorate the root cause of the drownings by helping fence off the lake.

Let's apply this point directly to the moderate version of the root causes objection. Suppose we determine that the most effective way to address the problem of suffering and death due to inadequate access to medical care is to reform the institutions that provide medical care. Harriett is an expert heart surgeon who provides pro bono surgery. The time she could allocate to producing the relevant institutional change—say, by researching which candidate has the best record on medical care and voting for them—will not make a difference to whether or not the relevant change is produced, because her vote is inconsequential. However, using her time to vote *will* result in someone dying who otherwise would have lived had Harriet spent that time in surgery. In this scenario, Harriet ought to allocate all of her effort to performing surgery because to do otherwise would be to allow needless death and suffering for the sake of making an inconsequential contribution to the effort to reform institutions to address the root cause of needless death and suffering. To be clear, when Harriet spends time performing surgery instead of voting, she need not be ignoring the need for institutional reform. Rather, she may simply be distinguishing between what she can change for the better (the condition of particular people) and what she cannot (national-scale institutions).

## Rule-consequentialism and effective altruism

We might be able to rework the root causes objection, though. Consider the following from Brian Leiter:

> What if instead of picking worthy charities in accordance with Singer's bourgeois moral philosophy, those with resources committed all of it to supporting radical political and economic reforms in powerful capitalist democracies like the U.S.; perhaps even committing their time and resources to helping other well-intentioned individuals with resources organize themselves collectively to do the same? Is it implausible that if all those in the thrall of Peter Singer gave all their money, and time, and effort, to challenging, through political activism or otherwise, the idea that human well-being should be hostage to acts of charity, then the well-being of human beings would be more likely to be maximized even from a utilitarian

[13] This section draws on arguments from Freiman, *Why It's OK to Ignore Politics.*

> point of view? Do Singerites deny that systemic changes to the global capitalist system, including massive forced redistribution of resources from the idle rich to those in need, would not dwarf all the modest improvements in human well-being achieved by the kind of charitable acts Singer's bourgeois moral philosophy commends?[14]

This looks like a broadly rule-utilitarian (or at least rule-consequentialist) argument rather than an act-utilitarian (or act-consequentialist) one: people should follow the rule that will do as much good as possible if everyone, or nearly everyone, follows it. More specifically, the idea seems to be that an individual effective altruist should allocate their resources in the way that would do the most good if all, or nearly all, effective altruists were to allocate their resources similarly. Leiter makes an additional comment that supports this interpretation:

> In fact, in conversing with Singerites, it seems many would deny this for classic rational choice reasons: namely, the marginal contribution of any individual to the transformation of unjust systems is negligible, by comparison to the "clear" impact of buying mosquito nets for people in Africa. This way of "calculating" what is worth doing of course guarantees that the existing socio-economic system will remain untouched.[15]

This passage suggests that Leiter thinks that focusing on the marginal contribution of an individual is the wrong way to look at our duties here.

What should we make of Leiter's argument? For the moment, I will grant Leiter his assumption that radical anti-capitalist institutional change tends to decrease rather than increase misery. Suppose, for argument's sake, that Leiter is correct that bringing about anti-capitalist institutional change would do more good than increased charitable giving would. It does not follow that an individual, on the margin, should contribute to radical anti-capitalist political activism rather than an effective charity. The trouble with Leiter's criticism is that it ignores the strategic dimension of morality. Sometimes, what I should do is sensitive to what other people do or what I expect them to do.

As Brian Berkey argues, effective altruists should take collective action seriously, "but, as individuals, we often cannot be certain that enough others will be willing to join in any particular collective effort for that effort to be likely enough to succeed to justify investing substantial time and resources in it."[16] He continues: "Even if the success of an anti-capitalist revolution would be a good thing, if there are not nearly enough committed revolutionaries to make the prospects for a successful revolution greater than infinitesimal, and there are good reasons to expect this to continue to be the case for the foreseeable future, then it seems clear that joining the revolutionary cause would not be the morally best use of one's time, energy, and resources."[17] As Singer puts it, "[i]f there is

[14] Leiter, "Why Marxism Still Does Not Need Normative Theory," 34.
[15] Leiter, "Why Marxism Still Does Not Need Normative Theory," 35n22.
[16] Brian Berkey, "The Institutional Critique of Effective Altruism," *Utilitas* 30, no. 2 (2018): 156.
[17] Berkey, "The Institutional Critique of Effective Altruism," 158.

little chance of achieving the kind of revolution you are seeking, then you need to look around for a strategy with better prospects of actually helping some poor people."[18] In brief, if your contribution to the revolution will not make any difference to whether or not it succeeds, you should not join in because it would not do any good.

To illustrate the point, consider again the modified version of Singer's shallow pond case.[19] Suppose that if all of the townspeople follow a rule that has them work on the fence, they will do the most good possible. It does not follow that an individual member of the community should work on the fence regardless of what others are doing.

First, imagine that no one else is working on the fence. You can either push ahead on your own and work on the fence even though that will not result in the fence getting built or you can use that time to save some individual drowning children. It is clear that you should save some individual children and that it would be wrong to do otherwise. For one, this is a plausible freestanding moral judgment about the case. And second, there is a compelling argument for why you should save the children rather than work on the fence alone. If the point of working on the fence is to spare children from drowning, it is difficult to see what the justification could be for working on the fence when doing so actively conflicts with the goal of sparing children from drowning.[20]

Importantly, this is similar to the situation that we find ourselves in—or at least the situation that anti-capitalist critics of effective altruism would tell us we are in. Too few people are working for the anti-capitalist revolution to give it any realistic chance of success just as too few people are working on the fence for the lake. If you should not work on the fence alone, you should not join the revolution alone. Instead, do some good for particular people.

But what if things change at some point and lots of people become anti-capitalist revolutionaries? Then should you join the revolution? Probably not. The revolution does not need *everyone* to become a revolutionary to succeed; it just needs *enough* people to become revolutionaries. Adding yourself to the mix will not make a difference to whether global capitalism is dismantled or not; your contribution to the revolution will not result in anyone being liberated from capitalism who would not otherwise be liberated from capitalism. So you are better off using your time and resources to enrich particular people in poverty.[21] Consider the lake case again. If (more than) enough people are building the fence, you should volunteer to serve as a lifeguard and save some drowning children instead of adding an inconsequential contribution to the effort to fix the root cause of the problem.

At this point, you are probably tempted by the following thought: "Fair enough, but if everyone thought this way, the results would be bad. We won't

[18] Peter Singer, *The Life You Can Save* (New York: Random House, 2009), 36.

[19] See also Berkey, "The Institutional Critique of Effective Altruism," 155.

[20] This is a classic objection to rule-consequentialism. See J. J. C. Smart, "Extreme and Restricted Utilitarianism," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 6, no. 25 (1956): 344–54.

[21] There might be circumstances where a revolutionary tipping point is near. In this case, you could have good reason to join in, assuming you have sufficiently strong justification for your belief that the revolution will be beneficial. But rarely will we find ourselves in such a situation.

get the fence built around the lake and we won't get the anti-capitalist revolution." That's true, but also unpersuasive. If everyone worked as a neurosurgeon instead of a farmer, we would starve, but that is no objection to working as a neurosurgeon.[22]

## Is there a Samaritan duty to vote well?

Although I would not characterize her as a critic of effective altruism, Julia Maskivker argues that a satisfactory account of beneficence is one that requires political participation—specifically voting well.[23] Maskivker appeals to a duty of collective Samaritanism, according to which people have an obligation to contribute to beneficial collective activities when they can do so at a reasonable personal cost. Maskivker is careful to note that one is obligated to make these contributions even when they make little or no difference to the success of the collective activity. For instance, you are obligated to recycle even though your individual recycling efforts will not make much of an environmental impact; what matters is that *collective* recycling efforts will have an impact.[24]

Similarly, although an individual vote will not have an impact on the outcome of a presidential election, voting *collectively* will. Because voting well is needed to produce the good of fair and effective democratic governance, individual citizens should vote well when they can do so at a reasonable personal cost. To be clear, Maskivker does not claim that the duty to vote well exhausts one's Samaritan duties. You may also be obligated to donate to charity, but a charitable donation does not exempt you from voting well just as it does not exempt you from keeping your promises or paying your debts.

As a first response, consider that donating to effective charities counts as a contribution to a beneficial collective activity, for instance, malaria prevention.[25] Why, then, doesn't donating to the Against Malaria Foundation fully satisfy one's duty of collective Samaritanism? Maskivker's reply is that good democratic governance is uniquely impactful:

> [G]overnments are distinguished from other entities and institutions because it is reasonable to assume that they have more power to affect people's life prospects by way of their capacity to enact, or block, far-reaching public and social policy. Thus, if we ought to act as good Samaritans and help the common good, it seems that partaking of the mechanism that makes governments elected is essential.[26]

[22] For this sort of reply, see Loren Lomasky and Geoffrey Brennan, "Is There a Duty to Vote?" *Social Philosophy & Policy* 17, no. 1 (2000): 62–86.

[23] Julia Maskivker, *The Duty to Vote* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

[24] Maskivker, *The Duty to Vote*, 57.

[25] I make a similar point in Christopher Freiman, "Book Review: Julia Maskivker, *The Duty to Vote*," *Journal of Value Inquiry* 56, no. 3 (2022): 529.

[26] Julia Maskivker, "Being a Good Samaritan Requires You to Vote," *Political Studies* 66, no. 2 (2018): 417.

On Maskivker's view, we have a special duty to contribute to the *most* beneficial collective activity, which involves voting well to secure good governance. So even if you donate to effective charities, you must still vote well.

Returning to the lake case, Maskivker's argument implies that an individual, on the margin, ought to volunteer as a fence builder rather than as a lifeguard even when serving as a lifeguard would save the life of a child and contributing to the fence would be inconsequential.[27] Completing the fence will save more lives than serving as a lifeguard and is therefore the most beneficial collective activity to which one can contribute. But it seems as though making an inconsequential contribution to the fence instead of saving a life is morally wrong.

However, maybe this objection moves too quickly. After all, Maskivker does not claim that voting well exhausts all of one's Samaritan duties. So perhaps we are obligated to vote well *and* fund effective charities.

The problem with this reply can be illustrated by returning to the thought experiment. Suppose you volunteered as a lifeguard on Monday, which enabled you to save a child's life. The fence will be finished on Tuesday, so you have one final chance either to contribute to the most beneficial collective activity (by joining the fence-building effort) or to save individual lives (by serving as a lifeguard). Let's assume that enough people have volunteered to contribute to the fence-building effort, such that adding any further volunteers will have an inconsequential impact; at most, it will mean that one of the other volunteers will enjoy a slightly longer lunch break.

As Jason Brennan and I argue elsewhere, it is at least permissible to help particular individuals (in this case, to continue to save individual children) and not make any contributions to the beneficial collective activity.[28] I will go further here and claim that it would be *wrong* to switch to fence building and thus allow some individual children to die who otherwise would have lived. Remember that, in effect, the choice is between saving a child from drowning or extending a fence builder's lunch break. Similarly, spending time on inconsequential political participation such as voting well instead of funding effective charities is wrong because doing so allows needless harm.

## Collective obligations and philanthropic efforts

Alexander Dietz argues that effective altruism is incomplete in virtue of neglecting collective obligations.[29] Even if effective altruists are doing the most good they can as individuals when they donate to effective charities, effective altruists as a collective have an obligation to work toward institutional changes that will do more good than the total good they could produce by working separately. As Dietz puts it, "[t]he problem is that even when we each individually produce the

[27] For a similar case, see Jason Brennan and Christopher Freiman, "Must Good Samaritans Vote?" *Politics* 43, no. 3 (2023): 291–92.

[28] Brennan and Freiman, "Must Good Samaritans Vote?" 291–92.

[29] Alexander Dietz, "Effective Altruism and Collective Obligations," *Utilitas* 31, no. 1 (2019): 106–15.

best outcome we can, given what other people are doing, we may together be producing an outcome that is worse than one we could have produced."[30]

In Dietz's example, two effective altruists are deciding whether to donate to GiveDirectly or an immigration advocacy group.[31] Each person's donation to GiveDirectly is stipulated to raise one person from poverty. If both donate to the advocacy group, it will be able to lift immigration restrictions and enrich millions of people in poverty. But both need to donate for this to happen; the restrictions will not be lifted if only one donates. It seems as though the two ought to act collectively and donate to the advocacy group rather than act individually and donate to GiveDirectly. Perhaps, as Dietz suggests, effective altruists have a *collective* obligation to fund the advocacy group.

Before responding, I will note that Dietz does not take the preceding to show that effective altruism is incorrect, but merely that it is incomplete insofar as it fails to recognize collective obligations. One might reply, as Berkey does, that this objection misses the mark because effective altruism is not meant to supply a comprehensive moral framework that accounts for all of our obligations.[32] Perhaps effective altruism is simply a view about what duties of beneficence individuals have in light of the actions performed by other individuals in the actual world.

I am sympathetic to this response, but I will set it aside to take up a challenge that Dietz raises to his own argument:

> [H]ow, exactly, is recognizing collective obligations supposed to make a practical difference for EAs [effective altruists]? After all, collective actions can only come about through individual actions. So if EAs are still committed to following their individual obligations, and if recognizing collective obligations to do good doesn't tell us anything about our individual obligations, how is this recognition supposed to influence their behaviour? ... Of course, we might say that even if recognizing collective obligations would not make a practical difference, it is still important to do this for theoretical reasons. But if it were true that recognizing these obligations would not make a practical difference, this would significantly detract from the force of the institutional critique of EA. After all, EAs are primarily concerned not with purely theoretical questions but rather with how to do the most good in practice.[33]

Here is how I interpret this practical challenge. An individual effective altruist might argue as follows: "Suppose there *is* a collective obligation to do the most good possible. I'm not a collective. So why should I, as an individual, do my part to fulfill the collective obligation to do as much good as possible at the cost of failing to fulfill my individual obligation to do as much as good as possible?" Dietz

[30] Dietz, "Effective Altruism and Collective Obligations," 109.

[31] Dietz, "Effective Altruism and Collective Obligations," 110.

[32] Brian Berkey, "Collective Obligations and the Institutional Critique of Effective Altruism: A Reply to Alexander Dietz," *Utilitas* 31, no. 3 (2019): 331.

[33] Dietz, "Effective Altruism and Collective Obligations," 114.

considers this reply and responds that effective altruists could become "team reasoners." As Dietz summarizes, "[t]he central idea of team reasoning is that I might decide to perform some action not on the grounds that this action is itself seen as ideal in some way, but on the grounds that this action is my part in some group action that is seen as ideal in some way."[34] The individual effective altruist thus could decide to donate to advocacy because this is part of an ideal group action, despite being suboptimal on its own.

However, this reply pushes the individual effective altruist to ask a different question: "Why become a team reasoner?" After all, she might reasonably worry that becoming a team reasoner is at odds with honoring her individual obligation to do the most good possible. Take the immigration case again. Suppose the two effective altruists are (independently) deliberating about where to give. Each one recognizes that the "ideal group effort" involves donating to immigration advocacy. Each one also recognizes, though, that if their donation to advocacy goes unreciprocated, it will raise zero individuals out of poverty, whereas performing the ideal individual action of donating to GiveDirectly will raise (at least) one individual out of poverty. So unless they have assurance of reciprocity, each one is inclined to donate to GiveDirectly.

Dietz acknowledges this problem and suggests that team reasoners can be sensitive to the behavior of other team reasoners. Maybe the individual effective altruist should donate to advocacy only if she expects the other to do the same. Yet the practical problem remains unsolved: How do we establish the expectation that effective altruists as a group will do their part? Simply advising individuals to become team reasoners does not help here. A team reasoner is happy to do their part when they expect others to do the same, but Dietz has not given them a reason to expect others to do the same. What we need is a mechanism that solves the assurance problem. However, I will argue that if we can solve the assurance problem, we do not need team reasoning—and we might not even need collective obligations.

Here is a sketch of one solution: an effective altruist organization could organize a dominant assurance contract.[35] Donors pledge a particular amount that is only transferred in the event that sufficiently many other donations are made to reach the relevant threshold. So, for instance, one's $5,000 donation to the immigration advocacy group is transferred only if the total donations reach $10 million, which is, let us stipulate, enough to push the reform past the finish line. If the $10 million threshold is not met, the initial pledge is released *and* donors are paid a bonus, say, $200 dollars in addition to the returned $5,000, which they can in turn donate to GiveDirectly if they would like.

We do not need to appeal to team reasoning to explain why an effective altruist should pledge a donation to the advocacy group. An effective altruist should pledge because pledging does the most expected good. Effective altruists who do not expect others to reciprocate should pledge because they expect to end up with $5,200 to donate to GiveDirectly instead of the $5,000 they would

[34] Dietz, "Effective Altruism and Collective Obligations," 114.

[35] Alexander Tabarrok, "The Private Provision of Public Goods via Dominant Assurance Contracts," *Public Choice* 96, nos. 3–4 (1998): 345–62.

have if they did not pledge. If, alternatively, others begin contributing and the total sum begins to close in on the threshold, an effective altruist should donate because the increasingly high chance of moving the sum to the threshold and thus saving thousands of lives is more valuable than saving one life.

In short, even team reasoners need to solve the assurance problem, but if we can solve the assurance problem, we do not need team reasoning. Plus, effective altruists can make sense of the idea that something has gone wrong when the advocacy group goes unfunded without resorting to collective obligations. Suppose, for argument's sake, the aforementioned dominant assurance contract would facilitate sufficient funding for immigration advocacy, which, again, would save more lives than uncoordinated donations to GiveDirectly. If individuals in a position to organize such contracts—such as those occupying leadership roles in effective altruist organizations—fail to structure their giving procedures in this way, they have failed to honor their obligation to do as much good as possible as individuals because, by hypothesis, their organizations will do more good with these procedures than the alternatives. And if individual effective altruist donors fail to pledge, they have also failed to do as much good as possible. None of this establishes that there are no collective obligations or advantages to becoming team reasoners, but the argument does suggest that effective altruists can accommodate Dietz's specific concerns without revising their view.

## Effective altruism and institutional reform

The argument in the preceding section suggests that contributing to political reform might occasionally turn out to be the most good an individual can do.[36] But what sort of political reforms should effective altruists prioritize? I will close by offering some objections to the specific proposals made by proponents of the institutional critique of effective altruism.

When deciding which causes to prioritize, effective altruists often use the scale, neglectedness, and tractability framework.[37] What is the scale of the problem, that is, how much welfare is affected by it? How neglected is the problem, that is, are sufficiently many resources already allocated to it, such that additional contributions are unlikely to make much of a difference? Is the problem tractable, that is, can we reasonably expect to be able to ameliorate this problem to a significant extent?

Although critics often condemn effective altruism for being insufficiently radical, this is actually a feature of the view, not a bug. Many of the more radical political proposals made by effective altruism's critics are simply infeasible.

[36] Some social scientists and political philosophers argue that voting for the better candidate in a swing state is a high-value activity. See Aaron Edlin, Andrew Gelman, and Noah Kaplan, "Vote for Charity's Sake," *The Economists' Voice* 5, no. 6 (2008): 1–4; MacAskill, *Doing Good Better*, 85-86; Zach Barnett, "Why You Should Vote to Change the Outcome," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 48, no. 4 (2020): 422–46. For a reply, see Jason Brennan and Christopher Freiman, "Why Swing-State Voting Is Not Effective Altruism," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 31, no. 1 (2023): 60–79.

[37] MacAskill, *Doing Good Better*, 181.

Leiter, Herzog, and Srinivasan each suggest that global capitalism is at the root of much human suffering and criticize effective altruists for devoting too little attention to revolutionary anti-capitalist action.[38] Even setting aside the fact that global capitalism has dramatically *decreased* human suffering, it is clear that this "problem" is not tractable.[39] It is safe to assume that even if GiveDirectly re-routed all of its resources to anti-capitalist action, it would do little, if anything, to bring about a socialist revolution. So even if you think capitalism is at the root of most contemporary ills, you should seek to ameliorate some of the harms you take to be caused by capitalism rather than bring down capitalism itself.

Those who claim that effective altruists could do more good by redirecting their efforts toward radical political change face the burden of producing evidence to support that claim. We already have evidence of the good done by effective altruists. Consider that one prominent effective altruist organization, GiveWell, will save over 200,000 lives thanks to $2 billion in donations from over 125,000 donors.[40] Radical critics of effective altruism need to show that spending that $2 billion on anti-capitalist political action would have done more good than saving 200,000 lives. Until they do this, we should regard their claims about the superiority of radical political action as conjecture.

What about nonrevolutionary but large-scale institutional change? Perhaps effective altruists should not aim to dismantle existing institutions, but to reform them in significant ways. The issue here is that the most impactful large-scale domestic institutional reforms are infeasible—although more feasible than a socialist revolution—because those reforms will tend to benefit those who have little or no political power in a country like the United States, such as nonhuman animals, the global poor, and future generations.

Take future generations. An increasing number of effective altruists are arguing in favor of what has been called *longtermism*.[41] Although longtermist views differ in their particulars, they are united in affirming the claim that we should give significantly more moral weight to the interests of distant future people (and presumably also distant future nonhuman animals). Future people matter morally, there may be enormous amounts of people in the distant future, and there are actions we can take now that will improve their lives.

One important way we can benefit future people is by promoting economic growth. Tyler Cowen writes:

[38] Herzog, "(One of) Effective Altruism's Blind Spot(s)." See also Leiter, "Why Marxism Still Does Not Need Normative Theory"; Srinivasan, "Stop the Robot Apocalypse."

[39] On capitalism and prosperity, see Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson, *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2012); Deirdre Nansen McCloskey and Art Carden, *Leave Me Alone and I'll Make You Rich: How the Bourgeois Deal Enriched the World* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2020).

[40] "About GiveWell," *GiveWell*, https://www.givewell.org/about.

[41] See Tyler Cowen, *Stubborn Attachments: A Vision for a Society of Free, Prosperous, and Responsible Individuals* (San Francisco, CA: Stripe Press, 2018); Toby Ord, *The Precipice: Existential Risk and the Future of Humanity* (New York: Hachette Books, 2020); William MacAskill, *What We Owe the Future* (New York: Basic Books, 2022).

> Economic growth alleviates human misery and lengthens human lives… . Just as the present appears remarkable from the vantage point of the past, our future may offer comparable advances in benefits. Continued progress might bring greater life expectancies, cures for debilitating diseases, and cognitive enhancements. Millions or billions of people could have much better and longer lives.[42]

Even small changes in the growth rate can have a huge impact over time.[43]

However, many popular policies, such as certain forms of welfare spending, are bad for growth. As Cowen explains:

> Beyond some point, a sufficiently generous welfare state limits the rate of growth. It withdraws some individuals from the labor force, weakens productive incentives, necessitates higher tax rates, and is usually combined with static, insider-oriented labor market regulations… . The empirical literature suggests that noninfrastructure government spending is correlated positively with lower growth rates. Over the long run, this will hurt the prospects of poor people around the world.[44]

Cowen notes, though, that a fully longtermist economic regime might even go further than simply reducing welfare spending; it could involve redistribution from the present-day poor to the present-day rich. (He is careful to note that he does not endorse such a policy.) The core idea is that putting resources in the hands of wealth-producing entrepreneurs—even if they are already rich—will do the most good for economic growth and thus for future generations. As Cowen puts it:

> We will have some reason, when thinking about the future, to redistribute additional resources to the more productive members of society. The implications will be antiegalitarian at first, but over a sufficiently long time horizon the poor will benefit increasingly from the high rate of economic growth. The results need not be antiegalitarian if we take the appropriate broader stretch of time, but they still will appear antiegalitarian by the usual metrics.[45]

Suppose Cowen is right about the redistributive implications of longtermism. It is safe to say that this growth-maximizing proposal is a political nonstarter.

Even more moderate reforms aimed at accelerating growth are probably infeasible. Take Social Security. It is the largest item in the U.S. federal budget

[42] Tyler Cowen, "Caring about the Distant Future: Why It Matters and What It Means," *University of Chicago Law Review* 74, no. 1 (2007): 18.

[43] Cowen, "Caring about the Distant Future," 19.

[44] Cowen, "Caring about the Distant Future," 33.

[45] Cowen, "Caring about the Distant Future," 37.

and it is also bad for growth compared to a system of genuine retirement saving.[46] Richard Wagner explains:

> Compared with a true system of retirement insurance, the pay-as-you-go or welfare approach to social security is likely to reduce people's incentive to save. This diminishes investment and the capital stock, which in turn reduces future standards of living... . The reason the welfare approach to social security is likely to reduce saving, capital formation, and real income is straightforward. With genuine retirement insurance, people save and this saving is invested in capital goods, the yield on which is the interest that savers receive. With a pay-as-you-go form of social security, the government guarantees people the same retirement benefits, but instead of investing the taxes it collects, it gives those revenues to present retirees to finance their consumption.[47]

Although it is bad for economic growth, Social Security is incredibly popular.[48] It is called the "third rail" of American politics for a reason: you cannot survive touching it.

For a final case, consider pharmaceutical price controls. Most Americans support more government regulation to limit the price of prescription drugs.[49] Yet research indicates that pharmaceutical price controls reduce research and development spending and, in turn, reduce pharmaceutical innovation.[50] The result is that future generations are deprived of health- and life-preserving drugs.

The preceding examples illustrate the problem of democratic shorttermism.[51] Politicians seeking reelection have a strong incentive to favor policies that deliver benefits to voters, even if they impose (significantly larger) costs on future generations, because future generations do not get a vote. More specifically, politicians have an incentive to deliver highly visible benefits to voters given that voters tend not to invest much time in acquiring political

[46] On Social Security as the largest item in the U.S. federal budget, see "Agency History," Social Security Administration, https://www.ssa.gov/history/percent.html.

[47] Richard Wagner, *To Promote the General Welfare: Market Processes vs. Political Transfers* (Arlington, VA: Mercatus Center, 2019), 183.

[48] John Waggoner, "AARP Poll Finds Near-Universal Support for Social Security After 85 Years," American Association of Retired Persons, August 14, 2020, https://www.aarp.org/retirement/social-security/info-2020/aarp-poll-finds-near-universal-support.html.

[49] Grace Sparks et al., "Public Opinion on Prescription Drugs and Their Prices," Kaiser Family Foundation, October 4, 2024, https://www.kff.org/health-costs/poll-finding/public-opinion-on-prescription-drugs-and-their-prices/.

[50] Tomas Philipson and Troy Durie, "The Evidence Base on the Impact of Price Controls on Medical Innovation" (Working Paper No. 2021–108, Becker Friedman Institute for Economics, 2021), https://bfi.uchicago.edu/working-paper/the-evidence-base-on-the-impact-of-price-controls-on-medical-innovation/.

[51] See, e.g., W. D. Nordhaus, "The Political Business Cycle," *Review of Economic Studies* 42, no. 2 (1975): 169–90; Sarah Binder, "Can Congress Legislate for the Future?" *John Brademas Center for the Study of Congress*, Research Brief 1 (2006), https://www.nyu.edu/content/dam/nyu/brademasCenter/documents/Research/publications-legislating-future-binder.pdf.

information.[52] Citizens do not need to watch C-SPAN to notice changes to Social Security or prescription drug prices; they need only look at their own expenses. Consequently, even voters who are largely rationally politically ignorant may know enough about these policies to punish politicians who reform them in ways that reduce the benefits they receive and increase the costs they pay.

I will note in passing that democracies may neglect future generations even if voters attempt to vote altruistically. It is easier to empathize with members of the present generation given that you can see them benefiting or suffering as a result of a particular policy. Empathetic concern is prone to the *identifiable victim effect.*[53] People are more likely to help those in need whom they can identify (and thus empathize with) than those whom they cannot identify. Thomas Schelling writes:

> There is a distinction between individual life and a statistical life. Let a six-year-old girl with brown hair need thousands of dollars for an operation that will prolong her life until Christmas, and the post office will be swamped with nickels and dimes to save her. But let it be reported that without a sales tax the hospital facilities of Massachusetts will deteriorate and cause a barely perceptible increase in preventable deaths—not many will drop a tear or reach for their checkbooks.[54]

He continues: "To evaluate an individual death requires attention to special feelings. Most of these feelings, though, involve some connection between the person who dies and the person who has the feelings; a marginal change in mortality statistics is unlikely to evoke these sentiments."[55] The worry here is that the lives saved by increased funding for preventative care are merely "statistical"—that is, the specific children whose lives will be saved are unknown—but the six-year-old girl is a specific person who can create a connection with our empathetic feelings. Yet the life of the unknown child is no less valuable than the life of the known child, and so we have no less reason to help the former.

Similarly, the victims of a lower rate of economic growth and reduced pharmaceutical innovation—in particular, future generations—are less easily identifiable than are the beneficiaries of those policies that slow growth. The victims are "statistical people." Empathy is more attentive to and affected by, for example, a specific person's suffering due to a higher priced drug than abstract and invisible information such as statistics about people who would have benefited had price controls never been implemented. Thus, even altruistically minded voters are likely to pay more attention to the needs of the present than the future.

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[52] Ilya Somin, *Democracy and Political Ignorance: Why Smaller Government Is Smarter* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013).

[53] Karen Jenni and George Loewenstein, "Explaining the Identifiable Victim Effect," *Journal of Risk and Uncertainty* 14, no. 3 (1997): 235–57.

[54] Thomas Schelling, *Choice and Consequence* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 115.

[55] Schelling, *Choice and Consequence*, 116.

Perhaps, though, concerns about shorttermism could actually *vindicate* the case for radical institutional reforms. To take one example, maybe we can improve lawmakers' incentives by doing away with elections and institutionalizing Alexander Guerrero's proposal for lottocracy, whereby citizens are selected at random to serve as lawmakers for a fixed period of time.[56] Because these citizens do not need to worry about getting reelected, they will have stronger incentives to make wise long-term decisions.

This proposal and others that aim to incentivize lawmakers to take the well-being of future generations more seriously are very much worth considering. However, institutionalizing something like lottocracy on a large scale is politically infeasible, at least in the near term. That said, perhaps some effective altruist or effective altruist-aligned organizations ought to explore experimenting with longtermist political reforms on a small scale. (Whether such experimentation is more valuable than current effective altruist projects is a question that we lack the information to answer, though.)

I will also register a general concern about the feasibility of longtermist political reforms. They face a Catch-22: the very reason why these reforms are needed—political actors' short-sightedness—is also a reason to doubt these reforms will be institutionalized.[57] To oversimplify, if we could count on the willingness of voters and politicians to suffer costs to provide greater gains for future generations, then democracy would not be as shorttermist as it is. However, because we *cannot* count on the willingness of voters and politicians to suffer costs to provide greater gains for future generations, it is not clear why we should expect them to support longtermist institutions that require them to do exactly that.

That is enough about the political causes that effective altruists should not prioritize. What *should* they prioritize? Here is my anticlimactic conclusion: they should prioritize those causes that meet the aforementioned criteria of scale, neglectedness, and tractability. Indeed, effective altruist-aligned organizations such as the Institute for Progress are already taking this approach to policy.[58] One example that fits this profile is increased funding for pandemic prevention.[59] The scale of the problem is large: the cost of the COVID-19 pandemic in the U.S. is estimated to be around $16 trillion.[60] It is also neglected: pandemic preparedness is currently underfunded. And it is tractable: there are clear steps that policymakers could take to prepare for future pandemics.[61]

One reason to focus on neglected political causes is that it enables effective altruists to do political good in conditions of rational ignorance. As I mentioned

[56] Alexander Guerrero, "Against Elections: The Lottocratic Alternative," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 42, no. 2 (2014): 135–78.

[57] For more on this sort of Catch-22, see Christopher Freiman, "Ideal Theory," in *The Routledge Handbook of Libertarianism*, ed., Jason Brennan, David Schmidtz, and Bas van der Vossen (New York: Routledge, 2017), 302; Christopher Freiman, *Unequivocal Justice* (New York: Routledge, 2017), chap. 1.

[58] Alec Stapp and Caleb Watney, "Progress Is a Policy Choice," Institute for Progress, January 20, 2022, https://progress.institute/progress-is-a-policy-choice/.

[59] Nikki Teran, "Preventing Pandemics Requires Funding," Institute for Progress, March 14, 2022, https://progress.institute/preventing-pandemics-requires-funding/.

[60] Teran, "Preventing Pandemics Requires Funding."

[61] Teran, "Preventing Pandemics Requires Funding."

above, a citizen will notice if their prescription drugs get pricier. But they will not notice if a government that spends over $6 trillion per year allocates a slightly larger fraction of its spending to pandemic prevention. Therefore, efforts to increase funding to prevent future pandemics are unlikely to run into significant popular opposition.

As I said, this conclusion is anticlimactic. It is not a call to start a Marxist revolution or transfer resources to billionaire entrepreneurs. Rather, it is simply applying the existing framework of effective altruism to political problems. When promoting a particular institutional reform does the most good possible, you should do it. When it doesn't, you shouldn't.

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