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Moral Renegades

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Review of *Strangers Drowning: Voyages to the Brink of Moral Extremity*, by Larissa MacFarquhar, London: Allen Lane, 2015, and *Doing Good Better: Effective Altruism and a Radical New Way to Make a Difference*, by William MacAskill, London: Guardian Books, 2015

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The world is full of terrible suffering, much of which could be prevented, and most people living comfortably in prosperous countries could easily donate something – money, skills, or time – to reduce some of that suffering. So, we should all give, right? Perhaps. Serious misgivings and complications can arise, though, in thinking about where this all leads. The mode of ethical reasoning that tells us we should donate *something* soon pushes us toward the conclusion that we should give up nearly *everything* to help others in need. There's no natural, discernible threshold at which anyone can be assured that she's given enough to meet her obligations to others. Moreover, even where our giving can alleviate some people's hardships in the short term, there's little reason to be confident – without systematic change – that our giving will have any real effect on suffering in the grander scheme of things.

These problems, Inexhaustibility and Futility, can be fleshed out by reflecting on Peter Singer's well-known [thought experiment](#), asking whether we'd be prepared to jump into a pond to save a drowning child, knowing that this would ruin our shoes or clothes. It would be terrible to prioritise one's wardrobe over the life of a child, Singer reasons, and by extension it would also be terrible to enjoy idle

luxuries while doing nothing to try to prevent needless death elsewhere in the world. But the Inexhaustibility problem re-emerges here: in real life we face an unlimited number of ponds and children. Our decision isn't whether to save *a* drowning child, it's what proportion of our resources we're willing to devote to the rescue of drowning children before we cordon off space for a life of our own. The Futility problem re-emerges too. Major charity organizations have been at work for decades, enacting plans to "make poverty history". Every year, in the U.S. alone, charities receive [hundreds of billions](#) of dollars in donations, and a [considerable segment](#) of those funds go to international causes. But despite this, extreme poverty remains in fairly [rude health](#), undergirded by complex political and economic forces beyond any of our individual control. The analogue of leaping into a puddle to save a child, for most of us, is being a donor (or maybe an employee) for an anti-poverty charity. But if the game is rigged to ensure that poverty withstands all efforts to consign it to history, then 'leaping into the puddle' might well feel pointless.

Two books published in 2015 address these kinds of quandaries about how to live as a well-off person in a world like ours, and both resist the suggestion that the quandaries are intractable. William MacAskill's *Doing Good Better* is an introduction to the ideas of [Effective Altruism](#) (EA), a movement that urges people to try to do a lot of good in the world, using empirical research and expected utility reasoning to offer advice on how to achieve this. Larissa MacFarquhar's *Strangers Drowning* is less interested in advising its readers on how to do good, and more interested in examining the choices others have made in seeking to do as much good as they can. Where MacAskill presents decision-making principles for us to think through, in an orderly sequence, to maximize the good we achieve, MacFarquhar describes the disorderly lives of various 'do-gooders' (her choice of words), making daring attempts to combat suffering, and muddling through with varying degrees of success. One could interpret MacAskill's title, *Doing Good Better*, as a mild riposte to the lives MacFarquhar chronicles. Her subjects sometimes flounder in their attempts at giving and helping, and while MacAskill's crowd shares in the moral energy that drives these people, they want to be sure they're not spending it on well-meaning but ultimately quixotic projects.

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MacFarquhar's subjects come from many backgrounds, and in quite a few of the stories their altruistic endeavours play out successfully, in a way that's genuinely inspiring. There's Dorothy Granada, a woman

who – after several false starts in the pursuit of a righteous life – becomes a midwife in rural Nicaragua, exhibits great bravery in the face of physical adversity and violence, and wins admiration from her community and adopted homeland. There’s Kimberly Brown-Whale, a church pastor in Maryland who – after tumultuous years as a missionary with her family – transforms her church by instituting a radical social justice agenda. There’s Julia Wise, who, since childhood, has given away a large portion of her income to charity, despite the relationship complications and social alienation this has sometimes caused for her. There’s Ittetsu Nemoto, a Buddhist priest who devotes much of his life to sympathetically listening to suicidal people. We also get an intergenerational saga, in the story of [Murlidhar Amte](#), nicknamed Baba, and his family – wife Indu, and sons Vikas and Prakash – who run a leper colony in a remote Indian jungle region. All of the Amtes show tremendous intelligence, courage, and stamina, as they help large numbers of despised people build a life and livelihood. And they do this not by treating people with leprosy as charity cases, but by creating a financially self-supporting system, from scratch, in which these outcast individuals have full franchise as workers and community members.

MacFarquhar tells these stories with an appealing fluency, injecting moments of humour amid much sorrow, and gently conveying the depth of emotion that underlies her subject’s life choices. She never fawns over her subjects’ triumphs or scolds their failures. Despite her even-handed demeanour, though, MacFarquhar doesn’t pretend to be a disinterested narrator. The lives of her subjects are offered up as a kind of argument. In her own words, the question is whether it is “good to try to live as moral a life as possible”, or whether, instead, there is “something in the drive to extraordinary goodness that distances a person too much from ordinary humanity”. (SD: 11). And this question cannot be answered in the abstract, she says; “only actual lives convey fully and in a visceral way the beauty and cost of a certain kind of moral existence” (SD: 11).

So, what *do* these life stories demonstrate, if we interpret them as an argumentative inquiry? What conclusion do they support? Certainly not an unqualified recommendation of a life devoted to doing good. At the close of the book MacFarquhar says that probably “not everyone should be a do-gooder” (SD: 301). And several of her accounts depict dysfunctions that can beset a life of altruistic zeal. We see Aaron Pitkin, a hardcore animal welfare activist, being weird and difficult across a series of relationships. We see [Sue and Hector Badeau](#), having adopted 22 disadvantaged children, being driven to the verge of breakdown when their best efforts aren’t enough to secure a safe and happy life for all of them. MacFarquhar’s final narrative vignette focuses on an intellectually restless woman, Stephanie Wykstra, who rejects her youthful Christian enthusiasm to become a part of the EA movement, before eventually

becoming estranged from all of the grand moral creeds she once bought into. In the end she feels, albeit with much self-doubt, that it must be okay to reject the ideal of being maximally good, and instead to say, of one's personal ideals, "these are the things I value, this is what I'm going to pursue in life" (SD: 294). The author doesn't say anything to cast doubt on Wykstra's conclusion.

On the other hand, MacFarquhar's unwillingness to *recommend* extreme altruism doesn't mean she's *opposed* to it. Indeed she takes time out, between telling the life stories, to critique altruism's detractors. Across three chapters she deftly dissects the allegations and analyses that other writers have used to disparage the do-gooder. These chapters make the book something much more than a journalistic compendium of fascinating tales. They show how the tendency to treat do-gooding as a pathology has dubious psychological underpinnings, as much as do-gooding itself.

First off we get a potted history of altruism's place in the political imagination. Within fifteen pages, nods are made to Mandeville, Kant, Smith, Robespierre, Darwin, Comte, Nietzsche, and Freud. The findings are inconclusive, but it finishes well, with an amusing swipe at second-rate psychoanalysis. The second chapter is narrower in focus, and better for it. It looks at how the Al-Anon movement encouraged people to see altruism as a smokescreen for controlling urges in relationships, the idea being, in short, that we help others only because it's gratifying to be needed. MacFarquhar then shows this line of thought resurfacing in contemporary opposition to [development NGOs](#) as agents of neo-colonialism. In the third of these critical chapters, exploring the derogation of altruism in literature, MacFarquhar is on song. Although she acknowledges a few notable exceptions, like Camus and Coetzee, she argues that it has generally been a mark of grown-up seriousness in literature, all the way back to Shakespeare, that our protagonist is not a moralistic do-gooder, and that the moralistic do-gooders are unmasked as shams and bumbles. As a proponent of this line of thought, she quotes James Baldwin, condemning the sentimentality of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and arguing that fiction which exalts the do-gooder flattens out the lumpy intricacies of real human life. For Baldwin, it is "only within this web of ambiguity, paradox, this hunger, danger, [and] darkness", that we can find "at once ourselves and the power that will free us from ourselves". MacFarquhar paraphrases the thought like this: "on the one side, there is complexity, life, and feeling; on the other side, sentimentality, moralizing, and violence" (SD: 280).

MacFarquhar's goal is to draw us away from this Manichean perspective, and help us recognize the false choice that it presents us with. It may be that a well-meaning do-gooder sometimes does more harm than good, having underestimated the complexity of the situation she's trying to intervene in. But at the same time, it's all too easy to discredit the altruist's intentions, and cynically deride the personality that

gives rise to them. Literature, philosophy, psychology, and other critical discourses all nudge us in this direction. When we sympathetically examine the lives of flesh and blood altruists, though, we see that writing off their compassionate ventures as bad-faith manifestations of hostility or vanity – or instead, just seeing these people as pious bores, devoid of real life and feeling – is simply inaccurate, not to say unfair. The lives that MacFarquhar portrays are as rich and as complex as any. They are full of love, heartbreak, optimism, despair, community, loneliness, hunger (of many kinds), and more danger than most. And as a group they're highly diverse. They don't all embody some shared, underlying personality-type. If the stories of these lives are to be read as an argument, the conclusion of that argument isn't about whether we should or shouldn't give ourselves over to saintly aspirations, all things considered. Its conclusion is that we shouldn't pull ourselves *back* from such aspirations out of a misplaced apprehension, that in chasing them we will be sacrificing real “complexity, life, and feeling” on the altar of altruism.

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In the closing pages of *Strangers Drowning*, after speaking of the “happy blindness that allows most people, most of the time, to shut their minds to what is unbearable” (SD: 298), MacFarquhar asks

What would the world be like if that happy, useful blindness fell away and suddenly everyone became aware, not just intellectually but vividly, of all the world's affliction? (SD: 300)

In *Middlemarch*, George Eliot suggests an answer to this question. In a passage remarking on Dorothea's mundane yet near-unbearable agony in her failing marriage, Eliot says

If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heartbeat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence.

Among its many ambitions, the EA movement aims to make facing up to the world's afflictions not so fatally overwhelming. By giving us actionable guidelines for how to live in a morally upstanding way, *Doing Good Better* tries to breed optimistic gusto in place of despair. MacAskill's advice for the person figuring out her life choices in response to suffering works something like this. Start by considering all the vocational options that are available to you over the course of your life, including ones where you'd have to initially spend time in training or education in order to pursue it some way down the line. Then for each of those vocations, try to judge how much good you can achieve through it, by asking (a) how many

people you could benefit, and by how much, (b) what your chances of success would be, (c) what the counterfactual scenario looks like (i.e., what would happen if you didn't pursue this option, would someone else step in to do the same tasks you would have done), and relatedly, (d) whether the vocation or goals that you're considering are neglected. With these considerations factored in, the new EA recruit is in a position to decide which pursuit is her best bet for maximizing the good she can achieve.

The book's first half elaborates on how EAs tackle these questions and the answers they favor. For questions about how much benefit different programs achieve, MacAskill's approach is to review randomized control trial studies on the cost-effectiveness – measured in Quality Adjusted Life Years, or [QALYs](#) – of various health programs. Consulting these metrics, he says, we see that the benefits of distributing bed nets to combat malaria are far greater, in per-dollar terms, than the benefits of distributing condoms to reduce lethal STDs, or distributing free books to promote school attendance in poor communities. When it comes to questions about neglected areas, MacAskill discourages giving to causes that are already well-funded relative to the size of the problem, like disaster relief and guide dog training. And on the matter of counterfactuals, he tells young EAs to avoid careers like general medicine, where their impact would be no greater than that of the replacements who would operate in their stead if they did something else. One of the best options that sidesteps all these pitfalls, he argues, is 'earning to give'. The idea is simple: get a job that makes good money, then give a lot of it away to organizations – like the [Against Malaria Foundation](#) – that produce big welfare benefits in a cost-effective way. The primary merit of this vocational strategy, he says, is that it achieves “a difference that wouldn't happen otherwise” (DGB: 93), and all the more so where one gives to relatively neglected causes.

Questions about the 'Chance of Success' are tackled using expected-utility reasoning, and with interesting results. Earning to give is a safe bet for someone who wants to do a lot of good, MacAskill says, but “we shouldn't dismiss more speculative or high-risk activities out of hand” because despite the long odds, “they can have an enormous impact” (DGB: 98). In short, people should sometimes punt on a vocation with a tiny chance of having a momentous benefit. He gives the example of Laura Brown, a young Briton who aspires to become an MP and influence UK Parliament towards funding high-quality international aid organizations. The decks are stacked against Brown, but if she does achieve her goal she'll be able to do a great amount of good. And with a few crucial positional advantages tilting the odds in her favor, MacAskill concludes that Brown is making a sound choice in pursuing politics. Naturally the calculations behind this conclusion are 'guesstimations', rather than watertight assessments of the probabilities and benefits. The sums partly turn on what percentage of current Tory ministers studied

PPE at Oxford. Still, as MacAskill says, when it comes to careers that have a tiny chance of doing enormous good, we'll do better "if we at least try to make these assessments rather than simply throwing up our hands and randomly choosing an activity to pursue" (DGB: 121-22). This is important, because it indicates why partisans of a radical political agenda – like Marxists, Green Anarchists, and the Occupy movement – don't *necessarily* have to be cast in the role of EA's ideological enemies. Expressed programmatically, the aim of EA is to "have the greatest positive impact we can" (DGB: 6). If someone has good reason to think that a swingeing overhaul of global capitalism would do immense good, then EA principles can endorse that person's attempts to captain the revolution. The minuscule likelihood of a *successful* revolution is, by MacAskill's own lights, not reason enough to override that verdict.

To be clear, though, MacAskill himself betrays little sympathy for hard-line critiques of capitalism, and *Doing Good Better* mostly strikes centrist, pro-business notes, as when it states in passing, for instance, that "most of the incredible progress that humanity has made over the last few hundred years has been due... to technology and innovation generally spurred by for-profit companies and governments" (202). These leanings are particularly evident in the book's second half, as he discusses assorted issues that arise when putting EA principles into action. We're given a discussion of the operational and self-reporting credentials of different charity organizations that reads a bit like an investor's guide to assessing stock valuations. And in MacAskill's comments on career-planning, the recommendations – be prepared to change direction, prioritise skill-building when you're starting out – wouldn't be wildly out of place in a general business advice book. The chapter on "The Moral Case for Sweatshop Goods" exemplifies all these tendencies, and in a way that's likely to leave some readers uneasy. Granted, plenty of economists [will agree](#) with MacAskill that "low wage, labour-intensive manufacturing is a stepping stone that helps an economy based around cash crops develop into an industrialized, richer society" (DGB: 161-62). But there are grounds for doubt here about whether – if we accept what the climate scientists say: that ecological catastrophe is nigh – the promise of progress via mass industrialization can anchor any sound moral argument. And a more comprehensive engagement with the elementary Leftist objection – that global capitalism's rising tide ultimately sinks more boats than it lifts – would have been valuable. Also, while it's a less weighty issue, it's surprising that MacAskill has such qualms about consumer activism. His usual instinct is to credit efforts to do good that others discount. So instead of speculation about why consumer activists may become averse to heftier moral demands (DGB: 180), one would have hoped for a more 'blue-skies' inquiry into [emerging modes of consumer activism](#) that have the potential to bring about major benefits in the future.

Today's young idea entrepreneurs like to say they're trying to start a conversation about the ideas they're pitching. Unlike many who parrot that line, MacAskill and company have undoubtedly succeeded in setting off a conversation. And anyone who's informed about the inner workings of the charity sector – the self-serving 'research' methods and financial unaccountability that predominate in many segments of it – should welcome that development, whatever misgivings they might have about EA's deeper (and contestable) cultural affinities. But in the end it's hard to assess MacAskill's book in the same way it's hard to assess any work trying to popularise a movement. In short, its merits cannot be judged independently of the movement it champions. There are important critiques of Effective Altruism – for instance, that it's not equipped to deal with the [structural political causes](#) of the [suffering it opposes](#), and that it misconstrues what the ethical life [is really about](#) – which are largely set aside, rather than tackled, in *Doing Good Better*. But even if adequate replies to these criticisms can be given, their inclusion wouldn't necessarily make for an effective primer to the EA movement. And ultimately that's what MacAskill's book is, even it doesn't speak to all of the subterranean sources of angst about the movement.



What will become of EA from this point? Could it help promote institutional reform aimed at countering the underlying sources of poverty in the developing world? Will it become attuned to the political origins of that poverty in the ruthlessly exploitative strategies of powerful states and corporations, and help shine a light on the links between proxy wars, puppet regimes, and extreme need? If so, then its critics might end up embracing it. By contrast, if it evolves into a technocratic policy engine ruled by Silicon Valley types and their moral priorities – like, say, 'curing' the aging process (see DGB: 226) – then its critics will double down in their opposition. Whatever the focus may be in future, to date the EA movement has focused much more attention on the well-off individual's menu of choices than they have on the historical and political structures that set the parameters for those choices. And it's instructive, in this connection, to note certain similarities in perspective in MacAskill's recommendations for doing good and MacFarquhar's tales of the lives of do-gooders. Even the basic formulation of the main question that MacFarquhar poses – whether it's good to try to live as moral a life as possible – chimes with EA's individualized angle on how to deal with global problems. This is partly due to MacFarquhar entering into her subjects' viewpoints. Most of them, when they're jolted by a recognition of how much suffering exists in the world, react by embarking on maverick schemes, alone or with a small band of allies (in several

cases, just a beleaguered spouse). MacAskill directs his advice to individuals making choices as individuals, and while it could hardly be otherwise – his readers *are* individuals – a deeper atomistic outlook is suggested at several moments. His remark that “the action of millions is simply the combined actions of many individuals” (DBG: 107) is stated as a definitional truth for which no argument is needed.

In a recent [defence of EA](#) against its critics, Jeff McMahan, the White’s Professor of Moral Philosophy at Oxford, says that we cannot but frame questions in this arena in this individualistic manner. “I am neither a community nor a state” he says, and if I adopt a strategy of trying to change how my state acts, or trying to reform global economic institutions, then “the probability of my making a difference to the lives of badly off individuals may be substantially lower”. Of course, as we have seen, certain EAs like Laura Brown may choose to gamble on these long odds. And some people like MacFarquhar’s subjects may set their sights on promoting far-reaching structural reforms. But still, this remains in line with the general notion that large-scale social phenomena can all be boiled down to individual actions.

Whether or not that’s right, it bears remembering that in many quarters historically, and still in some quarters today, people aspiring to do something to address society’s afflictions have viewed things through a different lens. In various kinds of political struggles aimed at effecting structural change – from revolutionary wars against oppressive regimes, to the early labour movement and major civil rights crusades – people have called on one another to subsume their individualities into a collective, to let go of any desire that moral credit would accrue to them personally, and abandon themselves to the fate and status of the group. Solidarity isn’t [yet lost](#) as a social value, but there is a categorical conception of solidarity here that seems unthinkable for most of us today – *literally* unthinkable; we can only make sense of the choices that it involves by reinterpreting them as high-risk, high-reward attempts to personally accomplish a colossal good. MacAskill’s EAs and MacFarquhar’s subjects are gripped by the fact that “there are crises everywhere, all the time” (SD: 5), and in consequence, their lives are always like wartime, with the altered ethical expectations that entails (SD: 9-10). What’s striking is that some EAs and some of MacFarquhar’s subjects seem worried about maximizing their *personal* impact on the battle. The good soldier is concerned exclusively with whether victory is won, not with how much credit he accrues.

That said, the distance between these two concerns only really matters if victory depends on a kind of solidarity that would be jeopardized by people wanting to maximize their own contribution. And then the crucial question is whether the fight against global poverty is such a case. Just like the temptation to see do-gooders as devoid of three-dimensional humanity, it’s tempting to see altruistic ambition – of the kinds on display in *Strangers Drowning* and *Doing Good Better* – as inimical to transformative solidarity.

But things are probably more complicated than that. A few of MacFarquhar's die-hard altruists have an individualistic bent, but most of them express their beneficence in a way that's community-minded through and through. And where individualistic mindsets predominate in the EA movement, this may just be because they predominate nearly everywhere in our society. Whatever effects such individualism may have, the flickerings of a politics of solidarity with the world's poor, both in the EA movement and in the lives of MacFarquhar's subjects, are evident all the same. The evidence consists first and foremost in the fact that these people – whatever the limitations of their perspective might be, and whatever obtuseness they might be accused of – really do seem to be [powerfully moved](#) by the suffering of human beings they've never met, in a way that's different to what most of us experience most of the time. For those who would insist that *truly* effective altruism necessitates a politics of transformative solidarity, in order to topple the economic and political systems used to dominate the world's poor, the question remains: where will these epoch-shifting forces bubble up and coalesce? It doesn't seem absurd to think that these forces could find good contributors and allies among the kind of ardent humanitarians that MacFarquhar examines, or among the hopeful Millennials that MacAskill is recruiting.

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