Pummer, Theron, *The Rules of Rescue: Cost, Distance, and Effective Altruism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023, pp. x+247 (hardback).*

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Consider the project of using one's time, money, and/or other resources to help others, and specifically to help them *the most*—or, as some like to call it, *effective altruism* (following the definition in MacAskill, 2019). Do we have moral reason to engage in that project? Are we, in many practical circumstances, morally required to do so?

Recent philosophical discussion of these questions has been somewhat blinkered. On one side, those who argue for an obligation to engage in effective altruism have often appealed (implicitly or explicitly) to a notion of the impersonal good.[1] We would bring about *better* consequences (or 'do more good') by spending our resources to help others effectively than by spending those resources on oneself or by spending them ineffectively. So, the argument goes, we ought to do the former (see, e.g. MacAskill, 2015; Singer, 2015; Ord, 2019; Chappell, forthcoming).[2] But in what sense are those consequences *better*? They are better in the sense of good *simpliciter*; better from 'the point of view of the universe'. This is the same notion of good that consequentialists claim we *always* ought to promote. It is not an exclusively consequentialist notion, but at least some non-consequentialists reject it (see, e.g. Foot, 1985; Thomson, 1994). Given the tendency to appeal to such a notion, you could be forgiven for thinking that the *only* moral views that say that you ought to engage in effective altruism are those that attribute moral significance to a notion of impersonal good.

On the other side of the discussion, those who argue against an obligation to engage in

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[1]Interestingly, such appeals are rarer in arguments for a general obligation to aid others—for instance, Singer (1972) and Unger (1996) argue that we are required to aid or prevent harm to others when we can do so at far lower cost to ourselves, and do so without any appeal to the good. Such appeals are also rarer in arguments that, conditional on aiding others, we are required to do so effectively (see, e.g. Kamm, 1993). But, where philosophers have argued for both at once—when arguing that we have an unconditional obligation to aid others and to do so as effectively as possible—invocations of the good become the rule rather than the exception.

[2]Representative quotes include: "The consequences are thus of great moral importance, with no serious moral factors counting in the opposite direction. Proponents of all ethical theories should therefore agree about the moral importance of funding the most cost-effective interventions." (Ord, 2019, 34); and "effective altruism consists of the honest and impartial attempt to work out what's *best for the world*, and a commitment to do what's best" (MacAskill, 2015, 15; emphasis mine).

effective altruism often do so by arguing against the notion of impersonal good playing much or any normative role (e.g., Skelton, 2016; Sinclair, 2018).[3] Others even claim that such an obligation follows *only* from consequentialist or, more narrowly, utilitarian views (e.g., Gabriel, 2016; Adams et al., 2023; Read, 2018; see McMahan, 2016 for related discussion). Again, it is not hard to come away with the impression that these commitments are necessary for accepting an obligation to engage in effective altruism.

In waters as muddied as this, Theron Pummer's *The Rules of Rescue* is a welcome intervention. It both unifies and expands on Pummer's previous work on the topic.[4] In the book and in his broader work, Pummer argues that in many circumstances we are morally required to engage in effective altruism. But what sets this contribution apart is that he makes no appeal to the good nor to any moral reason to promote it. His treatment of the topic is a distinctly non-consequentialist one. After all, as Pummer emphasises, "Consequentialism does not have a monopoly on beneficence" (p. 2).

In Pummer's account, two basic claims do much of the heavy lifting. The first is that we have *requiring* reasons to aid others whenever we have the opportunity to do so. So, given that, in practice, we have ubiquitous opportunities to aid others, we will have ubiquitous requiring reasons. But these reasons need not be decisive—for instance, if you can *either* aid Alex *or* aid Blake, your reasons to save each of them cannot both be decisive at once. These reasons are merely *pro tanto* reasons. Only when they are not outweighed or defeated by other reasons will they be decisive.

The second basic claim is that we have a variety of *permitting* reasons that contribute to making particular actions permissible; or, equivalently, to *preventing* other actions from being required. A familiar source of permitting reasons is the *cost* to the agent of taking an action. Take, for instance, Pummer's case of Costly Rescue.

> **Costly Rescue**
>
> A stranger faces a deadly threat. You can either do nothing, allowing them to die, or you can, at great cost to yourself, save their life. (p. 20)

The great cost you would incur in saving the stranger gives you a permitting reason to not save them. And, plausibly, if the cost is great enough (but still less than death), this permitting reason can be strong enough to make it permissible to do nothing. Even though you have a requiring reason in favour of saving the stranger, it can be defeated by your cost-based permitting reason. And this phenomenon isn't unique to costly actions. Pummer claims that similar

[3] Although she doesn't explicitly reject such obligation, Berg (2018) also claims that it depends on the notion of impersonal good playing some normative role.

[4] This includes Pummer (2016), Pummer (2019), Pummer and Crisp (2020), Pummer (2021), and Muñoz and Pummer (2022).

permitting reasons are generated where a requirement to aid would intrude excessively on your autonomy, or where it would prevent you from aiding someone else (even if you could only aid them to a lesser extent; more on this below).

By teasing out the implications of those two basic claims, Pummer is able to draw wide-ranging conclusions. In particular, in a variety of cases, he is able to uphold verdicts that match common intuitions. In more contentious cases too, where intuitions may vary, his discussion provides a principled justification for one verdict or another. Among the many verdicts reached in the book, including both contentious and uncontentious, are the following.

- **Numbers count:** Suppose you can either rescue one stranger from a painful death or rescue a greater number of strangers from similarly painful deaths. All else being equal, you are required to rescue the greater number.
- **Avoiding great costs is (often) permissible:** In Costly Rescue, you may be permitted to do nothing. (You are also permitted to save the stranger.)
- **Maintaining your autonomy is (often) permissible:** Suppose you can either rescue a stranger from a painful death by abandoning one of your life's central projects or do nothing. If the abandonment of that project would be a sufficiently radical change to how your life unfolds, you are permitted to do nothing.
- **Rescuing anyone at all is praiseworthy:** Suppose you can rescue one person from a painful death at significant cost to yourself, or you can rescue ten persons from similar deaths at no greater cost, or you can do nothing. If you rescue just the one, your action is praiseworthy (even though it is impermissible).
- **Upholding special obligations is (often) permissible:** Suppose you can rescue a loved one from a painful death or rescue several strangers from similarly painful deaths. All else being equal, for at least some numbers of strangers, you are permitted to rescue your loved one.
- **Foregoing repeated opportunities to aid can be permissible:** Suppose you face a version of Costly Rescue again each day of your life, except the cost to you for rescuing the stranger is low. Even if it is low enough that you would be required to rescue the stranger if you faced the decision just once, you may not be required to rescue a stranger every day of your life.
- **Small tiebreakers can permissibly be ignored:** Suppose you can either rescue 100 strangers from painful deaths or rescue 100 other strangers from similarly painful deaths plus one additional person from a hangnail. You are permitted to simply rescue the first 100.

Among this impressive roster of conclusions, some are difficult to deliver on other moral views. For instance, pure consequentialist views would struggle to reach any but the first verdict. More generally, views that characterise our duties to aid in terms of the impersonal good tend to struggle to deliver either of the last two verdicts.

The final entry in the list is a particularly fascinating one. Pummer claims that, if an action would provide benefits to others, this generates *both* a requiring reason and a permitting reason to do that action (see §2.2). How does this play out in the case of preventing 100 deaths versus preventing 100 deaths plus a hangnail? You have a strong requiring reason in favour of doing each action, with the requiring reason in favour of preventing the 100 deaths plus the hangnail being slightly stronger. So, the balance of requiring reasons slightly favours preventing the 100 deaths plus the hangnail. But you also have a permitting reason to do each. And, plausibly, these permitting reasons are strong enough to defeat the remaining balance of requiring reasons—strong enough to defeat your remaining reason to take the hangnail option. So, the option of merely saving the 100 will be permissible, as intuition might predict. (And, notably, the same may not hold if it were not a hangnail being prevented but instead an additional death—the permitting reasons may no longer be strong enough.) This is just one of several points that are entirely new to the book.

Nonetheless, there are inevitably some areas where the book is lacking. Readers who are looking for concrete recommendations for how to most effectively help others will be left wanting. So too, readers looking for discussion of effective altruism as a social movement, or of the actions taken by self-described effective altruists in practice, will be disappointed—this is largely a work of normative ethics, not of applied ethics nor of sociology. Another likely criticism is that several claims made in the course of discussion are presented quickly and without adequate defence—these include the claims that 'imbalanced altruism' is less blameworthy than 'innumerate altruism' (p. 93), and that we have quite strong permitting reasons to 'switch off' our attention from repeated opportunities to aid (§6.4). And another shortcoming is in the book's treatment of risk and uncertainty—although these are universal features of real-world rescues, they receive scant attention here (limited to §5.7 and §8.1).

Still, *The Rules of Rescue* is an impressive and major contribution to the literature. It provides an important and under-represented perspective in the philosophical discussion of effective altruism. Its style is accessible and its philosophical content both rich and novel—even for those familiar with Pummer's other work, there are new and interesting ideas to be found here. I recommend the book highly for anyone curious about their duties to aid others, especially those dissatisfied with existing discussions.

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