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Examining Effective Altruism as a Moral Guide to Alleviating Human Suffering

Abstract

The individualistic nature of the effective altruism approach limits its capacity to adequately address needless human suffering caused by poverty. Its extreme position argues that one’s personal choices on consumption and career path should produce the most good to the poor up until the point where they begin to cause personal harm. This is unnecessary. Rather, I argue that the collective action of individuals who realize, and accept their moral obligation to help the poor, can unite their comparative advantages in doing so to satisfy this obligation without making excessively demanding sacrifices.
In 1996, the European Union dedicated about $2 million in aid to support an AIDS awareness play in South Africa titled Sarafina II. Though the play consumed about half of South Africa’s entire AIDS budget, less than a hundred people attended it [1, 2, 3]. Dambisa Moyo, a Zambian-born economist and author of **Dead Aid**, a critique of the effectiveness of foreign aid to Africa, states that, “In the past fifty years, more than $1 trillion in development-related aid has been transferred from rich countries to Africa. Has this assistance improved the lives of Africans? No. In fact, across the continent, the recipients of this aid are not better off as a result of it, but worse—much worse [4].” She later emphasizes that, “...aid to Africa has made the poor poorer and [economic] growth slower [5].” According to Moyo, despite donors’ good intentions, this resource transfer has failed to fulfill its purpose of improving recipients’ lives.

Holden Karnofsky and Elie Hassenfeld, founders of GiveWell, an independent investigator of non-profit effectiveness, offer some explanation for this apparent failure of foreign aid. As former hedge fund employees, they apply the analytic tools they used in determining profitable business investments to guide donors towards effective charities. They partly attribute aid’s failure to poor program execution, and unintended funding of harmful aid projects [6]. An instance of poor program execution is the Gyandoot program in Madhya Pradesh in India, which provided computer kiosks in rural areas that lacked electricity and reliable internet connectivity [7]. Even more disconcerting is when aid projects harm intended beneficiaries. A large-scale program implemented in Egypt to treat schistosomiasis with mass parenteral antischistosomal therapy administration “had a major role in the spread of hepatitis C Virus throughout Egypt [8].” GiveWell aims to identify the most effective aid organizations that have the highest social returns on donated funds. Based on their analysis, donors can determine where to donate their
funds to produce the most social good possible. This approach to giving summarizes the effective altruism movement. In summary, this movement proposes to address the problem of ineffective aid by pursuing charitable endeavors which efficiently translate donations into desirable social outcomes.

Though proponents of effective altruism vary in their beliefs, they acknowledge four fundamental premises. First, all human beings are equal and deserve equal opportunity. Second, the wealthy in the world have an obligation to alleviate the suffering of the poor. Third, the resources available for satisfying this obligation are limited. Finally, akin to the utilitarian perspective, donors ought to allocate resources in ways that generate the most good for all those in need of assistance [10, 11].

In this paper, I will briefly illustrate the effective altruist’s approach to addressing the needs of the global poor through private donations, while highlighting the instances where this approach is inadequate to address human suffering. Second, I will discuss effective altruism’s extreme position which argues that one’s personal choices on consumption and career choice should produce the most good to the poor up until the point where doing so begins to cause personal harm. In response, I argue that one does not need to use every decision to satisfy personal responsibility for ending human suffering until the point where it causes personal harm. Rather, the collective action of individuals who realize and accept their moral obligation to help the poor can unite their comparative advantages and vocations to satisfy this obligation without making excessively demanding sacrifices.

Effective altruism is a good individualistic approach to correct for the ineffectiveness of foreign aid in alleviating human suffering. However, its most extreme form is unnecessary, and
can be replaced by the collaboration of donors and beneficiaries to advance mutually beneficial interests with a sense of vocation. The term vocation will be used in this text to describe one’s preferred profession given specific interests and talents.

**Effective Altruism's Response to Helping the Global Poor**

Extreme poverty, defined here as the inability to afford the basic needs of life, is concentrated in developing countries [10]. As such, effective altruism suggests that citizens of developed countries with higher average incomes are obligated to prioritize helping the poor in developing countries over the needy in their own communities. Iris Marion Young, in Responsibility for Justice, describes this interpretation of the effective altruism approach as cosmopolitan-utilitarian [9]. There are two key points inherent in this interpretation of effective altruism that will be addressed in this paper. These are, the nature of our obligation to the global poor and how we ought to fulfill it. I will discuss Peter Singer, Peter Unger and Thomas Pogge’s responses to these issues and how they illustrate the effective altruism position on addressing global poverty.

**Our moral responsibility to help the poor**

Singer and Pogge both argue that as citizens of an affluent developed country, we have the moral obligation to help the global poor; however, they have different primary reasons for making this claim. Singer’s primary reason is that if one is capable of preventing others from experiencing hardship but fails to do so, that individual’s inaction is analogous to causing others to experience hardship [10]. He emphasizes that one’s capacity to help places a demand on that individual to help. As Singer states in his Practical Ethics publication in 1979, “If it is in our power to prevent something very bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of
comparable moral significance, we ought to do it [11].” From his perspective, we ought to help alleviate human suffering when we can.

Pogge’s primary reason is that we are obligated to help the global poor if we are directly responsible for causing their suffering. Pogge expands this argument further in his chapter on The Bounds of Nationalism [12]. He provides the following hierarchy of moral reasoning to govern decision making in this context. First, one should not unduly harm others. Second, one should protect one’s next of kin from wrongdoing. Third, one should protect one’s fellow citizens and neighbors from wrongdoing. Finally, when the above conditions have been satisfied in sequence, one should protect unrelated foreigners from wrongdoing [12]. According to Pogge, global poverty is the outcome of our unjust actions and institutions—a violation of the first moral requirement to do no harm [12]. These actions include our nation’s engagement in trade contracts with developing countries that accrue negligible economic benefits to us but significantly harm the underprivileged in some of those countries. As such, we first have a moral responsibility to address the human suffering we have caused to foreigners.

Yet, the primary reason we ought to help the moral poor is because our exploitation of them financially enables us to do so. This conclusion is a combination of both primary reasons articulated by Singer and Pogge, because they support each other. Singer supports Pogge’s primary argument when he explains that affluent citizens of Western countries, directly exacerbate the suffering of the poor by trading with their oppressive leaders at their expense. According to him, citizens of affluent Western nations support corrupt dictators by patronizing the oil and minerals that their international corporations purchase from these corrupt leaders.
The effect of these interactions is that these dictators consolidate their power, and personally exploit the gains from such trade at the expense of their people’s well-being.

Pogge also supports Singer’s primary argument. According to him, in 2010 the Official Development Assistance given by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development was 14.96 trillion in 2010. It represents about twenty-one billion dollars above the combined GDPs of Ghana, Uganda, Liberia, Togo, Burkina Faso, Mozambique and Tanzania in 2010 [15]. Pogge acknowledges that what we freely give as aid is relatively insignificant in comparison to the wealth that our economies capture, partly as a result of our substantial influence over international trade [15]. Therefore one can conclude that we should help the poor because the level of wealth that current global institutions have helped us accrue allows us to do so without losing assets of comparable moral significance [10].

Obligations to Family and Neighbors versus obligations to the Global Poor

In meeting our moral obligation to end needless human suffering, effective altruists like Singer and Unger make what I argue to be a less agreeable claim. They assert that because all lives are equal donors should give as much to help a stranger as they would to help their family and neighbors to avoid preventable suffering [10, 11]. The following example further illustrates their argument. Assume a mother has the time to warn only one of two equally vulnerable groups of people of impending lethal danger. One group consists of her three children while the other consists of five complete strangers. Singer and Unger will argue that the better choice for her to make will be to warn the group of five strangers and let her three children die. They will argue that since each of her children’s lives are of equal value to each of the five lives, her choices caused the loss of three lives instead of five—a net salvation of two lives. This is one of
effective altruism’s less acceptable arguments, because it disregards individuals’ freedom to prioritize certain relationships over others.

As Young explains, most people choose to prioritize their responsibilities to those within their families and communities over their responsibilities to others, such as those abroad, and they have the right to make this decision [9]. In her *Two Concepts of Self-Determination*, she argues that, “…other people ought not to constrain, dominate, or interfere with those decisions and interpretations for the sake of their own ends, or according to their judgment of what way of life is best [13].” By Young’s understandable argument, people can choose to help those with whom they share a relationship rather than help strangers, regardless of what effective altruists might think is the better choice. As such, the mother is right to act in the interest of her children over the interest of the strangers.

Pogge’s hierarchy for addressing needs, stated above, supports Young’s argument as well. He argues that the positive duty to protect unrelated foreigners from wrongdoing is second to the duty to protect one’s compatriots from wrongdoing and third to the duty to protect one’s family from the same. In his words: “It is morally more important to stop injustices and other wrongs committed against our compatriots than to stop such injustices and wrongs committed against foreigners by third parties...it is more important to attend to the needs of our compatriots than to give like assistance to foreigners [12].” Pogge seems to agrees with Young that a strictly cosmopolitan-utilitarian approach to donating one’s resources towards alleviating human suffering should be ignored if it implies neglecting the equivalent needs of one’s neighbors and family. However, there is one caveat. As Pogge states, “When undue harms foreigners suffer are our own doing, foreigners and compatriots are on par [12].” He claims that when giving to help
alleviate human suffering is merely a benevolent act, one should first prioritize compatriots and family over foreigners only if one did not cause the foreigners’ suffering.

Therefore in the case above, where the mother can only warn either her three children or five complete strangers, it is morally acceptable for her to warn her children only if she did not place the five strangers in danger. The strength of this position is that it reinforces the equality of all human life regardless of one’s preferences for some over others.

How we are hurting the Poor

To illustrate Pogge’s argument that we have negative duties to the global poor because we are causing them undue suffering, consider this example. In 2005, India accepted the terms of the World Trade Organization’s (WTO) Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS), as a component of the WTO treaty [14]. In brief, this requirement required India to grant 20-year monopoly patents on a range of innovations, including medication. These terms required that generic drug companies in India should not reverse engineer and mass produce Western drugs at far lower costs during a drug’s 20 year patent-protection period. By some estimates, India’s generic drug companies were meeting the retroviral drug demands of about half of the developing world’s AIDS patients before this agreement—at very low prices [16]. Additionally, the competition of some of these generic drug companies helped drive the price for these drugs down from $15,000 to $200 per patient over a decade [16]. However, the WTO’s requirements removed the competitive advantage of some of these companies.

One might argue that regardless of the benefits of their drug production, these Indian companies were infringing on the intellectual property rights of Western pharmaceutical companies that deserved legal protection. However, consider Unger’s argument in response to
such a claim [11]. He states, “When needed to lessen the serious suffering of innocent enough people, it’s morally good to engage in what is typically objectionable conduct, like lying, promise-breaking, cheating, stealing and so on [11].” The trade agreement was deemed necessary by some to protect incentives for technological development. Yet, Unger argues that it will have been morally just for the US to influence the WTO to circumvent the TRIPS component of the agreement in the interest of providing needed medication to the global poor at affordable prices. Instead, the United States did the opposite.

According to the World Health Organization the European Union and the United States have refused to open their markets and reduce subsidies to favor developing countries [17]. Moreover, they aggressively pursue additional intellectual right protection from developing countries beyond the requirements of the WTO treaty. They developed what is termed TRIPS-plus provisions, which contain additional requirements beyond those of WTO’s TRIPS [17]. Two such requirements of TRIPS-plus are that the protection of industrial designs for 10 years under TRIPS is extended to at least fifteen years while the 20 year patent protection for pharmaceutical and of plant protection products has been increased to twenty five years. Moreover, the US-Jordan Free Trade Area, an aspect of TRIPS-plus, compels Jordan to raise its criminal penalties for copyright and trade mark counterfeiting and piracy [17]. Developing countries are not obligated to adopt these TRIPS-plus agreements but they decide to do so with anticipation that the benefits of such agreements will outweigh the costs. Also, they often lack the resources or expertise to compete against developed countries like the United States during bilateral dispute settlements and agreements [17]. Furthermore, as Pogge explains,

“...political power in the poor countries is typically very unevenly distributed. Even if an international treaty is disastrous for a country’s poor majority, signing up to this treaty as
proposed by the affluent states may nonetheless be advantageous for this country’s political and economic elite... by affording them export opportunities, by winning them diplomatic recognition, and political support, by enhancing their access to weapons, by protecting their ability discreetly to transfer and maintain wealth abroad, and in many other ways...This point is made vivid when we look through the list of rulers who..signed up their countries to the WTO agreement....: Nigeria’s military dictator, Sani Abacha,... Indonesia’s kleptorcrat Suharto, Zimbabwe’s Robert Mugabe... and a host of less well-known tyrants of similar brutality and corruption [14].”

Evidently, even though we are an affluent nation, we compel poor countries to accept trade conditions that benefit us significantly more than them. We also indirectly support corruption and tyrannical dictators who exacerbate the suffering of the poor. Worse still, some of these TRIPS-plus provisions directly target the TRIPS provisions that allowed for protection of public health in developing countries [18]. In sub-Saharan African and Southeast Asian countries, the cost of AIDS on their economies significantly offset the benefits of the FTAs they engaged in through these TRIPS-plus provisions [18]. As such, we are benefiting from trade agreements that significantly deprive poor countries, especially the already marginalized impoverished communities within them.

Robert E. Goodin’s brief discussion on property rights illustrates the injustice of this arrangement [19]. He argues that one may be legally entitled to protect private property from theft. However, from a moral perspective, one cannot protect private property against acquisition by those who are in need of it to survive and therefore can lay a moral claim to it. Yet, we are protecting our financial and economic interests by acquiring negligible profit that could significantly improve the lives of those in need of it.

In summary, our obligation to help the global poor should be considered a morally responsible. We should remove unjust systems that needlessly promote our interests at the
expense of sustaining and exacerbating global human suffering. This obligation is not limited by
geographic or relational proximity to those suffering.

How we ought to satisfy our obligation from the Effective Altruism Perspective

In response to how one can alleviate human suffering, Singer suggests giving a certain percent of one’s income to effective aid organizations that are alleviating human suffering globally. Additionally, he suggests that his readers should call their representatives and ask that their country’s foreign aid should be directed only to the world’s poorest people. Singer says that after doing these things and fulfilling similar recommendations, one would have made a difference to some people living in extreme poverty [10].

However, as Pogge and Young point out, alleviating human suffering is less of an attempt to produce the most good one can and more of a responsibility to correct injustices that we are culpable for because we significantly benefit from them [9, 14, 12]. This comparison is analogous to either running for exercise or out of necessity. If a man were running as a form of exercise because it is a healthy activity, he may follow a pre-planned route and take needed breaks while running. However, consider the case where he is running away from an assailant at night. Assuming his priority might be to get to a police precinct ten blocks away, it doesn’t matter how healthy the process is making his heart, or whether he feels the need to rest. In the former case, completing two thirds of the planned exercise route is commendable and would have made a difference in his health. However, in the latter case, he must reach the precinct for safety or risk bodily harm from the assailant. It does not matter if he successfully completes ninety-five percent of the journey. The ultimate goal is to complete the journey in its entirety. Likewise, the
goal is not to make a difference in lives of the global poor, in as much as it is to address injustices from which we benefit.

Also, as Oscar Schachter explains, when one approaches poverty and human suffering alleviation from a charitable perspective, it creates an asymmetric relationship between the donor and the recipient where the latter is expected to be submissive in some form [20]. However, when one approaches these concepts with the intention to address them as injustices, a more desirable relationship is formed between both recipients and donors. Moreover, donating to charities to alleviate the poor’s suffering through resource transfers risks sustaining injustice. We will continue to see less of the symptoms of an injustice if we keep addressing its symptoms with aid. This situation is analogous to an abusive mother physically abusing her children but using make-up to cover up their wounds. The make-up will disguise evidence of their misery to strangers, but it will not end it. Additionally, others seeking to help the children might overlook these children since they may not look like they are in need of help. Granted, Unger proposes that his readers should donate to Oxfam which claims to, “challenge the structural causes of the injustice of poverty, and work with allies and partners locally and globally [21].” However, Singer recommends organizations like the Against Malaria Foundation to donors. This charity, according to their website, does not address structural injustices or institutional problems as much as it addresses a symptom of a bigger problem. This problem is the inability of a local government’s public health’s department to effectively control the spread of a disease that has always been endemic to its geographic region [22]. Where that government’s health department is lacking in controlling malaria, it is most likely lacking in controlling similar diseases’ as well. To better illustrate this point, consider that the United States
does not have any charitable organizations soliciting aid from foreign donors to fund the
distribution of face masks during the seasonal flu. Face masks are used to control transmission of
the flu in hospitals’ emergency/waiting rooms but we have developed a better way of controlling
the flu than distributing face masks to the general public--vaccinations [23]. Our health system is
currently capable enough to provide the best protection available without such aid. However, I
will argue that organizations like AMF are doing good work, but in the process they are
preventing us from noticing the reasons for inadequacies of health systems in developing
countries. If they lack funds, is it because they do not sufficient tax revenue or that corruption
drains the resources allocated to the malaria control budget? If it is an issue of insufficient
revenue, could this be fixed by stimulating business to increase the amount of taxable revenue?
Or should tax policies be amended in ways that can feasibly generate the needed funds for these
local health departments in developing countries? By exploring these causes, more sustainable
and effective solutions that restructure unjust institutions can be discovered and implemented.

The Banker Example

To aid future discussion, imagine the following scenario. You, referred to as Client A, are
forced by a government mandate to contract the services of an investment banker to manage
your finances. You are required to grant your banker complete access to your finances including
the income from your job. In turn, she is required to give you a fixed income based on the
success of her investments on your behalf. Ordinarily, you would expect that your expected
monthly income should be more than or at least equal to what you could earn without the
banker’s help, given your banker’s investment expertise. Let us define this expected income as
$20. However, consider the instance in which your banker pays you less money than your
expected income ($15). The reason she gives is that her other client, named Client B, needed a fraction ($5) of your expected income to afford basic needs which you can satisfactorily meet in excess.

Granted, her reasoning is understandable as per Peter Unger’s discussion on *The Account* [11]. As he explains, it is morally acceptable for an accountant (the banker) to take a million dollars from a billionaire client (Client A) and donate it to UNICEF (Client B). Key to this argument is that the billionaire (Client A) is rich enough to barely notice this minor transaction and the accountant’s intent is to help alleviate the suffering of other people (Client B) not to satisfy personal interests. Likewise, if your investment banker paid you $5 less than you expected to earn as Client A so she could help Client B, you would reasonably condone the act on the basis of her intent.

Yet consider the same example except in this case the investment banker took the same amount of money ($5) from you as Client A but only gave a fraction of it ($2) to help the poorer Client B. She then retained part of it ($3) to purchase personal luxury items. It is reasonable that you (Client A) might not be as willing to condone this act. You might be intolerant of it for three reasons. First, the banker took your money without your permission. Second, she used it on items she wanted but did not need. Third, the banker may have helped her other client (Client B) to some degree, but if she had given all the money she took from you ($5) to Client B, more of Client B’s needs could have been met. Even if your banker helped Client B up to the point where that client’s most basic needs were met, you would still want the remainder of the amount that the banker took from you ($3) to either go to Client B or back to your account—not the banker.

**Our Role as Bankers**
Similarly, based on my argument thus far, we as citizens of an affluent country can be likened to the banker. By virtue of the design of global institutions, we control significant proportions of the world’s wealth. According to Pogge, high-income countries such as ours contain 15.7% of the world’s population but control 79% of the aggregate global income [12]. The more self-sufficient Client A, illustrated above as you, represents those whose resources we as bankers increase through donations or trade. The poorer Client B represents those we could help if we were more efficient with our current resource transfers to those whose lives we could improve (Client A). However, like both clients in our earlier discussion, the people we help as an affluent nation (bankers) through charity and/or trade have little control over our decisions on distributing our wealth.

Applying the effective altruism approach, we would remove the surplus sent to those around the world who through our trade or charity can already meet their basic needs and have surplus (Client A). As the ‘bankers’ in control of most of the world’s wealth we will divert this surplus to poorer people (Client B) who have difficulty meeting their basic needs. Our goal will be to ensure that as many of our clients as possible can meet their most basic needs and none has excess that could be used to help other clients meet basic needs. Moreover, we would not use any of the wealth that we took from Client A to help Client B on our own luxuries. Practically, what this implies is that we should cease trade with and aid to those around the world who can afford their most basic needs without us, and direct what would be their surplus to others. Additionally, we (bankers) will deny ourselves any luxuries until everyone in need of help (clients) can meet their most basic needs, at which point we will be released from our moral obligation.

**Weaknesses in Effective Altruism Approach**
There are four problematic issues illustrated by this thought experiment. First, you (Client A) would want to control your own wealth and not have to rely on an investment banker to redistribute it as she seems just. Second, though you may agree that the transfer of your surplus wealth as Client A to the suffering (Client B) is morally justified, you might want to retain some surplus to enhance your quality of living beyond the bare minimum, even if you know others’ suffering could be reduced by that surplus. Third, the banker is not allowed luxuries during this resource transfer. In relation, we are not allowed luxuries as long as there are human beings whose suffering can be alleviated by the resources we choose to expend on anything else except our basic needs. Finally, we will never fulfill our moral obligation from Pogge’s perspective. Though we might be alleviating the suffering that the unjust global institutions that benefit us cause to the poor, we will never stop causing that suffering until we implement needed institutional change. That is, we as bankers will have to allow our clients to capture and control their own wealth. If not, we will only alleviate suffering after it has been caused by using our incredibly optimized aid machine.

The critique of effective altruism I have tried to illustrate in the issues above reflects the perspectives of donors and beneficiaries of aid. As Pogge and Goodin explain, the effective altruist (the banker), chooses how to distribute resources that are illegitimately possessed. Worse still, the banker’s position prevents clients from capturing and controlling their own wealth just as the current global institutional orders at times limit recipients of aid from capturing and controlling their own wealth. In an extreme interpretation, effective altruism requests that we should redistribute wealth we have taken away from others up to the point where we begin to feel uncomfortable. Moreover, we should do this efficiently without allowing
too much excess to accumulate towards one recipient at the expense of satisfying the basic needs of another. Apparent in this interpretation is that the recipient’s preferences do not matter as long as the greatest number of people are helped by the donor. The recipient’s (Client A) desires to have some surplus, control their own income, and decide to what degree they will be helped are subjugated to the donor’s (banker’s) sense of fulfilling a moral obligation created without Client A’s involvement.

This point is highlighted in two proposed effective altruism approaches to guide donors on fulfilling their obligation. These are the ‘earning to give’ approach and the utilitarian approach to distributing resources which prioritizes the number of people who can be helped over the significance of that help to them when deciding when and how to give. In the first approach, eighty thousand (80 000) hours, an affiliate of the University of Oxford’s Future of Humanity Institute, proposes the concept of professional philanthropy [24]. It entails choosing a career which pays a high income so one can afford to donate more. For instance, it may recommend that a mathematics major who can work as a high school teacher or as a financial analyst on Wall Street should choose the latter because it pays more money therefore he can give more money to charity. He might have no reservations against working as an analyst and might prove to be a valuable asset to his employees in the finance sector. However, he may have a stronger preference for teaching in high school.

Singer’s following example illustrates the second approach. He explains that the level of democracy in Ghana has allowed international organizations to assist in the promotion of government accountability to the public on interactions with multinational corporations. On the contrary, the lower level of democracy in Angola does not allow for such transparency [10]. He
argues that in contributing towards improving transparency in places like Angola, one might not be as statistically likely of doing much good. Rather, one might be more successful in helping more people by donating towards the provision of insecticide-treated bed nets for malaria prevention because of the challenges of the former cause. However, he explains that if the potential benefits of giving towards improved government transparency in places like Angola outweigh giving to provide bed nets, and one is particularly risk tolerant, then one should pursue it [10]. Yet, I will argue that inherent in his qualification of this recommendation is that if challenging conditions limit the statistical probability of success in certain pursuits, other more promising pursuits should be sought instead. Though he acknowledges that the value of a transparent government to Angolans might outweigh its value to Ghanaians, he explains that chances of success at achieving it are small. As such, using an effective altruism guide that accounts for the probability of an endeavor’s success, one will be inclined to donate towards distributing bed nets which are more likely to alleviate human suffering rather than donate to an endeavor that has a low chance of success—the donor’s success at fulfilling a moral obligation. In essence, the factors causing suffering to the poor are being perceived as investments bonds with varying risks and returns on investment.

Effective Altruism from the Beneficiary’s Perspective

What these aspects of the effective altruism approach illustrate is that the aid recipient’s perspective is not as important as the donor’s. The donor who can earn several times more than the recipient is encouraged to do so and transfer part of that earned income to recipients. There seems to be little consideration for addressing why recipients cannot earn their own income and use the market economy to address their own needs rather than rely on charitable donations
from affluent donors. They might also spend their own incomes towards alleviating suffering that is not apparent to the professional philanthropist. Consider this example for illustration. In a household where a toddler is completely dependent on her parents’ income. The parents might channel their income through schools, piano lessons and tutor services for her, regardless of her opinion. They might do this because they believe that they know what is best for their child. Assume then that the child goes to school every day and is teased by classmates for wearing pink shoes instead of blue ones like they do. From the parents’, piano teacher’s and private tutor’s perspective, this is trivial. As such, every time she approaches them to ask for blue shoes, they argue that her pink ones are sufficient if they serve their purpose of protecting her feet. It might even have the most surface traction among all the shoes within its price range from a cost-benefit analysis. Yet what they do not realize is that in the society of the toddlers’ playground, that cost-benefit analysis is meaningless. As long as she wears those pink shoes, she would remain ostracized and bullied. If she had her own money, she would buy those blue shoes. This illustrates one of the main points against effective altruism. It presupposes the most effective ways of helping the poor and weighs aid effectiveness based on return on investment to the donor which in itself erodes the autonomy of aid recipients.

So far, we have accepted that citizens of affluent nations are morally obligated to alleviate needless global human suffering from which they continue to benefit. To satisfy this obligation some effective altruists propose donating part of one’s resources to effective charities while attempting to influence government’s foreign aid distribution through our representatives. From an extreme analysis of these suggestions, as illustrated with the banker analogy, it can be inferred that donors cannot enjoy luxury with resources they could donate to help others meet
their basic needs. Susan Wolf’s *Moral Saints* illustrates the implications of living in this manner. According to her, living this way, “does not constitute a model of personal well-being toward which it would be particularly rational or good or desirable for a human being to strive [26].” Aside from this expectation being excessively demanding of the donor, it also disregards the reasonable expectations and autonomy of the recipient.

**Collaborative Vocation-Led Altruism**

It seems then that the best alternative is to eliminate the mandate for contracting personal investment bankers, allow individuals to capture and control their own wealth, but simultaneously incentivize them to support each other by appropriately redistributing surplus. One might consider this suggestion ideal yet unrealistic. Instituting a new global order that will enable all citizens to capture and control their wealth equally is not feasible. However, this does not necessarily have to be the goal for those seeking a better approach to helping the suffering that circumvents effective altruism’s shortcomings.

There is a better approach to satisfying our moral responsibility to alleviating human suffering that does not unnecessarily burden donors or disregard the preferences and autonomy of recipients. It argues that one should pursue the moral obligation to alleviate the poor’s suffering as a calling rather than a responsibility. Second, it proposes that one should develop the best solution to ending human suffering regardless of the resources available, and then pursue that solution in collaboration with as many people as needed to realize it. This approach will be referred to as Collaborative Vocation-Led Altruism. Like effective altruism, it acknowledges that the poor should be helped by those who can; the process of helping must efficiently produce intended results; and both material and non-material resources can be used
to satisfy this obligation. However, it differs in that first, it prioritizes the obligation to help the poor as a primary goal rather than a requirement one must divert attention from daily living to attend. Yet, it does not overly burden the altruist as illustrated in Susan Wolf’s Moral Saint. Rather, it can be perceived as a pleasurable experience. Second, it does not delegate the moral responsibility to alleviate human suffering solely to affluent members of a society, but rather, it includes those suffering in the process and assigns them responsibility as well. As Young emphasizes, “…those who can properly be argued to be victims of structural injustice also can be called to a responsibility they share with others to engage in actions directed at transforming those structures [9].” Also, it requires the use of different kinds of resources possessed by the collective public but no one individual, thereby requiring every member of society to be involved in the process. Finally, it has a better chance of ending needless human suffering using a sustainable approach than an extreme interpretation of effective altruism can.

In the following justifications, previously constructed analogies in addition to an analysis of the Marshall plan will be used to provide supporting evidence for the arguments stated above in favor of collaborative vocation-led altruism.

According to our earlier discussion, effective altruists argue that affluent members of the global community are morally obligated to help the poor because they exploited them in the acquisition of their affluence. However, collaborative vocation-led altruism requires us to address poverty related injustice to the extent that we feel inclined. If one feels inclined to address poverty-related human suffering, she should. Additionally, she should do so to the degree that she feels inclined for any reason except that which is morally objectionable. For example, one cannot help a poor man to secure a well-paying job with the intent of compelling
him to repay the favor with a fraction of his monthly income. Otherwise, one’s reason to help the poor should not matter as much as one is dedicated to doing so passionately and effectively.

The Marshall Plan, implemented after World War II (WWII) provides an example for this approach to altruism. The program transferred about thirteen billion dollars to Europe in the years from 1948 to 1951 after WWII [27]. Bradford De Long and Barry Eichengreen argued in 1991 that it was “History’s Most Successful Structural Adjustment Program [27].” It was designed to do more than support Europeans’ ongoing efforts at rebuilding their states—it was designed to contain communism [27, 28]. It also sought to and succeeded at “transform[ing] its beneficiaries from poverty cases into partners [27].” Its beneficiaries used the assistance they received to replace or modify previously existing systems like markets and transportation infrastructure that they needed, and would have spent their own money on if they had any. Additionally, the plan’s funds were used on investments which generated high returns; to finance public spending on infrastructure that had been damaged during the war; and to relax foreign exchange rates, all towards the goal of rebuilding and protecting Western Europe from communism [27]. The plan was effective. The post-WWII economies of Western European states that received aid from The Marshall Plan were much stronger and grew faster than their economies before the war [27].

The Marshall Plan was a response to a perceived need; however, it was not the Europeans’ poverty that entreated US attention as much as the threat of their economic structures succumbing to communism and a reduction in trade revenue from them. In our banker analogy, this is analogous to the banker deciding to rescue a bankrupt client A with personal funds so client A can afford to keep employing that banker and not switch to another
banker who charges lower rates. George Marshall articulated this perspective in his speech at Harvard University in June of 1947. He stated,

“The truth of the matter is that Europe’s requirements for the next three or four years of foreign food and other essential products - principally from America - are so much greater than her present ability to pay that she must have substantial additional help or face economic, social, and political deterioration of a very grave character...aside from the demoralizing effect on the world at large and the possibilities of disturbances arising as a result of the desperation of the people concerned, the consequences to the economy of the United States should be apparent to all [27].”

He argued that helping Europe was in our best economic interest. This argument did not invoke moral responsibility as much as effective altruism does but it summoned the American people to act in support of a suffering people whom they had already helped in WWII. Likewise collaborative vocation-led altruism has at its core a calling to address poverty regardless of one’s role in creating it or previous contributions to aiding the poor. However, like the Marshall plan it is not overly demanding of the donor. When European governments were asked for an estimate of how much money they needed for economic recovery and reconstruction, they quoted twenty-eight billion dollars. The U.S. government rejected this amount as “hopelessly optimistic [30]”. However the US government succeeded at working with European governments to achieve mutually beneficial interests with just thirteen billion dollars. The US used less money than the Europeans thought was needed but they collaborated with Europeans to structure needed programs. According to an account by the Department of State, “For a short, intense period, a new American presence arrived in Europe, dedicated to finding ways to translate the successes of the American economic experience into recipes for the political salvation of others, and so turn American myth into model”. Similarly, collaborative vocation-led altruism proposes approaching a problem without a pre-designed solution but with a desire to solve it. The
application of this approach to individual donors is derived from William Easterly’s “Searcher” approach to foreign aid [30]. Searchers are people who “do not set predetermined problems and do not have big plans; they are just on the lookout for favorable opportunities to solve problems—any problem no matter how big or small, whose solution will benefit themselves or others [30].” A searcher only seeks to identify problems that poor people face and attempt to fix them by trial and error, accepting that poverty is a complicated phenomenon involving several factors including failures in politics, economics, and technology [30]. I will add that an effective searcher seeks to work together with those he wishes to serve while approaching every attempt with disciplined focus and at utmost desire to achieve mutually beneficial results as defined by both donors and recipients. This effective searcher does not evaluate personal resources and decide how much of it can be donated to meet a moral obligation to help the poor. Doing so is analogous the European countries budgeting 28 billion dollars when 13 billion dollars sufficed. Rather, he sets forth to help the poor with a passion to solve a problem and works with available persons and resources to solve it. The following account by Jim Warren, a Marshall Planner in Greece as he rejoiced fifty years after the program summarizes this approach. He states, “We had a goal; we had fire in our bellies; we worked like hell; we had tough, disciplined thinking, and we could program, strive for, and see results.” What he refers to as “fire in [his belly]” is explained as vocation or a passionate sense of calling from the collaborative vocation-led altruism approach. One of the Plan’s head administrators, Harlan Cleveland also highlights a paradoxical feature of the Marshall Plan’s implementation which reiterates Easterly’s “searchers” concept that is integrated into collaborative vocation-led altruism. He called the program, “a series of improvisations ... a continuous international happening [30].” It was not a
strictly structured plan as one might think, but like Warren and Cleveland explain, it was an amendable approach to solving a problem that was governed by discipline and the need to fulfill a task. As Marshall articulated in his speech before the plan’s implementation, “Any assistance that [the U.S. government] may render in the future should provide a cure rather than a mere palliative.” This is the intention that the U.S. had before implementing the plan. They meant to make Europe self-sufficient, not equitably or efficiently distribute much needed aid among its population. The US went to Europe to renovate an economic model that they thought would soon break down and cause Europeans, “economic, social, and political deterioration of a very grave character [29].” America acknowledged the need to re-structure the model rather than provide palliative aid which effective altruists like Singer advocate donors to do through effective charities.

The Marshall Plan’s success demonstrates the need for those seeking to help the underprivileged to partner with them and be willing to adjust approaches to a discipline-guided initiative to change institutions or economic structures that cause or sustain poverty. Therefore using collaborative vocation-led altruism is a similar guide to effective altruism in that it emphasizes that we have a duty to help the global poor, we should be disciplined in how we approach the issue and we should give our time and/or money depending on the situation. However, collaborative vocation-led altruism is more effective because it emphasizes institutional change as a cure rather than benevolent aid as a palliative temporary solution. Second, it requires donating up to the point where a solution is found rather than when one is no longer able to give anymore. Finally, it acknowledges the recipients’ interests and works in favor of them until recipients are entirely self-sufficient to pursue their interests without external
assistance, rather than no longer in need of assistance to meet basic needs. Moreover, it focuses substantial resources in one area to permanently address a problem.

In summary, I wish to argue that when approaching human suffering with the intent to alleviate it, one should do the following. First, determine the root cause of the suffering by learning about it and speaking with those whom one wants to help in order to understand their situation. Second, one should approach the root causes from one’s field of expertise and talents with the intent to eliminate the cause as best as one knows how without focusing excessively on the cost of the project initially. Third, one should collaborate with others who are more skilled in other needed fields and can help with the process. Finally, one should see the poor as partners whose well-being can be beneficial to one’s well-being as well. We all inherently know what resources and talents we possess that can help end the injustice of needless human suffering caused by poverty. What I propose is that we accept correcting this injustice as every individual’s responsibility and, make an accurate assessment of what we have available to satisfy this responsibility. Next, we should collaborate with others to maximize the impact of our contributions to alleviating human suffering. As more affluent and skilled individuals decide to engage and work with the poor in their fields, communities and countries, they will better understand the influence of unjust institutions on them. This understanding will better equip them to work towards restructuring unjust institutions as Pogge and Young and I recommend.
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