A More Humane Altruism
Effective Altruism Meets Humanomics

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> "The universe," he observed, "makes rather an indifferent parent, I am afraid."
>
> "Oh! I don't know!" cried Mr. Skimpole buoyantly.
>
> "I think I do know," said Mr. Jarndyce.
>
> —Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*

With global connectiveness offering near instant messaging and webcams installed everywhere, we can directly see into the lives of almost anyone in the world. This twenty-first-century perspective is like seeing everyone through a very sophisticated telescope. When we view others from a physical distance with the help of technology, we see some things more clearly, but we miss other things. This dichotomy between what we see well and what we see poorly really matters when it comes to global charity and especially the more recent phenomenon of effective altruism (EA), which seeks to use evidence and reason to make charitable giving more effective (see MacAskill 2019, 13).

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The sentiment of wanting to help others in remote locations has a name, *telescopic philanthropy*. The term was first introduced as the title of chapter 4 of Charles Dickens's novel *Bleak House* (1853). Dickens's story explores the unintended consequences of resolving an ever-greater set of disputes surrounding an estate through endless litigation in the London Chancery.

In chapter 4, Dickens introduces us to the philanthropist Mrs. Jellyby, who is not involved in the legal interaction. Mrs. Jellyby raises money for a mission in Africa, which is building coffee plantations. She cares tirelessly about people that live beyond her horizon, while her own family, young children included, are left uncared for in a state of exaggerated neglect. In other words, Mrs. Jellyby is a paternalist who is a lousy parent. Dickens's themes in *Bleak House* resonate with our experience: many well-meaning people think they can change the world for people they have never met, while they scarcely take an interest in people and causes that are within arm's reach.

This paper offers a critique of EA approaches. Solutions that draw on EA often ignore the knowledge problems and incentive problems associated with aggregate approaches to collective action. Scholars can recognize the problems EA addresses without adopting one-size-fits-all tools that abstract from the epistemic and motivational reality of those who are being "helped." I build on Dickens's optical terminology: the myopia section below discusses the correction that the EA approach makes to a set of biases, or lens distortions. I use the term *hyperopia* to describe the overcorrection bias consistent with aggregation and evidence-based approaches. Experimental economics and especially Vernon Smith and Bart Wilson's humanomics approach (2019), relying on moral sentiments, help to describe what is missing in an expert approach. A fourth section explores areas where recognizing moral sentiments can inform our critiques of EA.

Myopia

> "You can't make HIM responsible. The idea of Harold Skimpole with designs or plans, or knowledge of consequences! Ha, ha, ha!"
>
> —Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*

EA correctly identifies a problem with the practice of charity: donors focus only on what they already know. Caviola et al. (2021) discuss seven types of motivational obstacles and five epistemic obstacles to effectiveness in charity (see table 1). Donors are not experts, and their motivational obstacles result in systematic limitations in evaluating charities. EA experts provide more transparency, more information, and a better process of decision-making. Donors become more informed as a result. The discussion of epistemic obstacles focuses more on problems with existing information quality.

Caviola et al. (2021) discuss one epistemic shortcut that donors use, "overhead (administrative) cost," as a proxy for efficiency, ignoring how some types of overhead

Table 1
Obstacles to Effectiveness of Charity

Motivational Obstacles to Effectiveness	Epistemic Obstacles to Effectiveness
Subjectivity of giving	Overhead myth
Narrow affective motivation	Quantifiability skepticism
Personal connection	Innumeracy
Narrow moral circle	Underestimation of effectiveness variance
Scope neglect	Ignorance of the most effective charities
Prioritization aversion	
Character and reputational benefit	

Source: Caviola et al. (2021, 596–602)

improve quality and effectiveness (599). It is difficult for donors to process all relevant information. They must conserve resources somewhere, which is why they use shortcuts in thinking, or heuristics (Tversky and Kahneman 1974, 1124). Improving heuristics has the potential to improve outcomes. EA proposes that experts remedy donor bias.

Peter Singer (2015, 4–5), a well-known proponent of EA, points to the scientific nature of EA and its use of evidence and reason to arrive at "more effective ways to improve the world." One of the benefits of the scientific approach is that donors can take advantage of the specialized knowledge of experts who better understand the obstacles to effective social change. William MacAskill (2018, 10) defines EA as a tool that improves a donor's ability "to figure out, of all the different uses of our resources, which uses will do the most good, impartially considered." Impartiality is the central claim regarding EA's greater efficiency. Where this theory helps us correct our lens distortions, it works as a pair of good eyeglasses and provides greater clarity for the purposes of understanding cause and effect in social change.

Efficiency, Effectiveness, and Altruism

> "He is not so sanguine, Ada," continued Richard, casting his dejected look over the bundles of papers, "as Vholes and I are usually, but he is only an outsider and is not in the mysteries. We have gone into them, and he has not. He can't be expected to know much of such a labyrinth."
>
> —Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*

As a theory, EA holds altruism constant and then asks how a greater amount of altruism could be obtained given the same amount of resources (or equivalently, how the same amount of good can be done with fewer resources). The EA expert acts as an agent who can reduce information costs, information asymmetries, and transactions costs. EA rests primarily on the idea that information economies exist

where EA experts take advantage of superior information processing due to scale and scope. Global priorities emerge when an implied return on investment is compared with those of alternative donation opportunities. These calculations lead to more charity bang for the donor buck. EA experts also must make decisions about time-discounting, focusing on investments that pay out over time, extending their decision-making from relatively simple to more dynamic problems.

Aid organizations can have more information than individual donors when the problem is simple, e.g., supplying readily available medical aid to remote and underdeveloped locations. Consider aid to distribute antidiarrheal drugs. Because diarrhea is common and treatment is inexpensive, the gains from aid have been massive. The mortality from diarrhea of children under five has fallen 90 percent in four decades. This life-saving intervention was achieved by focusing funding on getting access to inexpensive drugs (Santosham et al. 2019).

The analysis gets progressively more complex, though. The remaining preventable deaths are around 500,000 per year, but reducing deaths beyond this threshold requires a different approach. One part of the complexity is epistemic, and the other is motivational. On the knowledge side, further reducing deaths from diarrhea would require a better developed supply chain, better health care facilities, better trained health care professionals, and greater trust in the health care infrastructure. As we add more moving parts to this question, simple tools—e.g., the marginal utility of a dollar—offer little insight into how to be effective. Less complex problems scale better than collective-action problems.

The motivational concerns add more complexity. One problem with the EA version of the principal-agent model is that it unquestioningly accepts the idea that the donor is the principal and the expert the agent informing the donor. This leaves the recipient of the aid outside the process. Accounting for recipients would make collecting relevant information by experts harder, but it would also add a human element to the analysis. Anything that treats the recipient instrumentally cannot properly be called altruism. It might be called paternalism instead.[1] Bad paternalism, as in the example of Mrs. Jellyby, is no guide to either effectiveness or altruism.

Hyperopia

> [Mrs. Jellyby had] handsome eyes, though they had a curious habit of seeming to look a long way off. As if—I am quoting Richard again—they could see nothing nearer than Africa!
>
> —Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*

1. Bauer (1981) was an early critic of reductionism in development planning. There is a long history since that time of failures in expert intervention due to oversimplifying the complexity of cultures targeted for development improvement (Thomas 2012, 86). We should note that even paternalism requires a commitment to improving the lives of the others, on their own enlightened terms.

EA was a corrective for the lens distortion due to common psychological biases that make donors focus on a set of limited information, i.e., myopia. Donor choices are expected to converge to unbiased expert opinions, which should decrease bias. There is a risk of another extreme. Expert bias occurs when aggregation ignores relevant information that recipients have. Hyperopia is the focus only on obvious metrics, creating an overcorrection. Like Mrs. Jellyby in Dickens's story, experts may ignore recipients and collectively emphasize the wrong kind of information. Expert priorities replace the purposes of recipients. In this section, I detail four concerns raised by this overcorrection. EA gets one part of the diagnosis right, but by overcorrecting, it misses some of the humanity of its subjects, creates a knowledge problem, locks in expert bias, and results in cognitive capture.

Humanomics

Vernon Smith and Bart Wilson have popularized the term *humanomics*. They observe that laboratory evidence often does not conform with economic theory. Economic theory without sentiments only represents agents that can be modeled well in terms of a narrow maximization approach.[2] Agents that systematically diverge from experiment expectations are also rational but act consistently with their pro-social moral sentiments (Smith and Wilson 2019, 61). Ostrom (2000, 142) distinguishes between "two types of 'norm using' players—'conditional cooperators' and 'willing punishers.'" Smith and Wilson's sentiments approach models different players differently.

Consider the example of the April 12, 2013, episode of *Planet Money* (McCune 2013), which introduces Mariana Ochoa. Her earned income tax credit (EITC) increased her tax return by $3,000. With this windfall, she decided to take her son to Disney World. Critics of cash welfare payments see her choice from a distance and conclude that limiting recipient choice would produce more desirable outcomes. While the objective value of Ochoa's decision is unknowable, the podcast episode reveals that she was attempting to honor a promise her ex-husband had made. She believes the trip helped her son learn an important lesson about keeping a promise and resulted in his deciding to major in graphic design at a college in Orlando.

Ochoa's pro-social motivations demonstrate a noninstrumental purpose in her behavior. Incomplete information is common for both experts and for Ochoa. Only she has access to the context of her individual relationships and personal history. This information is lost in systematic aggregation. Ochoa's example demonstrates that expert reallocation moves the recipient from a preferred outcome to an outcome less preferred (at least in the short term). To add sentiments to the description of human behavior offers an alternative to simply describing them as dysfunctional social norms

2. Cooter and Rappoport (1984) offer an early critique of the failure of marginal utility analysis for large heterogeneous groups. One implication of this analysis is that traditional welfare analysis is less useful in cases where heterogeneity is endemically complex.

(Bicchieri and McNally 2018). Substituting expert choice for recipient choice can be a large enough distortion in aid that the recipient simply rejects the intervention.[3]

More information can help us to humanize our descriptions of behavior. Mary Hirschfeld (2018) discusses the positive/normative split in economics. When viewing economics, she sees a limit to the usefulness of the utilitarian paradigm that counts only what is measurable, materially. Positivist, or evidence-based, approaches simply win the day through a reliance on empirical argumentation's advantage relative to softer normative arguments. A positivist approach misses Ochoa's explanation for her own behavior. A normative approach increases descriptive accuracy but limits policy prescriptions. Hirschfeld's call for the integration of economic models with comprehensive theories of humanity allows us to address the heterogeneity of agents while identifying where interventions are effective.

Knowledge Problems

The evidence-based approach of EA faces a knowledge problem when, through hyperopia, it ignores information. Local knowledge and tacit knowledge are types of information highlighted in the Austrian tradition. Carl Menger ([1871] 2007; and later articulated in Hayek [1945]), describes information that cannot be aggregated. Local knowledge draws heavily from information about context. Individuals articulate their plans and explain what they expect, how they gather inputs, what they choose to produce, and how they eliminate excess inventory; however, this information is noisy enough that it would be hard to aggregate without losing much of the signal that is clear to individuals.[4]

Entrepreneurs act on local information of time and place and exploit arbitrage opportunities that produce information about the relative scarcity of inputs reconciled with changes in demand shifters (Kirzner 1973). When this process works well, it is a highly tuned source of knowledge about complex and changing conditions. Because individuals take advantage of local information in real time, their entrepreneurial actions produce feedback about complex problems (Shughart et al. 2020).

Tacit knowledge is knowledge that individuals possess as a result of practice and intuition. Individuals cannot fully articulate this knowledge to themselves, much less to an expert building a dataset. This sort of knowledge is similar to how an athlete makes microadjustments in the swing of a club, bat, or racket to gain a competitive

3. These sorts of unintended consequences are well established for in-kind welfare programs like the food stamp program. See, for example, Clarkson (1976). For England (2002, 154), orthodox economics removes too many aspects of complexity, which results in a *normative* assumption of agents as "autonomous, impervious to social influence, and lack[ing] emotional connections." In other words, the experts simply remove the agents' humanity by assumption.

4. Gill and Thomas (2023) suggest that more complex social relationships, like gift exchange, can help to solve trust and coordination problems in ways that experts consider to be statically inefficient. If they are necessary to coordinate over time, however, they are dynamically efficient.

advantage. Some of this knowledge is precognitive or built into cultural or social intuition. Improving the descriptions of recipients frustrates aggregation, but it opens the epistemic process to local and tacit knowledge.

Lock-In

When a mismatch between expert and recipient occurs, it can cause the observer to assume irrationality on the part of the recipients of aid. *Lock-in* is a descriptive term used in the development literature to describe dynamic policy stability in the face of efforts to create change (Goldstein et al. 2023). Lock-in is applied to transitional problems, e.g., between a carbon-intensive system (incumbent) and alternative energy (new technology) when there are significant "interlocking technological, institutional and social forces" (Unruh 2000, 817).

The desire of experts to decrease carbon output results in green technology mandates. The use of mandates in this development context increases the use of solid-fuel fires instead. Green interventions can ignore the status quo where people burn any solid fuel available. Switching from solid fuel to coal-powered energy results in lower carbon emissions. Shobande (2023) uses World Health Organization data for twenty-nine African countries to show how first-time reliable access to electricity, even from fossil fuels, improves health, reduces poverty, and eliminates dirtier alternatives.

Lock-in entrenches rivalry between experts and recipients. Any incongruence leads to an insistence that recipients be brought in line with expert consensus.[5] The problem of lock-in is intensified when many disciplines are involved in forming an expert consensus (Goldstein et al. 2023). Heterogeneous experts face complex collective-action problems, eliminating the possibility of convergence to one consensus on global priorities.[6]

As an alternative to expert-led charity, the ground-up approach emphasizes the response of recipients of aid. Japhy Wilson (2017) suggests it was the large-scale failure of the expert-led Millennium Villages development in sub-Saharan Africa that opened the door for social change: large-scale projects did little to deliver on stated aims, but the gaps left space for individuals to solve collective-action problems in the shadow of expert failure. Benign neglect, ironically, allowed endogenous social change to outperform formal development efforts. In the next section, the term *cognitive capture* is used to explain why lock-in makes EA experts more resistant to

5. Murphy (2019) offers the term *ecological irrationality* to build on the term *rational irrationality* (Caplan 2001). These both offer insight into entrenched preferences beyond ignorance. Kuran (1987) uses *preference falsification* to describe limits to social change.

6. MacAskill (2019, 15) discusses the "scientific method" as it applies to expert consensus in EA. It comprises randomized controlled trials, "regressions, quasi-experiments, surveys, simple fact finding," and non-empirical questions of "ethics, epistemology, and decision theory."

feedback from those on the ground and how it reinforces formal rather than informal structures (Munger 2020, 404).

Cognitive Capture

Thomas (2019, 16) defines *cognitive capture* as "policy that reflects policymakers' own goals . . . with unreliable feedback from within the system." Those who get to decide the parameters for progress have tremendous influence on the institutions of aid. In the context of charity, cognitive capture is an unintended consequence of expert bias: i.e., when experts fail to account for moral sentiments or for tacit and local knowledge, their preferences crowd out those of the recipients. The longer a theoretical paradigm persists, the less open it is to heterodox accounts of cause and effect.[7] Thomas and Thomas (2020, 450) suggest that "normal science" becomes relatively closed to new information as it develops institutions of orthodoxy.

For EA, agreement on the rank ordering of projects clarifies the highest returns on the dollar.[8] Heterogeneity of preferences between experts and recipients reduces convergence to the same objective. A decrease in feedback quality increases uncertainty about these priority rankings. In cases where lock-in and cognitive capture exist, the priority setting of EA experts can overly simplify problems. Solving complex problems with a set of known solutions is not only epistemically limited, but also dynamically inefficient when it entrenches hyperopia.

Experts can respond quickly to dire need. To address social change, by contrast, lock-in is an important part of evaluating any realistic intervention. The humanomics approach accounts for complex motivational aspects of social change, such as resistance, as well as making space for entrepreneurship on the ground. From an effectiveness perspective alone, the epistemic limitations of expert consensus are salient. Increased descriptive complexity results in dynamic effectiveness, but also improves on the margin of being altruistic. Cognitive capture results in a monopoly of expert advice, but a consensus approach is rigid. Heterogeneity in approaches should be celebrated.[9]

As the problems with an overly ambitious EA approach have now been outlined, the next section offers an attempt to craft a reformed approach.

7. Thomas and Thomas (2020) suggest that rent seeking is more common in mature areas of expertise in the republic of science because openness to new ideas and competition becomes dominated over time by the value of consensus among a growing number of experts.

8. Cochrane and Thornton (2015, 60) raise the issue of using charity rankings to set priorities, noting that there is a difference between "technocratic" approaches of ranking priorities and those that merely advise donors. The authors emphasize that human rights do not appear in abstract models, resulting in worse outcomes on these margins. They also point out that a focus on cost-effectiveness results in less innovation (67).

9. MacAskill (2019, 18) discusses a spectrum from the most ecumenical approach to evaluating effectiveness to total hedonistic utilitarianism. He acknowledges "vibrant disagreement" in the EA community on the evaluation of priorities.

A Humbler Altruism

> I then said, more particularly, that I was not sure of my qualifications. That I was inexperienced in the art of adapting my mind to minds very differently situated, and addressing them from suitable points of view. That I had not that delicate knowledge of the heart which must be essential to such a work. That I had much to learn, myself, before I could teach others, and that I could not confide in my good intentions alone. For these reasons I thought it best to be as useful as I could, and to render what kind services I could to those immediately about me, and to try to let that circle of duty gradually and naturally expand itself. All this I said with anything but confidence, because Mrs. Pardiggle was much older than I, and had great experience, and was so very military in her manners.
>
> "You are wrong, Miss Summerson," said she.
>
> —Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*

EA may be useful in correcting for myopia despite the problems that result from what I have called hyperopia. Local and tacit knowledge are necessary to prevent distortions between the intentions of charity and its results. Any consensus in global priorities that ignores moral sentiments and epistemic problems produces lock-in and cognitive capture. Evidence-based approaches entrench a bias toward reducing the complexity of an issue to what can be measured. While such an approach is appropriate for certain tasks, like allocating resources to alternative supply chains, it gives us very little help in understanding the incentives, information, and innovation that belong to individuals and groups on the ground (Boettke 2019, 114).

The term *effective altruism* implies two categories: motivational and epistemic. Charity requires a distinction between egoism, or self-regarding reasoning, on the one hand and altruism, or other-regarding behavior, on the other. Altruism was formulated as a nineteenth-century response to utilitarian overreliance on atomistic and egoist arguments (*Encyclopaedia Britannica* 2024). Humanomics helps us model altruism by accounting for moral sentiments like other-regarding behavior (Smith and Wilson 2019, 61). Altruism as a moral sentiment places the good of the other as a priority over the wealth or resource transfer from donor to recipient.

Efficacy relies on an epistemic argument that the decision-maker has relevant information useful in identifying trade-offs between competing priorities. The presence of knowledge problems indicates that attempts may do more harm than good if expertise ignores disaggregate knowledge. In table 2, we see the interaction between the motivational dynamics and the epistemic problem of charitable giving. The two-by-two matrix describes how charity can be classified along motivational and epistemic dimensions.

Ineffective egoism (cell A) is the original myopia that EA addresses. Donors choose a charity with little information and less attention to the results of their

Table 2
Effectiveness of Giving, by Interactions of Motivation and Epistemic Knowledge

		Epistemic Knowledge	
		Ineffective	**Effective**
Motivation	Egoism	A	B
	Altruism	C	D

giving. An example of such myopic charity might be simply rounding up on a transaction at the grocery store. A donor appears to be altruistic to the cashier without knowing what the charity does. The motivation is pure egoism because no attempt is made to consider the other.

Effective egoism (cell B) occurs when charity is based on better information but does not consider moral sentiments or tacit and local knowledge. The results of such charitable efforts are distorted by either lock-in or cognitive capture. Even a focus on evidence-based approaches can ignore information that cannot be aggregated.

On the other dimension, it is possible to have altruistic motivation that is other-regarding, while basing decisions about charity on little information about trade-offs (cell C). A donor may be highly aware of the needs of particular recipients, but not be aware that there are higher-yield returns in other areas. In quadrant C, donors exhibit availability bias in their donation decisions, ignoring the EA expert's unbiased rubric. A donor that follows their own preference may disagree without being ignorant. Giving granola bars to panhandlers does not maximize social welfare, but the motivation to donate does not always respond to efficiency arguments.

The last quadrant (cell D) contains two different scenarios based on the nature and quality of feedback on the ground. First, "clean problems" benefit from simple analysis (Boettke et al. 2013). EA can do a good job where information is gathered, processed, and applied without many distortions, for example, in logistics. Getting medical supplies to areas hit by natural disasters may be a good example of such a clean problem.

For more complex problems, like questions of social change, including cultural and psychological change, the analysis must be relatively dirty to address the thick descriptions of recipient choice. Dirty problems are areas where feedback is weak, creating distortions in top-down approaches. Such dirty problems require "dirty" analysis, which involves "thicker" descriptions of the people that donors are trying to help. Moral sentiments, complex interdependent behavior, and heterogeneous cognitive commitments thicken descriptions. For dirtier analytical situations, a bottom-up approach is far more valuable. To treat dirty problems as clean oversimplifies the analysis. For dirty problems, benign neglect from aid organizations can, counterintuitively, help to increase the bottom-up solutions that are necessary to incorporate local and tacit knowledge.

Conclusion

> "My young family are not frivolous; they expend the entire amount of their allowance in subscriptions, under my direction; and they have attended as many public meetings and listened to as many lectures, orations, and discussions as generally fall to the lot of few grown people. . . ."
>
> . . . As soon as we were out of doors, Egbert, with the manner of a little footpad, demanded a shilling of me on the ground that his pocket-money was "boned" from him. On my pointing out the great impropriety of the word, especially in connexion with his parent (for he added sulkily "By her!"), he pinched me and said, "Oh, then! Now! Who are you! YOU wouldn't like it, I think? What does she make a sham for, and pretend to give me money, and take it away again? Why do you call it my allowance, and never let me spend it?"
>
> —Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*

Effective altruism (EA) largely exists to correct the bias resulting from an excessive focus on the preferences and priorities of donors. Reducing information costs, information asymmetries, and transaction costs helps donors to consider what good their donations are doing for those they intend to help. Correcting the myopia of the donors can also lead to an underappreciated flaw, however: hyperopia, which is the result of aggregation, abstracts from moral sentiments as well as local and tacit information. Lock-in and cognitive capture are a result of such hyperopia. To counteract this tendency and stay focused on the recipients of transfers in their own terms, EA must recognize limits on the aggregation of information at the macro level, on formal institutional change, and on interventions from the top-down.

Experts should leave room for ways in which change can come endogenously from the ground-up. If formal institutions are expected to do all the work of their subordinate structures, lock-in reinforces both expert bias and recipient reactions to intervention, making attempts at social change less effective. EA must be effective in a particular case, moving these recipients closer to their actual goals. This is an intrinsic part of what it means to be altruistic, to judge what effects our intentions have on specific individuals, not just in the abstract. Insights from humanomics help experts, donors, and recipients alike understand why lasting social change must take account of moral sentiments and fellow feeling.

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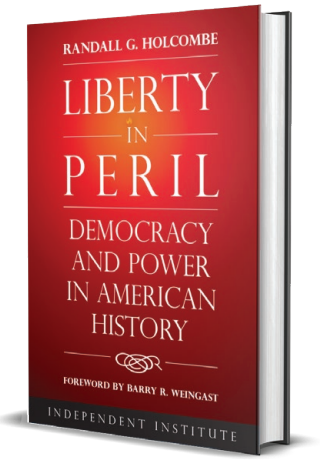
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