



#### IN THIS REVIEW

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#### BEING GOOD IN A WORLD OF NEED

432pp. Oxford University Press. £35.

Larry S. Temkin

**T**he Effective Altruism movement, which aims to make charitable giving as efficient and productive as possible, is more than a decade old. And while some of its luminaries have now moved on, devoting themselves to threats to human extinction, many members remain committed to doing the most good by supporting demonstrably impactful international aid organizations. Donations to charities distributing anti-malarial bed-nets and deworming kits are popular, and so too is the idea that we should seek highly remunerated employment to increase the quantum of our giving.

Larry Temkin advocates a pluralist conception of the good, a departure from the consequentialism that dominates most Effective Altruist thinking, but he shares the conviction that the well-off have a moral responsibility to help the poor. In his new book, *Being Good in a World of Need*, he systematically unpicks the lazy thinking that characterizes many campaigns “to save” those in need, and he warns against believing that the requirement to do something urgently overrides the requirement to understand carefully what things should be done. In 1971, Peter Singer presented an argument that moral principles should take no account of proximity: just as we would save the life of a child drowning in front of our eyes, so too we should save the life of a child dying of starvation thousands of miles away. Drawing on the work of the economist Angus Deaton, Temkin subjects Singer’s argument to detailed criticism, showing that spatial and temporal distance is practically significant to the moral evaluation of our actions. The less we understand the specific, local causes of need, the greater the chance that we do more harm than good, irrespective of our intentions.

Temkin remains convinced that the well-off cannot ignore the moral demand to assist the needy, but he concludes that what we should do in response to that demand is far from obvious. His list of suggested actions, in the book's final chapter, consists mostly of knowledge transfer and the reform of political institutions and practices in the developed world. Teju Cole has written of the banality of sentimentality - the idea that the world is nothing but a problem to be solved by enthusiasm - and of contemporary Western philanthropy as the "white savior industrial complex". Temkin may be more restrained in his language, but the force of his criticism of the Effective Altruism movement should not be underestimated. Without a credible account of what it means to live a good life, we cannot have a credible account of the good we should try to do.

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