

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,¹ using ‘high-quality evidence and careful reasoning’ to identify and promote ‘the most promising solutions to the world’s most pressing problems.’² Effective Altruism also seeks to change social norms in affluent societies by creating ‘a social expectation that to be decent people, the rich should give away a large fraction of their wealth to others.’³

Although it is, in principle, open to any intervention that can be reasonably expected to do a lot of good, EA has so far mostly endorsed direct poverty relief efforts, such as the distribution of anti-mosquito bed-nets to combat malaria and efforts to combat existential risks to life on Earth, such as asteroid strikes and rebellious artificial intelligence. Anti-poverty interventions are ‘safe bets’ that will reliably do quite a bit of good in the short term while efforts to combat future existential risks are the ‘best bets’ in terms of expected value because, while they are far more speculative and lack solid evidence of their effectiveness, they promise to do a truly enormous amount of good.⁴

The *systemic change objection*⁵ contends that EA ignores the systemic causes of poverty and the potential positive impact of individual contributions to social change, such as the replacement of capitalism with socialism. Some critics accuse EA of adopting a ‘bourgeois moral philosophy’ that is blind to the ills of capitalism⁶ and renders EA ineffective in the battle against poverty.

The main defence of EA is that, in principle, the movement ‘loves systemic change’⁷ and is open to the possibility that it should ‘prioritize lobbying for “massive forced redistribution”’⁸, as such socially transformative interventions could be very effective. In addition, EA itself seeks systemic change in relation to norms of giving and has also begun investigating areas where policy advocacy could be an effective altruistic intervention.⁹ EA insists, however, that the effectiveness of individual contributions to systemic change must be measured in the same way as charitable donations and

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

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

³ Wiblin, 2015.

⁴ Chappell, 2016.

⁵ See, for example, Srinivasan, 2015 and, for a complete list of references see footnote 7 in Berkey, 2017.

⁶ Snow, 2015.

⁷ Wiblin, 2015.

⁸ Chappell, 2016.

⁹ Most prominently by the organization Open Philanthropy.

shown to ‘actually help some poor people.’¹⁰ Chappell suggests that radical politics is not a safe altruistic bet because there is no ‘robust’ evidence that individual efforts to change society will have any immediate positive impact. And it is not the best bet, because even the most beneficial social changes are dwarfed in scale by the benefits of preventing the destruction of all human life. Chappell concludes that there is no ‘principled evaluative standpoint from which radical politics looks distinctively promising’ as a form of effective altruism.¹¹

Stronger responses to the systemic change objection attack the vagueness of systemic critiques and the motivations of those making the systemic change objection, suggesting that critics of EA are not interested in ‘gather[ing] evidence about which efforts to promote institutional change individuals should contribute to.’¹² And rather than sincerely caring about the suffering of the poor, critics of EA are mainly seeking ‘to avoid accepting that well off individuals ought to be making significant sacrifices in order to contribute to addressing global suffering’¹³ and to signal ‘how very Left they are’ by taking ‘cheap shot[s]’¹⁴ at EA.

Altruists and their anti-capitalist critics agree that severe poverty is a moral emergency demanding significant redistribution. They disagree about the best way to eliminate poverty and accuse each other of serious ethical failings. I seek to bridge this divide by reformulating the systemic change objection. Previous formulations are too quick to concede the merits of charity and shy away from claiming that affluent people should join radical social movements instead of donating to aid efforts. I argue that systemic change poses a greater challenge to EA than it has so far recognised but that radical critics also face some EA-inspired challenges of their own.

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.¹⁵

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

¹⁰ Singer, 2010, p. 36.

¹¹ Chapell, 2016.

¹² Chappel, 2016.

¹³ Berkey, 2017, p. 28. See also MacAskill, 2013 and McMahan, 2016.

¹⁴ Ashford, 2018, p. 141.

¹⁵ 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 narrower formulation of a similar argument.

- 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.

This second claim focuses on the interdependent nature of social systems and the fact that systemic practices are perpetuated in and by the everyday actions of their participants, not just by governments. I argue that, if current economic practices are very harmful, individuals may do more harm in acquiring the money to donate and in perpetuating prevailing philanthropic practices than they do good through these donations. I also argue that individuals can contribute to systemic change through everyday efforts to resist, subvert and re-construct harmful practices, such as highly permissive cultural norms of economic decision-making.

This kind of ‘everyday direct action’ would likely involve adopting a lifestyle and an ethos that would not only make significant wealth, and thus significant philanthropy, impossible, but also involve repudiating the mindset and values embodied by the current organizational form and discursive role of charities in general, and the aid and development industry specifically. Critics of EA should, however, also think more carefully about whether they are actually contributing effectively to social change while occupying prestigious, well-paid roles in academia or the development industry. Just as EA should pay more attention to the structural context of charity, so should affluent leftists consider whether wealthy universities, for example, are also so implicated in the harmful status quo as to be largely incompatible with effective radical politics.

Section one argues that EA’s own core concerns require it to take systemic change much more seriously. The second and third sections elaborate the forms of evidence that EA would have to embrace in order to engage properly with systemic issues. Section four sketches a socialist critique of charity and explores the demands of everyday direct action.

1. EA and systemic change

I begin by arguing that systemic change promises to be more effective than charity and that EA’s resistance to radical politics is potentially distorted by status-quo bias. I also point out that radical critiques are not inherently vague and that it is actually EA whose aims as a social movement rely on a vague and under-developed analysis.

Effectiveness

Systemic change promises to produce more good for less effort than 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 collective effort at social transformation, perhaps similar to a massive aid campaign, can become embedded in systemic practices, and become routine and ‘easy’. Removing the causes of poverty is also better than poverty relief insofar as fewer people suffer in the first place. Systemic changes are not usually permanent, but they can be stable over decades or centuries. If the structural causes of poverty could be eliminated for several generations, this would likely be a greater reward for similar effort than a massive aid campaign without systemic consequences.

It may be that successful poverty relief would actually lead to systemic changes that prevented further poverty.¹⁶ To defend poverty relief on these grounds, however, would require the kinds of structural analysis that I discuss below and which EA has so far largely eschewed. It would also depart significantly from the more immediately powerful defence of charity in terms of its direct impact.

The potential effectiveness of social change is enough for EA to take it seriously, but it does not establish that individuals would do more good through activism than charitable giving. The success of a social movement depends on the cooperation of many 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 this below.

Status-quo bias

EA aims to avoid cognitive biases and challenge common sense intuitions about the moral acceptability of unreflective giving and of ongoing affluence in the face of enormous preventable suffering.¹⁷ EA shares this iconoclastic self-understanding with radical social critics, who also seek to challenge socially mandated common sense.¹⁸ But EA’s relative insensitivity to systemic issues indicates 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.’¹⁹ System

¹⁶ Chappell, 2016, for example, endorses charity only because of its ‘flow-through effects.’

¹⁷ McMahan, 2016 and MacAskill and Singer, 2015

¹⁸ Albeit often in terms of ideology and false-consciousness rather than cognitive bias.

¹⁹ Jost and Banaji, 1994, p. 3.

affirmation bias is an especially serious risk for EA because its affluent members probably benefit personally from the status quo. EA is therefore at risk of ‘structural blindness’, of failing to notice ‘crucial aspects of the social order.’²⁰ 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.’²¹

This bias could lead EAs to underestimate the feasibility of alternatives that are desirable according to their altruistic values but incompatible with their continued socio-economic advantages.

Socialism

The possibility that EA’s lack of interest in social change reflects bias is supported by two telling lacunae in its discussions of systemic change. Defenders of EA chide critics for not setting up organizations to evaluate potential systemic changes and for their vague critiques of capitalism. They ignore the entire academic discipline of Social Movement Studies, which focuses on the processes and dynamics of large-scale social change²² as well as vast quantities of analysis by social movements themselves. The failure within EA to even acknowledge the existence of this evidence, let alone engage with it, suggests status-quo bias.

There are many specific analyses of how the current social order reliably produces significant and severe poverty. I will focus on a socialist analysis that regards capitalism as the primary structural cause of poverty and thus contends that the best way to eliminate poverty is to eliminate these relationships and institute a democratized, egalitarian global economy.

I ignore more moderate, reformist analyses, such as those identifying flaws in capitalism and calling for reforms and reparations to unjustly impoverished parts of the world.²³ One reason is that the clear contrast between the pro- and anti-capitalist analyses helps to illuminate my methodological arguments in sections 2 and 3, although these arguments do not rely on the truth of the socialist critique. In addition, my argument in section 4 invokes a systemic critique of unaccountable economic power that is closely associated with socialism, although perhaps not exclusively.

Despite EA’s complaints, the socialist analysis of poverty is not particularly vague. It argues that poverty is the result of introducing ‘capitalist social relations’ to agricultural production in the

²⁰ Levy, 1991, p. 61.

²¹ Levy, 1991, p. 63.

²² See e.g. Klandermans and Roggeband, 2010 and della Porta and Diani, 2015,

²³ See e.g. Pogge, 2014

world's poorest regions.²⁴ Various factors 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. These include the commodification of land and food; the development of global markets; technological change; and the rationalization of production. Socialists argue 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.'²⁵ Further details of this diagnosis, strategies for achieving socialism and visions of the socialist alternative can be fairly easily found in the literature of socialist movements, perhaps most relevantly in recent work responding to the economic crisis of 2008.²⁶

The potential impact of radical change, the risk of status-quo bias and the socialist worldview combine to form a perspective from which radical politics is a promising way of doing good, at least at the collective level. EA's may well have concerns about the evidence underpinning this perspective but this does not justify dismissing it entirely.

EA as a movement

EA should also take radical politics more seriously because it is itself a social movement and so ought to offer the kind of analysis it claims its critics lack. Defenders of the movement have yet to offer much detailed analysis of its own aims and strategies with respect to social change.

Singer argues that the best way of 'ending world poverty' involves 'creating a culture of giving'²⁷, a social expectation of generous and well-informed philanthropy. He also criticizes current social norms for discouraging donors from publicizing their generosity and argues that social norms advocating self-interest are 'ideological' and 'socially pernicious.'²⁸ In the classic paper which significantly influenced EA, Singer acknowledges the need for an economic transformation, arguing that if affluent people gave as they ought 'the consumer society...would slow down and perhaps disappear entirely.'²⁹ Ashford has argued that addressing severe poverty requires 'a transformative shift in social mores and moral norms'³⁰ in order to change 'certain features of the operation of global social institutions, and of the economic policies of affluent countries and other powerful economic

²⁴ Gomberg, 2013, p. 55.

²⁵ Gomberg, 2013, p. 61. Gomberg, 2013, p. 63.

²⁶ See e.g. Mason, 2015

²⁷ Singer, 2010, chapter 5.

²⁸ Singer, 2010, p. 77.

²⁹ Singer, 1972, p. 241.

³⁰ Ashford, 2018, p. 106.

actors'³¹, thus involving 'a fundamental challenge to the moral legitimacy of existing legal, economic, and political structures and calls for a real shift in power between the affluent and those suffering severe poverty'³²

However, when discussing these undeniably radical social changes, neither Singer, Ashford nor other EAs offer or even allude to a detailed analysis of social phenomena they discuss or the changes they seek.³³ They say nothing about the history and social function of norms of charity and self-interest, their relationship to other parts of the social system or any potentially unintended consequences of radically changing them. And when discussing macro-economic change they neither offer nor endorse a theory of political economy or acknowledge the need to confront and tame powerful economic actors, let alone how this might be achieved. These issues are especially salient given longstanding critiques of charity as functioning to stabilize harmfully unjust societies and that the current capitalist system seems to rely on widespread self-interest.³⁴

Some EA's also suggest that effective charity leads to positive social change because

'...concerted efforts to make the world a broadly better place seem to have become more common and...viable as economic development has progressed. Environmentalism, multiple civil rights movements, and large-scale foreign aid are...positive...changes...in the last two centuries and appear stronger in the developed world than in the developing world...We'd guess that increased wealth and improved technology often improves people's ability to coordinate around, and concentrate on, movements whose effects go beyond their personal lives....If one believes that, on average, people tend to accomplish good when they become more empowered, it's conceivable that the indirect benefits of one's giving swamp the first-order effects.'³⁵

This passage exemplifies EA's inattention to the complexities of historical and social analysis. It does not even note the existence of alternative interpretations of this same historical period, such as analyses emphasizing the role of radical politics in successful movements, rather than economic development alone. This clumsily a-historical attitude causes further problems for EA with respect to the ethos and discursive framing of charity in general and aid specifically, which I discuss below.

More generally, it is unclear whether EA understands its own goals as a movement as amounting to 'systemic change' or something less significant. There is some ambiguity this and related

³¹ Ashford, 2018, p. 114.

³² Ashford, 2018, p. 116.

³³ Singer's early paper does include some brief remarks on slowing economic growth and on population control but these vague comments do not amount to a proper analysis. Singer, 1972, pp. 241-242.

³⁴ See Schervish, 1994 and Burlingame, 1992 for historical overviews.

³⁵ Karnofsky, 2013b.

terms like ‘social change’, ‘institutional change’ and ‘radical change’. The terminological differences don’t matter too much here but I will clarify that I understand the social system as an interdependent set of pervasive social rules, which includes informal cultural norms, such as those related to charity, on the same terms as formal legal institutions, like taxation.³⁶ I will therefore say very little about ‘institutional change’, which is sometimes conflated with ‘systemic change’ but which usually refers to changes in formal rules and regulations enacted by states or through international treaties, and seems to exclude a wholesale transformation of culture and everyday practice. The ultimate consequences of a social system depend on the complex interaction of all of its institutions and practices, not just those formally encoded in law, and also on patterns of individual action and choice within these rules. We can therefore distinguish between the following types of ‘social change’, broadly construed:

Behavioral change. All the rules stay the same but people make different choices e.g. buying a newly fashionable product or donating to more effective charities.

Changes within a system. The rules of some institution, practice or norm are altered, thereby causing patterns of action to change too but within a broadly unchanged system e.g. reforming capitalism to protect the interests of the poor or changing norms of giving to encourage more generosity, but keeping everything else substantially the same.

Changes to a system. The fundamental principles and purposes of the system are altered, as with a transition from capitalism to socialism, or if changes to norms of giving had enormous knock-on effects for the organization of the economy.

Each of these changes could be more or less ‘radical’, where this is understood in terms of the qualitative difference from the status quo. An important complication is that some rules are more important than others, such that changes to them might amount to or bring about broader changes to the system. Socialists sometimes argue that practices regulating economic production are more ‘fundamental’ than, say, the organization of political institutions; while some altruists think that hugely increased charity would be similarly transformative. There is also some inevitable vagueness how radical specific changes are and about what counts as a change to the system e.g. whether a transition from the status quo to a genuinely humane capitalism would constitute a change within or a change to the system. For the remainder of this paper, when I mention ‘social’, ‘radical’ or ‘systemic’ change, I mean significant ‘changes to the system’, such as a transition to socialism, not just an adjustment to capitalism, mere changes in behavior or to some subset of rules.

³⁶ Syme, 2018.

It is unclear which of these forms of change EA is pursuing. On the one hand, remarks like those of Singer and Ashford quoted above and the general tenor of the movement's critique of affluence suggest that its goals are potentially systemic in their consequences. On the other hand, its repudiation of radical politics suggests that EA seeks significant but focused changes in philanthropic norms and patterns of altruistic choice, rather than, say, a broader repudiation of norms of self-interest throughout the economy.

Social movements should have a detailed analysis of the nature and impact of their desired changes and of the chances of bringing them about. The ambiguity and opacity of EA's aims as a social movement further highlight an attitude to social change that negligently lax by its own altruistic lights. The key disagreement between EA and other movements is about their relative chances of success rather than the desirability of their proposals. The likely effectiveness of an individual contribution to a social movement always depends upon the current or future cooperation of many other people. Even if socialism would do more good than improving norms of giving, it may have much less chance of achieving enough cooperation from others, meaning that charity is a better bet in the fight against poverty. This may be true, but in the absence of serious engagement with systemic issues means, such conclusions are entirely unsubstantiated.

2. Structural analysis

EAs argue that there is no evidence that contributions to systemic change would be more effective than charitable donations. EA currently prioritizes quantifiable data and empiricist methods, using observations and experiments to ground inductive conclusions about the effectiveness of available interventions, with randomized controlled trials as the 'gold standard'. Such methods and evidence are, I argue, inadequate for structural analysis and thus for serious consideration of systemic change.

Interpretation

Social systems are complex forms of intentional activity that require interpretation, not just observation. Interpretations are paradigmatic forms of qualitative evidence because they involve judgments of intelligibility. Consider, for example, whether capitalism is a system of free exchange or of 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 because individuals always act within a framework of institutions and practices whose rules 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’³⁷ reinforce ‘a set of ideas and associations’³⁸ 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, say, duties of justice. Such disagreements about the meanings of actions can only be settled by digging deeper into their rival claims of intelligibility and cultural analyses, not by empirical testing.

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, poverty might be caused by the combined effects of state sovereignty, market competition and a culture of greed, such that if any of these were absent or 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.

Holism also means that explanations of broad social outcomes like poverty 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.³⁹ 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. The same is true of the causes of poverty and the consequences of charity.

For example, Open Philanthropy is an EA organization focused on high-risk, high-reward

³⁷ Rubenstein, 2016, p. 15.

³⁸ Gabriel, 2017, p. 12.

³⁹ Haslanger, 2016, discusses this example.

interventions, including systemic change. Its lack of a holistic analysis makes it 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 practices in social life.⁴⁰

The importance of interpretation and holistic analysis is sometimes invoked in foundational critiques of quantitative and micro-social science. I argue only that such qualitative methods are necessary for structural analysis specifically, not that they are sufficient for any form of social inquiry. In order to take systemic change seriously, EA must extend its current methods to embrace the qualitative and holistic judgments about social life that are essential to structural analysis. I argue that this threatens EA's apolitical identity.

The impossibility of structural agnosticism

Structural analysis is inevitably politically controversial because it involves defining fraught terms like 'freedom', 'power' and 'society' and making contentious claims about the history and causes of, say, poverty. We might try to avoid committing ourselves on such contentious issues by remaining agnostic between multiple plausible analyses or adopting an empirical attitude to structural analysis itself, using specific policy campaigns as empirical tests of structural hypotheses.

Underlying resistance to political commitment is legitimate concern about being dogmatic and ineffective, of ignoring contrary evidence in order to preserve a critique and the ideals of a hoped for social transformation. Among liberals and capitalists, this dogmatism is associated with the authoritarian orthodoxy of Soviet Marxism. Among socialists, it is associated with capitalist philanthropists (among others), who fail to recognise that capitalism itself is a reliable cause of enormous suffering.

Agnosticism and experimentation about structural analysis make sense only within a limited range. Structural analyses will usually be quite general and abstract. Applying them in particular situations creates further controversy. The aid and development industry, for example, seems to share an oft-implicit, broadly liberal-capitalist analysis and yet disagrees internally about the best development strategies. Socialists similarly share a critique of capitalism, but are divided over the appropriate goals and methods for socialism.

Agnosticism between wholly contradictory analyses is, however, rendered impossible by the

⁴⁰ <https://www.openphilanthropy.org/focus/us-policy/macro-economic-policy>. Accessed: 9/24/2018.

need to act. All actions within a system either perpetuate the status quo or seek to change it, so people have to decide which analysis they believe before they can identify a range of possible interventions to then experiment with and evaluate empirically. It is impossible, for example, to adopt and test pro- and anti-capitalist analyses simultaneously. We can usefully adopt an experimental attitude only once we have first identified a narrow range of potentially plausible analyses; but this narrowing of options is itself politically contentious.

Structural analyses also form a partial 'social theory' within which particular social phenomena are observed, explained and predicted, such as general conceptions of power and human motivation. It is impossible to eschew all such assumptions when observing social phenomena, because they establish the basic terms of all such observations. Our evaluation of the results of policy experiments is unavoidably influenced by the very structural analyses whose predictions we are trying to test, making it difficult to be confident in any putatively impartial evaluation of experimental results. And because such analyses are holistic, it is difficult to isolate and test particular elements of such a critique or to decide what to change if a prediction fails and when to abandon the whole theory and try another one. For example, socialists and capitalists often interpret the same historical evidence about the impact of aid or the failings of socialist regimes very differently due to their divergent structural assumptions.

Structural analyses also tend to make quite long term predictions without precise timelines or detailed routes from here to there. It is epistemically irresponsible to discard a plausible social critique if events fail to rapidly redeem its predictions. The complexities of applying general analyses to particular situations also introduce a lot of noise into any experiments, further slowing down any process of empirical testing.

The reflexive nature of social action further dooms empiricism about structural analysis. How we think and act now changes the conditions for future actions, meaning that interventions which do not work now might work in future or be rendered unnecessary. This reflexivity is central to long-term political strategies, which can try to create conditions friendlier to further changes. It is also relevant to aid projects, which aim to create the conditions in which their recipients will no longer need aid but which risk undermining local governance structures and moving further away from these desired conditions.

Reflexivity means that structural analyses are ultimately immune to empirical demonstration. Even if socialism is implemented globally at some point in the future and fails, this would not prove that it could never have worked if it had been implemented earlier or that it would not work at some future time. Historical conditions are never repeated, so it is impossible for society as a whole to test

and compare fundamentally different structural analyses and predictions.

It is, therefore, impossible to be an epistemically serious altruist without explicitly acknowledging that (a) you make some basic assumptions about how society works and how it can change and be changed, and (b) that these assumptions are to some extent commitments, rather than empirical hypotheses, and that you will not simply discard them at the first sign of contrary evidence.

We should of course be wary of dogmatism. Adherents of all analyses should be more open about which of their assumptions are, at least temporarily, accepted regardless of apparent empirical substantiation and about what evidence would be needed for them to revise their analysis. But EA should also accept that doing the most good involves committing to politically controversial judgements about how society works that are to some extent insulated from empirical contradiction. This is an unavoidable epistemic cost of taking social critique and systemic change seriously.

3. Contributing to and predicting social change

Giving to charity is superior to pursuing systemic change if such change is unlikely to happen, even if it would do a lot of good were it to be successfully implemented. Some EA's have argued that individual efforts to achieve systemic change are unlikely to be effective because not enough people will join them to make success likely. McMahan contends that 'individuals must decide what to do against the background of what others will in fact do.'⁴¹ And Berkey points out that

'[w]e 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...'⁴²

Even if socialists are correct that capitalist social relations are the key cause of unnecessary suffering and that socialism would be much better, it might not be worthwhile for EAs to dedicate any effort to replacing capitalism if it is unlikely that enough other people will contribute to the movement and thus unlikely that it will do any good. By giving to charity instead, individuals can be confident of doing some good without relying on others in the same way.

The example of Engels illustrates the limitations of EA's current approach. Engels has been described as an 'utterly brilliant' EA before his time because he worked in his family business to support Marx financially:

⁴¹ McMahan, 2016, p. 4.

⁴² Berkey, 2017, p. 12.

[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.⁴³

It is, however, unlikely that Engel's intervention would have been endorsed by EA at the time. Marx's huge influence was far from a certainty when Engel's began supporting him, years before the publication of *Das Kapital*. Marx and Engels also faced 'complete political isolation'⁴⁴ in a socialist movement exiled and splintered after the failure of the 1848 revolutions.

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

Most people in social movements will have less impact than Engels, 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 initiate and sustain embryonic movements.

Evaluating the prospects of individual contributions and entire movements requires measuring individual contributions to collective actions and predicting the prospects of long-term movements that can reflexively influence their own chances for success. EA is insensitive to these complexities, partly due to its empiricist methods, and its predictions that radical movements are unlikely to succeed are therefore unsubstantiated and unreliable.

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.⁴⁵ Predicting the likely impact of an individual contribution requires solving this deep puzzle of collective action. The heterogeneous and inter-subjective nature of social practices further complicates the application of

⁴³ Alexander, 2015.

⁴⁴ Hunt, 2009, p. 182.

⁴⁵ See Kagan, 2011 and related literature.

any solution to the specific case of social change.⁴⁶

MacAskill endorses a *threshold analysis* to resolve the puzzle of over-determination in relation to voting.⁴⁷ While individual votes make no difference, some cumulative total determines election results and there is a small chance that each vote will trigger the result. If we know the odds of our making the triggering contribution, we can calculate the expected utility of our vote. Even an apparently pointless contribution could be worthwhile if there is some chance it will trigger a valuable outcome, like a good government. Whatever its merits, the threshold account is not easily applicable to social change.

Votes are identical, 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 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.

Social practices and social movements are also essentially joint, inter-subjective activities, such that individual contributions are inter-dependent, with the impact of each person 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, each of which adds one to the total 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 establish that a particular contribution was counter-factually necessary for a consequence that occurred much later and after many other people had also contributed.

⁴⁶ I ignore 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.

⁴⁷ See MacAskill, 2015, chapter 6, which also applies this analysis to ethical consumption.

Alexander suggests that Engels' efforts 'directly led' to the socialist revolutions and crimes of the 20th century, but there were important contributions by many other people, not least Marx himself. And 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 he did so much to foment. It is no easier to specify the impact of individual contributions to smaller collective efforts like election campaigns, where victory is achieved only by the combined efforts of a charismatic leader and their organization.

In order to measure and predict an individual's likely impact on a social movement using the threshold analysis, EA would need to solve the problem of over-determination and also distinguish and quantify the interdependent and heterogeneous contributions to these essentially joint efforts. If this is impossible, then the threshold analysis is not applicable 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 and thus to any claim that charity is best because socialism will not happen.

Feasibility and ethical change

A further complexity with predicting social change concerns the mutability of prevailing patterns of preference and value. Prevailing ethical profiles change over time, including in response to intentional efforts. That too many people are currently unwilling to voluntarily join the socialist movement does not by itself render socialism unlikely in the longer term, because social change involves and is facilitated by ethical change.

Patterns of preference are subject to 'dynamic variation'⁴⁸ 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 feasible.⁴⁹ 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

⁴⁸ Gilabert and Lawford-Smith, 2012, p. 6.

⁴⁹ See Gilabert, 2011. Such changes can also happen as part of broader patterns of social change that can be predicted and exploited by activists.

possibilities and prospects for ethical change, rather than assuming the permanence of current patterns of motivation.

EA efforts to change norms of giving may help initiate more radical change in the long term or, at least, not impede it. This stronger defence of charity, however, must confront critiques of the structural impact of encouraging charitable motives, such as the worry that it perpetuates harmful attitudes to poverty, and more generally specify exactly what changes are sought, as discussed above.

Commitment, strategy and position

To predict the success of a social movement we need to consider the strategies by which it might best pursue its aims, such as moral persuasion or class struggle, and how potential individual members could best contribute to this strategy, such as by persuading others to adopt it, as Engels did with class struggle. This complicates predictions of individual impact and overall success in at least three respects: commitment, strategy and position.

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. Strong and long-term commitment is probably essential for maintaining focus and motivation, signalling integrity to potential allies and fostering the expertise needed to identify and respond to opportunities. It also helps members develop the ethos and integrity needed to avoid the temptation to take the easy option and compromise with status-quo. Small, committed movements can gain traction rapidly as circumstances alter if they are ready to exploit the change.⁵⁰ 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 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

⁵⁰ Gabriel has also argued that the need for long-term commitment is in tension with EA's current methods. Gabriel, 2017 pp. 12-13.

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.

EA 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. EAs 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. 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 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.’⁵¹

Berkey is probably correct that coercion is rarely justifiable as a tool of social change although it is notable that he introduces apparently deontological restrictions into the usually consequentialist EA framework. But he is wrong to imply a simple dichotomy between voluntary and coerced cooperation.

Social movements engage in social conflict.⁵² 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 encouraged to acquiesce or compromise by altering their incentives, such as a realistic prospect of electoral defeat, rather than by persuading them of the substantive merits of the cause. By mobilizing social power in permissible ways, whichever these are, 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 understood as voluntary cooperation. Evaluations of the likely effectiveness of different strategies require ethical analysis of the permissibility as well as the effectiveness of using more or less aggressive tactics for winning specific political struggles. But we cannot simply assume that anything other than voluntary agreement is illegitimate.

⁵¹ Berkey, 2017, p. 12.

⁵² Diani, 1992.

Berkey also seems to assume that poverty is not an ‘unusual exception’ to prohibitions on aggressive, perhaps even violent political methods. This is in apparent tension with EA’s own emphasis on the moral catastrophe of severe poverty, which may well justify highly disruptive and aggressive tactics up to and including violence, if it is the only available strategy that is likely to work.

My aim here is not to defend political violence or any particular aggressive tactic, but to highlight that predicting the success of a movement does not depend upon the chances of achieving the voluntary acquiescence of every person whose cooperation is needed for the change to occur. Social movements build power both by gaining adherents and by posing political threats to their opponents. There are probably a huge number of ways in which a movement trying to avert a moral emergency can permissibly pursue its goals, such as disruptive protest, aggressive propaganda, electoral threats and backroom deals between leaders.

In this section I have discussed the complexities involved in weighing the chances of radical change occurring and the likely impact of individual contributions to social movements. Were EA to attend to these issues, they might 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 the example of Engels highlights the kinds of reasoning which could justify contributing to social change and which EA has hitherto ignored.

4. Charity vs. revolution

I have argued that EA is inattentive to structural analysis and the complexities of collective action and social change. Its conclusions on such matters are thus poorly supported. I now take up the concrete concern that, if capitalism causes poverty and aid helps maintain capitalism, then charity and revolution are at cross-purposes and, therefore, that charity, at least in its conventional forms, should be largely rejected by those wishing to do good. I offer a limited defence of what Ashford calls the

[absurd]...assumption (which tends to be implicit in certain objections to effective altruism rather than explicitly stated) that acknowledgment of the unjust structural underpinnings of severe poverty implies that we should avoid supporting aid agencies.⁵³

I also rebut the charge that critics of charity argue in bad faith and are actually more concerned with

⁵³ Ashford, 2018, p. 119.

preserving their own comfortable lives than with improving the lot of the worst-off.

My defence is limited insofar as I am here concerned only with the perspective of impartial, consequentialist altruism. I leave open the possibility that there are other considerations which should be weighed against impartial maximization of the good and which might support charity in general and perhaps effective aid charities particularly. These might include reasons of the kinds defended by altruists like Singer and Ashford, such as duties of emergency rescue or ‘second-best’, back-up duties triggered by the lack or slow pace of structural change. Or they might include personal interests and attachments, as with the conventional approaches to charity criticized by EA. For all I say here, charity might be permitted or required even though it slowed down or prevented radical change and so did not maximize overall wellbeing. This kind of justification is, however, incompatible with a narrow focus on effectiveness and also with the idea that charity and social change are complementary.

I reject the suggestion 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 them themselves’⁵⁴

McMahan also suggests that social change is a matter for states and that some individuals should take ‘direct action, unmediated by the state’ to help the world’s poorest people by giving to charity. If systemic change is primarily a task for organized political institutions or other collective actors then it is more plausible that individuals should combine conventional forms of political campaigning with donations to effective charities direct aid.

I argue that charitable giving in its currently dominant forms is so intertwined with the current social order that it does more harm than good, that individuals can actually make direct and unmediated contributions to social change in their everyday lives and that doing so is likely to be incompatible with giving to charity. The widely shared focus on conventional political action underestimates the scope for individuals to undertake quotidian forms of anti-capitalist direct action to

⁵⁴ McMahan, 2016.

change harmful social norms and practices. This argument further distinguishes my formulation of the systemic change objection from previous versions, which concede that charity is worthwhile⁵⁵ and ignore the extra-political demands of radical anti-capitalism. It combines this critique of charity with a defence of limited ongoing affluence on the part of socialists that appeals only to strategic considerations, rather than to the hardships of impoverishment.

I argue that the situation we are currently in with charity, especially in the aid and development sector, is akin to one in which the doctor in McMahan's example is also a soldier, who thus participates in and perpetuates the military and political hierarchies that are, let's assume, significantly responsible for 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. Or perhaps he should try to establish an radical, autonomous medical service that treats people while simultaneously advocating revolutionary pacifism, although this may be impossible in practice. The doctor faces an unpleasant and difficult ethical decision. But he should not be distracted from the complexities of his moral situation by the stark suffering of the injured people he sees. He should also think carefully about his contribution to maintaining the institutions and practices which cause war and his potential for combating them outside of the army.

Charitable giving has a number of predictable and largely unavoidable side-effects that contribute to harmful aspects of the capitalist social order and work against the socialist cause, thereby potentially doing enough harm to outweigh the good done by donating. I focus specifically on what I call 'none-of-your-business (NOYB) norms'⁵⁶, which I assume to be a harmful element of the current social system. These norms are especially interesting here because they are ostensibly repudiated by more radical effective altruists too and so highlight the significant differences between the socialist analysis and EA's current approach.

NOYB norms are permissive cultural norms of economic choice that facilitate legal rights of private property and freedom of occupation. EA's criticize NOYB norms because and insofar as they facilitate both low levels of charitable donation and ineffective giving. But this is far from their only harmful social function. NOYB norms protect people's career choices and the career-advice they give to others; their choices in their job, especially when they own or manage a private company; and their choices about which media and cultural products to consume, allowing people to insulate themselves from radical critiques. Such norms permit wealthy and fortunate people to exploit and dominate

⁵⁵ Srinivasan, 2015.

⁵⁶ See Radzik, 2012, for a useful general discussion of the virtue of minding your own business.

others in pursuit of personal gain and desirable careers and lifestyles, largely free from socially enforced mechanisms of deliberation and accountability.

NOYB norms operate in two specific contexts that are relevant to charity. Firstly, they help create and protect the power of wealthy institutions and individuals, allowing them to acquire money in harmful ways and then use that money to influence the existence, aims and success of charities, thereby enhancing their own reputations and distracting from the harm they do, as well as helping the recipients. This includes private corporations exploiting their workers and rich countries whose wealth results from historical and ongoing injustices. Secondly, NOYB norms allow individuals with access to funding to set up and control hierarchical organizations with whatever purpose these individuals choose and their investors or donors accept, whether it be a profit-making business or an aid-giving charity. People without a financial stake in these organizations are largely unable to hold their founders and funders to account because of NOYB norms. Donors, especially the richest, have power over charities in part because NOYB norms protect their right to decide what to do with their own money and so to make their donations conditional.

NOYB norms thus influence the existence and character of aid organizations that accept, seek or rely on donations from corporations, states and wealthy individuals. Whatever good actually existing charities do, their very existence relies upon and thus perpetuates NOYB norms. This critique applies to the cultural structures within which charity currently takes place and is independent of concerns about whether charity actually helps its recipients in the long term.

NOYB norms are an important part of the system that causes poverty. This undermines the putative benefits of charity and poses a practical obstacle to pursuing charity and radical change simultaneously. Although I invoke this analysis from a socialist perspective, it is conceivably available to, say, capitalist reformists, although they would have to take on the burden of explaining how capitalist social relations could survive drastic reductions in the scope of NOYB norms, which would, I assume, involve a significantly democratized economy.

I also argue that charity and politics are not the only ways in which individuals can do good. People can also take *everyday direct action* to transform harmful aspects of the social system, such as NOYB norms. The scope for effecting social change through extra-political quotidian activity has been widely neglected by students of social change, especially when compared to conventional politics. EA should be especially interested in such tactics given the potential for making a significant marginal impact on a nascent form of altruistic intervention.

Everyday direct action is like conventional politics in being a collective effort, as it involves

joining with others to alter mutual expectations and responses. But it differs from politics in that it must occur in ‘normal’ contexts, such as in the workplace or the home, and so cannot be explicitly coordinated in the manner of, say, a protest. Everyday direct action is an essential complement to conventional political efforts whenever it is necessary to change cultural norms and material practices as well as laws and public policies.

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. challenging NOYB norms that protect harmful economic choices from social scrutiny.

Subversion: Participating compliantly in harmful practices but doing so in a way that undermines their purposes e.g. Engels working 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. establishing an autonomous socialist aid-agency or joining an intentional community of utopian socialists.⁵⁷

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 are often incremental, as more people enact the new practices, and so are likely to be accompanied by incremental improvements in welfare as harmful practices are slowly chipped away. Individual contributions could 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 also 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.

It is unlikely, however, that such incremental effects would be as effective as quickly as charitable donations. If charity and social change are incompatible, as I suggest, then advocates of social change seem obliged to accept that currently poor people should be denied structurally harmful charity for the sake of eventual improvements under socialism, which might only be enjoyed by future generations. This involves the kind of impartial maximizing that EA is sometimes criticized for by the

⁵⁷ These tactics are often associated with radical movements but they are actually used by all kinds of social movement; norms and practices can be reformed as well as revolutionized using similar methods. 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 to the needy.

same critics who mount the systemic change objection.⁵⁸ Critics of charity ought to confront this implication explicitly. If the structural harm of charity is rendered worthwhile by the short term good it does, even if it undermines radical change, there is no systemic change objection to charity, although there would still be a challenge to EA's claim that it does the most good. I shall begin my critique of charity by arguing that pursuing radical change is just as demanding as giving a lot to charity.

The demands of radical change

A significant concern with the systemic change objection is that it functions as an illegitimate excuse for people to do little or nothing to fight poverty. EA is also sometimes accused of being too demanding because it requires people to sacrifice 'the things that constitute us as humans: our personal attachments, loyalties and identifications' and therefore ignores the value of personal integrity.⁵⁹ I argue that both EA and its critics are wrong, because radical 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 debates about consequentialism and impartiality in moral theory. However, as Ashford argues, no plausible moral theory will allow that personal integrity always trumps moral requirements. People's personal projects can be immoral, as with a desire to benefit unfairly from an exploitative economic system, and their repudiation can be a moral requirement. And extreme demands can always arise because, again, no plausible moral theory permits people to ignore severe suffering when they are in a position to relieve it.⁶⁰

Radical social change, however, also threatens 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, 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 about systemic change, in addition to any ethical adjustments demanded by the change itself, for similar reasons as apply to charity. The task of organizing and advocating for change is enormous, just like feeding the hungry, and 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

⁵⁸ Srinivasan, 2015.

⁵⁹ Srinivasan, 2015.

⁶⁰ Ashford, 2000, p. 430.

dedicated members will likely be required to sacrifice their personal goals. This is especially true for those who initiate a movement and sustain it through difficult and dangerous periods. Everyday direct action also makes its own distinctive demands.

Each of resistance, subversion and reconstruction can impose distinctive personal costs reflecting their relationship to current power structures. Resistance to widely accepted norms and practices will likely lead to social sanctions, such as stigma and exclusion. Subversion can cause severe alienation, as suffered by Engels, and risks moral corruption that can lead to betrayal of the cause, as it involves enthusiastic, knowing participation in harmful practices.⁶¹ There is also always a risk that subversion will fail and that a person will have contributed to harmful practices without making any positive contribution to change; this would likely have been true for Engels if he had been wrong about the significance of Marx's work. Reconstruction can involve giving up previously valued relationships and activities in order to enact new norms and practices, and may also face social sanctions.

More generally, the pursuit of social change involves trying to balance effectiveness against the ethical risks and unpleasantness of complicity in the harmful status quo. Wholesale repudiation of mainstream society may allow a person to keep their hands clean, say by joining a commune or living 'off the grid', but usually at the cost of their doing relatively little to further their cause, precisely because they are disconnected from the rest of society and thus from the context and terrain of social struggle and change. This inevitably complex challenge is a source of stress and anxiety for radicals because it poses a permanent threat to the effectiveness of their contributions; it is all too easy for radicals to be blind to their own domestication and neutralization by the status quo.

The ways in which social change can be demanding reflect the complexities of structural analysis and predictions of social change, as described above. By focusing on the 'simple' solution of giving to charity, EA unhelpfully underplays the ethical complexity of living in, being shaped by and benefitting from a deeply harmful social order.

Getting rich is harmful

Let's assume, for the sake of argument, that an individual's quotidian contributions to harmful social norms and practices can outweigh the good of their charitable contributions. If this seems implausible,

⁶¹Engels enjoyed some aspects of bourgeois life, but he also despised 'accursed...filthy commerce' and the 'facade of painful propriety' he had to maintain so much that 'the contradiction between public commitments and personal beliefs eventually sent Engels spiralling toward illness, depression, and breakdown.' Hunt, 2009, p. 201.

note that some of the most problematic practices are potentially very widespread, provide the social framework within which many other activities occur and are often deeply embedded in people's everyday lives and self-understanding. This means that people are potentially contributing to the perpetuation of these practices extremely often, perhaps almost constantly. If NOYB norms are indeed very harmful, it is therefore likely that people do as much or more harm acquiring money perpetuating the culture of charity as they do good for the recipients of their donations.

In order to acquire enough disposable income to make significant charitable donations, individuals will very likely have to work for (or own) wealthy private corporations or non-profit organizations which are financially reliant on the state or private funding, such as universities and large NGOs, and thus aligned with the interests of private capital. In order to get and keep jobs in such institutions, individuals will almost certainly have to comply with and perpetuate NOYB norms in many contexts. The practical tension between significant wealth and effective radicalism highlights a number of problems with EA defences of charity.

Some altruists argue that charitable giving is permissible and desirable but not morally required and thus seem to accept NOYB norms.⁶² And MacAskill, for example, endorses 'earning to give', which involves seeking out high-paying jobs, even in harmful industries like the arms trade or speculative finance, rather than working to do good directly for an aid organization, in order to make very large donations to such organizations. This is effective because there is competition for high-paying jobs and for jobs in the aid industry. Were the altruist not to take the high-paying job the role would be filled by a non-altruist who would do the same harm but without donating and, if they do take the high paying job, an equally qualified person will take the aid job they eschew.⁶³

I argue, however, that the harm of pursuing such careers is not limited to particular industries like the arms trade but extends to the practices within which all such careers are embedded. It may be possible for individuals to keep these jobs if they challenge NOYB norms with respect to charitable giving only, but they will struggle to do so if they challenge every instance in which a person with unjust economic power makes an unaccountable decision in pursuit of profit. This would involve persistently confronting the business decisions of bosses, colleagues, investors, clients and donors. This reflects the unsurprising fact that it is difficult to effectively challenge unjust social, political and economic power within a capitalist organization or one significantly dependent upon capital. And, if a person does repudiate such norms, it is unlikely that their contribution will be replaced by someone

⁶² E.g. Macaskill, 2015, and Pummer, 2016.

⁶³ Macaskill, 2014.

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.

Earning to give might be redeemed from a radical perspective if it served to subvert NOYB norms while also helping people through donations. Perhaps altruists contribute to desirable social change by encouraging colleagues and clients to give more to effective charities and modelling generosity in institutions founded on greed. But whether such encouragement effectively contributes to changing these norms depends upon how exactly it is framed. Advising people how to best spend their money is, like charitable donations themselves, compatible with NOYB norms, even when framed in moral terms. Moral norms are not the same as social norms because there is no guarantee that flouting them will cause one to face social sanctions. NOYB norms are challenged by denying that people ought to be socially free to decide for themselves how to spend their money and run their business. Merely highlighting the moral urgency of aid and the existence of efficient charities need not contribute to restricting this harmful social freedom.

Such exhortations attempt to influence people's choices within norms which permit them to choose without fear of social sanction. If the admittedly unusual appeal to altruistic motives is not accompanied by any attempt to impose such sanctions on those who do not give, it is not subversive. But attempts to impose such sanctions will be very difficult in a corporate environment where bosses, investors and clients can harshly punish behavior they dislike. Altruists will inevitably be strongly tempted to soften their critiques of wealth or present them in abstract moral terms, rather than by trying to impose social sanctions.

Altruists may do less harm than those who participate normally in the same practices without giving substantial amounts to charity, but this is not the same as doing the most good possible. Earning to give may have subversive potential, but its positive contribution to such change must be defended through detailed consideration of the difficulties involved in challenging NOYB norms within capitalist institutions. These considerations suggest, firstly, that permissive defences of charity fall victim to the systemic change objection and, secondly, that there is no way to acquire significant wealth without doing significant harm through perpetuating NOYB norms.

In defence of affluence

The previous section suggests that the harm of becoming unusually rich may outweigh the good done by giving a lot of money to charity. It remains conceivable, however, people who are merely affluent, rather than really rich, ought to still donate a significant share of their disposable income to charity.

Let's focus on people who are contributing effectively to social change, including opposing NOYB norms, either directly through their jobs, such as organizer or journalist, or in their spare time from a non-activist, normally remunerated job. The radical critic of charity needs to explain why such people are morally permitted or even required to refrain from giving to charity.

Some altruists, like Singer and Ashford, argue that giving to charity should be a social requirement, thus rejecting NOYB norms with respect to giving. They are especially interesting because they share with radicals both a critique of affluence and an insistence on the ultimate need for a transformation of society, not just an increase in charity. But despite their overlap with the socialist critique, Singer and Ashford actually illustrate the failure of EA to engage seriously with the complexities of systemic change and the critique of charity.

As noted earlier, neither Singer nor Ashford offer a holistic analysis of the social function of norms of self interest or of the broader social context in which the change must be pursued. Radical altruists offer a moral critique of the status quo but fail to consider that, as socialists have long argued, moral exhortation alone is vanishingly unlikely to achieve the radical changes they endorse, which challenge the material interests of powerful social actors. While altruists highlight the need for 'moral' reform alongside conventional political change, they say nothing at all about the specific measures needed to achieve the transformation they call for, the obstacles such efforts face or the possibility that actually existing charities are part of the problem, rather than of the solution. They thus ignore important radical arguments in favor of affluence and against charity.

Two considerations can be appealed to by altruists and socialists alike. One is that luxury spending is necessary to avoid burnout and sustain long-term efforts. It can also help recruit new members to the movement by showing that doing good need not be wholly miserable. Social movements also need to be embedded in society in order to effectively promote their cause. Extreme altruists and radicals who entirely repudiate mainstream society will likely struggle to campaign effectively for their cause. They may be too poor to present themselves appropriately in relevant social contexts, such as by wearing the right clothes, or too isolated from mainstream culture to communicate effectively with non-members.

Socialists can also invoke the strategic value of prefiguration; of embodying in the present some of the values and practices of the radically different society you seek, in order to demonstrate its merits and its feasibility to yourself and others. Insofar as socialists aspire to a society of universal material abundance and maximal liberation, asceticism and self-denial are incompatible with prefiguration; it is better to integrate fun, pleasure and even luxury into a radical way of life.

Perhaps the strongest radical arguments against charity concern the ethos that radicals should cultivate. Everyday direct action can include efforts to reshape your own character, so that your habitual, instinctive responses reflect the values and strategic needs of the cause. When we change ourselves, we thereby change how we relate to others and to prevailing social practices. To the extent that charity in general and most actual charities, especially in the aid sector, depend upon and manifest a harmful ethos, radicals should not be the kind of people who support them in word or deed.

I argued above that the actually existing charitable sector is importantly shaped by NOYB norms. Charities depend upon and thus cannot effectively challenge the economic power of wealthy individual donors, private corporations and post-imperial states. Radicals should regard actively supporting such organizations as unthinkable. In addition, how individuals relate to economic production is far more causally significant than how they relate to practices of consumption. Effective radicals will therefore care a lot about how they relate to economic production, such as the extent to which they contribute to exploitation, and relatively little about how they and others spend whatever limited disposable income they have. Radicals reject as harmful an ethos that prioritizes spending money on the right things, whether luxuries or saving lives, rather than through, say, participating in a democratic economy or a movement for radical change.

Radicals will also reject charity because of their ethical orientation to the historical and ongoing injustices that created and perpetuate the inequalities of power that have prevented huge numbers of people enjoying the fruits of technological development and left them to suffer severe material deprivation. This involves repudiating actually existing aid and development efforts because they perpetuate an ethos of generosity that, as Ashford notes, ‘fails to recognize’ the unjust origins of the wealth of the global North and perpetuates an ‘invidious moral hierarchy’⁶⁴ in the culture of rich countries,

Singer’s classic paper on famine relief manifests this harmfully a-historical framing. In his introductory discussion of the then ongoing humanitarian crisis in East Bengal, Singer notes that the British government has so far given the most aid.⁶⁵ He goes on to consider the objection that affluent people are ‘in a better position to judge what needs to be done to help a person near to us than one far away.’ He suggests that this ‘may once have been a justification for being more concerned with the poor in one’s own town than with famine victims in India.’ But he argues that ‘instant communication and swift transportation...the development of the world into a “global-village”’ have changed our

⁶⁴ Ashford, 2018, p. 139.

⁶⁵ Singer, 1972, p. 229.

moral relation to distant famine victims and that '[e]xpert observers and supervisors...permanently stationed in famine-prone areas, can direct our aid to a refugee in Bengal almost as effectively as we could get it to someone in our own block.'⁶⁶ These comments indicate insensitivity to the history of, specifically, Britain's relationship to India. It is absurd to suggest that only the recent technological developments have allowed British people to know about or influence events in Bengal.

Ashford is much more careful to acknowledge the risk of charity perpetuating harmful framing through insensitivity to history. She insists, however, that this harmful framing does not mean 'that aid in itself paternalizes the global poor'⁶⁷ because total dependence on others 'is a pervasive fact of human existence', as with infancy and old age, and is not in itself degrading. And some aid organizations are explicitly aware of and seek to counteract this framing and that aid practitioners are motivated by humanitarian concern and thus are not guilty of problematic paternalism.⁶⁸ These defences are inadequate.

While it is true that needing help is not always degrading, Ashford does not consider that needing help in these particular circumstances of post-colonial poverty may in fact always be degrading, precisely because of the history of the aid industry and its current close relationship with the institutional agents of both past and present exploitation of the South. In addition, the potentially virtuous motivations of those who give aid are largely irrelevant to the social function and the ethical, cultural impact of their actions. Aid can function paternalistically and perpetuate an invidious hierarchy even when its practitioners are genuinely well-meaning, as was likely the case for some during the colonial era who sincerely wished to help 'civilize the natives', rather than to exploit or demean them. Good intentions are not sufficient to escape the pernicious effects of a deeply embedded culture of paternalism integrated with ongoing domination and exploitation.

Singer's clumsiness and the inadequacy of Ashford's response show that aid and development efforts are still bedevilled by their past and present relationship to unjust power and the harmful ethos this embodies. Promoting radical change effectively requires an ethos that wholly repudiates invidious ethical hierarchies, so radicals should reject foreign aid in its current form, while fighting for a proper reckoning with historical injustice.

These arguments against radicals giving to charity and in favor of their limited affluence are based solely on considerations of effectiveness. They do not appeal to the personal interests of these

⁶⁶ Singer, 1972, p. 232.

⁶⁷ Singer, 1972, p. 232.

⁶⁸ Ashford, 2018, pp.126-127.

affluent radicals, such as their personal commitments and relationships or the discomforts of voluntary poverty. They reflect the inevitable complexity of efforts to pursue radical change, especially when a movement is new or weak, as socialism is right now, when it is especially important that individuals manifest an unwavering commitment to the values of their cause. Altruists may object that the effectiveness of social change work will not be undermined if radicals compromise their principles in order to give to effective aid charities. But to defend this riposte properly they would need to develop precisely the kind of nuanced analysis they currently lack, attending carefully to the complexities of ethos and self-understanding to show that such ethical compromise will not undermine the cause.

Challenges for affluent socialists

I argued in the previous section that radicals have good reasons to spend their disposable income on themselves and to repudiate aid charities entirely. However, my account of everyday direct action also presents challenges to some affluent radicals.

EA's like Chappell suggest that radical critics oppose charity because they prefer to maintain their affluent lifestyles rather than make material sacrifices to relieve unnecessary suffering. My discussion of NOYB norms and everyday direct action suggests that there may be some truth to these charges, at least in some cases. Most proponents of the systemic change objection say nothing about these issues and often reject EA's focus on individuals on the grounds that institutions and structures matter more. Like EA itself, proponents of the systemic change objection, like Srinivasan, fail to acknowledge that institutions and structures are also created by individuals in their everyday lives and that socialists can contribute to radical change by undertaking forms of quotidian struggle that are potentially incompatible with affluence and social status.

These critics do not seriously evaluate their own effectiveness in promoting radical change. For example, successful participation in academia as it is currently constituted may not be compatible with being an effective socialist. Intellectual work is an important part of any successful movement but modern universities are deeply embedded in the capitalist system. Putative radicals face a very real risk of being subtly disciplined by the many benefits provided by these institutions, such as wealth and social and professional status, which are often effectively conditional on keeping criticism and political activity within boundaries that scholarly peers, university administrators and funding bodies deem

acceptable.⁶⁹ This may effectively neutralize the impact of even the most ostensibly radical critical work. The same considerations apply to media and political organizations that are able to pay generous salaries. Just like altruists, socialists risk doing more harm than good by pursuing change from within capitalist institutions, at least some of whose harmful norms they will thus unavoidably perpetuate. Critics of charity should be more sensitive to these issues.

A final consideration concerns the possibility of radical charity. Many of the concerns noted above concern the relationship between actually existing charities and harmful aspects of the social system. There is, however, a tradition of radical charity, in which a social movement provides services directly to those in need, rather than just advocating for better state provision, with the aim of helping people and the movement simultaneously.⁷⁰ Socialists could seek to establish or support programs which ameliorate severe suffering without in any way supporting capitalist social relations or invidious hierarchies between donors and recipients. Such efforts can eschew problematic organizational forms and reject any funding from wealthy individuals or institutions, or at least take steps to ensure that any large donors have no influence on the activities of the movement or the charity, thereby minimizing the risk of being disciplined by wealth.

It is likely to be especially difficult for affluent radicals to establish such charities in the poorest parts of the world, however, because of likely opposition by the state in both donor and recipient countries. But if there were or could be poverty-relief that did not involve cooperation with the harmful status-quo, socialists might be required to donate to or create it. Such a requirement would, however, still be modulated by considerations such as burnout and prefiguration. And such autonomous service provision would likely only be one part of an effective strategy and thus would not require all radicals to donate or all donors to give as much as they could. So this possibility only offers limited succour to EA.

In this section I have argued that giving to charity depends upon potentially harmful participation in economic and cultural practices, that EA may not be effectively challenging harmful norms of giving and that everyday direct action on harmful practices is just as demanding as charity. I have also argued that radicals have good reasons to repudiate charity entirely and to embrace limited affluence. And I have suggested that critics of charity ought to be more explicit about whether they really think that charity should not happen at all, more self-critical of their own affluent careers and

⁶⁹ Nair, 2017.

⁷⁰ The service programs established by the revolutionary Black Panther Party in the USA in the 1960s are a prominent example of revolutionary charity. See Hilliard, 2008.

lifestyles and more open to the possibility of radical charity. These arguments illustrate the practical urgency of the kinds of evidence discussed in sections two and three, which have so far been ignored by EA.

Conclusion

I have argued that EA is, as critics suggest, inattentive to the problem of systemic change and shows signs of status-quo bias in its simplistic and hostile responses to the systemic change objection and its inattention to research into social critique and social change. EA is, in principle, open to the potential effectiveness of actions that promote radical change rather than directly helping poor people, but paying proper attention to systemic change would require the movement to repudiate its distinctive empiricist approach to altruism. Structural analysis requires qualitative judgements that cannot be easily proved or disproved, such as holistic social analyses and assessments of the best strategies for bringing about desirable change. I have also argued that giving to charity is not straightforwardly compatible with promoting radical change because it is intertwined with harmful social practices and character traits.

However, if EA were to embrace structural analysis, it would risk collapsing into vacuity or splintering into rival ideological camps. If EA gives up its distinctive empiricist approach, its principles might amount to little more than a generic exhortation for people to be morally better, to care more about the suffering of strangers and do more to address it in whatever way they think best. The imperative to engage in structural analysis and the incompatibility of rival analyses means that, if some EAs conclude that a reformed capitalism can eliminate poverty while others conclude that radical socialist transformation is required, it is unlikely that they will agree on how to best do good. The movement would therefore effectively dissolve into pre-existing, rival social movements, such as liberalism and socialism.

I have not defended the substance of my own or any other structural analysis, so I doubt that my substantive critique of charity will persuade non-socialists. But regardless of the substantive merits of the socialist cause, I have clarified the debate about EA and shown that the systemic change objection poses a more severe challenge than the movement has hitherto recognized. And I have framed my argument solely in EA's own terms of impartially altruistic consequentialism, so my argument should dent the breezy confidence of the movement and its often dismissive attitude towards its critics – doing any good, let alone the most good you can, is very tricky.

The enormous practical ramifications of getting structural analysis right mean that EA should

not 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.'⁷¹ 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. That judgments about such systems are inevitably controversial and immune to empirical demonstration does not mean that altruists can avoid them or ignore their own, unavoidably structural assumptions without falling victim to status-quo bias. 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 be serious about systemic change or, indeed, about doing good.

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⁷¹ <https://concepts.effectivealtruism.org/concepts/a-flowchart-for-focus-area-selection/>: accessed 11/4/18

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