

Introduction

1. Effective Altruism and Religion: An Intriguing Encounter

The effective altruism (EA) movement matters. In the past decade, its adherents have put forth an ever increasing number of challenging ideas about how to improve the world the most. They have set about redefining our understanding of the most ethical life for individuals and the most urgent priorities for humanity. But EA is not just new fodder for academic debates or a further addition to a long line of ideologies offering intellectual entertainment. After only a few years of existence, and despite comprising only a couple of thousand people,¹ it has also already left a significant real-world footprint. One reason for this is that a number of highly influential actors have been influenced by its ideas. Bill Gates called William MacAskill, one of the movement's co-founders, "a data nerd after my own heart".² Sam Bankman-Fried – believed to be the richest person under thirty³ – became wealthy precisely in order to promote effective altruist aims. And institutions like the World Health Organization, the World Bank or the UK Prime Minister's Office have been influenced by advice of Toby Ord, another co-founder of the movement. Another reason for EA's real-world effect is the simple fact that its distinguishing feature is a radical focus on impact. So even those of its adherents who are not global players have had remarkable leverage. The movement started out with a focus on channelling money towards poverty eradication. But it soon broadened into a more general project of improving the world as smartly and impartially as possible. And it did not fail to live up to its aim of "using evidence and reason to find the most promising causes to work on, and taking action [...] to do the most good."⁴

The EA movement clearly has a secular character. When leaders of the movement state its core project, or articulate reasons for pursuing it, they rarely ever put forward explicitly religious claims. In a recent survey, 86

1 Moss, "EA Survey 2019."

2 Effective Altruism, "Doing Good Better."

3 Chan, "Hong Kong's 29-year-old crypto billionaire."

4 Effective Altruism, "Effective altruism is about doing good better."

percent of the members of the EA community reported being non-religious, agnostic, or outright atheist.⁵ Indeed Peter Singer, the movement's father figure, has historically been met with profound opposition from religious quarters.⁶

At the same time, the world of charity – or more generally, of people for whom improving the world is a core part of their identity – has long been heavily populated by religious actors. Sometimes the religious background is very explicit. On other occasions it serves less visibly as the underlying motivation of individuals or the historical root of organisations. But it has often been, or still is, important for many. So with the rise of EA, a distinctively secular movement entered a territory that has long been, and still is, importantly shaped by religion. And this overlap has in some sense become even stronger when many effective altruists have become committed to longtermism: the idea that what matters most, today, is setting a good trajectory for the very long-term future. Themes like the end of humanity or a future radical utopia in particular have not always received intense attention outside of religious circles.

From the perspective of traditional, and often religiously influenced charitable initiatives, EA can thus have felt like the new kid on the block. But that kid has come of age rapidly, both intellectually and practically, and must now be taken seriously indeed. It calls for examination and discussion. First and foremost, there's a question about what people of different religions can learn from EA. EA is intellectually and sociologically rooted in very different soil than the charitable efforts of many people of faith. But many of its insights on questions of efficiency are independent from specific conceptions of the good: they should be relevant for a broad array of worldviews. It would thus seem natural that EA's fresh take has lessons to offer. At the same time, there's a question whether people of different religions should repudiate some EA stances as unimportant – or even as outright wrong and dangerous.

But religious perspectives on EA go far beyond the simple questions of what people of faith should accept or reject from the movement. They comprise a whole array of fascinating issues. In particular, there's the opposite question as well. Can EA learn some important lessons from religion? Can religious traditions offer interpretations of, or justifications for, doing good that EA has so far ignored? Have religions produced conceptual resources,

5 Dullaghan, "EA Survey 2019 Series."

6 This opposition primarily concerned Singer's views in bioethics, not his stance about global poverty.

or practical experience, that EA could helpfully adopt? Or should the adoption of EA in religious communities be seen as dangerous from EA's perspective? Finally, may EA in some sense be seen as a quasi-religious movement itself, considering how comprehensively life-orienting it is for some of its adherents?

At a practical level, the intersection between EA and religion is already a lively sphere: there has been an active community of Christian effective altruists for a number of years now, a Facebook group for Buddhists in EA, as well as an effective altruist initiative for Jews.⁷ Astonishingly, however, at a theoretical level, hardly anything has been published on these wide-ranging questions. Aside from a small number of broader discussions about utilitarianism, Peter Singer, and religion,⁸ the body of academic work on EA and faith appears to consist of no more than a handful of articles.⁹ This, it seems to us, is not enough.

2. The Structure and Content of the Book

This book works toward filling this lacuna and getting the ball of discussion rolling. It consists of three blocks of chapters. The book opens with three contributions that provide an assessment of EA from a specific religion's perspective: Calvin Baker discusses Buddhism and EA, David Manheim considers an Orthodox Jewish perspective, and Dominic Roser elaborates on EA and Christianity. The middle block of four chapters then discusses EA in general but with a narrower perspective than a whole religion: Mara-Daria Cojocaru focuses on the type of love at stake, Jakub Synowiec on who counts as a neighbour, Stefan Höschele uses the lens of Relational Models Theory to compare EA and Christianity, and Kathryn Muyskens focuses on asceticism and activism. The book closes with three chapters that each look at a specific theme in EA from a religious perspective: Stefan Riedener examines existential risks from a Thomist perspective, Robert MacSwain explores the question of moral ambition and sainthood, and Markus Huppenbauer discusses donations.

7 <https://www.eaforchristians.org>; <https://www.facebook.com/groups/buddhists.in.ea>; <https://eaforjews.org>.

8 See in particular Camosy, *Peter Singer and Christian Ethics*, and Perry, *God, The Good, and Utilitarianism*.

9 See Liberman, "Effective Altruism and Christianity"; Miller, "80,000 Hours for the Common Good"; Gregory, "Charity, Justice, and the Ethics of Humanitarianism"; Chukwuma et al., "An Evaluation of the Concept of Effective Altruism."

Let us give a slightly more detailed summary of the chapters in this book. Baker begins his examination of Buddhism and EA by noting similarities between the two outlooks: they are akin to each other when it comes to such central commitments as impartially promoting the welfare of all sentient beings. He goes on to argue, however, that Buddhism would significantly diverge from EA on how to most effectively help others: it involves a radically different conception of ourselves and our place in reality – in particular, an idea of the ultimate good as quitting the cycle of rebirth. Nonetheless, Baker suggests that there can be a productive dialogue between EA and Buddhism, and he ends with a couple of constructive insights to this effect.

Manheim situates a number of EA tenets within the context of ancient and contemporary Orthodox Jewish debates: the moral obligation to help, consequentialist reasoning about altruism, cause prioritisation, and the use of reason and evidence to understand effectiveness. He suggests that Orthodox Judaism, with its unyielding emphasis on the Halacha norms, is not compatible with the complete framework of EA. Still, EA is not irrelevant to it. In particular, Halacha is engaged with complex questions about charitable giving, and thus EA insights matter – not to guide or change Halacha, but to inform it.

Roser characterises EA in terms of seven core commitments, and examines whether Christians can share these commitments. His verdict is very positive. The core EA commitments are not only compatible with Christianity, but novel and useful tools for living out Christian faith. So Christians ought to take up many of EA's insights. However, Roser also mentions a tension between the EA mindset and Christian faith: while EA is concerned with taking control and actively shaping the world in accordance with our values, a core thread in Christianity encourages us to renunciate control and to place ourselves trustingly in God's hands.

Cojocarú focuses on the “heart” in EA, or the concept of “love” that is central to it and to many religions. Building on Iris Murdoch, she distinguishes two spheres of morality: a public and a private one. In the former, agents operate on simple, uncontroversial ideas of the good, and utilitarian norms seem relevant. In the latter, however, much more complex conceptions of the good become pertinent, and those will only be detectable through really looking at the particulars of another person or a relationship. Different kinds of love operate at these different spheres. EA, Cojocarú claims, often ignores that humans need partial relations and perspectives in order to learn what is good.

Synowiec starts from the Christian imperative to love our neighbours. Along with other authors in this volume, he brings up the parable of the Good Samaritan and focuses on its core question: “who is my neighbour?” On standard interpretations of EA, the relevant neighbours would be all beings with interests – regardless of species, geographical distance, or temporal distance. Can Christianity share this understanding? Synowiec proposes a biblical interpretation according to which “neighbours” are persons that we can personally affect. He argues that, given the characteristics of our times, this includes all contemporary people. Animals are not exactly neighbours, but we have sufficient knowledge and power to treat them as such. Far future people are not neighbours either – and indeed, we have neither the knowledge nor the power to treat them as if they were.

Höschele discusses EA and Christian ethics through the framework of Relational Models Theory. According to this theory, there are four “elementary forms” of human sociality: four models of human interaction, governed by different norms. So Höschele asks which kinds of models, or human interaction, EA and Christian morality envision. He concludes that EA and New Testament ethics largely agree on the key element that characterises moral actions: the kind of love that values the other as much as the own person. Still, effective altruists and Christians can learn from each other, challenge each other on blind spots, and together steer philanthropy to appropriate levels of reflection and action.

Muyskens suggests that EA needs a kind of asceticism. She argues that charitable donation is not enough to stop systemic inequality or structural violence. Indeed, a focus on “charity” may even contribute to such injustice. And the cost-benefit analysis and randomised controlled trials favoured by the movement can produce distinctly biased perceptions of harms. So the traditional focus of EA on charity has problematic aspects. As a remedy, she argues, EA needs an ascetic type of action tackling systemic injustice, addressing the roots of the problem more directly.

Riedener examines EA’s focus on reducing risks of human extinction, and asks whether such a focus can be justified within a Thomist moral framework. He argues that it can: Thomas’s idea of the human end, his emphasis on the virtue of humility, and his conception of the place of humanity in the cosmos imply that anthropogenic extinction would be a tremendous moral disaster – a cosmologically important prideful failure to fulfil our God-given role. And this, Riedener suggests, should not only be relevant for Christians quite generally: similar thoughts also emerge on non-religious worldviews, based e.g. on the import of human dignity.

MacSwain discusses the relationship between EA, supererogation and sainthood. He begins with a discussion of supererogation in Singer, Urmson and Wolf – suggesting that according to Singer, effective altruists are not saints because their actions are often not supererogatory. He then argues for a reconsideration of Robert Merrihew Adams’s notion of “real saints”, as people who follow their own vocations. This suggests that some, but not all effective altruists are saints – just like some, but not all, non-EA people are saints.

Finally, Huppenbauer explores charitable giving. He looks at the motives for which people donate, endorses the moral obligation to give, and examines questions about when, how, and how much we should donate. He then considers two challenges to the present culture of donating: EA and a movement advocating social investment instead of donation. Concerning the former, he articulates a worry: if improving the world is such a dominant concern as it is for many effective altruists, and if there is no understanding of a good life outside of morality, people threaten to become “morality machines” – and to thus miss the meaning of life.

If there is anything like a common thread through these essays, then perhaps it is this: the relation between religions and EA is not without tensions, contradictions and differences. But in spite of this, or perhaps precisely because of it, a deepened dialogue will be mutually beneficial. Beyond this shared thread, we find that the essays also manifest a beautiful diversity: they are written from different backgrounds in religion, theology or philosophy, ask different questions and come to different conclusions. Thus they illustrate the richness of our topic. And they certainly still only cover a small part of the questions that emerge at the intersection between religion and EA. In particular, the majority of them still focus on Christianity. It is our firm hope that this collection is the beginning of a much larger story – the story of a more extensive and more serious engagement of religious people of all kinds with EA’s ideas and practices.

3. The Book’s Story

This book is not just the beginning of one story. It is also the end of another. This latter story had its bright and its sad moments. It started out in the late summer of 2019 with an inspiring workshop at the University of Fribourg entitled “Religious Perspectives on Effective Altruism”. The present book is the outcome of this workshop: all the chapters, except for Calvin Baker’s, were presented there.

On a warm summer day one year later, Markus Huppenbauer, the workshop's co-organiser and the book's co-editor, unexpectedly passed away. This was a tremendous shock. It is difficult to see how others could fill Markus's footsteps. While we, the remaining co-editors, occasionally disagreed profoundly with him on the promise of EA, our discussions about it were always delightful and informative. Markus had a uniquely generous and cheerful way of engaging with his interlocutors. And he always displayed an unflinching desire to push the debate forward, a strong commitment to making room for all kinds of viewpoints, and a remarkable boldness in taking up unpopular stances himself. Markus's plan was to revise the public talk he gave at the 2019 workshop for the purpose of this book. Sadly, he couldn't implement this plan anymore. Upon reflection, we decided to publish a translated transcript of his talk, and ask readers to keep in mind that he did not get the chance to edit and polish it anymore. We miss Markus dearly, and find that his talk – which seems characteristic of his style, attitude, and position – serves as a fitting memory.

This book has profited a lot from the generous efforts of many people. We are particularly grateful to Ludovico Conti, Véronique Dupont, and Joe Tulloch who got the manuscript in good shape. We would also like to thank Aryeh Englander, Elie Hassenfeld, Caleb Huffman, Frances Kissling, and Ben Schifman for their substantive inputs as well as Sarah Kirkby and Arianna Lanfranchi for their work on Markus Huppenbauer's chapter. We are indebted to Beate Bernstein from Nomos who skilfully led the book through the publication process. Without the funds from the Center for Religion, Economy and Politics and the University of Fribourg this whole project would not have been feasible in the first place. We would like to express our appreciation for their support.

We hope that the efforts of all these people and institutions – and particularly of the authors – will prove fruitful. May ensuing discussions not overemphasise differences between religions and EA. Rather, may all sides collaborate productively and take up insights from each other. The vision of a much better world inspires many effective altruists and people of faith alike. The beauty and importance of this goal, and the fact that at bottom it is shared, mean we should all listen to each other.

References

- Camosy, Charles. *Peter Singer and Christian Ethics: Beyond Polarization*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- Chan, Michelle. “Hong Kong’s 29-year-old crypto billionaire: FTX’s Sam Bankman-Fried.” *Nikkei Asia*, 25 June 2021. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Business/Business-Spotlight/Hong-Kong-s-29-year-old-crypto-billionaire-FTX-s-Sam-Bankman-Fried>
- Chukwuma, Joseph Nnaemeka, Tobias Chukwuemeka Ozioko, Obiora Anichebe, Gabriel Chukwuebuka Otegbulu, Charles Kenechukwu Okoro, George Ohabuenyi Abah, Collins Ikenna Ugwu, and Anthony Chukwudi Areji. “An Evaluation of the Concept of Effective Altruism in Peter Singer.” *International Journal of Mechanical and Production Engineering Research and Development* 10, no. 3 (2020): 14803–14816.
- Dullaghan, Neil. “EA Survey 2019 Series: Community Demographics & Characteristics.” Rethink Priorities. 5 December 2019. <https://www.rethinkpriorities.org/blog/2019/12/5/ea-survey-2019-series-community-demographics-amp-characteristics>.
- Effective Altruism. “Effective altruism is about doing good better.” Accessed 30 September 2021. <https://www.effectivealtruism.org/>.
- Effective Altruism. “Doing Good Better.” Accessed 30 September 2021. <https://www.effectivealtruism.org/doing-good-better/>.
- Gregory, Eric. “Charity, Justice, and the Ethics of Humanitarianism.” In *Everyday Ethics: Moral Theology and The Practices of Ordinary Life*, edited by Michael Lamb and Brian A. Williams, 81–102. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2019.
- Liberman, Alida. “Effective Altruism and Christianity: Possibilities for Productive Collaboration.” *Essays in Philosophy* 18, no. 1 (2017): 6–29.
- Miller, Ryan. “80,000 Hours for the Common Good: A Thomistic Appraisal of Effective Altruism.” *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* (forthcoming).
- Moss, David. “EA Survey 2019: How many people are there in the EA community?” Rethink Priorities. 26 June 2020. <https://rethinkpriorities.org/publications/eas2019-how-many-people-are-there-in-the-ea-community>.
- Perry, John (ed.). *God, the Good, and Utilitarianism: Perspectives on Peter Singer*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014.