

## Charity vs. Revolution: Effective Altruism and the systemic change objection

Effective Altruism (EA) is a movement that encourages affluent people to make considerable sacrifices as efficiently as possible in order to do the most good they can.<sup>1</sup> EA describes itself as

‘...a research field which uses high-quality evidence and careful reasoning to work out how to help others as much as possible [and] a community of people taking these answers seriously, by focusing their efforts on the most promising solutions to the world's most pressing problems.’<sup>2</sup>

EA also seeks to transform social norms in affluent societies, especially those related to charitable giving, by creating ‘a social expectation that to be decent people, the rich should give away a large fraction of their wealth to others.’<sup>3</sup> Although it is, in principle, open to anything that can be reasonably expected to do a lot of good; EA has, in practice, focused on international aid to the world’s poorest people, such as distributing mosquito nets, with the ultimate goal of eliminating severe poverty.

EA has been subject to the *systemic change objection*<sup>4</sup>, that it ignores the systemic causes of poverty and the potential positive impact of individual contributions to social change. EA responds to these charges by claiming that, in principle, it ‘loves systemic change’<sup>5</sup> because such interventions could be very effective, and because EA itself seeks ‘a form of systemic change’ in relation to norms of giving.

EA insists, however, that the effectiveness of individual contributions to systemic change must be demonstrated using the same methods and standards as charitable donations; such efforts must be shown to ‘actually help some poor people.’<sup>6</sup> If the effectiveness of such efforts cannot be demonstrated, then charity should be prioritized by EAs.

More robust defences of EA attack the vagueness of systemic critiques and the motivations of those making the systemic change objection, suggesting they are not interested in ‘gather[ing] evidence about which efforts to promote institutional change individuals should contribute to’ and appear ‘motivated by the desire to avoid accepting that well off individuals ought to be making significant

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<sup>1</sup> Key recent texts on EA are MacAskill, 2015 and Singer, 2015. Carey, 2015 provides a helpful overview of the movement’s ideas and activities.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.effectivealtruism.org/articles/introduction-to-effective-altruism/>. Accessed: 9/24/2018.

<sup>3</sup> Wiblin, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Srinivasan, 2015 and, for a complete list of references see footnote 7 in Berkey, 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Wiblin, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Singer, 2010, p. 36.

sacrifices in order to contribute to addressing global suffering<sup>7</sup>

I reformulate the systemic change objection and argue that it poses a significant challenge to EA. I defend two related claims.

1) Taking systemic change seriously would require EA to embrace a much wider range of methods and forms of evidence, embracing the inevitably uncertain judgments involved in the holistic interpretation of social systems and analysis of the dynamics of social change.<sup>8</sup>

2) Individual contributions to social change may well do more good than charitable donations,

- i) if making such donations requires contributing to harmful social practices, and
- ii) because potentially effective everyday efforts to directly transform social practices will often be incompatible with significant philanthropy.

I build on and extend previous formulations of the systemic change objection, which too quick to concede the merits of charity and which shy away from claiming that affluent people should join radical social movements instead of donating to direct aid efforts.

The argument proceeds in six sections. The first argues that two of EA's own core concerns provide initial support for the systemic change objection. The second outlines two rival analyses of the systemic causes of poverty. Sections 3 and 4 elaborate the forms of evidence that EA must embrace in order to take systemic change seriously. Section 5 argues that charity may be less effective than EA believes, while 6 argues that everyday direct action is potentially as effective as charity and that social change can be very demanding.

## 1. Systemic change and status-quo bias

The systemic change objection contends that EA ignores structural sources and solutions to harm and the huge amount of good people could do by promoting social change. Two considerations lend initial

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<sup>7</sup> Berkey, 2017, p. 28. See also MacAskill, 2013 and McMahan, 2016.

<sup>8</sup> This argument generalizes and expands significantly on a points made separately by Kuper, 2002, Gabriel, 2017, Rubenstein, 2016 and Kissel, 2017. See also Teles and Schmitt, 2011, for a narrow formulation of a similar argument.

support to the objection in EA's own terms.

### *Potential effectiveness*

Systemic change has the potential to do much more good than widespread charity because of its potentially longer term impact. If we assume that a huge aid campaign would not eliminate the causes of poverty, then, even if it succeeded in helping most currently poor people, poverty would re-emerge. Ongoing aid efforts, perhaps smaller each time, would be required to maintain the elimination of poverty.

A single, large exertion of collective effort, perhaps of similar scope to a massive aid campaign, can become embedded, and thus 'easy', and have an impact over multiple generations. Systemic changes are not usually permanent, but they can be stable over long periods of time. If the structural causes of poverty could be eliminated for several generations, it is likely that this would be a greater reward for similar effort than a massive aid campaign without systemic consequences. It is open to EA to defend charity on the grounds that it will, in fact, lead to systemic change, but this would be a considerable departure from its current position and would anyway require it to embrace the kinds of evidence I discuss below, which it currently ignores. Systemic change would also likely help many people beyond the poorest, which is less likely with carefully focused charity.

The potential effectiveness of social change should be enough to get EA to take it seriously, and indeed it has done so to some extent. It does not, however, show that particular individuals would do more good through activism than charitable giving. The success of a movement for social change depends on the cooperation of many other people. If such cooperation is not available, individual efforts to promote change may be very likely to do no good at all, whereas charity might at least do some good and so be an individual's best altruistic investment. I consider these issues below.

### *Risk of status-quo bias*

EA aims to attend to and avoid cognitive biases and challenge common sense, such as intuitions about the moral acceptability of affluent people maintaining their way of life in a world replete with

unnecessary suffering.<sup>9</sup> EA shares this iconoclastic self-understanding with radical social critics, who also seek to challenge socially mandated common sense, albeit in terms of ideology rather than cognitive bias. But even on its own terms, EA's relative insensitivity to systemic issues shows signs of a bias in favor of prevailing social arrangements.

Status-quo or system affirmation bias is 'the psychological process by which existing social arrangements are legitimized, even at the expense of personal and group interest.'<sup>10</sup> System affirmation bias is an especially serious risk for EA because its members probably benefit personally from a status quo that might be harmful overall. EA is therefore at risk of 'structural blindness', failing to notice 'crucial aspects of the social order'<sup>11</sup> It may fallaciously 'consider only the immediate social environment in order to understand what happens and why...[;] favor individualistic interpretations of social behavior; [and] ignore socially produced inequalities, discrimination, and structural barriers.'<sup>12</sup> This bias could also lead EAs to underestimate the feasibility of alternatives that are desirable according to their altruistic values but incompatible with their continued socio-economic advantages.

A telling lacuna in EA's discussions of systemic change provides further evidence of this bias. Although Berkey suggests that proponents of the objection should set up organizations to evaluate potential systemic changes and MacAskill denounces systemic critiques as hopelessly vague. But neither notes the existence of vast amounts of research on social change and social criticism. And nor does Singer, even when discussing EA own social change efforts.

There is an entire academic discipline of Social Movement Studies<sup>13</sup> as well as enormous quantities of scholarship on systemic analysis and critique. Effective altruists may have concerns about the methods used in such research, as well as its findings, but this is a reason to engage with it, not to ignore it entirely. They should do this both with respect to the merits of charity and in order to clarify and evaluate their own aims and methods as a movement. The failure within EA to even acknowledge the existence of this evidence-base is suggestive of a blind-spot created by status-quo bias. It is an epistemic failure of just the kind EA seeks to avoid.

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<sup>9</sup> McMahan, 2016 and MacAskill and Singer, 2015

<sup>10</sup> Jost and Banaji, 1994, p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> Levy, 1991, p. 61.

<sup>12</sup> Levy, 1991, p. 63.

<sup>13</sup> See e.g. Klandermans and Roggeband, 2010 and della Porta and Diani, 2015,

## 2. Poverty and systemic change

I now sketch two contrasting analyses of the social system in order to illustrate that such analyses are not inherently vague, although I do not elaborate them in huge detail as my argument here does not depend upon which analysis is correct.

### *Capitalist Charity*

Poverty could be eliminated by maintaining capitalism but transforming the ‘culture of giving’ in affluent societies to encourage more and more rational charity.

### *Socialist Sharing*

Poverty could be eliminated by replacing capitalism with socialist institutions that democratize the economy.

I ignore more moderate, reformist critiques, such as a call for reforms to capitalism and reparations to unjustly impoverished regions.<sup>14</sup> One reason is the clear contrast between the pro- and anti-capitalist analyses, which helps to illuminate my methodological argument. Reformist and radical movements also face similar objections from EA because significant social change of any kind is difficult and all movements face similar collective action problems. Everything I say here about socialism therefore applies also to more moderate views.

Elements of Capitalist Charity appear to be accepted within EA itself, although there is not enough evidence to impute the full view to the movement which is, anyway, internally heterogeneous. EAs often seem to accept in general terms that poverty is to some extent structural, but do not offer any detailed analysis of where the problem might lie. Two themes emerge, however, from the few EA discussions of systemic issues.

The first is an apparent endorsement of capitalism.<sup>15</sup> For example, MacAskill defends the benefits of sweatshop labor as ‘a stepping-stone that helps an economy’<sup>16</sup> Holden Karnovsky, a founder of two prominent EA meta-charities, GiveWell and the Open Philanthropy Institute, explains that his ‘deep value judgments and worldview characteristics’ include that ‘further economic

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<sup>14</sup> See e.g. Pogge, 2014

<sup>15</sup> Kissel is a notable EA dissenter from this position.

<sup>16</sup> Macaskill, 2015, chapter 8.

development...is likely to be substantially net positive'<sup>17</sup> The evidence from these and other similar passages is far from definitive. These comments claim only that capitalist development makes people better off than they were, not that it makes them as well off as any possible economic system. Marxists might say similar things, so such claims do not prove that EA is pro-capitalist, but they are certainly suggestive of a positive attitude to capitalism.

EA's belief in transforming norms of giving is far clearer. Singer dedicates an entire chapter of a book about 'ending world poverty' to the importance of 'creating a culture of giving.'<sup>18</sup> Singer criticizes current ethical norms for discouraging donors from publicizing their generosity and argues that social norms advocating self-interest are 'ideological' and 'socially pernicious.'<sup>19</sup> EA's aim to do good not just by giving to charity but by making society more altruistic.

*Socialist Sharing* is expounded by Gomberg, who argues that 'capitalist social relations...deprive huge numbers...and lead to hunger'<sup>20</sup> especially in the poorest rural areas. The commodification of land and food; development of global markets; technological change; and the rationalization of production all combine to make it harder for poor people in these regions to control their own food supply or to earn enough money to buy food from elsewhere.

Gomberg suggests that his analysis 'raise[s] the *possibility* that the best response to extreme poverty is to attack the capitalist institutions that create and recreate it', replacing the competitive market in food with 'social understandings and relationships that put the fundamentals of human well-being outside the...market'<sup>21</sup> While Gomberg says little here about this socialist alternative, there is a large and longstanding anti-capitalist movement from which many more details can be found.

Social movements are, by definition, committed to social change and thus to an analysis of the social system. The above sketches show that structural analysis is not inherently vague. EA is, in principle, open to any strategy for doing good, whether it be transforming norms of giving or implementing socialism. In order to justify the strategy it actually advocates it must be much more explicit, to itself and others, about its underlying analysis of the social system. Structural critique is a kind of due-diligence, required of anyone trying to do the most overall good. EAs might be so confident in their under-specified structural assumptions that they see little value in defending them in

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<sup>17</sup> Karnofsky, 2013a.

<sup>18</sup> Singer, 2010, chapter 5.

<sup>19</sup> Singer, 2010, p. 77.

<sup>20</sup> Gomberg, 2013, p. 55.

<sup>21</sup> Gomberg, 2013, p. 61. Gomberg, 2013, p. 63.

greater detail. Such confidence is, however, a sign of status-quo bias.

### 3. Structural analysis

EA rebuts the systemic change objection by arguing that the likely effectiveness of contributions to systemic change is not well-supported by evidence in EA's preferred form. EA currently prioritizes quantifiable data and empiricist methods, using observations and experiments to ground inductive conclusions about the effectiveness of available interventions. Randomized controlled trials are the 'gold standard' of this kind of evidence. I argue that such methods are inadequate for structural analysis and thus for serious consideration of systemic change.

#### *Interpretation*

Social systems are complex forms of intentional activity. Understanding them involves interpreting both the micro- and macro-aims of these activities. Interpretations are paradigmatic forms of qualitative evidence because they involve judgments of rational intelligibility.

Consider, for example, whether capitalism is a system of efficient free exchange or of inefficient structural coercion. We cannot simply count the number of 'free' and 'coerced' labor contracts because we must first specify this distinction, which is an interpretive task, requiring historical and normative inquiry into the character of wage labor.

Interpretation is also necessary at the individual level, because of the complex web of institutions and practices within which individuals necessarily act and which they thus help to either perpetuate or alter. For example, EA interprets its own actions as noble contributions to the elimination of poverty. Others, however, contend that its 'language of charity' and the 'self-understandings and sensibilities that it cultivates in its members'<sup>22</sup> trigger and thus reinforce 'a set of ideas and associations'<sup>23</sup> that worsen 'public attitudes to poverty'. On this interpretation, EA's rhetoric detracts from the fight against poverty by talking in terms of altruistic generosity rather than,

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<sup>22</sup> Rubenstein, 2016, p. 15.

<sup>23</sup> Gabriel, 2017, p. 12.

say, duties of justice, thereby participating in and reinforcing harmful social practices. This is not definitive, but the issue can only be settled by establishing the plausibility of a particular interpretation.

### *Holism*

Social systems are complex, temporally extended wholes whose different parts combine to set the terms for all actions and outcomes within them. For example, it could be that poverty is caused by the combined effects of state sovereignty, market competition and a culture of greed, such that if any of these were absent or very different, poverty would be distributed differently or eliminated.

Structural analysis requires characterizing causal relationships within the system and the impact of the system as a whole. Most social movements offer such holistic analyses. Liberals and socialists, for example, criticize or defend particular claims by marshalling detailed rival accounts of the interdependent functioning of law, property and culture and their combined impact on welfare, freedom and efficiency.

Holistic social analysis is always relevant to explanations of broad social outcomes, like patterns of poverty, which must be sensitive to every potentially relevant aspect of the system. For example, if we wish to explain the gender-earnings gap by measuring the impact of women's economic choices on their income, we must also explain the impact or irrelevance to these choices of the institutions of gender and the family.<sup>24</sup> And it is impossible to precisely quantify the impact of the whole system on women's earnings because no experiment could replicate all relevant macro-social features to see what women would earn under alternative arrangements and any observation of actual women is unavoidably tainted by the influence of the existing system.

Effective altruism does not offer or cite a detailed holistic account of social life, even when it focuses explicitly on systemic change. Open Philanthropy, for example, is dedicated to high-risk, high-reward interventions, including systemic change, but does not invoke a detailed holistic analysis. It is thus impossible to evaluate Open Philanthropy's cause areas, such as 'macro-economic stabilization', where it advocates changing US monetary policy to place more emphasis on reducing unemployment and less on preventing inflation. This policy's merits cannot be evaluated independently of a holistic macro-economic theory and a general account of the role of economic

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<sup>24</sup> Haslanger, 2016, discusses this example.

practices in social life.<sup>25</sup>

The considerations outlined here are sometimes used to make stronger claims about the overall merits of interpretive and macro- over quantitative and micro-social science and the philosophical foundations of social explanation. I make only a weaker claim that interpretations and holistic analysis are necessary for structural analysis, not that they are sufficient for it or any other form of social inquiry. In order to take systemic change seriously, EA must extend its current methods to embrace the controversial, qualitative and holistic judgments about social life that are essential to any plausible structural analysis. This change would threaten EA's apolitical identity, its treatment of altruism is primarily a technical challenge, and the idea that the most effective interventions are every obvious and easy to identify.

#### 4. Contributing to and predicting social change

Social change is a collective action problem involving a vast number of people over a long period of time. I argue that proper analysis of the dynamics of collectively enacted social change also requires evidence that EA has so far largely ignored.

EA argues that individual efforts to achieve systemic change are unlikely to be effective because not enough people will join them to make success likely. McMahan argues that 'individuals must decide what to do against the background of what others will in fact do.'<sup>26</sup> and, as Berkey points out,

'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...'<sup>27</sup>

Even if the socialist analysis were correct, it might not be worthwhile for EAs to dedicate any effort to replacing capitalism, because of the high probability that not enough other people will join the movement and it will fail to do any good at all. By giving to charity instead, individuals can be confident of doing some good without relying on others in the same way.

Let's focus on the key substantive prediction that not enough people will comply with the

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<sup>25</sup> <https://www.openphilanthropy.org/focus/us-policy/macro-economic-policy>. Accessed: 9/24/2018.

<sup>26</sup> McMahan, 2016, p. 4.

<sup>27</sup> Berkey, 2017, p. 12.

requirement to implement a less harmful social system. One complication is that any prediction of this kind assumes a background account of how to measure individual contributions to collective actions. Further complications arise in relation to the reflexive and temporally extended nature of social movements, which mean that patterns of compliance can change over time, sometimes as result of the efforts of the movement itself. Ultimate success is thus not rendered unlikely simply by the *current* extent of compliance but by the prospects for achieving such compliance in the future.

EA is insensitive to these complexities and thus its predictions of the hopelessness of radical change are unsubstantiated and unreliable. This inattention is also partly a function of EA's quantitative, empiricist methods, but is also indicative of EA's more general disregard for the complexities of collective action, whatever methods are appropriate for such investigations.

The case of Engels illustrates the limitations of EA's current approach. Engels is sometimes mentioned as an 'utterly brilliant' EA before his time because he worked in his family business to support Marx financially. Alexander suggests that:

[H]e...zeroed in on the most influential thinker of his era, funded an otherwise-impossible level of output from him...[which]...directly led to revolutions...[and] radical change in the lives of billions of people.<sup>28</sup>

But it is actually unlikely that Engel's intervention would have been endorsed by EA at the time. Marx's huge influence was far from a certainty in 1850, when Engel's began supporting him, seventeen years before the initial publication of *Das Kapital*. Marx and Engels also faced 'complete political isolation'<sup>29</sup> in a socialist movement exiled and splintered after the failure of the 1848 revolutions; it would be decades before any successful socialist revolution.

Despite these unpromising circumstances, Engels might have argued that his chances of having a big impact were actually quite high, especially in the long term, on the basis of his belief in the importance of Marx's work; his analysis of the trajectory of capitalist development, which he believed would create conditions increasingly favorable to socialism; and his prediction of the likely impact of long-term socialist organizing efforts, which were fairly embryonic at that time. Engels only makes sense as an EA if such considerations are included in calculations of likely effectiveness, which they currently are not.

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<sup>28</sup> Alexander, 2015.

<sup>29</sup> Hunt, 2009, p. 182.

Most people in social movements will have less impact than Engels, of course, just as most charitable donors will have less impact than billionaire mega-philanthropists. But his case illustrates the potential for individuals to have a significant impact through working for social change, particularly if they help to initiate embryonic movements or sustain them through hard times when their prospects are bleak.

EAs could argue that Engels was wrong about all of this and that, given the weakness of the socialist movement at the time, his support for Marx was recklessly indulgent and he would have been better to donate money directly to the poor. But in order to rebut or defend all such predictions about future compliance with social change - and thus the chances of success for a social movement - a number of complex issues must be addressed.

#### *Over-determination and interdependence*

Many collective actions are over-determined. Individuals often make no perceptible difference to collectively produced outcomes, so it seems irrelevant whether they contribute or not.<sup>30</sup> Predicting the likely impact of an individual contribution requires first solving this general puzzle of collective action. The heterogeneous and inter-subjective nature of social practices further complicates the application of any solution to the specific case of social change.

I do not here consider the possibility that individual actions really are causally irrelevant to collective outcomes and that only institutional agents like the state can ever change social systems. This is implausible, given that individual actions are the necessary components of collective actions, and especially so when we are concerned only with causal impact rather than moral obligations. Plus, of course, the state itself acts only through individuals, so the question of how individuals contribute to collective actions does not disappear simply by shifting focus to collective agents. Individuals may not be proper subjects of moral requirements to do things that only groups can do, but this does not mean that they are causally irrelevant to collectively produced outcomes.

MacAskill endorses a *threshold analysis* to resolve the puzzle of over-determination in relation to voting.<sup>31</sup> While individual votes make no difference, some cumulative total determines election

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<sup>30</sup> See Kagan, 2011 and related literature.

<sup>31</sup> See MacAskill, 2015, chapter 6. He applies this analysis to ethical consumption too.

results. There is thus some small chance that each vote will trigger the desired effect. If we know the odds of our making the triggering contribution, we can calculate the expected utility, and thus impact, of our contribution. This could show that even an apparently pointless contribution is worthwhile, because there is some chance it will trigger a very valuable outcome, like a good government. Whatever its merits, however, the threshold account is not easily applicable to social practices and social change.

Votes are all the same, are easily individuated and quantified and accumulate discretely and linearly. By contrast, social rules are complied with, enforced and monitored by a wide variety of actions, like alerting authorities to thefts; omissions, like not stealing; beliefs, such as that unauthorized taking is theft; and feelings, such as shame at having stolen. These can all be anywhere between explicit, conscious and intentional and implicit, unconscious and habitual. They can also be very frequent, as with acts of obedience to the law, or quite rare, as with witnessing and reporting a crime. Social movements involve similarly heterogeneous contributions, from financial donations to philosophical theorizing and grassroots organizing. It is difficult to categorize and count such contributions, let alone quantify their impact. It is unclear, for example, if a lifetime of passive obedience to a rule is one contribution or many and how its impact compares to occasional active enforcement of the same rule.

Furthermore, social practices and social movements are essentially joint, inter-subjective, activities, such that individual contributions to them are necessarily inter-dependent, with the impact of each conditioned by the reactions of others. The success and impact of any social performance, such as trying to enforce a law or publishing a book on political economy, depends on how others respond to it. This is not true of votes; my vote adds one to the total of my chosen candidate regardless of how anyone else votes.

Social practices and social movements involve direct interdependence, as in interpersonal interactions like conversations, but also indirect interdependence across time and space. Tracing the causal connections between such contributions is hugely difficult; it is even harder to show that a particular contribution was counter-factually necessary for a consequence that occurred much later and after many other people had also contributed.

Alexander suggests that Engels' efforts 'directly led' to the revolutions and crimes of the 20th century, but the relationship was, in fact, far from direct; there were important contributions by many other people. It is possible that similar events would have occurred even if Engels had not acted as he

did. Furthermore, if Engels is to get the ‘blame’ for the crimes of Stalin, he should probably also get the ‘credit’ for the good done by the welfare state, which was inaugurated in order to neutralize the socialist threat. It is no easier to specify the impact of individual contributions in smaller, more concentrated collective efforts like an election campaign, where victory is achieved only by the combined efforts of a charismatic leader and their organization.

In order to apply any solution to the problem of over-determination to social change we must first distinguish and quantify the interdependent and heterogeneous contributions to such essentially joint efforts. If this is impossible, then the threshold analysis cannot be applied to social change. EA has yet to acknowledge these issues, let alone begun to address them, despite their centrality to predictions of the impact of individual contributions to social change.

#### *Feasibility and ethical change*

A further complexity arises due to the mutability of prevailing patterns of preference and value. Prevailing ethical profiles change over time, including in response to intentional efforts. The fact that too many people are currently too selfish, say, to voluntarily join the socialist movement, does not by itself render socialism unlikely, especially in the longer term, because social change can involve and be facilitated by ethical change.

Patterns of preference are subject to ‘dynamic variation’<sup>32</sup> where an intermediate goal changes preferences in a way that makes the ultimate goal easier to achieve. A fully socialized economy may currently be infeasible because of widespread patterns of economic selfishness, but a successful shift to social democracy and the erosion of the culture of greed could make full socialism more feasible.<sup>33</sup> Such changes can also happen as part of broader patterns of social change that can be predicted and exploited by activists.

Engels believed that the mindset required for socialism would be fostered by the cooperative nature of industrial production under capitalism and thus that the movement would eventually attract enough people to succeed. Any prediction of success or failure for a movement requires considering the possibilities and prospects for ethical change, rather than assuming the permanence of current

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<sup>32</sup> Gilabert and Lawford-Smith, 2012, p. 6.

<sup>33</sup> See Gilabert, 2011.

patterns of motivation.

*Commitment, strategy and position*

Predicting the success or failure of a movement requires identifying the best possible strategy and the best contribution an individual can make to it. This introduces at least three further complexities to predictions of the impact of contributions and ultimate success of movements.

There is little chance that any movement will succeed unless some people commit to it when it is small, weak and unpopular and has little apparent chance of success. Long-term commitment is useful for signalling integrity to potential allies. It is arguably essential for fostering the expertise and capacity needed to identify and respond to opportunities; small movements can gain traction rapidly as circumstances alter, if they are ready to exploit the change.<sup>34</sup> Engels is a prime example of the value of long-term commitment in the face of long-odds.

A further challenge involves navigating the potentially lengthy and indirect route from the status quo to a desired social change. This raises strategic problems about, for example, the relative merits of reformism and radicalism, which is a prominent debate within socialism. We may credit Engels with helping create the welfare state, but he himself regarded it as a potentially fatal compromise. Predicting the chances of a movement succeeding requires first specifying both what would count as success and the routes by which it could be best achieved.

Identifying the most effective strategy for each individual requires considering their specific skills but also their social position. The best strategy for the movement as a whole depends upon the patterns of power, status and resources among the whole membership. Engels, for example, believed that the workers were best positioned to overthrow capitalism and that the role of bourgeois intellectuals like him was to facilitate their education and organization. Effective altruism is so far dominated by well-educated people, many of whom work in the technology industry or in other relatively high-status, well-remunerated fields.

Effective altruists might be effective proponents of socialism due to their socially and materially privileged position in the established order and their prior support for and success within it.

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<sup>34</sup> Gabriel has also argued that the need for long-term commitment is in tension with EA's current methods. Gabriel, 2017 pp. 12-13.

On the other hand, if their class position precludes EAs from gaining the trust of those more disadvantaged than themselves, they may not be effective participants in socialist organizing. Either way, positional analysis is essential to predictions of individual's likely impact and of a movement's overall chances of success.

### *Ethics*

Participants in a social movement must also consider the ethical status of their available strategies; potentially effective methods might be prohibited on ethical grounds. Berkey points out that:

‘...[W]e cannot simply force others to contribute...when we find that they are unwilling to contribute voluntarily. Even in cases in which we could do this, in the sense that we would succeed if we tried, it would, perhaps with some unusual exceptions, be wrong to do so.’<sup>35</sup>

Berkey is probably correct that coercion is rarely justifiable as a tool of social change, especially the private or otherwise illegal use of violence. But he is wrong to imply a simple dichotomy between voluntary and coerced cooperation.

Social movements engage in social conflict.<sup>36</sup> Success in such conflicts does require some number of people to voluntarily commit to the cause. But there are usually also people who must be persuaded to acquiesce or compromise using social and political power to change their incentives, rather than persuading them of the substantive merits of the cause, such as a realistic threat of electoral defeat. By mobilizing social power in uncontroversially permissible ways, social movements can get their opponents to compromise or concede, as happened with the welfare state. This may not qualify as coercion, but it is not usefully described as voluntary cooperation.

Berkey also seems to assume that poverty is not an ‘unusual exception’ to prohibitions on aggressive, even violent political methods. This is in apparent tension with EA’s own emphasis on the moral catastrophe of severe poverty. If this catastrophe is a consequence of deeply embedded institutions and practices, then it may well justify highly disruptive and aggressive tactics to tame the powerful interests opposed to social change.

In this section I have highlighted a range of issues involved in weighing the chances of changes

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<sup>35</sup> Berkey, 2017, p. 12.

<sup>36</sup> Diani, 1992.

occurring and the likely impact of individual contributions to social movements. It is possible that, were EA to attend to these issues, they would still conclude that radical change is unlikely whatever altruistic individuals do, and thus that people would do more by giving to charity than fighting for socialism. But EA has so far failed to attend to any of these issues and therefore has yet to justify its predictions that radical change is unlikely. The example of Engels highlights the kinds of reasoning which could justify contributing to social change and which EA has hitherto ignored.

### 5. Charity vs. revolution

I have argued so far that EA is inattentive to structural analysis and the complexities of collective action and social change and thus that its conclusions on such matters are poorly supported. In these final two sections, I argue that, in a harmful social system, charity might be less effective than efforts to achieve social change.

This further distinguishes my formulation of the systemic change objection from previous versions, which concede that charity can be worthwhile<sup>37</sup> and say nothing about extra-political contributions to social change. It also further demonstrates that structural analysis is not an optional extra for people who aim to do the most good possible because even purportedly ‘a-political’ approaches to altruism are inescapably implicated in potentially harmful social systems and thus cannot ignore structural analysis in the name of ecumenicism.

McMahan contends that collective social change is a matter for communities or states, and that some individuals should take ‘direct action, unmediated by the state’ to help the world’s poorest people. He argues that there should be a ‘division of moral labor’ between charity and ‘efforts to bringing about institutional changes through political action’:

‘To suppose that the only acceptable option is to work to reform global economic institutions and that it is self-indulgent to make incremental contributions to the amelioration of poverty through individual action is rather like condemning a doctor who treats the victims of a war for failing to devote his efforts instead to eliminating the root causes of war... if others become persuaded that the appropriate agents for addressing problems of global poverty are communities, classes, and states, they are likely to be quite content to leave the problems to those entities and not bother with

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<sup>37</sup> Srinivasan, 2015.

them themselves<sup>38</sup>

I accept for the sake of argument that, if charity and revolution are complementary interventions, charitable efforts are insulated from structural critique. I argue, however, that if the status quo is very harmful - specifically if capitalism causes poverty - and if direct aid helps to maintain capitalism, then charity and revolution are at cross-purposes and no division of labor is possible.

Giving to charity requires individuals to acquire disposable resources, which requires participating successfully in current economic practices and thus actively maintaining them. Such ongoing participation might contribute to the harm of done by the system and thus potentially outweigh the good done by donating. Similarly, if the doctor in McMahan's example is also a soldier, then he participates in and perpetuates the military and political hierarchies that are, let's assume, significantly responsible for the war. It is quite conceivable that he would do more good by becoming a conscientious objector and anti-war campaigner, rather than continuing to treat injured people.

MacAskill fails to consider the impact of individual's everyday participation in a potentially harmful social system when he defends the altruistic merits of *earning to give*: pursuing a high paying job in order to donate large sums to charity. High-paying jobs are usually highly competitive, so if an altruist does not do them, a non-altruist will, and without donating. So in the counter-factual scenario where the altruist does not do the job, the overall outcome is worse, even when the job is in a directly harmful industry.<sup>39</sup>

The harm of pursuing such careers is, however, not limited to particular industries like the arms trade. The harm extends to the social practices within which all such careers are embedded. To pursue lucrative careers, individuals have little choice but to conform to and enforce the rules and norms of economic and professional life. Practices of economic choice permit people to choose a career without fear of significant social oversight, sanction or stigma for either their choices or reasoning. These practices include broad, informal prohibitions on interrogating, exposing and critiquing the motivations behind private economic choices and norms exalting wealth. EA itself seeks to change such permissive norms of economic choice because they protect people who give too little or ineffectively to charity. Socialists criticize such norms insofar as they preclude democratic oversight over consequential economic choices and help perpetuate a culture of competition and exploitation.

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<sup>38</sup> McMahan, 2016.

<sup>39</sup> Macaskill, 2014.

It would be difficult for anyone to successfully pursue such a career without participating in these norms. EAs will likely take advantage of them as they apply their idiosyncratic altruistic standards of career choice. Earning to give requires people to support these practices in their interactions with colleagues and investors so as to avoid the economic costs of nonconformity. If a person abjures the culture of greed, it is unlikely that their contribution will be replaced by someone else, as with earning to give. It is more likely that there would simply be one less person enforcing the harmful norms, slightly weakening their hold on society. Permissive norms of economic choice are one of many forms of potentially pernicious participation intertwined with charity.

The benefits of charity - or any other altruistic intervention - are contingent upon the character of the practices on which it depends. When these are key components of a harmful social system, it is likely that affluent people contribute significantly to structural harm in the course of acquiring and controlling the resources they then donate to charity. In such circumstances, it is possible that they could do more good by contributing to social change. This is especially clear when we consider the full range of contributions people can make to social change.

#### 6. Everyday direct action and the demands of social change

I shall now argue that social change itself requires forms of 'direct action' that seek to alter social practices 'unmediated by the state'. This further undermines McMahan's defence of EA and fleshes out my earlier claim that social change can be very demanding. My remarks here illustrate the strongest possible interpretation the systemic change objection.

The scope for effecting social change through extra-political quotidian activity (the so-called 'revolution [or reform!] of everyday life') has been widely neglected by students of social change, especially when compared to conventional politics. EA should thus be especially interested in such tactics given the potential for making a significant marginal impact on a nascent form of altruistic intervention.

Most discussions of systemic change assume that it can only be achieved by campaigning for legislative change. But most meaningful social change, like the liberation of women, also requires cultural change and adjustments to basic norms of social interaction. Such change involves a collective effort because it involves changing mutual expectations and responses e.g. from accepting and joining in with sexist harassment to repudiating and sanctioning it. This kind of collective effort is unusual in

being largely disaggregated and uncoordinated. Even if there is an organized movement in the background, the actual activities that change social rules take place in a range of ‘normal’ contexts, such as in the workplace or the home.

There are three broad types of everyday direct action:

*Resistance:* Refusing to obey or enforce harmful rules and attempting to sanction those who do so e.g. ‘calling out’ sexist remarks.

*Subversion:* Participating compliantly but avoiding, reducing or compensate for the harmful impact of the practice e.g. Engels posing as a capitalist while funding Marx.

*Reconstruction:* Joining with others to create and implement new, less harmful ways of pursuing the same purposes e.g. participating in a new anti-sexist culture among a group of friends or colleagues; joining an intentional community of utopian socialists.

These tactics are often associated with radical movements but they are actually used by all kinds of social movement. Cultural norms and everyday practices can be reformed as well as revolutionized and using the same methods. EA’s efforts to change norms of giving already utilize such tactics e.g. by ‘resisting’ the permissibility of ineffective giving and ‘constructing’ new altruistic practices. The more harmful current practices are, the more likely it is that individuals could do more good by resisting, subverting and reconstructing them than by participating enthusiastically and giving money to charity.

It is likely that such quotidian efforts make the kind of ‘incremental contributions to the amelioration of poverty’ that McMahan suggests are the unique preserve of charity. Charity can help people almost immediately rather than in the hoped for future, as with political campaigns aiming at eventual legislative victory. Changes to everyday practice can be fast, although they are often slow, but they are almost of necessity an incremental process, as more people enact the new practices more of the time in more contexts.

Such incremental change is likely to be accompanied by incremental improvements in welfare as harmful practices are slowly chipped away. Individual contributions could, therefore, have some positive impact before the system as a whole is transformed, in the same way that charitable donations can help some poor people without eliminating poverty. This further blunts concerns about the probability of ultimate success, as movements may be able to do significant good without completely succeeding, as with socialism and the welfare state.

*The demands of social change*

EA calls on affluent people to make significant material sacrifices to help the poor. EA is sometimes accused of being too demanding because it ignores the value of personal integrity. Critics like Srinivasan and Lichtenberg have argued that EA ‘demands the wrong things, the things that constitute us as humans: our personal attachments, loyalties and identifications.’<sup>40</sup> EA, on the other hand, accuses proponents of the systemic change objection of demanding too little from affluent people and justifying their selfishness with bad-faith appeals to integrity. I argue that both EA and its critics are wrong. Systemic change also, and quite rightly, poses a threat to personal integrity and can be just as demanding as charity.

Integrity is often discussed in the context of moral theoretic debates about consequentialism and impartiality. However, no plausible moral theory will allow that personal integrity always trumps moral requirements, because people’s personal projects can be immoral, like a desire to dominate others or benefit unfairly from an exploitative economic system. Such commitments ought to be repudiated in accordance with moral requirements. Furthermore, extreme demands are always because, as Ashford argues, no plausible moral theory permits people to ignore severe suffering when they are in a position to relieve it:

‘...the current state of the world is a constant emergency situation; there are continually persons whose vital interests are threatened and...the relatively well-off are continually able to help them. Because of the scale of the emergency, the moral requirement to help others' vital interests is so demanding as to threaten agents' personal projects.’<sup>41</sup>

Social change can also threaten integrity in this way. Social systems provide the framework within which personal attachments develop and influence the characters of their participants. Significant and relatively sudden social change - like a shift from capitalism to socialism over, say, 20 years - would require people to repudiate any personal projects and attachments that could be pursued only under capitalism, such as being a captain of industry.

Individuals are also likely required to make significant personal sacrifices in order to bring

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<sup>40</sup> Srinivasan, 2015.

<sup>41</sup> Ashford, 2000, p. 430.

about systemic change, in addition to any ethical adjustments demanded by the change itself. This is for similar reasons as apply to charity. The task of organizing and advocating for change is enormous, just like feeding the hungry, and so, in the absence of a huge number of committed people to share the load, there is no end to the amount of money, time and effort that an individual can usefully dedicate to the cause. Even if a movement achieves a mass membership, a core of highly dedicated members will likely be required to sacrifice or subsume their personal goals to those of the movement. And just as EA criticizes donations to ‘ineffective’ charities, like arts organizations, so do radicals criticize activities that do not further the cause.

Social change can also make distinctive demands related to challenging harmful practices. Engels illustrates the potential demands of subversion. Although he did enjoy some aspects of bourgeois life, his socialist principles meant that he was also deeply alienated by ‘accursed’ and ‘filthy commerce’<sup>42</sup> and his need to maintain ‘a facade of painful propriety’ over his preferred radical bohemianism. Indeed, according to Hunt, ‘the contradiction between public commitments and personal beliefs eventually sent Engels spiralling toward illness, depression, and breakdown.’<sup>43</sup>

Engel’s subversive ‘earning to give’ was in some ways even more demanding than giving to charity because it involved not just material costs but also compromising his deepest commitments. Giving a significant share of one’s financial resources to charity (or to radical causes) is largely compatible with maintaining the status and relationships associated with one’s family, nation, ethnicity, class, education and career. This is not true of direct actions that challenge prevailing standards and socially accepted ways of life or, as with Engels, participate enthusiastically in a despised lifestyle in order to further a radical cause.

In practice, neither EA nor advocates of social change insist upon the sacrifices or purity of focus required by the letter of their theories. Such rhetoric would likely discourage potential converts. Both donors and radicals risk ‘burning out’ by giving up other interests or making huge initial sacrifices that undermine their long term commitment to the cause and thus reduce their overall impact. In principle, however, the pursuit of social change is at least as demanding as charity and everyday direct action can involve its own distinct costs, such as alienation and loss of status.

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<sup>42</sup> Quoted in Hunt, 2009, p. 188.

<sup>43</sup> Hunt, 2009, p. 201.

## Conclusion

I have argued that EA is inattentive to the potential systemic causes of and solutions to severe poverty. The movement shows signs of status-quo bias in its variously simplistic and hostile responses to the systemic change objection and its complete inattention to research into social critique and social change. It thus risks being unable to recognize that the most effective anti-poverty interventions might involve pursuing such change.

The critique advanced here is not necessarily fatal to EA, as it leaves intact its basic principles and primarily requires an adjustment in the focus and methods of its research efforts. But it is unclear whether, in practice, EA could survive as a unified movement if its members took systemic change seriously, because of the likelihood that they would disagree in their structural analyses, endorse mutually incompatible social changes and pursue conflicting strategies for achieving them. Their shared identity as EAs would not provide enough common ground to make cooperation between them worthwhile. Another risk is that the rich individuals and powerful institutions that currently fund EA organizations would withdraw their support if EA started advocating for radical social change.

The enormous practical ramifications of getting structural analysis right mean that EA's should not be willing to simply accept that '[d]ifferent people make different ethical and empirical assumptions, and this affects what they believe to be the best ways to do good.'<sup>44</sup> Social systems matter too much for judgments about them to be treated as mere 'background assumptions' and 'worldview characteristics' that underpin altruistic efforts but are not themselves evaluated by the movement. I have not directly defended the socialist critique, so for all I have argued here, EA could be right that charity is the best solution to poverty. But EA must be explicit about the structural analysis underpinning such a conclusion, or it cannot claim to take systemic change seriously.

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<sup>44</sup> <https://concepts.effectivealtruism.org/concepts/a-flowchart-for-focus-area-selection>: accessed 11/4/18

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