



# The collectivist critique of the effective altruist movement

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Conference on The Ethics Of Giving, St Andrews, 23 May 2017

# The effective altruism movement, very briefly

- ▶ Intellectual roots: Singer 1972, “Famine, affluence and morality” (altruism) + focus on (cost-)effectiveness.
- ▶ Paradigm case: GiveWell’s recommendations for (small-scale) philanthropic donors, e.g.
  - ▶ AMF
  - ▶ SCI
- ▶ Massive ‘movement growth’ since c. 2012.

# Collectivism, roughly

- ▶ For many large-scale issues, it at least looks at first sight as though the relevant actors are only *groups* of persons, not individual persons taken separately.
- ▶ Climate change: individuals' emissions make no difference?
  - ▶ “The environmental system leading to climate change is so complex that it can effectively be treated as over-determined , in which case it will happen regardless of individual agents' emissions.” (Ashford MS)
  - ▶ “My exhaust... does not cause any climate change at all. No storms or floods or droughts or heat waves can be traced to my individual act of driving.” (Sinnott-Armstrong 2005)
  - ▶ “We can't solve global warming because I f---ing changed lightbulbs in my house. It's because of something collective.” (Barack Obama)
- ▶ Revolutionary campaigning: Individuals' campaigning efforts make no difference?
- ▶ The collectivist critique: (i) The EA movement focusses only on individuals' outcome-based reasons for action, and (ii) because of this, it necessarily fails to see the value of these potentially very valuable *collective* actions.

# The collectivist critique (I): Stephanie Collins

- ▶ “[C]ollective agents tend to have strong reasons of both rightness and goodness... The point is not that *he* [i.e. the individual agent] has a reason to *affect* his state, or his university, or the international organisations of which his state is a part. The point is that *his state* and *the university* and *the international organisations* each have reasons to change their ways.” (Collins 2016)

# The collectivist critique (II): Elizabeth Ashford

- ▶ “The broadly act consequentialist moral framing [effective altruist reasoning] tends to favour can lead to a certain myopia. [It] focuses on the impact of the various choices available to *individual agents*, *taking as given* the background social structures... This, I suggest, needs to be complemented by a focus on the consequences of the structures themselves. ... [S]tructural harms can only be seen by looking at the at the combined effects of ongoing patterns of behaviour of a vast number of agents. .... The moral significance of an individual agent’s contribution to a structural harm cannot be adequately grasped if we just focus on the impact of that agent’s behaviour, even across a lifetime.” (Ashford MS)

# The collectivist critique (III): Amia Srinivasan

- ▶ “There is a small paradox in the growth of effective altruism as a movement when it is so profoundly individualistic. ... The tacit assumption is that the individual, not the community, class or state, is the proper object of moral theorising. There are benefits to thinking this way. If everything comes down to the marginal individual, then our ethical ambitions can be safely circumscribed; the philosopher is freed from the burden of trying to understand the mess we’re in, or of proposing an alternative vision of how things could be.” (Srinivasan 2016)



# Two short responses to the collectivist critique

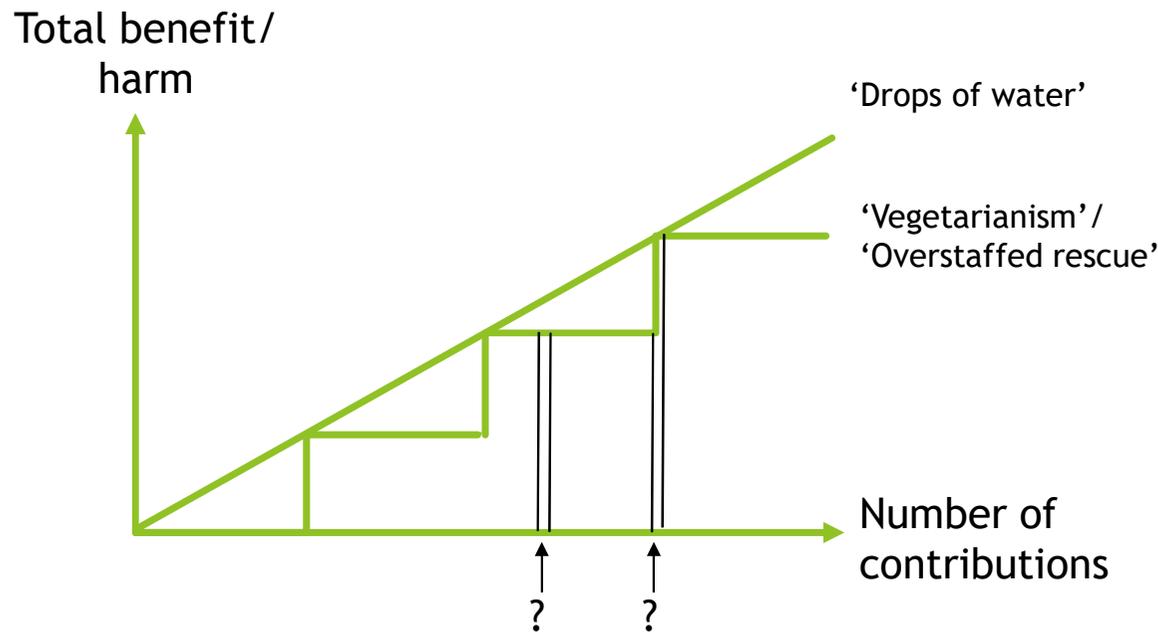
- ▶ First short response: The critique attacks a straw man: It is not true that the EA movement considers only what outcome-based reasons *individuals* have.
- ▶ Second (more-or-less incompatible) short response: The EA movement is *correct* to focus on individuals' reasons.
  - ▶ “I am neither a community nor a state. I can determine only what I will do, not what my community or state will do.” (McMahan 2016)
- ▶ Each of these responses (implicitly) concedes too much to the critic, though...

## ‘Do I make a difference?’ Some stylised puzzle cases

- ▶ **Drops of water.** Many men lie in the desert, suffering from extreme thirst. A large number of altruists have a pint of water each. If an additional pint is poured into a water-cart, each wounded man would get one extra drop of water. But “even to a very thirsty man, each of these extra drops would be a very small benefit”, and “might even be imperceptible”. (Glover 1975, Parfit 1984)
- ▶ **Vegetarianism.** The butcher orders another 25 chickens, and thus the farm kills another 25 chickens, every time the 25<sup>th</sup> chicken is sold. Many people buy one chicken each. In fact, 578 people do this. But no individual knows how many other purchasers there are; they have only a vague awareness that this butcher’s shop seems to have a reasonably large customer base. (Kagan 2011)
- ▶ **The overstaffed rescue.** Some injured victims lie at the bottom of a mineshaft. For every four people who pull on the rope, an additional victim will be successfully rescued. Five people pull, and each knows in advance that all the others will pull. (Cf. the ‘Firing squad’ case in Parfit 1984.)

# Graphing the puzzle cases

- ▶ In each case, consider the graph of *total amount of benefit/harm done against number of contributions*.



Drops of water: Each additional pint confers a *real*, albeit very small, benefit on each of the (many) thirsty men.

Vegetarianism: The *expected* amount of badness resulting from buying one chicken is roughly equivalent to one chicken-death.

Overstaffed rescue: In this case (only), the individual makes no difference *even in expectation*.

# Categorising the real-world cases

- ▶ None of the real-world cases is like *Overstaffed Rescue*. They are all like *Drops of water* and/or *Vegetarianism*.
- ▶ Therefore they are all cases in which the individual's action does affect the (expected) value of the outcome.



# Climate change, in more detail

- ▶ On the significance of individual emissions: The complexity of the climate system is a reason against viewing this as a case of overdetermination (in the sense of *Overstaffed Rescue*), as opposed to a case of small but real harms (like *Drops of Water*) or triggering (like *Vegetarianism*).



# Revolutionary campaigning, in more detail

- ▶ Obvious fact: Other things being equal, larger campaigns have greater prospects of success than smaller campaigns. E.g.
  - ▶ Amnesty International's "letters floods"
  - ▶ The 1963 March on Washington
- ▶ Again, the complexity of the systems involved makes it implausible that even a large campaign is in a situation of (known) overdetermination.



# Conclusions and conciliatory remarks

- ▶ Conclusion: the fact that one's reasoning is simultaneously (i) individualist and (ii) outcome-based does not prevent one from capturing the case for collective action, in particular on various forms of 'systemic change'.
- ▶ Conciliatory remarks:
  - ▶ Psychologically: It may well be much easier to *grasp* the importance of some intervention when considering many thousands/millions of people engaging in it simultaneously.
  - ▶ Identifying the best *types* of action (for individuals): It may well be that what individuals have strongest outcome-based reason to do (in expectation) is to initiate and join 'coordinated efforts' (e.g. revolutionary campaigns), rather than attempting 'unilateral action'. So certainly these types of (individual!) action must also be on the EA's agenda.

# References

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- ▶ McMahan, J. (2016) “Philosophical critiques of effective altruism.”
- ▶ Parfit, D. (1984) *Reasons and Persons*.
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