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Debate: Accelerated Charity for Accelerated Existence? Effective Altruism and Charitable Donation Practices

In an increasingly accelerated human existence plagued by information overload, an epidemic of poor mental health, and increasing concerns regarding the use of technology and artificial intelligence, the position of the human, and therefore accountability as an emotional practice of relatedness (Letiche & De Loo, 2025; Munro, 1996; Roberts, 2012), remains uncertain. Comprehension and Judgement are being rapidly reshaped by technological processes of accounting and data utilisation. Preference for the rational over the emotional is increasingly evident in society, as organisations seek to maximise productivity, and subjects pursue greater utility and satisfaction 'on demand'.

Charitable donation processes are not immune from such influences. The rise of online platforms such as 'JustGiving', and similar mechanisms via social media sites and online payment platforms (National Council for Voluntary Organisations, 2020) mean that donating to charities and good causes *should* be easier than ever (Charity Finance Group, 2022). This said, charity finances remain volatile, and motivations to donate are complex. In the United Kingdom, 50% of individuals donated to charity in 2024, down from 61% in 2016 (Charities Aid Foundation, 2025). Globally, charity donations are also under pressure, with affordability concerns, cultural motivations, and social norms all affecting donation trends (Charities Aid Foundation, 2026).

For potential donors, the question of where to donate to remains. Often with larger charities, the individual donor cannot bear witness to the charitable activity, nor to the organisations that they are supporting, due to lack of physical proximity. One of the proposed solutions to this issue is to provide potential donors with greater amounts of information regarding how effective their donation will be in terms of doing the most social good. The Effective Altruism (EA) movement is aligned with the objective of doing 'the most good' (MacAskill, 2015, 2019) with scarce resources available, with these often translating to financial donations.

Despite there being no universal definition of EA, it rests on several key tenets that define it according to MacAskill (2019). These include: attempting to maximise the benefit from every unit of currency or time donated in terms of the most good to the most people, using an evidence-based approach to decide where to donate, and a focus on the most promising solutions to the world's most pressing problems (Singer, 2015). Arguably the most obvious thread running through the principles of EA is that of utilitarian ethics; doing 'the most good for the most individuals'.

From an accounting (and accountability) point of view, EA is often credited with the presentation of 'hard facts' concerning how effective each donation is in terms of maximising benefits for potential beneficiaries. However, for those familiar with accounting, it presents anything but the 'objective truth' as Singer (2015) asserts. Rather, when potential donors interact with such ratings and rankings, they take on symbolic power, influencing perception, judgement, and behaviour (Hines, 1988). Subsequently, it becomes incredibly difficult to mount challenges against powerful arguments based on such accounting data (Sanbonmatsu, 2023), even when situational changes emerge, yet the accounting data does not yet represent them. The fact that data may be out of date, incomplete, or reductionist in nature, does not feature when the dogmatic belief exists that donating in this way is the most beneficial, the 'most good'.

EA is not without wider criticism. A stark conflict between EA and themes currently sounded in the critical accounting literature arises from the consideration of potential beneficiaries and their rights to self-determination, cultural traditions, and voice. In some extremes, EA has been compared to a reimagining of colonialism (de Lima, 2023), one that glosses over potential rights-based approaches to accountability (see for example: O'Leary, 2017) with a cultivated image of effectiveness. EA's reliance on models that assume a large philanthropic base as the foundation of an ideal giving structure disavow the causes of the very issues they propose to address. Peter Singer, speaking in 2013, hailed Bill and Melinda Gates and Warren Buffet as the 'most effective altruists in history' (Blunt, 2023). Yet concerns regarding the accumulation of political power through philanthropy remain unanswered today. The large influence that foundations based around EA have in emerging economies results in them being able to impose their will onto people and governments, effectively dictating their future.

Through its philanthrocapitalist friendly approach, EA effectively dampens the political elements to altruistic behaviour, failing to challenge the structural conditions that have made the situation deemed to require such altruism to occur (McGoey, 2015), and the notion that in providing a 'solution', EA fails to consider the pluralistic perspectives that could open potential paths to other modes of charity and existence than that pushed by EA (Alawattage et al., 2021; jones, 2023)[1].

Another critique of EA comes from looking at the nature of the charity sector itself. Charities are diverse in many ways, including size, cause, and structure. This means that the wide variety of activities carried out by charities can be difficult to quantify accurately, or indeed, are entwined with ethical considerations when attempting to quantify them. One example is how EA relies on the metric 'Health Adjusted Life Years' (HALY) as a primary measure of effectiveness. This form of measurement fails to encapsulate qualitative factors along with ethical commitments brought about by emotion and interaction. For example, providing someone who is visually impaired with a guide dog is considered a relatively poor investment in terms of EA, as much more could be achieved with the same money in other regions through preventative measures against avoidable blindness for example. However, what EA fails to consider here is the fact that (morally) both initiatives *should* receive proper funding – both potential beneficiaries are due responsibility and the right to a dignified life. Essentially, EA endorses the notion that funds are scarce, and always will be, rather than tackling the structural inequalities that makes them so scarce, and is likely to be exacerbated by prevailing accelerationism within global politics and living trends (see for example: Varoufakis, 2024).

While effective altruism does offer a potential theoretical perspective to critically analyse the motivations of larger donations, especially where tax planning for the donor is involved (such as corporate donors or individuals with the capacity to give large amounts), its application is limited when considering emotional aspects that are intertwined with action related to charity, such motivations to donate (Pummer, 2016), and experiences of undertaking charitable action for individuals that go beyond the 'good glow' (see for example: Dean, 2020). Felt accountability of the donor, when considered at the individual level, embodies an emotional experience (Yates & Difrancesco, 2022). Motivations to donate are often driven by a sense of care, or empathy for those less well off, be that human or non-human others. While charities have leveraged this to their advantage in marketing for donations (Warren & Walker, 1991), there is still an element of this aspect to the act of charity that remains with the donor, one that goes beyond simply 'pitying the other'. Instead, donating time, personal resources, and money can open new spaces for relatedness, and the potential to access other emotional aspects of subjectivity, such as trust (Hyndman, Liguori, & McKillop, 2021), empathy, solidarity, and compassion (Yates, Belal, Gebreiter, & Lowe, 2021; Yates & Difrancesco, 2022). The call to action that compels (some)

[1] 'jones' does not capitalise their name.

donors to act (see: Roberts, 2001), takes the act of charity beyond the distanced approach often associated with large scale philanthropy.. EA effectively asks humans to disregard this emotional side to charity, instead asking for faith in depersonalised metrics and a system that pits charities against one another, ranking them based on an inevitably narrow and reductionist view of their activities and effectiveness.

Charity does not operate in a vacuum in terms of wider societal trends and changes. When considering the shifts towards an existence that is increasingly accelerated and ‘posthuman’ (and indeed, post-emotional), the question of whether emotional aspects associated with charity donation practices remain ethically valid must be considered. Time will tell whether charity becomes more aligned towards the rational, utilitarian, and longtermist approach to ethics that EA views as superior to one that is emotionally engaged and politically aware. Neither model alone represents a panacea for solving the issues that people affected by war, famine, disease, political oppression, and poverty face globally each day. Although EA may have some nice accounting (in terms of measurement and presentation), it’s overreliance on such processes of calculation and measurement render it inadequate when considering the complex nature of human relatedness, social justice, and accountability.

END

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