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How Helpful is 'Effective Altruism' as an Approach to Increasing Global Justice?

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This essay argues that effective altruism (EA) is unhelpful as an approach to increasing global justice. Firstly, this essay identifies and selects from different conceptualisations of global justice, then outlines EA and its theoretical basis. It then presents three sections in which different aspects of EA will be presented and evaluated in terms of EA's helpfulness as an approach to increasing global justice. Section 1 evaluates and highlights the failures of EA to address the systemic nature of global injustice, which contributes to a perpetuation of existing inequalities. Section 2 identifies and assesses the donor-centrism in EA and illustrates that the concentration of affluent actors in decision making relating to the needs of the poor and distribution of justice, can undermine attempts to increase global justice. Lastly, Section 3 appraises the emphasis on evidence utilisation in EA and highlights how this principle can lead to an exclusion of complex injustices from the agenda. This leads to a concluding judgement that EA is unhelpful as an approach to increasing global justice, as the practices that it utilises and endorses can reinforce the structures that create injustice; the methods it employs can exclude complex issues of injustice from the agenda; and it gives affluent actors a dominant position in decision making which is imperious and unlikely to be conducive to increasing global justice.

Within the field of global justice, some key definitions and terms remain highly contested. This essay focuses on distributive justice which is concerned with the spread of challenges, benefits, and resources across society. This essay centres global justice within Rawls' (1985) conceptualisation of justice as fairness, and in evaluating EA considers aspects of both equality and liberty. The context in which justice is measured is a key point of contention. The political conception of justice argues that justice is relative within states, relating to political context, social connections, and institutions (Dworkin, 2000; Young, 2006). In comparison, the cosmopolitan conception argues that place of birth is arbitrary and should not be a factor in determination of justice; instead, justice should stem from a duty of equal concern that should be afforded to all people (Nagel, 2005, p.119). Risse (2012) argues that these conceptions are too dichotomous and offers an alternative approach called the pluralist international approach. Risse (2012) argues that justice is relevant in both inter and intra state contexts and should be applied both within states *and* across all human beings. As this conceptualisation best illustrates the complexities and growing interdependence between states, this essay considers justice to operate through the pluralist internationalist approach.

It is also important to begin by defining EA and its theoretical basis. In one of his formative works, Peter Singer presents a principle of moral obligation with roots in utilitarianism and altruism (Singer, 1972, p.231). He argues that individuals should strive to prevent adversities; as long as they do not have to make any significant moral sacrifices in the process (ibid). He illustrates this through the shallow pond example in which he conceptualises that figuratively, individuals have a moral obligation to assist a child that is drowing in said pond (ibid). EA is the practical application of this theory and it seeks to enable individuals to maximise the effectiveness of their response to these moral obligations. EA focuses on the utilisation of evidence, so to calculate the best way in which to maximise the benefit from a specified set of resources (MacAskill, 2019). In practical terms, EA is typically delivered as cash transfers through platforms like *Give Directly* or through donating to charities that are deemed to be highly effective by the EA movement (Saunders-Hastings, 2015).

A Systemic Critique of Effective Altruism

EA does not attempt to tackle the systemic nature of global poverty and injustice and as such it cannot provide the means for an approach that sustainably increases global justice.

Pogge (2001) argues that individuals have a negative duty, that is to not contribute to or profit from injustice. This obligation acknowledges the non-passivity of the international order in that global inequality is maintained by the well off; the global poor are not simply poor but systemically impoverished (ibid). The shared institutional order is shaped by, and therefore preferential to the interests of wealthier states, as a result of their greater economic and military power (ibid). As such, wealthier states and actors are implicated in the suffering of the poorest. EA is designed to operate *within* the structures that *already* exist.

By not recognising that the existing structure creates and perpetuates injustices, EA cannot adequately address global injustice. Pogge (2001) proposes the "global resources dividend" (GRD), based on the Lockean Proviso, which entails a tax on use or sale of natural resources; which could be distributed as a means to alleviate injustice from unequal access to said resources. However, both EA and the GRD are designed to operate *within* the current system; both are financial-based solutions that portray global injustice as an issue of a lack of money or resources, as opposed to an issue requiring systemic re-evaluation and configuration (Hayward, 2019). In both proposals, the current global order is perceived to be flawed rather than fundamentally unjust (ibid). By opting for financial-based solution to issues of global injustice, Pogge and Singer both indicate that global justice can be solved through the means in which it is created and perpetuated (ibid). This creates a paradox as financial based solutions are employed, so to mitigate the suffering that the same system creates and perpetuates.

This incongruency is perhaps best illustrated by the 'earning to give' practice, that is supported by some Effective Altruists (EAs). This practice encourages EAs to maximise donating potential through opting for a high-earning career (Singer, 2015; Morduch & Szafarz, 2018). However career choice is not passive; in reality it can worsen injustice (Srinivasan 2015). The 'earning to give' theory perpetuates the idea that greater economic growth is needed so to alleviate injustice, when in reality furthering economic growth may deepen inequality (Syme, 2019). Despite EAs' efforts to increase global justice, the impact of their employment could simply undo these efforts and reinforce and potentially worsen global injustices (ibid). Therefore, the consequences of certain roles could result in greater financial resources to contribute to effective altruism; but only at the expense of worsening a different aspect of global injustice. EAs argue that this consequentialist criticism is weak, based on a theory of replacability. This theory suggests that if EAs do not take certain jobs then others who are less willing to donate may take these jobs instead (MacAskill, 2015). However, in reality, there is a high degree of uncertainty in these hypothetical scenarios. Fundamentally however, as long as people continue to work in roles that reinforce injustice, efforts to increase justice, will continue to be undermined.

Ultimately, the EA movement is a fundamentally flawed approach to increasing global justice as operating within existing structures can contribute to a perpetuation or worsening of global injustice.

A Donor-Centric Critique of Effective Altruism

EA places donors at the fore of decision making as it is designed to ensure that donors money is used in the most effective manner. The donor-centrism within the EA approach renders it largely unhelpful in increasing global justice.

The Centre for Effective Altruism (2020) recognises a clear homogenity across EAs. The vast majority of EAs come from affluent countries and are white, middle or upper class, and 70% are men (ibid). This creates and perpetuates a monoculture which influences group agenda, priorities, and behaviour (McMahan, 2016). Community membership, particularly in non-diverse groups (such as EAs) can create group mentalities that powerfully augment people's actions (ibid). Nationality and physical proximity are key factors that can influence donor perceptions relating to appropriate methods to employ (ibid). In critiques of EA, many scholars (see Wisor, 2011; Gabriel, 2016; McMahan, 2016; Beattie, 2020) have highlighted that the monoculture across the movement creates 'othering' of the recipients of EA by donors. Othering is a concept that was developed by Said (1978 [2003]) in his works on stereotyping and

prejudices in the West towards the East.

In this context, othering of recipients of EA contributes to a portrayal of recipients as helpless or needy (Gabriel, 2016), which in turn can form a basis for a white saviour complex in humanitarianism; which has roots in imperialism and colonialism (Langan, 2018). Wisor (2011) also criticises Singer's (1972) conception of the shallow pond example which is used to illustrate Singer's (1972) principle of moral obligation. Wisor (2011) argues that it paints recipients of aid as naïve and weak, whilst assuming that donors are strong, more experienced and knowledgeable. Further, the shallow pond example makes an assumption that donors and recipients operate in isolation and act on an individual basis. This ignores the structures through which interactions occur and the uneven power relationship that emerges when affluent actors are given influence over decision making relating to the needs of the poor. As such, this othering of recipients of EA, which stems from homogenity within the culture and experiences of EAs, means that EA is not a helpful approach in attempting to increase global justice.

The EA movement has also been criticised for its central focus on maximising the effectiveness of the donor's resources (Saunders-Hastings, 2015). This further centralises power with donors which further cements a power imbalance. This contributes to donor defined effectiveness and is reductionist of the experiences, preferences and views of recipients of EA (Wisor, 2011). Singer has argued that EA effectively removes biases that stem from race, nationality and community (Singer, 2015). However by having a homogenous group of donors, the approaches and strategies that are deemed to be most suitable and are then employed, are heavily influenced by preconceived notions and donor biases. As such, the structures through which EAs understand issues of injustice heavily influence decision making. Systemic global injustice is deeply rooted in both historical and institutional context and as such solutions to issues of global injustice, which have been decided by people in states that have profited from this injustice, cannot adequately conceptualise the needs and appropriate strategies for tackling injustice (ibid). The donor-centrism in EA is also unhelpful in terms of increasing justice, as the value placed on effectiveness can often lead to selections of causes and approaches that will be able to produce immediate successes (Mills, 2012). This diminishes recipient community involvement in decision making and programme implementation (Gabriel, 2016).

By placing emphasis on donors rather than recipients and local contexts, democratic process, legitimacy, and trust in government can be undermined (Saunders-Hastings, 2015). Unlike democratic governments, EAs do not have to democratically defend or justify their decisions, despite the excessive control that they can gain over policy, law and cultural practices within states (Gabriel, 2016). This weakening of democracy and state capacity and authority can create greater global injustice. On a state level, this disproportionately affects the poorest people and groups through weakening their agency (ibid). As such, EA's focus on donor-centrism can further hinder attempts to increase global justice.

A Methodological Critique of Effective Altruism

A key principle of EA is utilisation of evidence and reasoning in order to decide which causes to support and how best to provide this support. The EA movement criticises a lack of transparency in the charity sector and calls for greater openness about the effectiveness of work carried out by these organisations (Singer, 2015). However, Wisor (2011) warns against this approach, arguing that it is important to ensure that cause selection and policy choice decisions are made based on need and potential to increase and sustain global justice, rather than ease of quantifying success. Gabriel (2016) adds to this, arguing that there is a paradox in attempting to 'do the most good', stemming from the demand for quantifiable evidence, that oversimplifies injustice and the methods through which justice could be increased. Those that could be determined to be 'most in need' often have the most complex needs and therefore it may be most effective to give to a group whose injustice is more easily solvable, and quantifiable, so to be able to prove efficiency (ibid). Thus, some causes may not be selected as they are less observable or less provable, leaving complex issues of injustice unresolved.

Alternatively, the preference for quantifiability may mean that overly simplistic solutions to complex injustices may be introduced, when in reality long-term and multidimensional solutions are needed (Mills, 2012). This would mean that whilst absolute cumulative injustice across the entire population may reduce, overall inequity would persist and perhaps deepen. As mentioned previously, EA can lead to the employment of strategies that produce the most

immediate success so that effectiveness can be measured more easily. This means that certain issues which may be cases of greater relative or absolute need may not be tackled because of the time sensitivities attached to complex issues (ibid). As such, due to the cause selection biases and desire for quantifiable injustice alleviation, EA is an unhelpful approach for increasing global justice.

The principle of reliance on evidence in following EA also raises epistemic concerns relating to the understanding of effectiveness and the base of knowledge from which EAs may deem certain approaches to be effective. 'Effectiveness calculators' known as health-adjusted life years (HALYs), are used to quantify and compare the effectiveness of different measures. Commonly used types include quality-adjusted life years (QALYs) and disability-adjusted life years (DALYs) which provide a value of effectiveness based on what impact they will have on life quality and/or disability (Gold, et al., 2002). However, in use of these methods for calculation, attempts to increase global justice can be further undermined (Anand & Hanson, 1997; Dimoliatis, 2004; Garrison, et al., 2017). The ethics of both DALYS and QALYS have been called into question as within each measure, value is assigned to different health issues that leads to discrimination towards those that are less-well off and those with pre-existing health issues (Gold, et al., 2002). As such, those that are already disadvantaged in health or social terms may face greater disadvantaging through employment of these methods. Therefore, EA can be judged as an unhelpful approach for attempts to increase global justice through its use of HALYs and demands for quantifiability.

Conclusion

This essay has demonstrated that EA is not a helpful approach to increasing global justice. Furthermore, it does not even facilitate the equality principle. EA fails to acknowledge the systemic nature of injustice and encourages the use of a financial-based solutions. Thus, contributing to a direct undermining of efforts to tackle injustice. It is also a highly donor-centric approach. Homogenity amongst EAs is deemed to create an othering of recipients. Moreover, donor defined effectiveness and selection of methods can subvert local contexts which further undermine efforts to increase global justice. Lastly, the preference for quantifiable success of methods can lead to a failure to address complex issues of injustice, and the employment of HALYs excludes certain groups from access to justice. Overall, EA is unhelpful in its attempts to increase global justice as its methods and key principles directly undermine its own goals and efforts.

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