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Shackling the Poor, or Effective Altruism: A Critique of the Philosophical Foundation of Effective Altruism

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Abstract

Effective Altruism (EA) is both a philosophy and a movement. The main criticism on EA is that by donating to charities EA leaves fundamental moral issues such as global poverty and injustice intact. EA, arguably, does not promote radical institutional change which could lead to an ultimate eradication of the problems that may endanger people's lives in the first place. In this article, this critique is reinforced from a different point of view. The criticism on EA has been mainly on the performative or the empirical aspect of the movement. That is, criticism on EA focuses on evaluating the practical realisation of its mandates with little, if any, evaluation on its philosophical foundation. My aim in this paper is to extend the critique but from a different angle, that is, by going back to its philosophical underpinnings. By exploring the philosophical foundation of EA, I undertake to show how EA is not authentic altruism as it is founded on the sacrifice of the Other whom is supposed to be saved.

Keywords: *effective altruism; sacrifice; capitalism; the Other; Singer; utilitarianism*

I. Introduction

One of the most prominent movements of the last decade is 'Effective Altruism' (EA). EA is both a philosophy and a movement. As Peter Singer, one of the founding fathers of EA, tells us, it "is based on a very simple idea: we should do the most we can."[1] Similarly, along with William McAskill, another founding father of EA, they write that EA "is a growing

[1] Peter Singer, *The Most Good You Can Do: How Effective Altruism Is Changing Ideas About Living Ethically* (New Haven, NY, and London: Yale University, 2015), vii.

community based around the idea of aiming to do the most good one can."[2] The most good is construed as being charitable to those who need help to save their lives. Charity is construed mainly in monetary terms, in money. Donating money to charities supposedly saves lives around the world and, thus, ends up being how one can do "the most good." Donating to charities that can provide a proven record that they save or that they have the potential of saving the most lives possible is how one does "the most good" effectively.

EA has received a lot of attention and has generated a lot of discussion which takes place in philosophical journals, newspapers, and on-line in various forums and blogs.[3] The main criticism on EA is that by donating to charities EA leaves fundamental moral issues such as global poverty and injustice intact. EA arguably does not promote radical institutional change which could lead to an ultimate eradication of the problems that may endanger people's lives in the first place. Such criticism, however, is on the performative or the empirical aspect of the movement and not so much on its philosophical foundation. That is, criticism on EA focuses on evaluating the practical realisation of its mandates with little, if any, evaluation on its philosophical foundation. Essentially, it is a consequentialist critique insofar as it focuses on what its results are. My aim in this paper is to extend the critique but from a different angle, that is, by going back to its philosophical underpinnings. I would like to show how the problems that have been noted in the recent criticism are all reflected in the foundational argumentation for EA.

II. Funding the foundation of EA

EA is a rather recent movement if we go by the name of it. Before exploring EA from the writings of the community, let us reflect for a bit on the title. By its title, EA introduces us to an altruism that is different from what altruism is. The adjective "effective" allows us the possibility to conceive that there are other ways of being altruistic which are not 'effective.' Yet, EA purports to be precisely that. There is a difference in being altruistic and being altruistic effectively. If altruism is simply about doing good, then EA is about "doing good better" or "the most good that you can do" as the supplementary titles of the books of McAskill and Singer announce respectively. But such "adjectivation" adjects, in other words adds or appends[4] to altruism certain conditions. These conditions are questioned in this paper.

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[2] Peter Singer, and William MacAskill, "Introduction," in *The Effective Altruism Handbook*, ed. Ryan Carey, viii-xvii (Scotts Valley, CA: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015), viii.

[3] For an extensive recent literature review see Brian Berkey, "The Institutional Critique of Effective Altruism," *Utilitas* 30, no. 2 (2018): 1-29.

[4] For the various meanings of "adject" see "Adject," *Oxford English Dictionary*, accessed September 15, 2020, https://www.oed.com/search?searchType=dictionary&q=adject&_searchBtn=Search.

As it has already been noted, EA is both a philosophy and a movement. This "raises the *sticky* question of how books that seek to popularize EA [...] should be evaluated."[5] In this paper, it is this sticky question that is problematised. We can go about reflecting on the philosophy of EA, or on the movement itself, or on the way the philosophy becomes praxis; in other words, how the theory is materialised into action. Whatever one opts to do, what the above comment from Jennifer Rubenstein suggests is of crucial importance because it asks us to apply the principle question of EA on EA itself. That is, we can ask: How good or how effective is EA? But, most importantly for our purposes here, we can ask: How altruistic is EA? In this paper, I would like to risk the hypothesis that EA presupposes the sacrifice of those that it purports to save. With EA, the poor or those in need of being saved from the conditions of poverty are literally and figuratively stuck, shackled in their poverty. To risk an analogy, if the condition of a business is its original funding, its monetary foundation, then the sacrifice of those found in current need come to be the funding of EA which allows the business of capitalism to keep working.[6]

In the *The Effective Altruism Handbook* Singer and MacAskill tell us about the idea of EA and where it comes from. We read that the idea "arose naturally out of recent developments in economics, psychology and moral philosophy."[7] We focus on the philosophy:

> The development of moral arguments, by Peter Singer and others, in favor of *there being a duty to use a proportion of one's resources* to fight global poverty, and in favor of an "expanded moral circle" that gives moral weight to distant strangers, future people and nonhuman animals.[8]

While it is difficult to trace in their writings who the 'others' are, those others who have developed similar moral arguments, we shall first focus on Singer's philosophical argument on there being a duty to use a proportion of one's resources in order to be altruistic.[9] This choice is important and needs a bit

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[5] Jennifer C. Rubenstein, "The Lessons of Effective Altruism," *Ethics & International Affairs* 30, no. 4 (2016): 516. My emphasis.

[6] See also Amia Srinivasan, "Stop the Robot Apocalypse," rewiew on *Doing Good Better: Effective Altruism and a Radical New Way to Make a Difference*, by William MacAskill, *The London Review of Books* 37, no. 18 (2015): 3-6;

[7] Singer, and MacAskill, "Introduction," xii.

[8] Ibid., xiii.

[9] From the point of view of the history of philosophy, this idea of giving due proportions can be found in the writings of Marcel Mauss based on his ethnological research. Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange*, trans. W. D. Halls (London: Routledge, 1954). However, in Mauss the giving in due proportions is not represented in terms of a system

of clarification. By starting with Singer's widely discussed paper, I am not claiming, as some might hastily read, that the plausibility of EA depends exhaustively on the plausibility of Singer's moral arguments advanced in his 1972 paper. After all, one might be convinced to be an effective altruist (EA) without ever having read (t)his paper. They may rest on *the development of (the) moral arguments* by Peter Singer and others. But the development requires a seed. This seed may not be visible in what has developed – the acorn seed is not visible from the outside. In his writings, Singer identifies the seed of EA in his argument advanced in his 1972 paper.[10] Based on the textual evidence, there is no other philosophical argument to be found as a seed. In this paper, the focus is to philosophically explore such founding or fathering, that is, begetting argument of or for EA.[11]

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regulated by capitalist principles but it is a giving of reciprocity. Exchange is the condition of this primal form of economy which Mauss identifies as the first form of collective economy but it does not lead to accumulation of capital or differences in property. It would be interesting to interrogate how this research has not attracted attention from the community of EA but this is not the purpose of this paper.

[10] In both his books, Singer starts with the argument of the 1972 paper. In his contribution in *The Effective Altruism Handbook* the same appeal is made. In his recent attempt to defend his moral position from various critics he cites his own 1972 paper with the following: "Given the present conditions in many parts of the world[...] it does follow from my argument that we ought, morally, to be working full time to relieve great suffering of the sort that occurs as a result of famine or other disasters." Peter Singer, "The Most Good You Can Do: A Response to the Commentaries," *Journal of Global Ethics* 12, no. 2 (2016): 163. Unless we completely disregard the textual evidence, the foundational philosophical arguments which condition the development of EA are found in the 1972 paper.

[11] In a recent anthology on EA, MacAskill defines EA but he does not offer a moral argument as a motivating reason to follow EA Cf. Hilary Greaves, and Theron Pummer, *Effective Altruism: Philosophical Issues* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019). He just rephrases the main ideas of a consequentialist thinking – I am saying consequentialist and not utilitarian as Gray, and Frazer do. Cf. John Gray, "How & How Not to Be Good," review of *The Most Good You Can Do: How Effective Altruism Is Changing Ideas About Living Ethically,* by Peter Singer, *The New York Review of Books*, May 21, 2015, https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2015/05/21/how-and-how-not-to-be-good/; Giles Fraser, "It's Called Effective Altruism – But is it Really the Best Way to Do Good?" *The Guardian*, September 23, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/money/belief/2017/nov/23/its-called-effective-altruism-but-is-it-really-the-best-way-to-do-good. In utilitarianism the most you can do is cashed out in terms of happiness whereas a consequentialist can, theoretically, assume any kind of standard of rightness to maximise. As in his monograph, MacAskill rests on most people's intuition on making a difference and doing good assuming a *pro tanto* reason. But whence and whither such intuition or reason? One might interpret it as an intuition pointing to a universal truth. Cf. William. D. Ross, *The Right and the Good* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1930), or as a hard-wired neural mechanism, cf. Donald W. Pfaff, *The Altruistic Brain: How We Are Naturally Good* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Iraklis Ioannidis, "The Altruistic Brain," Review of *The Altruistic Brain: How We Are Naturally Good,* by Donald W. Pfaff, *Metapsychology Online Reviews* 19, no. 27 (2015): https://metapsychology.net/index.php/book-review/the-altruistic-brain/, or one may interpret it as a deep-seated habit – cf. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo,* trans. Walter Kauffmann (New York: Random House, 1967) –, a habit like the one MacAskill

III. Saving a child

Singer's 1972 article starts with the following: "As I write this, in November 1971, people are dying in East Bengal from lack of food, shelter and medical care."[12] Whether used literally or figuratively, the death of the Other seems to have motivated Singer to explore whether or not we have a duty to help and save those who are dying. But where does this duty come from?

Singer says that if it is in our power to act in such a way as to prevent something bad from happening; and if this prevention would not entail our sacrificing something of comparable importance, then we have to act in that way. This principle follows from an "assumption," that is, "that suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care are bad."[13] At this instance, Singer does not say that death is bad but qualifies badness as a particular kind of death. This qualification opens up the possibility of asking the reason of such a particular death. If this death comes from 'lack,' then at some point we need to face this lack and ask how it comes about. Is it a natural lack? But before we proceed in this path let us follow Singer in his writing.

As Singer avows, if one does not believe that such suffering and death are bad, then his reasoning will not appeal to them and they "need read no further."[14] For those (of us) who share the assumption that Singer articulates would mean that the principle of altruism stated above follows logically. To make this evident, Singer provides us with an imaginative scenario or what is usually called a thought experiment. We shall quote the scenario as it has been written by Singer to avoid missing any important details:

> [...] if I am walking past a shallow pond and see a child drowning in it, I ought to wade in and pull the child out. This will mean getting my clothes muddy, but this is insignificant, while the death of the child would presumably be a very bad thing.[15]

Like most thought experiments, Singer's experiment aims to accelerate our understanding[16] by focusing closely only on what is relevant in making the

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asks us to pick up in being effectively altruistic at the end of his monograph: "1. Establish a Habit of Regular Giving." See William M. MacAskill, *Doing Good Better: Effective Altruism and a Radical New Way to Make a Difference* (London: Guardian Faber, 2015), 165;

[12] Peter Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 1, no. 3 (1972): 229.

[13] Ibid., 231.

[14] Ibid. This exclusion is interesting and raises questions to what effective altruists profess as a need for a global ethics, but we cannot take up this thread here.

[15] Ibid.

[16] For an extensive description of thought experiments and their development see, James

argument. For this acceleration, however, there is a cost: historical sacrifice.[17] For instance, we are not given any further information concerning how we ended up passing a shallow pond. Yet, we ought to, that is, we have a duty, to wade in and pull the drowning child out. If we assume that death is bad and that no death, or something of comparable moral importance, will come to us by preventing it, then we have to do it. The comparison is whether to save a drowning child or get muddy. The death of the drowning child would be, presumably, much worse than the impairment of some clothing. In other words, the issue is about value. The value of life weighs or is worth more than the value of clothing. The animate is more valuable than the inanimate. Most people would, perhaps, agree that saving the child would be the right thing to do – regardless of whether such a statement could be motivated by some sort of social desirability or cultural mandate.

If we feel authentically that we ought to save this child, Singer tells us, then there is no reason why we should not feel the same way for those suffering in East Bengal or any other distant other who would be suffering and dying from food, shelter, and medical care. "The fact that a person is physically near us, so that we have personal contact with him [sic], may make it more likely that we *shall* assist him, but this does not show that we ought to help him rather than another who happens to be further away."[18] If you would really save the child and you feel that this is the moral thing to do, then you really need to save those who need to be saved based on your experiencing their suffering and dying. Although the child may be experienced from a close distance, the moral feeling of obligation should not alter if the experience of someone in need of being saved comes from a medium of communication. The physical distance between your body and their body should not play any role in mitigating this feeling since the experience of their suffering which results from your perceiving it remains the same. The only difference is the medium of perception. With the child you use your eyes, with the refugees you use your eyes and another medium such as pictures, television, internet and the like. The perception of someone being in need of assistance is, essentially, the same. Thus, there is no reason why the moral duty should not be felt from the distant Other along with the concomitant actions which would entail saving them.

Robert Brown, and Yiftach Fehige, "Thought Experiments," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, September 26, 2019, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2019/entries/thought-experiment/.

[17] I am using the term 'historical' with the widest possible scope. In this case, 'history' can refer to past events which can be traced to condition or cause a present situation and its possible future developments. For instance, we are presented with a drowning child. A historical question for this situation would amount to: What happened for the child to end up drowning?

[18] Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," 232.

Furthering his argumentation, Singer tells us that just because there could be others who could provide assistance for those in need, be they drowning babies or refugees, it does not make it any less obligatory to us that we should help. Our moral obligation should be felt the same and thus propel us to action regardless of any other who could also help. Regardless of what others are doing, our duty is to save the ones in need.[19] Since the distance as physical proximity and the amount of other possible helpers should not mitigate our dutiful obligation to help the drowning baby or the refugees in East Bengal, Singer extends the dutiful obligation to help others no matter where there may be. "Given the present conditions in many parts of the world, however, it does follow from my argument that we ought, morally, to be working full time to relieve great suffering of the sort that occurs as a result of famine or other disasters."[20] In this way, if pulling the baby out of the pond would have fulfilled the moral obligation in the case of the baby drowning, then for the others who are far, the moral duty can be fulfilled by giving money to those who can provide the assistance that would save them and thus relieve their suffering. In Singer's words, "the application of the moral conclusion we have reached" is the "giving away a great deal of money [which] is the best means to this end."[21] And this giving away is not squandering, but, like in the case of Bengal, a giving to those "[e]xperts, observers and supervisors, sent out by famine relief organizations or permanently stationed famine-prone areas [who] can direct our aid to a refugee in Bengal as effectively as we could get it to someone in our own block."[22] In simple terms, this would mean giving a great deal of money to charities – which are made out of people –who can be as effective as we would have been were we to save a drowning child by pulling it out of the pond.

Whereas some people may consider that this giving money to charities might not be "the best means to this end" Singer provides two arguments. Someone might consider that this is the responsibility of one's government and thus they should not engage in giving what the government should (have) be(en) giving. Such thought would waive them from their responsibility. Yet, as Singer argues, we cannot establish whether refusing to donate to charities would either motivate the government to take up or eschew this responsibility. "So, the onus of showing how their refusal will bring about government action is on those who refuse to give."[23] As stated earlier, it

[19] For an analysis of what this argument entails in praxis – i.e. the restriction of collective action – see Rubenstein, 511-526.

[20] Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," 238.

[21] Ibid., 239.

[22] Ibid., 232.

[23] Ibid., 239.

should be of no concern to us whether any other would (also) engage in the same undertaking. Focusing on our duty we should help regardless.

The second argument for not giving money to private charities as the best means to the end of relieving suffering revolves around the idea of population control. Arguably, letting people die out of famine keeps resources in a good state whereas if the former were saved that would mean spending those resources or part of them and thus "fac[ing] starvation in a few years' time."[24] However, as Singer underscores, that argument simple points to the fact that there needs to be some population control because the limited earth resources cannot indefinitely sustain an ever-growing human population; it does not negate the moral obligation of helping those suffering and dying of famine.[25]

Following these two arguments, which aim to convince us that giving to private charities is the best means to the end of being altruistic, as defined earlier, Singer proceeds to clarify that this moral conclusion can take place in two ways. We can give in two ways. There are two versions of the principle "giving as much as we can" which is analogised with all that we could do. The stronger version is that we "ought to give until we reach the level of marginal utility – that is, the level at which by giving more, I would cause as much suffering to myself or my dependents as I would relieve by my gift."[26] The second one, the moderate one, is the one which is closer to the principle of saving unless this saving means sacrificing something of comparable moral significance.

To conclude, it is our moral duty to do all we can to help others and "taking our conclusion seriously means acting upon it."[27] And this action is an act of charity whereby we give away as much money as we can in order to help those who are suffering or dying. It is on this foundation that EA rests: Giving money. As we saw earlier, there have been some developments to these moral arguments. One such development refers to clarifying what the good is and, all the more so, how we can know what we give is as effective as it could possibly be. In other words, how can we know that all that we can give can have the best possible outcome which should be nothing else than the "most good?"[28]

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[24] Ibid., 240.

[25] Singer is not very clear here as to whether the starvation refers to the possible descendants of those suffering now or a possible starvation for all. Some philosophers who disagree, like Garett Hardin, believe that we should not help the poor at all otherwise we would all starve sooner rather than if we did not help them at all – cf. Garett Hardin, "Lifeboat Ethics: The Case Against Helping the Poor," *Psychology Today,* September, 1974, 800-812.

[26] Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," 241.

[27] Ibid., 242.

[28] Singer, *The Most Good You Can Do*, 7, 9.

In the further developments of this thinking, the "most good" is articulated as the improvement of the world such that there would be less suffering and more happiness in it and where people live longer. Effective altruists work in materialising these values which are terminologically packed into the phrase "saving lives." The latter, "of course, only ever means extending someone's life" in a way that they are happy and not suffering. Whereas we do not have a clear indication of what is the ideal number of years one should live, we can risk the hypothesis from the writings of effective altruists that premature death would translate into any age of below 70 years old.[29]

Our moral obligation to do the most we can to save lives, as defined by effective altruists, has also been developed with respect to the action it would require to take place. So now, to fulfil our moral duty according to the developed EA would entail to (a) choose a career which would allow us to make as much money as possible so that we can give as much money as possible to charities – what they call "earning to give,"[30] (b) choosing causes and donating to charities which pursue this cause and which can provide a proven track record that they do save lives or have a verified probability of being able to do so, and (c) giving body 'parts' that we can regenerate[31] and possibly "non-regenerative organ[s]" such as kidneys insofar as they are not causing any serious damage endangering our own well-being. All this amounts to being altruistic effectively.[32]

We have conceptually followed EA and we have also gone all the way back to its founding principle as explained by Singer. Let us go back to EA's childhood – after all, if we are to adopt EA it is the abandoned child that we first need to rescue from its being drowning. By accepting the assumption that Singer set forth earlier, we shall reflect on the analogy that he has attempted. Is saving a drowning child instead of getting muddy analogous to saving the refugees of East Bengal or any other distant Other? Also, is the act of saving the drowning child analogous to giving money to charities?

IV. How much charity shall we give to EA?

We start by reflecting on the thought experiment. If we were to be as logically strict as Singer asks to do, then we would struggle to see how this drowning child comes easily under the category of *suffering and death from*

[29] MacAskill, *Doing Good Better*, 27-29.

[30] Singer, *The Most Good You Can Do*, 39.

[31] Ibid., 70.

[32] From the point of view of the history of philosophy, these prescriptions do not have any structural difference from Comte's idea of living for others (vivre pour autrui); cf. Auguste Comte, *The Positive Philosophy*, vol. I, trans. Harriet Martineau (London: John Chapman, 1896), 500-560.

lack of food, shelter, and medical care. Since we do not have historical or contextual information, this child might have ended up being drowning for a million different reasons other than the category which we assumed to be bad. Nevertheless, let us wade in this murky logical pond and try to follow Singer. Let us give him a free pass for the moment, or as it is usually said, let us be charitable to Singer and allow him to make manifest this duty. Let us assume that we feel that we ought to wade in and pull out the drowning child.

Singer tells us that when presented with this scenario most people or his students would shout out that they would save the child. They feel that this is the moral thing to do. However, just because most people would agree that saving the child is moral, that does not make it necessarily so. This appeal to the majority or to, what amounts to the same, an appeal to representationalism, will haunt us until later. For the moment, the point we need to raise is that what constitutes morality is traced to a feeling of being compelled to have a tendency to act in a particular way when compared to alternatives. The thought experiment, as every thought experiment, excludes all variables apart from the ones that need to be compared. Let us attempt to investigate these variables. According to the thought experiment the variables that are analogised in the two cases are:

1. Perception
2. Evaluating badness
3. Feeling moral obligation
4. Providing aid in order to save

> [...] if I am walking past a shallow pond and see a child drowning in it [perception], I ought [feeling moral obligation] to wade in and pull the child out [providing aid in order to save]. This will mean getting my clothes muddy, but this is insignificant, while the death of the child would presumably be a very bad thing [evaluating badness].[33]

In order for a strict parity between the two cases to obtain we have to secure parity for each individual variable between the case of the drowning child and the case of the distant Other. Singer has already given us some reasons for which perception is analogous in both cases. So far, we have secured the parity of perception as an act. However, we have not analogised the content

[33] Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," 231. The brackets refer to the variables identified in the thought experiment.

of perception.[34] If the parity of the content of perception does not obtain, then the overall parity will fail. If the extension from child to refugees does not prove to be analogical, then the further analogy from East Bengal as the distant Other to any Other could not pass either.

There are two issues that make the parity of the content of perception difficult to obtain. First, the child is one and the refugees are many. Logically, we can say with Heraclitus[35] that the one and the many are in the end one – so that we can assume logical parity in classes, i.e. class of child and class of refugees. We have to assume a logic of classes to make the analogy happen. The logical parity can be achieved by thinking of *thinking* of a class of drowning children to be saved and then *thinking* of a class of refugees to be saved – the parity is between a thinking of classes. This, however, goes beyond perception. Initially we were asked to think of a perception of a child and then a perception of refugees. Yet, the analogy is not between what is thought to be perceived – or having been perceived – but of a reworked thought; a thought with classes. If the variable of perception is to be kept, as Singer aims to do, then we would have to imagine as many children as refugees – that is the meaning of strict analogy in all levels.

Imagine you come across hundreds of children drowning in ponds – or as many children as refugees you see on television or whatever else medium: Do you still feel the same moral obligation to save all of them? As many as you can? Save them all by yourself? Most of us could possibly answer affirmatively to the first two questions. Yet, if the scenario had us imagining as many children as there were immigrants in East Bengal, then that could have possibly changed the dynamics of whether saving all of them would interfere with the sacrifice of something of comparable importance. Having more children to save may raise the feeling of compulsion to save them but it may equally raise the amount of sacrifice – even if this sacrifice was only of time. The passage between the one and the many does not secure the non-violation of the principle of sacrificing something of comparable importance. And this is the cost of changing from perception into a thinking with classes to obtain an analogy.

We are still examining the variable of perception. Singer attempts to neutralise the variable of distance in perception in order to obtain the parity. Perhaps, Singer assumes that distance is implied only in the case of perceiving the refugees. However, there is also distance in the perception of the drowning child. The perception of the child is not just a perception of a child; it is a

[34] For the importance of the difference between perception and content of perception see Edmund Husserl, *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time (1813-1917)*, trans. John Barnett Brough (Dordrecht: Kuwer Academic Publishers, 1991).

[35] For the variations of the 'one and the many' see Heraclitus, DK 50, DK 60, DK 106, DK 125, and also DK 7, and DK 41.

perception of a drowning child. Our perception has already been classified as 'child' and 'drowning.' How do we know that the child is drowning? It is given by the scenario of course. But to perceive that a child is drowning and to know that a child is drowning are two different things. Singer says "see" but this 'seeing' which should lead to our moral intuition of feeling compelled to help would have to be a knowing that this is the case. Here Singer enjoys and enjoins the senses of 'seeing' in order to neutralise the distance which is always implied in perception. Seeing a child drowning in an authentic act of perception does not immediately entail knowing that the child is indeed drowning. The child could be playing or faking and the like. I can see something which would turn out to be something else. The condition of seeing with epistemic import requires a particular distance and engagement – not to mention the historical context of each event. And this particular distance and engagement cannot be secured immediately in the case of an additional medium of perception (i.e. tv, internet) which informs us about what is the case.[36] Someone suffering and dying from lack of food, shelter and medical care may have visual signs that provide immediate information about their situation whereas the case of a drowning child does not. Strictly logically, analogous perception fails.

The parity of perception cannot be achieved based on what Singer has given us. But let us provide some more charity to his attempt and allow the possibility that the perceptions are analogical. The second variable that we identified was 'evaluating badness.' We have already given some charity in order to achieve the analogy between the category of drowning and the category of dying out of lack of food, shelter and medical care. To make this happen we assumed the broader category of dying. However, there is an issue of agency which might pose problems in securing the logical parity. For instance, the 'child' is a class of persons and these persons can vary with respect to their agency and their power of acting. We could suppose[37] that the child requires help and we know better what kind of help to provide in order to save them. But the presupposition here is that the child cannot save itself hence our act(ion) is deemed necessary. However, the class of refugees may quantify over persons who know what they need to do to save their lives. If they could reason like we do, could we not ask them what kind of help they need? Would we not be stealing their autonomy as reasonable people if we assumed that we know better how to save them?

If we assume a logical parity between 'children drowning' and 'refugees dying of hunger,' then we would be sacrificing the autonomy of refugees as follows: First, the categories 'drowning' and 'dying of hunger' are bad

[36] The present controversy over the development of the Covid-19 virus as an epidemic or pandemic is an adequate example of this point.

[37] I use the term 'suppose' as we do not have any more historical information about the child which would relate to its capabilities. This problem will haunt us again later.

with respect to the imminent death that they imply. Second, the categories 'children' and 'refugees' end up being analogous with respect to not being able to avert the condition of badness. Yet, the category 'refugees' includes or may include both 'children' and 'adults whereas the category 'children' should exclude 'adults.' With Singer's analogy, however, we could end up doing the following: with respect to autonomy of action and reflecting and acting responsibly, we would be treating the children as refugees and the refugees as children.

Apart from the moral issue involved in this type of thinking, we shall focus on its logical problems. The logical flaw is generated here from an implicit use of a metaphor. 'Pulling the child out of the pond' is used to arrive to the idea of 'pulling the Other out of their suffering and death.' But in our case the issue is of creating an analogy, a logical parity, not a metaphor. To assume that the class of 'drowning child' is analogous to the class of 'refugees dying from' with respect to evaluating the badness of their condition cannot be saved that easily unless we provide some more charity to Singer.

Yet, even with more (logical) charity what we save here will haunt us if we look at the type of aid we could provide. To understand this further we need to introduce an auxiliary concept, the 'body.' The provision of the aid in the case of the child was "wading in" and "pulling out" which refer to one's own body. Bodies come into contact. The aid comes from one's body and, more importantly, from the power of one's body. We agreed with Singer that "if it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it."[38] Now, through the referential opacity of 'power' Singer moves into suggesting that providing aid as donating money is analogously powerful to "wading in" and "pulling out" someone who is drowning.[39] But such a logical move does not follow. Even if we presuppose that in the end of both events people's lives are saved, one bodily action is not as powerful as the other precisely because in the case of donating money more bodies will be involved in this saving supplementing the power of wading in and pulling out.[40] Let us think this in re(-)verse: To punch someone is not necessarily

[38] Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," 231; emphasis added. Contrary to Kissel who argues that there is "no deep theoretical between EA and anti-capitalism," we have to note that insofar as effective altruists represent power in monetary terms then this representationalism would always stumble or stick on the issues of adequacy and thus the possibility of reserves and surpluses on which capitalism rests – we shall revisit this point shortly. Joshua Kissel, "Effective Altruism and Anti-Capitalism: An Attempt at Reconciliation," *Essays in Philosophy* 18, no. 1 (2017): 19.

[39] In the same line of thought, MacAskill conceives of power in terms of the amount of money one has in their possession (see Chapter 1, *Doing Good Better*).

[40] In one of the ways that effective altruists apply their principles is through the Charity 'Give

analogous with having someone hired to punch them. The analogy would obtain, if it would, concerning the impact on the receiver i.e. being hurt. The ends may be analogous but the events are not. Thus, the logical extension of the two scenarios cannot obtain unless we give more charity to bridge this logical gap.

V. Giving and taking

So far, we have provided a lot of (logical) charity to Singer to make his argument work. But there are other issues which flow from such a logical path. Earlier we raised a question concerning the history of the event of the drowning child. For the class of persons in East Bengal we get a glimpse of the history through the very adjective 'refugees.' The reason for which we inquired into the history or the context for the drowning child is because we wanted to explore whether this could possibly affect our evaluation of the situation and, thus, our moral intuition and, finally, our motivation to act. In the paper where the drowning child first appears, Singer avowed that the moral obligation to help comes as an entailment of one's valuing that dying of lack of food, shelter, and medical care is bad. This evaluation comes from an assumption and this assumption harbours a belief in that things can be bad or good in themselves, objectively. In his later writings, Singer does not claim that this is an assumption but a truth and that "the eternal truths of reason can generate feelings in all human beings."[41] Following Henry Sidgwick, Singer argues that there are "self-evident fundamental moral principles, or axioms, which we grasp through our reasoning capacity."[42] One such axiom is that everyone's good, or let us say well-being, is of equal importance and thus we are bound to regard each other's well-being as our own. It is thus reason that plays a generating force for acting for the well-being of the Other. Supposedly, reason can motivate us to help the other. Yet, the scenario that Singer proposed initially was not meant to show how reason works or should work in the case of the drowning child but how there is a moral intuition generated at the instance of 'seeing' someone dying. The problem that Singer tries to solve is that of being motivated to help regardless if it is judged to be the moral thing to do.

Directly' which transfers the donated money directly to those whom they consider in need. Even in this case, the body-to-body action of wading in and pulling out is still not analogous with handing in money physically or virtually through an electronic transfer. The medium which intervenes between the bodies, in this case money, through which everything is represented, is what shatters a strict analogy. It is also this medium which allows to advance an argument which gives the impression that by a single click on the computer you can save lives.

[41] Singer, *The Most Good You Can Do*, 81.

[42] Ibid.

Before we proceed into the issue of motivation we shall pause and reflect a bit on this philosophical idea of objectivity in what is good. This view is often called "objectivity in ethics" or "moral realism-universalism." The opposing view to realism would be relativism, meaning that there are no truths about right or wrong. A moral intuition of right or wrong is equated with a judgement since we are in the realm of evaluating something. In this case, there are moral judgements which can be true or false. Reason is that which can help us reach those fundamental moral truths. However, this creates a circularity. If reason is what can lead us to moral truth then what is moral truth? Obviously that which is coming from reason, that is, reasonable. Unless we fall into a vicious regress we would have to say that truth here is also the good. And what is good? That which reason allows us to grasp. As we shall shortly explore, unless we presuppose some ultimate end or a regulating idea, truth and reason do not make much sense in explicating each other.[43] Singer, who espouses Darwin's evolutionary theory of being, tries to show that helping others is a fundamentally true judgment and also consonant with the theory of evolution which poses as an end one's own survival and the perpetuation of the species.[44] This is also the way that other philosophers who espouse moral universalism attempt to conceptually fund their thoughts. The argument is essentially transcendental. For instance, as Rachels tells us: "There is a general point here, namely, that *there are some moral rules that all societies must embrace, because those rules are necessary for society to exist*."[45] Unless there is universality of how cultures act in some fundamental respects, cultures would not have existed in time. What this transcendental thinking, however, does not reveal is why we, be it singularly or collectively, should exist or survive. For whatever reason, I can inquire into the reason of existence and I cannot find any compelling argument of why I, as a person who reasons, should exist – whether I evolved or was created. And this is why I should exist does not only refer to my origins but also to my purpose in life. Why is this relevant to our discussion? It is relevant because Singer admits that

[43] See Kant's First Critique. For reason to work an *ens realissimum* is required – be it God or any other Ultimate End as regulating idea. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (London: MacMillan and Co., 1929).

[44] See Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek, and Peter Singer, "The Objectivity of Ethics and the Unity of Practical Reason," *Ethics*, 1, no. 10 (2012): 9-31. It is based on this regulating idea of 'survival' and 'perpetuation of the species' that Comte and contemporary neurobiologists are trying to make a case about humans' being essentially altruistic.

[45] James Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy* (New York: Random House, 2012), 24; original emphasis. There is a difference between wanting to live and having to live. We do not have to live; there is no necessity in living. One can always committ suicide. The latter, even if undesirable, is within our power.

surviving without meaning, that is, purpose in life, does not make much sense and is "a self-defeating enterprise."[46] Perhaps, evolution is an effect of having a meaningful life and not the cause of it. It is not that we all have reason that we perpetuate our species, but we perpetuate our species as a result of creating a reason, a purpose in life which motivates us to go on. According to Singer in his later effective altruist writings, in the natural development of his arguments, securing the well-being of the Other does not seem to be propelled exclusively by a mandate of reason, nor by an immediate intuitive compulsion but of a personal pursuit of happiness which would come about by creating a meaningful life. And this meaning means having a purpose since we "live in a time when many people experience their lives as empty and lacking in fulfilment."[47] In this case, however, helping the Other does not come from the well-being of the Other being the reason as an end in itself, but instead it is a personal reason to have a meaningful life. Ethics "offer a solution. An ethical life is one in which we identify ourselves with other, larger, goals thereby giving meaning to our lives."[48] From reason we now move to "the need" of finding "meaning and fulfillment in life" and thus many people turn to effective altruism as a way of giving their lives a purpose it would not otherwise have."[49] Reason alone cannot motivate the enterprise, the business for producing the well-being of the Other; it cannot find, fund, and found a (foundational) ground to help the Other unless it attempts a detour whereby it gives self-satisfaction – from a universal reason we pass into a personal reason. What we have here, then, is not a need but a desire for a meaningful life which is fulfilled by helping the Other. And for this desire to be fulfilled the Other must be in need of help. Does this mean that the Other must be constantly in need of help for us to keep beli(e)ving in a meaningful life (as effective altruists)?[50]

To explore this hypothesis we would need to go back to the semantic ambivalence of the parameter (4) of providing aid. In the case of the drowning child, the provision of aid is wading in and pulling out. It happens once with one's body. Once again, there is no 'again' or a gain in saving the child. It happens once for the child itself and not for us – *hapax*. The child is saved

[46] Peter Singer, "The Drowning Child and the Expanding Circle," in *The Effective Altruism Handbook*, ed. Ryan Carey, 3-10 (Scotts Valley, CA: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015), 9.

[47] Ibid.

[48] Ibid., 10.

[49] Singer, *The Most Good You Can Do*, 91, 47.

[50] From the philosophy of psychoanalysis, this would be an instance of projection and masochism with respect to having a meaning on the condition of the exploitation of the Other and the giving of charity both as projection and as a reaction formation to justify the guilt of the exploitation.

from imminent death and then it is on its own.[51] In the case of the Other who dies of poverty, lack of shelter or medical care, could we say something analogous? It is right at this moment that the history of each scenario becomes important concerning the provision of aid. If we were to do all that is in our power to wade in and pull out the Other from imminent death coming from poverty, lack of shelter and lack of medical care what would that mean? For the latter two, the lack already sign posts us their fulfillment. We can provide shelter and medical care. Effective altruists do argue about that and they also seek to realise it – there is no doubt about that.

But what about poverty? What is the lack that is fundamentally implied in poverty? Earlier we followed Singer in thinking that poverty relates to the lack of food. We ought to help those who die of famine. But famine and poverty in the developments of EA are translated in terms of money. Poverty is represented in monetary terms presupposing a capitalist economy. McAskill writes:

> For almost all of human history – from the evolution of Homo sapiens two hundred thousand years ago until the Industrial Revolution 250 years ago – the average income across all countries was the equivalent of two dollars per day or less. Even now, more than half of the world still lives on four dollars per day or less. Yet, through some outstanding stroke of luck, we have found ourselves as the inheritors of the most astonishing period of economic growth the world has ever seen, while a significant proportion of people stay as poor as they have ever been.[52]

I let the reader decide how much 'luck' has to do with the 'lack' of food as a result of the building of our colonial empires; how much 'luck' and 'lack' is involved in slavery, genocide and ethno-cleansing which have made us, the western world, the inheritors of the abundance that MacAskill describes. Instead, I would like to underscore how effective altruists do not reflect on their presupposition that poverty should be construed in capitalist terms.

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[51] This point may raise concerns as to the extent to which a child can make it on its own. That concern would require a clear conceptualisation of what we mean by 'child.' See Philippe Aries, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* (New York: Random House, 1965). Obviously, a newborn baby or a baby without certain developed capacities cannot. Yet, once certain capacities are developed a child as a young human being could do surprising things for their survival. See John Eekelaar, "The Emergence of Children's Rights," *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies* 6, no. 2 (1986): 161-182, or the confessions of Jean Gennet in his various works. But even if one adheres to a strong paternalism, an individual of a certain age can be knowingly independent in terms of avoiding being drown in ponds. I thank an anonymous reviewer for allowing me to think this further.

[52] MacAskill, *Doing Good Better*, 20.

As MacAskill says, when it comes "to helping others, being unreflective means being ineffective."[53] It is not the case that poverty, *for almost all of human history*, was a matter of income and money. Plato for, instance, describes poverty (πενία) as *aporia* (ἀπορία): "ἡ οὖν Πενία ἐπιβουλεύουσα διὰ τὴν αὑτῆς ἀπορίαν παιδίον ποιήσασθαι ἐκ τοῦ Πόρου."[54] And aporia, as a quick semantic and etymological analysis would suggest, relates to the inability to move – ultimately to what the body cannot do.[55] Because we take the current capitalistic system of exchanging goods for granted, we now think that the poor is the one who does not earn beyond a numerical monetary threshold in a capitalist setting. The poor, then, are not the ones who are not able to sustain themselves foodwise, through the power of their bodies, but the ones who cannot participate in the current system of exchanging goods effectively so as to be able to have food or whatever else.

Taking such representations for granted will not allow EA to wade in and pull out the poor from poverty but will always be limited in trying "to end the extreme poverty."[56] Would that mean that there should always be poverty? Why should there always be poverty? Whereas MacAskill seems to neglect the philosophical and historical developments of representing poverty, Singer takes for granted that altruism should be defined within the capitalist setting: "Like it or not, for the foreseeable future we seem to be stuck with some variety of capitalism, and along with it come markets in stocks, bonds, and commodities."[57] Since EA sticks to capitalism, EA is always going to be ineffective since it does not reflect on the phenomenon of poverty and the development of its representation. If we really were to be altruistic (effectively), then we should realise Singer's analogy differently by reflecting on how to wade in and pull out the other from poverty and not just from the way poverty is represented within a capitalist setting.[58] But, perhaps, that requires another economy, an

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[53] Ibid., 7.

[54] For the original text see Plato, *Symposium*, 203b. Keeping the original text in Greek is vital to apprehend the semantic nuances between poros-aporia which can be lost in translations (cf. "Then Penia, because she herself had no resource, thought of a scheme to have a child by Poros" Plato, "Symposium," in *Plato: The Symposium*, eds. M.C. Howatson and Frisbee C. C. Sheffield (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 39.

[55] Even when 'aporia' is used by Aristotle to describe a noetic impasse, the explication used is always with reference to the body – Cf. Thomas Aquinas who translates and comments on Aristotle's aporia: "For just as one whose feet are tied cannot move forward on an earthly road, in a similar way one who is puzzled, and whose mind is bound, as it were, cannot move forward on the road of speculative knowledge." Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's Metaphysics*, 1: 339.

[56] MacAskill, *Doing Good Better*, 105. My emphasis.

[57] Singer, *The Most Good You Can Do*, 50.

[58] EA cannot be saved just by making some fine tunings in their methods or their causes as Gabriel tries to show; see Iason Gabriel, "Effective Altruism and Its Critics," *Journal of Applied*

economy which would not be charitable to sustaining the condition of poverty as, arguably, takes place in capitalism. Such economy would not make an allowance, would not allow the poor to exist as capitalism does. It would not aim to eradicate extreme poverty but, rather, it would aim at not allowing the existence of the poor or the aporous. But such a possibility requires a thinking where poverty is not represented in monetary terms, a representation which has created the opacities we have explored.

However, effective altruists are not likely to promote such a passage precisely because it cannot be quantified in the epistemic terms they accept in order to be convinced about its importance.[59] We are, thus, stuck with a representation of poverty in monetary terms and this representation allows only a thinking of the eradication of a type of poverty and not the eradication of poverty itself. This means that by being charitable to this (representation of) poverty we sustain it. Just as, in this paper so far, we have been giving representational charity to EA in terms of logically bridging their argument without being able to offer us a passage to altruism, so too, giving monetary charity within a system which sustains the existence of those who have and those who have not, i.e. capitalism, not only is not effective altruism, it is neither authentically altruistic. If poverty did not take place would we need to give to charity? What would the meaning of giving to charity be if there was no poverty? With poverty represented with(in) capitalism, charity becomes its crutch. Charity is not like wading in and pulling out someone from a drowning pond, but maybe like throwing a life jacket, a life preserver. Preserving the life of the poor in the conditions that they are found also preserves the conditions which endangered them in the first place; it is not saving them from these conditions. Following EA which relies so much in giving monetary charity within a capitalist setting we do, in one sense, sacrifice something of comparable importance: the possibility of trying to authentically free the poor from poverty.[60] And, if we take Singer to the letter that EA offers a purpose in life, as we explored earlier, then that would mean that our meaningful lives in EA would require the sacrifice of the poor's possibility to authentically overcome poverty.

Philosophy 34, no. 4 (2017): 457-473. Analogically, just rearranging furniture would not do if our aim is an authentic restructuring. Since the philosophical-theoretical axiomatic principles are problematic, any realization of them, be it adequate or, *per impossibile*, perfect, would entail these philosophical-theoretical problems, in one way or another.

[59] One could even risk here the hypothesis that the epistemic criteria set forth by EA are complicit with the political system in which they emerged. As Srinivasan aptly put it: "capitalism, as always, produces the means of its own correction, and effective altruism is just the latest instance." Srinivasan, 6.

[60] For a similar critique see Matthew Snow, "Against Charity," *Jacobin*, August 25, 2015, https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/08/peter-singer-charity-effective-altruism/.

VI. Epilogue

With EA we see how moralising about those in need in monetary representational terms ends up at their expense. For us to be charitable we need those who are in need of such charity utterly neglecting how they came to be poor – the refugees of Bengal were the effect of post-colonial war not just some outstanding stroke of luck. It seems that this altruism is not motivated by the Other *per se*, but by our desire to have a purposeful life as we saw with Singer earlier. In one sense, the Other is sacrificing themselves for us. Some altruism does occur but not only from us but *for* us as well.

As we saw earlier, Singer admitted that if one does not believe that such suffering and death are bad then his reasoning will not appeal to them and they "need read no further."[61] This prescription seems a bit troubling. It allows for an exclusion of those who would not share Singer's presuppositions. Singer makes no effort of trying to understand why some might disagree with his assumption. An authentic altruism would start right here, that is, in the attempt to understand the Other rather than by imposing our own beliefs, our values, and, with capitalism, our ways of life on them. The problem with EA is not only that is ineffective but the fact that it is funded by a philosophy which has little to do, which in Latin means give, when it comes to helping the Other authentically, without reserve.

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[61] Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," 231.

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