Philosophical Critiques of Effective Altruism

What is most striking in published commentaries on effective altruism written by philosophers is that they are often derisive and contemptuous in tone yet weak in argument. The objections they advance tend to be at least as much ad hominem as substantive in character. While I do not find this surprising, I do find it depressing. The primary goal of most of those who identify themselves as effective altruists is the prevention or alleviation of suffering and premature death resulting from poverty and disease in the areas of the world in which these problems are worst, or affect the greatest number of people. To the best of my knowledge, none of the philosophical critics of effective altruism rejects this goal. It is therefore dispiriting to read their criticisms, which often ridicule people who are devoting their lives, often at considerable personal sacrifice, to the achievement of this shared goal, and are often gleeful rather than constructive in their attempts to expose the effective altruists' mistakes in their choices among means.

In this brief article I will discuss some of the criticisms that philosophers have advanced against effective altruism. I will refrain from speculating about the psychology behind the critics' antagonism. The explanations are no doubt complex and various. At the end I will comment briefly on criticisms of effective altruism by developmental economists. The best of these contrast with the philosophical commentaries in being expressed respectfully and in acknowledging that their disagreements are concerned with priorities and with the means of achieving shared ends.

To the extent that the philosophical critics discuss the moral philosophy underlying effective altruism, their criticisms consist almost exclusively of rehearsals of familiar objections to utilitarianism, mainly those presented in the 1970s by Bernard Williams, who was himself more gifted in amusingly ridiculing positions with which he disagreed, and eviscerating their defenders, than anyone else I have ever known. That those who rely almost entirely on his arguments in this context also tend to mimic his polemical style (which in his case appeared more in his conversation than in his publications) may be one unfortunate aspect of his brilliant legacy.

The critics I will discuss tend to assume that effective altruism is grounded in a commitment on the part of its adherents to utilitarianism. That is understandable, as many or even most of those who write and act under that banner are in fact utilitarians whose concern is to produce the greatest good, impartially considered (and whose particular goals may therefore shift depending on which activities promise at a given time to promote the good most effectively). But there is no essential dependence of effective altruism on utilitarianism. Peter Singer's earliest argument in support of a demanding standard for giving to the poor appealed in the first instance to a single widely held moral intuition and argued that consistency required those who accepted

the intuition to give most of their wealth to the relief of extreme poverty. Some years later, Peter Unger, in *Living High and Letting Die*, reasoned in a similar but more systematic way to the same conclusion, explicitly disavowing any commitment to or reliance on a particular moral theory. His aim was to demonstrate that a view of the sort that now informs the work of effective altruists is implicit in values and convictions we already have. Neither his nor Singer's arguments presupposed or implied that we must give equal weight to everyone's well-being. It is therefore insufficient to refute the claims of effective altruism simply to haul out Williams's much debated objections to utilitarianism. To justify their disdain, critics must demonstrate that the positive arguments presented by Singer, Unger, and others, which are independent of any theoretical commitments, are mistaken.

Yet the reliance on Williams alone, without any effort to add to or even to defend his claims, seems irresistible. John Gray, in a review of Peter Singer's recent book defending effective altruism, writes that people's acceptance, at the urging of effective altruism, of what Williams referred to as '"negative responsibility" (which asserts that one is responsible for evils that one could have prevented) would be a fundamental compromise of their moral integrity. If this is required by utilitarian ethics, so much the worse for utilitarianism.' (http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2015/05/21/how-and-how-not-to-be-good/) Williams thought that the reason that utilitarianism is incompatible with moral integrity is that it alienates people from what may matter most to them: their projects, their relations with those they care about, and so on. It does this because it implies that their projects, commitments, attachments, and values matter no more in themselves, or from what Sidgwick called 'the point of view of the universe', than those of other people. One's own projects and attachments therefore cannot have any priority or privileged role in the determination of how one ought to live or what one ought to do. To accept this, Williams thought, would be to surrender all that makes one's life worth living. There is thus a distinct echo of Williams's own words in Gray's claim that 'for many of us a world in which our own projects and attachments were accorded value only insofar as they enabled us to maximize the general good … would be hardly worth living in'.

The insistence that morality is essentially first-personal rather than impersonal is an obsessive theme in the writings of the philosophical critics of effective altruism. Gray claims that 'whether or not they find fulfillment in the way they live, effective altruists are bound to view their lives not as ends in themselves but as means to the greatest good'. Amia Srinivasan, reviewing a book promoting effective altruism by William MacAskill, contends that his adoption of an impersonal view, or the point of view of the universe, involves stepping 'outside what is unavoidably the scene of ethical action: one's own point of view'. (http://www.lrb.co.uk/v37/n18/amia-srinivasan/stop-the-robot-apocalypse) MacAskill's view thus obscures the fact that you ought to