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The Flaws of Applying Effective Altruism

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Effective altruism’s impact on recent trends of philanthropy is unquestionable. Prominent organizations such as GiveWell have been established to rate charity organizations based on the QUALY system of wellness evaluation. The idea of a charity focused on gathering data on other charities may actually have benefits. Mainly, due to the reality that most charitable organizations are not forthcoming about how they spend their money. The key issue I find with GiveWell is the brand of effective altruism it holds as its core philosophy. This is highly connected to QUALYs. This system of wellness measurement has been praised by effective altruists as being the solution to the issues in philanthropy. I disagree. In fact, I believe that QUALYs inherently misrepresent charity effectiveness in a number of ways.

Effective altruism is a recently coined philosophical idea regarding how individuals should act in such a manner to maximize the good they can do in the world. There are a variety of versions of effective altruism so I believe it is important to clarify the definition I will be using in this analysis. A light interpretation of effective altruism focuses mostly on providing the most possible aid that you can as an individual. People who can have a disproportionate impact should donate more to charity and subsequently improve the world for the better. A stronger interpretation focuses on using scientific analysis being used to determine the most effective methods of aid. For example, if given the option between two charities they should donate to the one that provides the most cost effective changes with the money donated. This view is based in consequentialism and takes the idea that the overall individual welfare of people is the most important factor to consider when providing aid. I will be primarily focusing on this strong interpretation of effective altruism because it is the viewpoint from which many charities are now rating their effectiveness. This consequentialist viewpoint is what I find most problematic with effective altruism. Although, effective altruism lays the groundwork to improve philanthropic works, its consequentialist view of the world leads it to miss key real world factors that could have a negative impact on the change that effective altruists are looking for.

To look at the flaws within Effective altruism first we must look at the primary method they use to assess philanthropic aid. QUALY is a method of understanding human welfare from a quality of life standpoint. This method allows effective altruists to prove how some charities are more cost effective than others. Meta charities such as GiveWell use QUALY as a way to back their lists of effective charities. Unfortunately, QUALY as a system is flawed. By focusing only on lives saved through one program, QUALYs neglect specific human aspects of morality. For example, imagine that an effective altruist had the opportunity to donate to a charity fighting the zika virus. They could either allocate the donated money between multiple communities or a single community. To me the choice seems simple. It seems moral and just to distribute the money equally among the communities. An effective altruist would disagree. QUALY would showcase that donating all the money to one community would have the greatest effect on overall welfare. Does leaving out the other communities feel moral? I would argue it is not. Helping one community would be great for that population, but it would leave the others with no aid.

Effective altruism fails when faced with helping those suffering from physical disabilities or ailments. Often treating people with life changing injuries is not cost effective to the amount of welfare provided. This logic is backed by QUALY. The fact is that it's incredibly expensive to provide this aid. Additionally, because this aid may not be effective this would seem to be a waste of resources to an effective altruist. I argue that aiding those with physical disabilities is worth our time and effort no matter the cost-effectiveness. This is a trend with effective altruism. Aid programs that by nature will have a low overall gain in wellbeing still provide a real benefit to real people. Effective altruism’s bias towards efficient results will naturally leave some causes as not worth supporting. A possible solution to this is additional methods of evaluation focused on the social impact of charities. Although I don’t claim to have created such a complex system myself I believe that focusing on this may change the system of charity evaluation for the better. In fact I think developing many of these systems may be part of the solution. Each method of charity evaluation will inevitably be flawed. I think it is our moral duty to fill these gaps with new methods of evaluation. This will allow us to understand the complex systems which we hope to change through altruistic behavior.

This core issue of misevaluation can also be seen in another meta charity: Animal Charity Evaluators. The top charities they rate highly are focused on welfare improvements for farm animals. The logic behind this is that because most charity efforts focus on non livestock animals that these charities have the opportunity to create more welfare per donation in a place where animals are often abused. While I agree with the idea that support for livestock welfare is underrated, an issue arises when you look at the methods of altruism these charities actually perform. The charities Animal Charity Evaluators promote all focus on short term benefits based on QUALY evaluations. In short, these charities focus on small practical changes within the toxic system of food production instead of working to alter the system itself. Essentially, to an effective altruist it is simply not worth the cost to make real change in this industry. We are better off simply making small changes that may have no real impact on the systematic problem. This is a result of a measurability bias. Effective altruism needs to be able to evaluate potential benefits based on individual actions. They only evaluate what can easily be measured within their system which leads to this bias. In reality, our problems are much more complex and real change may only come from restructuring institutions like the food production industry.

Even with the flaws of effective altruism I believe some of its core ideas fix issues currently plaguing modern charity. Effective altruism is right to take the subjectivity out of philanthropy. Currently, our way of viewing charity as a society is slightly flawed. People tend to not research the charities they donate to. Additionally, they may end up donating to ineffective charities due to personal bias. Effective altruism encourages charities to be more subjective about how they address issues and how they prove their effectiveness. This is undoubtedly a positive shift. The best way to move forward from this point is to improve the systems we measure human welfare. Something more complex than QUALY that will help to encompass the many complex issues that are a part of charity projects. This is vital to creating a better world in which we can trust charity organizations to make a real impact.

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