

Solidarity Over Charity: Mutual Aid as a Moral Alternative to Effective Altruism

Abstract: Effective Altruism is a popular social movement that encourages individuals to donate to organizations that effectively address humanity's most severe poverty. However, because Effective Altruists are committed to doing the most good in the most effective ways, they often argue that it is *wrong* to help those nearest to you. In this paper, I target a major subset of Effective Altruists who consider it a moral obligation to do the most good possible. Call these Obligation-Oriented Effective Altruists (OOEAs), and their movement Obligation-Oriented Effective Altruism (OOEA). I argue that insofar as this variety of OOEA seems to commit us to refrain from helping the people right in front of us, there is something intuitively wrong about it. In response, I introduce an alternative model that embraces partiality: Mutual Aid. Mutual Aid is a network of community members, usually from the same geographical region, who share a commitment to offer, receive, and exchange material goods, wealth, and social support. I recommend Mutual Aid as a liberatory model, which—through empathy, solidarity, and care—mobilizes community building and provides a catalyst for community advocacy. As such, we should resist the claims of OOEAs that partially distributing our funds to people or causes we care about is morally wrong or even less than ideal. We do not have a moral obligation to use our funds “effectively;” rather, we have a broader obligation to address human suffering, and Mutual Aid is one moral alternative for discharging this duty.

I. Introduction

It is uncontroversial that we should do good, when possible. Still, we disagree about how to achieve good. Effective Altruism is a popular social movement, which contends that we should do the most good possible by sourcing one's personal donations to the organizations that most effectively address humanity's most severe problems. These issues include, but are not limited to, access to food and clean water, adequate healthcare, and providing measures to avoid preventable disease.^{1,2} However, because Effective Altruists are committed to doing the most good in the most effective ways, some argue that it is *wrong* to help those nearest to you.³ These Effective Altruists view impartiality as a key quality of fairness: Neither proximity nor our personal relationships should affect who we help, or how much we help them.

¹ The organizations or charities most often cited include the Against Malaria Foundation, UNICEF, Oxfam, Doctors Without Borders, among others.

² There are many in the Effective Altruism community who are also committing to offsetting non-human animal suffering; however, my article will focus on those concerned with human suffering in particular.

³ Note: This assumes you are located in a Western country.

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In this paper, I target a major subset of Effective Altruists who consider it a moral obligation to do the most good possible.⁴ Call these Obligation-Oriented Effective Altruists (OOEAs), and their movement Obligation-Oriented Effective Altruism (OOEA). I argue that insofar as this variety of OOEA seems to commit us to refrain from helping the people right in front of us, there is something intuitively wrong about it.⁵

In contrast, I introduce an alternative model of doing good—Mutual Aid—which encourages aid to those nearest to us. Mutual Aid is a network of community members, usually from the same geographical region, who share a commitment to offer, receive, and exchange material goods, wealth, and social support.⁶ As Dean Spade (2020) writes: “Mutual Aid is a form of political participation in which people... [provide] for one another through coordinated collective care” (Spade 2020b, pp. 136). Though Mutual Aid has a long tradition among people of color, queer and disability groups, the concept has recently made headlines as communities have formed Mutual Aid platforms to meet the needs of their communities during the Covid-19 crisis.⁷

In what follows, I argue that we should resist those Effective Altruists who claim that partially distributing our funds to people or causes we care about is morally wrong or even less than ideal. If our shared goal is to do good, where good includes minimizing human suffering, Mutual Aid has much to offer above and beyond the distribution of wealth and material goods by encouraging community-building, solidarity, and coordinated collective care. Call these features

⁴ This is in contrast to those who view it as supererogatory—good, but not morally required. See the 2017 Effective Altruism Survey, McGeoch and Hurford (2017).

⁵ Thanks to Hannah Read for helpful discussion on this point.

⁶ Though it is possible to form a Mutual Aid group based on some other salient group affinity, such as nationality, ethnicity or other identity, most operate by geographic location as a result of logistical restriction—it is easier to exchange physical goods and personal services to those who live nearby.

⁷ For more on the roots of 20th century Mutual Aid among the Black Panther Party, the Young Lords, and the Zapatistas, see: Nelson (2011), Enck-Wanzer (2010), and Grubačić and O’Hearn (2016). For Mutual Aid in recent headlines, popularized by Covid-19, see: Fernando (2021), Aberg-Riger (2020), Schmelzer (2020), and Lawrence (2020).

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“relationship goods.” I argue that one can make a morally good choice by investing in the relationship goods of one’s own community, even if one’s money might be more effective abroad.

Below, I begin by outlining the philosophical commitments of Effective Altruism. Next, I explain the tension between Utilitarian OOEA’s (OOEA’s) and Mutual Aid, which I take to be mutually exclusive philosophies of aid.⁸ I highlight a key issue with Effective Altruism: it requires a top-down model of charitable giving, which (unlike Mutual Aid) is one directional. I take issue with OOEA in particular: to say that an act is morally good only if it produces maximal results disregards the non-instrumental goods that come from the combination of local community building, solidarity, and care.

Finally, I present Mutual Aid as an alternative model of aid, which—through solidarity and empathy—recognizes the virtue of care as valuable over and above quantifiable material goods. We do not have a moral obligation to use our funds “effectively;” rather, we have a broader humanitarian duty, which Mutual Aid can satisfy.⁹

II. Effective Altruism and Its Philosophical Commitments

Virtually all prominent Effective Altruists—Peter Singer, William MacAskill, and others—support an account of Effective Altruism with substantial philosophical commitments. These include the maximization of welfare (where good is reducible to averting suffering and loss of life), consequentialism (the consequences of one’s action determines whether that action is a good one), and ‘a scientific approach to doing good’ (where data tools help us determine which intervention is best and most cost-effective) (Gabriel, 458-9).

⁸ I have previously drawn out these tensions in a recent post on the Blog of the APA: <https://blog.apaonline.org/2022/06/23/in-tension-effective-altruism-and-mutual-aid/>.

⁹ For a Kantian account of Mutual Aid and the duty of beneficence, see Herman (1984). Ignieski (2006), Noggle (2009), and Schaller (unpublished manuscript) argue that we have an imperfect duty to (some types of) beneficence. Statman (1996), Lichtenberg (2004), and Hooker (2002) criticize this characterization of beneficence, on the grounds that imperfect duties are too easily fulfilled. Noggle (2009) writes what I take to be a successful reply to these criticisms.

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For instance, William MacAskill (2018) specifies a commitment to using science as an impartial tool to direct wealth in a way that maximizes human welfare. According to MacAskill, the four central characteristics of the Effective Altruist project are:

- *Maximizing*. The point of the project is to do as much good as possible.
- *Science-aligned*. The best means to figure out how to do the most good is the scientific method, broadly construed to include reliance on both empirical observation and careful rigorous argument or theoretical models.
- *Tentatively welfarist*. As a tentative hypothesis or a first approximation, goodness is about improving the welfare of individuals.
- *Impartial*. Everyone's welfare is to count equally

(MacAskill, 2018; 442).

These features are particularly evident, for instance, when we look to the Effective Altruist's use of the Quality Adjusted Life Years (QALY) scale in measuring a cost-benefit analysis of health outcomes. Against QALY, medical staff and policy makers can compare how one might maximize health outcomes with a certain amount of available funds.

Effective Altruists contend that we should impartially distribute our time and wealth in the most effective way possible in order to attain the best possible result for humanity.¹⁰ With the help of science, Effective Altruists can determine which organizations have the most effective strategy to execute this goal.¹¹

But what does it mean to be impartial and effective? While we consider where to target our wealth, being impartial requires our treating everyone's welfare equally (MacAskill, 2018; 442). As such, we ought not privilege any one person's welfare over another. Effectiveness, on the other hand, is a matter of the consequences of your action. If a donation is effective, the input of our

¹⁰ To see this, consider Theron Pummer (2016) who argues that we ought to avoid so-called "gratuitous worseness:" All things being equal, it's wrong to perform the worse act if we could do the better act at no extra cost to us (Pummer, 84). Likewise, MacAskill argues—for example—that we shouldn't spend \$50,000 to train and provide one guide dog for a blind person when we could use that money much more effectively elsewhere (MacAskill, 2016; 78).

¹¹ See GiveWell's "Top Charities" and impact factor calculation.

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money will produce the needed goods or services, which will reduce or prevent the maximum amount of needless suffering.

Some varieties of Effective Altruism and Mutual Aid are compatible. Those who perceive Effective Altruism as supererogatory could, for instance, donate 10% of their salary to highly effective charities (as Effective Altruist organization GiveWell suggests)¹² and participate in local Mutual Aid efforts. There are almost certainly moderate Effective Altruists that would be pleased with this compromise, which seems to be an excellent way to achieve a variety of diverse goods. However, moderately-minded Effective Altruists are not the target of this paper.

In contrast, the majority-held view for OOEA is theoretically incompatible with Mutual Aid. But first, who are OOEA's? A 2017 survey of Effective Altruists shows that 56.6% of respondents consider Effective Altruism a "moral duty" compared to 37.7% who chose that it is a mere "opportunity."¹³ OOEA's refer to former respondents, who—the survey suggests—make up a majority of Effective Altruists. While we do not currently have the data to determine the specific moral theory to which members of this subset subscribe, we can make an educated guess. A 2019 survey shows that nearly 70% of all Effective Altruist respondents take Utilitarianism to be their moral view of choice.¹⁴ Effective Altruism is often linked with Act Utilitarianism, the view that whether or not an act is morally right depends on whether not it achieves the most good.¹⁵

While Effective Altruists might hope to avoid the concerns that plague Utilitarianism by pointing to alternative moral frameworks, only a very small sliver of OOEA's subscribe to Virtue

¹² I suspect that Effective Altruist organizations suggest these kinds of percentages not because they think that 10% is "enough," but rather because they have to make the ask reasonable or no person would commit to it.

¹³ This question appears not to have been asked on the 2019 survey. The 2017 survey, therefore, is the most recent data.

¹⁴ Another 11.1% stated their moral view is another kind of consequentialism, while only another 7.3% and 3.2% stated Virtue ethics and Deontology, respectively. See: Rethink Charity (2019).

¹⁵ Effective Altruists often profusely deny they are one-in-the-same. However, one need only look to the tagline for the Global Priorities Institute at Oxford (the premier academic institute for Effective Altruism), which promotes itself as providing "Foundational academic research on how to do the most good." I explore the possibility that Effective Altruism is inherently Utilitarian in 2021 post on the Blog of the APA: <https://blog.apaonline.org/2021/03/29/is-effective-altruism-inherently-utilitarian/>

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Ethics or Deontology.¹⁶ For this reason, I will set those minority views aside and from here on I will use the term OOEA^u to refer to those majority OOEA's who hold Utilitarian sympathies.¹⁷

While Singer's seminal work, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," contained an explicit argument for a moral duty, in recent years many Effective Altruists have shied away from the difficult task of outlining the extent of our benevolent obligations.¹⁸ Wary of associating the movement with the traditional problems of Utilitarianism, McMahan, Singer, Unger and MacAskill have all argued that we have a *general* moral intuition to "do good," which is compatible with any number of ethical theories.^{19,20}

However, if the moral motivation were simply grounded in this general intuition, we might permissibly make a number of moral decisions that are at odds with Effective Altruism. Imagine that I decide to donate \$100 towards a rare childhood cancer.²¹ Since that childhood cancer is unusual, and thus has relatively few funds and researchers, my money does not go particularly far. I am "doing good," but this donation is at odds with several of Effective Altruism's philosophical commitments: I am being partial to this particular, expensive disease. My money is doing almost nothing to offset human suffering—and there are any number of ways in which it could have been more effectively spent. The general moral intuition "do good" is insufficient to motivate the project of Effective Altruism.

¹⁶ The 2019 survey indicates that these make up a tiny fraction of Effective Altruists overall. Merely 7.3% selected Virtue ethics and only 3.2% chose Deontology. See: Rethink Charity (2019).

¹⁷ Far from a minority view, OOEA^u makes up anywhere from almost a third to more than half of all Effective Altruists surveyed. Based on the survey data and taken as probabilistically independent answers, the minimum will be at least 30.4% and the maximum will be at most 56.6%. The exact overlap has not been published.

¹⁸ A notable exception to this is Peter Singer's original call for donating one's wealth to the point of marginal utility (Singer, 1972). For other accounts of those who do attempt to outline the extent of our benevolent obligations, see Murphy (1993), Hooker (2000), Cullity (2004), and Pummer (2016).

¹⁹ See: Unger (1996), Singer (2015), McMahan (2016), MacAskill (2019).

²⁰ I reject these arguments elsewhere, see Pearlman (2021).

²¹ Walter Schaller discusses similar cases in his unpublished manuscript.

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Although it is a matter of controversy within the wider Effective Altruist community, OOEA^us explicitly recognize a moral obligation: One ought not distribute one's wealth in a way that conflicts with the tenets of maximization, impartiality, science-alignment, and human welfare. Doing so is not only a bad thing to do, generally speaking, but also as a morally wrong thing to do—as one could have helped *more* people to have less suffering but chose not to.

Notably, this view has striking consequences: It categorizes any “good” act that one has failed to make a good faith effort at maximizing as morally wrong. For instance, it would rule out such things as volunteering at your local food kitchen or donating to your local homeless shelter, since your time and money could technically do “more good” elsewhere.²²

In contrast to the casual notion that Effective Altruism can be an opportunity to participate in supererogatory acts, OOEA^u is committed both to Effective Altruism's core features—impartial calculation, alignment with science, and welfarism—and also a moral project about what we should or should not do in relation to these principles. And yet this moral project is against the common intuition that it's perfectly acceptable to donate time and money to a charity of our choice.

Thus, there is a real sense in which the “do both” attitude (where both refers to both Mutual Aid and Effective Altruism) is in direct tension with OOEA^u. We could do more measurable good by taking the time and effort we put into Mutual Aid and redirecting it towards highly effective charities. OOEA^us will hold that it is morally wrong to direct our input (time, money, energy) into a less productive output.

Perhaps an OOEA^u could respond by stating that solidarity, community-building, and care are capable of fulfilling this moral obligation. That is, these relationship goods could produce maximal good if such things were to lead to broad institutional change.

²² For instance, instead of volunteering one could have spent the equivalent time working, making extra money, and donating that money to highly effective charities. In that case, one's money could feed a greater number of people and reduce a greater amount of needless suffering.

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I have two replies to this argument. First, I do not see how the calculus could sufficiently measure these abstract relations. How are we to determine the quality of one's care or the degree of one's solidarity? Even if we were able to measure these relationship goods in the same way that we measure the number of mosquito nets or ounces of clean water, it would be wrong to locate the primary value of community-building, solidarity, and care in their instrumental use. Unlike mosquito nets and clean water, relationship goods have intrinsic value—value that is not adequately captured by the results they produce. As Avery Kolers writes in *A Moral Theory of Solidarity*, “the meaning and justifying features of solidarity depend not on what you hope to achieve, but on which side you are on” (Kolers, 38). Likewise, when I care for a friend, a good friend will understand that my care is valuable as a thing in itself—not a resource merely valued for what I am capable of providing them. If my friend only sought to benefit from my care, we would likely conclude that they are not a very good friend at all. We might think they are doing something wrong, even exploitative, by merely instrumentalizing my care. Effective Altruism commits this same mistake.

Second, Effective Altruism aligns itself with the initiatives that are most achievable. Solidarity, community-building, and care are often unsuccessful at leading to broad institutional change, as they are hindered by systemic and institutional inequality. This process would be further complicated by the consideration of both long-term and short-term results. Since wide-spread institutional change is not easily achieved, relationship goods often fail to produce maximal instrumental goods. I argue that relationship goods are normatively valuable even when they fail to lead to maximal results. In contrast, the consequentialist nature of OOEA^u will disregard the non-instrumental value that relationship goods provide us.

Ultimately, what matters most for OOEA^u is that the numbers add up in support of a particular initiative. Because poverty mitigation in the U.S. is notoriously expensive, Effective Altruism emphasizes global giving precisely because western money can “do more good” abroad.

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But could it really be wrong to aid those in one's own communities simply because it is more expensive to do so?

III. The Impartiality Critique Revisited

Whereas many defenders of OOE^a argue that we have a moral obligation to aid suffering abroad—as this poverty is generally more severe than those who live nearby—I argue that we have a broader obligation to offset human suffering, which we can fulfilled through both partial and impartial methods.²³ To show this, I take a traditional issue with the philosophical commitments to impartialism and I consider it in light of the growing interest in community-building as one of the most promising means of addressing systemic inequality.²⁴

Let us begin by distinguishing between two types of impartiality: impartiality regarding proximity and impartiality regarding personal relationships. One of the motivations behind impartiality of proximity is that we are already more likely to attend to the needs of those nearest to us. As such, Effective Altruists wish to address the needs of those who are neglected. Impartiality of both physical and emotional proximity, then, is supposed to bolster the task of distributive justice.

A. Impartiality Regarding Proximity

²³The question of physical proximity and its bearing on our normative duties has been discussed at length. See: Singer (1972), Unger (1996), Kamm (2000), Orsi (2008), Singer's Chapter 10 in *The Most Good You Can Do*, and Pummer (2016).

²⁴For instance, Allison Bailey (2007) writes that interpersonal interaction is one of the ways to address the problem of white ignorance, writing: "I think about my own struggles with white privilege and the ignorance it generates. Who I am is the product of my interactions with others. My continuing journey from privilege-evasive to privilege-cognizant thinking on matters of race did not come from thinking my way out of these problems; it came from hanging out with people of color, interacting, laughing, and making mistakes, while being attentive to my interactions and what they reveal (Bailey, 90).

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Effective Altruists deny that proximity is a relevant feature whatsoever in our moral calculus.

Singer's seminal paper sets the stage for the call that there is a moral obligation to impartially distribute wealth to those in need, wherever they are, writing:

I do not think I need to say much in defense of the refusal to take proximity and distance into account. The fact that a person is physically near to us, so that we have personal contact with him, 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. If we accept any principle of impartiality, universalizability, equality, or whatever, we cannot discriminate against someone merely because he is far away from us (or we are far away from him)

(Singer, 1972; 232).

But should we accept a principle of impartiality?

Consider the following scenario:

While walking to Starbucks to grab a coffee, you see a homeless man wrapped only in a thin blanket, despite the fact it is a mere 10 degrees outside and snowing. After a brief conversation with him, you learn that his name is John. When you ask whether he has access to anywhere warm he informs you that the Emergency Winter Shelter is only open from 8:30pm to 7:30am. As such, he has nowhere warm to go during the daytime, and relies on the kindness of strangers to subsist between those hours. You have two options: Spend \$8 purchasing John a hot drink and warm sandwich, or you can send the \$8 abroad to deworm 8 children, which can prevent blindness due to parasitic illness.²⁵

If your moral intuitions are anything like mine, you will feel the pull to help John—a cold community member right in front of you—more strongly than the pull to help the 8 children abroad. Singer takes this intuition to be a mere psychological failing (Singer, 232-233). While the OOE^a would claim that I am doing something morally wrong by failing to maximize, I take it that not only is permissible to buy John a hot drink and a warm sandwich—but also that it is a morally good thing to do so.

²⁵ SightSavers is one of GiveWell's top rated charities, as it effectively spends donations to treat schistosomiasis and soil-transmitted helminthiasis. Children are dewormed from approximately .92 cents per child. (GiveWell.org)

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Why might we feel more responsible for John than for the 8 strangers? F.M. Kamm (2000) notes that in these types of cases we are individually called upon to act, and therefore this obligation feels stronger compared to the overseas case, where virtually all of us (members of the global community) are able to contribute to aid (Kamm, 657). I am one of handful of people who see John on this cold day, but virtually anyone could donate to SightSavers at any time.

Then there is the fact that I have met John. I have a name, a face, and I see him suffering from the cold right in front of me. OOEA's will say that in this case I am being irrational and even weak. I am letting my emotions get the best of me.

But my moral intuition is not only rooted in emotion: Proximity allows us to learn new information we would not otherwise know (such as the details about the hours of our local shelter). In addition to the epistemic salience of proximity, it seems to me that neglecting the humans nearest to us is particularly problematic at the level of respect for persons. Imagine if I had, upon realizing I would be willing to spend \$8 on a warm meal for John, instead pull out my smart phone and donate to SightSavers instead. This would be quite the slap in the face to John! As I began this paper—insofar as OOEA^u seems to commit us to refrain from helping the people right in front of us, there is something intuitively wrong about it.²⁶

Why might this be? Recall that OOEA's will only value relationship goods like solidarity and care as instrumental goods. I argue that choosing to “ineffectively” spend my \$8 on John provides additional, non-instrumental moral value—it treats John as a human worthy of dignity and respect, and it facilitates a bond between two community members with salient identity differences. This, in turn, lays the foundation for community-building and the exchange of solidarity and care.

Unlike Effective Altruism, Mutual Aid is capable of appreciating relationship goods as both intrinsically and instrumentally valuable. Insofar as OOEA^u values solidarity and care, it does so only

²⁶ Thank you to Hannah Read for inspiring this point.

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for the wrong sorts of reasons. While it can account for the benefits generated from successful acts of community building, it by-passes the significant normative value that simply caring or being in solidarity with others can provide.

The OOE^u rejection of proximity also limits our ability to be properly attentive to community needs. Being on the ground and listening to first-hand accounts from marginalized persons makes equitable community organizing possible. Only when we are aware of community needs can we organize to meet them. Last winter, community members in my town learned that the police had recently raided homeless camps, resulting in the loss of heaters they use to survive the winter in their tents. Knowing this, community organizers were able to emergency fundraise for several propane tanks and camp heaters to replace the ones that were lost. These heaters cost hundreds of dollars—and while it is true that those dollars may have gone further abroad, our community does not regret this purchase.

B. Impartiality Regarding Relationships

Effective Altruism is also wrong to reject the value of partiality regarding personal relationships. Effective Altruists aim toward the ideal of Extreme Impartialism.²⁷ Susan Wolf (1992) describes Extreme Impartialism as the position where “a person is morally required to take each person’s well-being, or alternatively each person’s rights, as seriously as every other, to work equally hard to secure them, or to care equally much about them, or to grant them equal value in her practical deliberations” (Wolf, 244). Wolf, herself, points out that this is clearly problematic for those who value the partiality involved in both friendships and familial relationships.²⁸

²⁷ Wolf’s term.

²⁸ Wolf suggests a view called “Moderate Impartialism,” which seeks a middle ground between partialism and impartialism. See: Wolf, 2019. I think Moderate Impartialism leaves much to be desired, as it suggests that buying John a sandwich (acting partially) is *admirable*, but still the *wrong thing to do*. If one really is committed to treating everyone of equal moral worth and acting accordingly, the right action is to donate the money to SightSavers. My argument suggests that both acts are not only permissible but of positive moral value.

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Admitting that Effective Altruists will not be able to manage this variety of Impartialism, Singer recommends a type of Stingy Partialism,²⁹ where it is permissible, in practice, for parents to be partial but not *too* partial:

Effective altruists can accept that one's own children are a special responsibility, ahead of the children of strangers...Most parents love their children, and it would be unrealistic to require parents to be impartial between their own children and other children. Nor would we want to discourage such bias because children thrive in close, loving families, and it is not possible to love people without having greater concern for their well-being than one has for others. In any case, while doing the most good is an important part of the life of every effective altruist, effective altruists are real people, not saints, and they don't seek to maximize the good in every single thing they do, 24/7...

(Singer, 2015; 28)

In his attempt to be more realistic, Singer demonstrates why partialism matters, and how arbitrary and difficult impartialism can be.

On the one hand, the Effective Altruist is convinced that we ought to reign in our natural inclinations regarding our partiality, and on the other hand there is a begrudging acceptance that we are partial beings. Effective Altruists suggest we navigate this line by appealing to the special relationships we have to our families in general, and our children in particular. If we draw the line at those with whom we share this special relationship, the thought goes, we can sustain our impartiality with everyone beyond it.

But why think our partiality should cease with our children? In Section VI, I will return to this question by arguing that community partialism—a combination of proximity and relationship partialism—is both intrinsically and instrumentally valuable. But first, in Sections IV and V, I outline 1) how “top-down” maximization is a poor method for justice-oriented distribution of goods and services, and 2) how OOEA^u misallocates our moral attention towards the exchange of objects rather than interaction between persons.

²⁹ Thanks to Ricky Mouser for suggesting this term.

Section IV: Top-Down Giving & “Othering” as Maximizing

Unlike Mutual Aid, Effective Altruism operates in line with traditional paradigm of charity: It relies on the relatively wealthy to donate their funds to the poor and impoverished. That is, it relies on the “top” to donate their funds “down.”

I should note that OOEA's do not see their giving as mere charity, but rather as a duty that they ought to fulfill. For this reason, let us differentiate between the philosophical notion of charity as supererogatory—which does not amount to a duty—and the tactic of charity—which describes the top-down method of the wealthy providing for the poor. Though OOEA's deny that charity is an optional good, they do align themselves with the tactic of charity by encouraging top-down giving.

Unavoidably, top-down giving is classist by nature of who is at the “top” and who is on “bottom.” One undesirable implication of this one-directional current of aid is that the “bottom” cannot provide anything of value to the “top.” The one-directional nature of top-down giving reifies existing class structures and, without explicit intervention, perpetuates injurious stereotypes.³⁰

Take the fact that most Effective Altruist causes usher Western money to African nations. This “top-down” exchange brings with it the harmful stereotype that African people are less than, needy, or unable to sustain themselves without outside intervention.³¹ Those who seek to provide justice-oriented aid must be conscious that top-down giving can sometimes “other” the receivers of aid. To “other” is not to highlight or mark mere difference, but to assert (explicitly or implicitly) the inferiority of the “othered.”³² For instance, we must be very careful to explicitly teach about the

³⁰ In recent years, many have accused Effective Altruism of bias, maintaining an inequitable status quo, and failing to acknowledge the importance of institutional change. See: Srinivasan (2015), Herzog (2016), Gabriel (2017) and Dietz (2019).

³¹ It is a fact that poverty is more severe in Africa than it is in Europe or North America. I am not suggesting we abandon top-down giving altogether, but rather that we ought to make a serious attempt to recognize and offset the negative consequences of paradigmatic charity models.

³² One way that “othering” manifests itself in the top-down charity model is when the wealthy (the top) control the circumstances under which funds are to be distributed. For example, the poor are often required to meet certain moral

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legacy of slavery and colonization so as to avoid the wrong belief that African people are “unfit for self-governance” as a result of intrinsic incapacities (Taylor, 2007).³³ We must also work diligently to minimize attitudes of white saviorism even as money flows from predominantly white to predominantly Black populations.

Worryingly, Effective Altruism will sometimes “other” under the guise of maximization. For instance, consider a case where a middle-aged white man and a middle-aged Black man both require a liver transfer to survive. Imagine that besides their race, all else is equal (including their occupation, health data, personal activities, and family life). Knowing that race is correlated with health outcomes and life expectancy, where Black individuals are statistically more likely to die earlier and have chronic illness,³⁴ the tenets of Effective Altruism will back providing the liver to the white transplant candidate. Even more distasteful, OOEA^us would contend that we are morally obligated to provide the liver to the white patient.

Thus, insofar as OOEA^u would perpetuate systemic injustices under the guise of “good,” we ought to question it. All of the traditional critiques against Utilitarianism, including this one, will apply to OOEA^u.³⁵

stipulations, as in the case of the homeless who must be sober or go to religious services in order to receive services at a shelter. “Othering” can also be an unintended consequence of good, as in the case of some children’s experience when they receive “free lunch,” or when low-income families are afforded subsidized housing.

³³ The full quote is: “Classical race thinking encourages us in our ignorance of this history. It enables us to rely, tacitly or expressly, on the assumption that black folks cannot be expected to govern themselves properly. And this allows us to explain failed, flawed, or troubled black states without appealing to any factors outside of their native incapacities—which is to say the incapacities of the natives. On the other side, though, critical race thinking, especially of the racial constructionist variety, enjoins us to return to the forgotten histories and contexts of the new world African politics. Black people, radical constructionism reminds us, are among the peoples that Western culture routinely depicts as unfit for self-governance. Degrading myths of black laziness and irrationality intertwine with honorific myths of white civilization and civilizing missions, and these myths collectively motivate utterly unsatisfying accounts of real social problems and phenomena” (Taylor, 142).

³⁴ See: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Minority Health, (2013, 2014, 2016).

³⁵ A string of authors, in recent years, have accused Effective Altruism of committing all of the classic mistakes of utilitarianism—including alienating our personal convictions by measuring the “good” that can be done and insisting on an impersonal calculation of that “good.” See: John Gray’s (2015) book review of Peter Singer’s *The Most Good You Can Do: How Effective Altruism is Changing Ideas About Living Ethically*; Amia Srinivasan’s (2015) book review of William MacAskill’s *Doing Good Better: Effective Altruism and a Radical New Way To Make a Difference*; and Nakul Krishna’s (2016) musings, “Add Your Own Egg: Philosophy as a humanistic discipline.” Note: All three of these writings are cited by Jeff

Section V: Objects, Persons, and the Flattening of Moral Values

In practice, much of Effective Altruism involves a money transfer from one's own bank account to a designated recipient (usually to a highly effective charity representing a cause rather than an individual).³⁶ Karl Marx (1867) described a worry about the exchange of commodities—that we tend to treat this exchange as one between objects (such as money and markets), rather than between people.³⁷ I suggest that the Utilitarian calculus of OOEA^u results in a similar mistargeted allocation, this time of our moral attention.

To see this, consider Shelly Kagan's (1994) distinction between lives and the well-being of persons. Kagan draws upon the following scenario to motivate the distinction:

Imagine a man who dies contented, thinking he has achieved everything he wanted in life: his wife and family love him, he is a respected member of the community, and he has founded a successful business. Or so he thinks. In reality, however, he has been completely deceived: his wife cheated on him, his daughter and son were only nice to him so that they would be able to borrow the car, the other members of the community only pretended to respect him for the sake of the charitable contributions he sometimes made, and his business partner has been embezzling funds from the company which will soon go bankrupt

(Kagan, 311).

Kagan uses this example to draw a wedge between the man's well-being *as a person*, which has in fact been very good, and his life—which seems to have gone badly, unbeknownst to him.

Recall that Effective Altruists use QALY to measure health outcomes, as they argue that it allows for science-guided maximization of welfare. Anwarzai and Mouser (2021) draw attention to the relation between QALY and Kagan's distinction to show that it is the wellbeing of persons, rather than lives, that is the appropriate target of our monetary allocation.

McMahan (2016), in his article "Philosophical Critiques of Effective Altruism," where he argues that Effective Altruism is not inherently utilitarian, and therefore such arguments are misguided.

³⁶ Cash transfers to individuals are becoming more popular and succeed in avoiding the worst forms of "othering." Still, there is some hesitancy surrounding the increase of this method, as studies show they do not generate long-term income. See: Carter (2020).

³⁷ See: *Capital*, Volume I, Chapter 1, Section 4: "The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof." Marx (1867).

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If we accept Kagan's distinction, the QALY scale will only capture part of what it means to have good well-being as a person (as opposed to quality of life). As their reliance on QALY and other similar measures indicate, OOEA^u are concerned with lives, not the well-being of persons.

Likewise, digitized monetary donations minimizes engagement between people. While OOEA^u are preoccupied with human welfare, they direct their attention towards lives (physical well-being), treating lives as objects rather than full-fledged persons. In catering to the calculus, OOEA^u flattens moral values by emphasizing those "goods" that can be easily captured by numerical measurement, e.g., how many cataract surgeries can be accomplished. This is not to say these are unworthy of moral attention—they are. However, it is shallow to restrict moral value to *only* these acts.

Recall that OOEA^us argue that we have a moral obligation to act in ways that produce the most good. However, it is unclear how OOEA^u can determine which acts result in the most good if it cannot adequately measure the value of social interdependence, community, solidarity, and care. OOEA^u cannot quantify these robust, normatively-laden concepts of moral value, which play a central role in Mutual Aid.

VI. Mutual Aid: A Moral Alternative

I have noted that core features of OOEA^u and Mutual Aid are incompatible. Mutual Aid embraces community partiality, which involves both partialism of proximity and of relationships (towards those in one's own community). If we are to choose one over the other, I show the benefits of the Mutual Aid as a moral alternative to OOEA^u. However, unlike OOEA^u, Mutual Aid lends itself to a pluralistic account of aid, capable of co-existing alongside other tactics.

Recall that Mutual Aid is a network of community members—bonded by locale—who join in solidarity to exchange goods, services, support and care.³⁸ Significantly, Mutual Aid connects members of the same geographical community despite their salient differences, e.g. socio-economic status, race, or immigration status, which might otherwise divide them. Community members form an anti-hierarchical network of solidarity and care to tend to one another's needs.³⁹

The sorts of needs that Mutual Aid networks address are extremely diverse. Community members request, provide, or trade: Cash for bills (energy, rent, car insurance, vet bills, etc.), material goods (diapers, clothes, toys, household items, furniture, mattresses, etc.), services (tax help, picking up prescriptions or groceries, legal help, mechanical assistance, physical labor such as assisting with a move etc.), and care (listening to problems, suggesting additional resources that have been helpful to them in the past, physical caregiving, commiseration, recognition, and respect).

What I have described here may appear, at first glance, to be well within the paradigm of traditional acts of charity. But, far from simple charity, I will show that these are instances of “radical collective care.”⁴⁰ Whereas charity brings to mind the wealthy providing for the poor, Mutual Aid has no presumption of unequal status.⁴¹ Unlike top-down giving models, Mutual Aid does not reaffirm existing class structures by depending on the wealthy to give to the poor. There are those on the receiving end of Mutual Aid who would not be a candidate under the traditional charity paradigm. For instance, an otherwise well-off elderly person may benefit from having their

³⁸ While I think it is possible for a Mutual Aid network to evolve based on some other *kind* of community (along identity lines, for instance), the type that I discuss here is founded on proximity to a town or region in which that network operates. There have also been instances of online donations to regions of need, particularly during natural disasters, but I would characterize this as charity (rather than Mutual Aid) due to the one-sided nature of the exchange.

³⁹ See: Both works by Spade (2020).

⁴⁰ Dean Spade's (2020b) phrase, which likely originates from disability justice communities. See: Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarsinha (2018).

⁴¹ This is not to imply that members will have equal social or economic status. Quite the contrary. However, there is an important attitudinal difference between a well-off donor giving to a charity and a well-off community member providing extra support to someone who asks for it in the context of Mutual Aid. One's status as donor in the charity case is individualistic and top-down. In contrast, a wealthy community member perceives themselves as part of a community, situated inside (rather than outside) of the system they hope to improve. Social interdependence is central to Mutual Aid, while it sometimes—but not usually—a feature of mere charitable giving.

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prescription picked up and dropped off at their doorstep. Or a middle-class woman may benefit from working-class community members who volunteers their truck and labor to help her move to a new home. Mutual Aid is solidarity, not charity: above and beyond the distribution of wealth and material goods, it embraces community partiality as collective care.⁴²

Let us distinguish care from mere sympathy or concern for others:

Theorized as an affective connective tissue between an inner self and an outer world, care constitutes *a feeling with*, rather than *a feeling for*, others.⁴³ When mobilized, it offers visceral material, and emotional heft that acts of preservation that span a breadth of localities: selves, communities, and social worlds

(Hobart and Kneese, 2).

Similarly, Liam Murphy (1993) describes the demands of beneficence as a cooperative project, “where each of us aims to promote the good *together with others*” rather than *for* others (Murphy, 268).⁴⁴ The “collective care” aspect of Mutual Aid embodies this task, which begins with the practice of empathy and gives rise to solidarity with members of one’s own community and concern about their well-being.⁴⁵

In my own Mutual Aid network, I recently saw a woman whose teenage daughter had died of cancer last year ask if anyone would be willing to come to her house to color and cut her hair. She wrote, “My little girl died in September of 2019. I haven’t gotten my hair done since then. It just didn’t seem important.” Several members answered the call. Clearly this request was about something more than the haircut itself—it embodied an appeal for and subsequent offering of care.⁴⁶

⁴² This definition is adapted from Spade (2020b).

⁴³ The italics are mine.

⁴⁴ Again, italics are mine.

⁴⁵ Michael Slote (2007) writes that “empathy is a crucial source and sustainer of altruistic concern or caring about (the wellbeing of) others” (Slote, 15). For a taxonomy of philosophical notions of empathy, see Hannah Reed (2019).

⁴⁶ The origins of care ethics would have us look to a mother and her child. Virginia Held (2015) writes that the mother aims “at the well-being of their children along with themselves, at what would be best for them *together*, at their mutual interests rather than individual gain” (Held, 2). Mutual Aid embodies that same sentiment.

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Michael Zhao (2019)'s account of solidarity as community and commitment to fate-sharing does much to explain the social phenomenon surrounding Mutual Aid and community-building. Zhao writes, "because the agent identifies with a group that both he and the objects of solidarity belong to, he feels bound to other members of that group in particular ways. Among these ways is in having the thought that...what happens to part of the group should happen to the entire group" (Zhao, 5). For instance, a grass-roots volunteer group might take it upon themselves to deliver food pantry boxes to those who lack the transportation otherwise. The mentality of these groups is one of empathy and solidarity—no one in our community should starve—so we will volunteer our time and money to make sure this is not the case.

Participating in and bearing witness to the vulnerability of expressing one's needs (and the community's willingness to meet those needs) forms a bond of mutual respect and provides a venue for community members to recognize the dignity of others.⁴⁷ The act of giving Mutual Aid is a form of expressing one's care, whereas receiving aid makes one feel *cared with*. As patterns of various needs emerge, Mutual Aid platforms are able to amplify the awareness of problems that plague the community, which one might otherwise fail to see from their own limited, first-hand experience. Any one public exchange is a model of care for others to see and to replicate. However, the good of Mutual Aid is not limited to the consequences of the aid provided but also the intrinsic value of radical collective care.

You may wonder, just what is radical about this practice? As official channels have failed to respond to ever-mounting community needs, Mutual Aid has grown out of necessity to fill this void. This is not to say that Mutual Aid would not exist without institutional breakdown. Mutual Aid is part of a well-functioning society, and as such would have a place even if official channels were

⁴⁷ It should be noted that asking for assistance does put the requester in a vulnerable position, sometimes publicly exposing that they are unable to meet their own basic needs. However, many groups have introduced an anonymous asking system to address this issue.

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sufficient to meet the community's needs. Still, there is no doubt that emergency circumstances are a catalyst for Mutual Aid.⁴⁸

Mutual Aid is radical because it is organic and spontaneous—it defies institutional and governmental organization. It rejects the bureaucracy and side-steps the red tape that these organizations entail. Mutual Aid does not need the paper trail to maintain tax-status, nor does it need to provide receipts for tax write-offs.⁴⁹ The radical aspect of Mutual Aid is that it leverages both interpersonal and collective care as a force of direct action.

To the extent that capitalism is economically alienating and unjust,⁵⁰ Mutual Aid gives individuals the opportunity to directly improve the conditions for people within their communities and be on the receiving end of those improvements. Whereas capitalism incentivizes stark individualism, Mutual Aid borrows from socialist ideals of interdependence: By working together and providing for one another, we ought to be able to satisfy everyone's basic needs.

Mutual Aid is a participatory political act—it defies capitalism and consumerism by encouraging the redistribution of wealth and material goods at a local level. It does this not by the mere push of a button (a digitized donation, duty discharged), but through sustained relationships and care.

Spade writes:

Mutual Aid is a form of political participation in which people take responsibility for caring for one another and changing political conditions, not just through symbolic acts or putting pressure on their representatives in government but by actually building new social relations that are more survivable.

⁴⁸ As Hobart and Kneese (2020, 7) write, “care is mobilized as a response to neglect or catastrophe.” Some examples of Mutual Aid in reply to emergency circumstances include responses to Covid-19, climate emergencies (such as fires, floods, or earthquakes), and manmade acts of violence, as in war and refugee crises.

⁴⁹ That being said, some Mutual Aid groups are more “official” than others. I know our local group does keep records of requests and whether they have been fulfilled. There is an enormous amount of back end labor that volunteers put in to facilitate a daily dispatch of requests. It takes a huge amount of community care and a commitment to solidarity in order to sustain the willingness to do this without pay.

⁵⁰ If the reader agrees that capitalism is a driver of inequality (and therefore, a driver of suffering), it seems that we ought to prefer a method, which involves disrupting capitalism (Mutual Aid) rather than exploiting it (top-down giving).

(Spade 2020b, 136).

The term “survivable” is not hyperbolic. For instance, after the life-threatening conditions of Hurricane Maria and the government neglect that followed, Puerto Rican communities had to organize to feed themselves through community kitchens and socialized food distribution.⁵¹ Another example is our own local effort to provide propane heaters to those living outside in frigid temperatures. Despite our best efforts and the subsequent opening of an Emergency Winter Shelter, a man froze to death besides a park bench just this past Christmas Eve.⁵²

Mutual Aid is radical because it offers direct intervention between persons. It is not a charity. It is not a non-profit. It is not a governmental program. Whereas charities and governmental programs are top down and one-directional, Mutual Aid is bottom-up, diagonal and side-to-side.⁵³ Mutual Aid allows community members to disrupt the inequality in their own towns by directly and intentionally redistributing wealth, resources, and an ineffable sense of *being cared with* to those in need of it most.⁵⁴

Effective Altruism is wrong to reject the value of community partiality, which has both intrinsic and instrumental moral worth. Just as it is intrinsically valuable to love our children, so too can it be intrinsically valuable to be a good neighbor and a good community member. Instrumentally, community partialism is the driving force behind community activism.

⁵¹ See: Roberto (2019) and Soto (2020).

⁵² See: Jeremy Hogan’s article in our local news blog, the Bloomingtonian: <https://bloomingtonian.com/2020/12/24/man-dies-christmas-eve-at-seminary-park-cause-of-death-under-investigation/>

⁵³ The reciprocal nature of Mutual Aid is especially apparent in the offer of some to trade or barter to meet mutual needs.

⁵⁴ This is not to say there is not the odd duck who is driven strictly by Kantian duty (rather than empathy and “fellow feeling”). Still, the “collective” in radical collective care is built up by positive participation; it is not diminished by the occasional absence.

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If we are to address the injustices that plague our social circumstances, community-building is a key place to start.⁵⁵ We cannot sufficiently respond to local injustices by remaining impartial. Empathy, solidarity, and care strengthen community interaction and form the basis for community coalitions—the gathering of community members to advocate for solutions to specific community issues.⁵⁶ Community coalitions are the foundation for local change, and can be deployed as an advocating body to rise against unjust police practices and local policy, particularly those that target people of color, undocumented immigrants, trans people, and other marginalized persons.

As a result, Mutual Aid is a springboard from which members can join forces with and advocate for marginalized persons within their own communities. As I have described, my local Mutual Aid group made it possible for homed community members to see just how vulnerable our local homeless population is, especially during the winter. We were able to form an ad-hoc community group, which linked community members (both homed and homeless) to advocate at city hall meetings, communicate with the mayor, and organize protests against the dismantling of homeless encampments.

If our goal is to do good at a local level by rectifying injustice in our own communities, it is crucial to ensure that our Mutual Aid network is a liberatory movement.⁵⁷ To do this, Spade suggests we ask ourselves the following questions, as criteria:

Does it provide material relief? Does it leave out an especially marginalized part of the affected group (e.g., people with criminal records, people without immigration status?) Does it legitimate or expand a system we are trying to dismantle? Does it mobilize people especially those most directly impacted, for ongoing struggle?

(Spade 2020b, 133).

⁵⁵ In this I build off of Spade (2020)'s account, which argues that Mutual Aid mobilizes community members to embrace solidarity. Solidarity, in turn, is foundational for building social movements (Spade 2020a, 25).

⁵⁶ This is in line with Sally Scholz's (2008) account, which argues that social solidarity ("individuals as members of tribes, communities, or groups, based on shared attributes, experiences, histories, or locations") is a precondition for political solidarity ("a group that comes together based on common interests...[where] their opposition to injustice or oppression unites the group") (Scholz, 41; Scholz, 10).

⁵⁷ Failure to do this can risk exacerbating existing injustices.

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While Effective Altruism can answer “yes” to questions one, it is often unable to meet criteria two and flat out fails criteria three⁵⁸ and four.⁵⁹

In contrast, the Mutual Aid model can answer in the affirmative to each of these criteria. Mutual Aid provides material relief. It explicitly denies gatekeeping and moralizing in exchange for that relief.⁶⁰ It challenges capitalistic structures by encouraging the redistribution of wealth at a local level,⁶¹ and it fills the vacuum left by the inability (or unwillingness) of formal governmental (and institutional) channels to provide for its citizens. In this way, Mutual Aid is a culmination of the community work that people of color have forged for decades.⁶²

VII. Limitations and The Upshot

If I am right to think that our duty to offset human suffering can be satisfied by both partial and impartial acts of aid, participating in Mutual Aid is an attractive moral alternative to the maximization required by OOEAs.

I have argued that OOEAs are incorrect in their implication that we have a moral obligation to donate our money most effectively. Instead, I have sought to show that there is great value in

⁵⁸ Though not a metaphysically necessary feature of the view, Effective Altruism operates within capitalist systems by encouraging individuals to modify their monetary behavior. Herzog (2016) writes: “the current order...[are] designed and maintained by human beings, and it is up to us, collectively, to reform them. Because of its focus on the ‘rational choices’ of individuals within the current system, this is the point that Effective Altruism misses or ignores.” Srinivasan (2015) notes that Effective Altruism does align itself with capitalism, though this is a contingent and not a necessary feature of the view. She writes, “There is a seemingly unanswerable logic, at once natural and magical, simple and totalising [sic], to both global capitalism and Effective Altruism... Yet there is no principled reason why Effective Altruists should endorse the worldview of the benevolent capitalist. Since Effective Altruism is committed to whatever would maximise [sic] the social good, it might for example turn out to support anti-capitalist revolution” (Srinivasan, 4). To date, there have been no Effective Altruist initiatives targeting post-capitalism.

⁵⁹ The 2019 survey shows that 71% of respondents self-report as male, 87% identify as white, and the majority are age 25-34.

⁶⁰ While there is still a current debate surrounding the institutional critique and long-term goals of Effective Altruism, I have laid out my reasoning in previous footnotes for thinking that Effective Altruism does legitimate and make use of the status quo, whether or not it can ultimately license institutional change. For defenses of Effective Altruism against the institutional critique, see: Kissel (2017), Berkey (2018), and Berkey (2019).

⁶¹ While Effective Altruism does the same at a global level, it works within capitalist channels and relies on top-down giving. See: Srinivasan (2015) and Herzog (2016).

⁶² This work is characterized by interpersonal community care to provide aid where formal channels have failed. See: Fernando (2021).

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community partiality—that even though these moves are “ineffective” at the level of calculus, they are priceless in terms of human dignity, respect, and care. I take it that donating to highly effective charities or contributing to one’s own community are both morally good ways to discharge our duty of beneficence.

However, Mutual Aid is not without limitations. While Effective Altruism has the built-in feature of encouraging donors to give an annual percentage of their income, Mutual Aid has limited resources for redistribution. Individual community members do not always have the money, goods, or emotional energy available to meet the need expressed. Our own Mutual Aid group has had to limit requests for gas cards and eliminate requests for rent payments, due to our inability to meet the demand. The best that Mutual Aid groups can do in light of increasing demand for resources that outstrip their own capacity is to gather a list of other better-funded organizations that may be better equipped to handle them. These may include formal channels like government assistance, local trustees, or non-profit organizations.

Effective Altruism, by contrast, has a number of centralized organizations, many of which are well-funded by billionaire patrons.⁶³ In fact, The Centre for Effective Altruism, affiliated with Oxford, has recently come under fire for the purchase of Wytham Abbey, an 8 bedroom 10 bath chateau that is valued at 15 million pounds.⁶⁴

The Mutual Aid movement, on the other hand, must stretch its finite resources. One method of doing so is to seek out horizontal support networks and collaborate with pre-existing movements. Doing so has the additional benefit of preventing the accidental co-opting of work led by marginalized persons.⁶⁵ When movements that begin on the margins become mainstream, those

⁶³ Patrons of Effective Altruism include: Jaan Tallinn (founder of Skype), Dustin Moskovitz (co-founder of Facebook), Cari Tuna (co-founder of Open Philanthropy) and Sam Bankman-Fried (much discussed founder of FTX, currently under criminal investigation).

⁶⁴ See Lewis-Kraus (2022).

⁶⁵ Spade (2020a, pp. 76-89) and Arani (2020) discuss co-opting at length.

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with dominantly-situated identities often receive credit for the work done by their marginalized forbearers.⁶⁶ We in the Mutual Aid movement must be cognizant of this fact. For example, Alexia Arani (2020) writes:

Long before COVID-19, many [Trans, Queer People of Color] were redistributing wealth, sharing meals, offering rides, and opening up our homes, while struggling to gain the support we need in the face of rampant racialized, gendered violence and structural inequalities...COVID-19 has generalized the conditions under which anyone can get sick, lose their job, or struggle with accessing resources, disease spreads continue to put certain precarious populations at increased risk of preventable illness, disability, and death... In other words, “particular” forms of suffering had to become “universal” in order to become worthy and deserving of a collective social response

(Arani, 655-58).

Those new to the commitments of Mutual Aid must school themselves in its robust history, rooted in resistance to systemic oppression.⁶⁷

A second limitation is that Mutual Aid organizers or moderators, like other activists, are often subject to burn out. It is emotionally draining to take on the responsibility of navigating and meeting other’s emotional, physical, and monetary needs. Admittedly, it is unclear if Mutual Aid can provide the consistent presence required to sustain those in dire need,⁶⁸ or if the unofficial platforms can sustain themselves once key organizers transition out.

It is critical for Mutual Aid groups to create a sustainable model by having some central procedures and on-going recruitment efforts in order to distribute the work across a number of community volunteers. These procedures should detail how requests will be managed, whether or not the group will track whose needs have been met, and compile a list of community resources (food pantries, housing advocates, utility management) that are commonly requested.

⁶⁶ See Hobart and Kneese (2020, 6-7) for a discussion of Mutual Aid’s history in Indigenous and Black and Brown communities.

⁶⁷ For a historical and evolutionary account of Mutual Aid, see: Kropotkin (1902). For a survey of Mutual Aid’s anarchical roots, see: Gammage (2021).

⁶⁸ See Arani (2020, 661).

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To this end, some have suggested that Mutual Aid groups simply become non-profits themselves. Perhaps this is one lesson to learn from Effective Altruism, which has embraced this strategy to great success.⁶⁹ Greater organization, it is said, can be more efficient and provide more substantial fundraising capacities.⁷⁰ However, doing so would have the undesirable outcome of taming the radical nature that drives the Mutual Aid movement.

Organizers have rebuffed these suggestions, calling them well-meaning but misguided. In particular, they point to the bureaucracy of adhering to government requirements, fears about increasing barriers of access, and concerns about having to cater to a board of directors, which are usually made up of “donors and elite professionals” who fail to represent and properly serve diverse populations (Ang, 2020; Spade 2020a, pp. 42-44). Still, relying on unpaid labor to organize and maintain a Mutual Aid group without fully professionalizing it remains a challenge for most advocates.

A final concern about Mutual Aid is a worry about “exceptionalism:”

Anthropologists of humanitarianism argue that people are most willing to offer aid in the wake of “exceptional” events such as epidemics, “natural” disasters, and war. This tendency to prioritize short-term, interruptive events over more “ordinary” forms of suffering ingrained into everyday life—such as disability and death from environmental contamination, homelessness and food insecurity resulting from capitalist resource-hoarding, and neglect or assault in prisons and detention centers by militarized officers and guards — are shaped by perceptions of who constitutes a worthy suffering subject

(Arani, 657).⁷¹

The challenge for Mutual Aid groups is to work to prioritize community response to the more “routine” and persistent local inequalities. As the urgency of the Covid-19 crisis fades and

⁶⁹ Effective Altruist non-profit organizations include GiveWell, Against Malaria Foundation, Giving What We Can, and 80,000 Hours, to name a few.

⁷⁰ Note that are many who doubt that funded non-profits are “highly effective.” Several authors argue that large non-profit organizations are often willfully ignorant of cultural context and further social inequalities. See: Miriam Ticktin (2011), Erica James (2012), Vinh-Kim Nguyen (2010), Saiba Varma (2020).

⁷¹ To this end, Arani cites Fassin and Rechtman (2009), James, (2004), Nguyen, (2010), and Ticktin, (2006).

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employment returns for many, Mutual Aid groups may struggle with the ebb and flow of interest, as traditional political and non-profit organizations do.

The tendency of Mutual Aid efforts to increase in times of widespread or severe hardship can be exasperating for those whose needs are persistent and “unexceptional.” For instance, the surge of interest towards Mutual Aid during the Covid-19 crisis (and the anticipated decline of interest assumed to follow in a post-Covid world) is a source of frustration for sick and disabled trans people of color. Arani (2020) explains,

Quarantine has forced abled people to experience the mundane forms of suffering that many sick and disabled people deal with on a daily basis in an ableist society that isolates, prevents access, and defines social value based on a person’s ability to work... There are many people for whom immobility and isolation were a part of everyday life before COVID-19 and others who never had the privilege of quarantine due to racialized, classed, and gendered work demands and social responsibilities

(Arani, 660).

Prior to the universalizing of these harms, sick and disabled people, including trans people and people of color, were routinely told their asks (like affordable medical care or work-at-home accommodation) were impossible to fulfill.⁷² Suddenly, the generalizing of these experiences made these resources not only possible, but widely available. Remote work became routine and medical care, such as covid tests and vaccines, were freely offered. Of course, the recent rollback of free covid tests underscores the temporality of aid for those who need it most. Covid tests remain essential for those with health concerns, even as others return to business as usual.⁷³

We must recognize this injustice, and work diligently to harness the bonds formed during times this time of crisis to maintain channels of community care even as the crisis recedes. Explicitly centering and attending to the needs of the disabled, unhoused, formerly incarcerated,

⁷² Arani (2020, 660), see Arani’s description of “Liz’s” Facebook post.

⁷³ Covid tests are presently refundable if one is insured. However, the onus is on the customer to save the receipt and go through the process of requesting reimbursement. This burden is placed disproportionately on sick and disabled people who depend on covid tests (to test themselves, as well as their friends and family) to stay alive.

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undocumented, and sex workers in our own communities is vital to avoid the retreat of Mutual Aid, even after the harms revert from being general (faced by many) back to particular (faced by few). If executed with liberatory values in mind and proper tribute to pre-existing movements, Mutual Aid is a robust instrument of community reconciliation and repair.

VIII. Conclusion

In conclusion, we have seen that Effective Altruists and members of Mutual Aid coalitions have a shared aim—to do good. However, I have argued that Effective Altruism cannot value (for the right reasons) the intrinsic relationship goods that are fundamental to Mutual Aid movements. Mutual Aid, on the other hand, is capable of appreciating both the intrinsic and instrumental value of community-building, solidarity, and care.

I have sought to show that Mutual Aid is an alternative framework to “do the most good,” which can also coexist alongside other tactics. In sum, I advocate a pluralist account of aid: There is not one moral method that will discharge the duty of benevolence, but several. One moral alternative to doing the most good you can the most effectively you can do it is to participate in and promote community care.

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