The Philosophical Core of Effective Altruism

*Singer’s Definition of EA:* “a philosophy and social movement which applies evidence and reason to working out the most effective ways to improve the world.”

*My Aim:* to develop a view about how we should understand EA’s core commitments, in light of the challenges presented by the goal of social movement building.

*My View:* EA can be fairly ecumenical about a range of issues in moral and political theory about which there is substantial philosophical disagreement, but must embrace controversial positions on a few key issues.

I. EA’s Central Moral Concerns

EA’s tend to:
- Give money to charities regarded as highly effective (e.g. recommended by GiveWell).
- Live modest lifestyles so as to limit negative impacts and to be able to give more.
- Choose a career based on how they can best contribute to improving the world.
- Contribute to efforts to determine what the best ways to improve the world are.
- Make decisions about where to direct resources on the basis of evidence about the best ways of improving the world.

EA’s tend to criticize:
- Spending on luxury goods.
- Donating to, e.g., wealthy universities or a local opera house.
- Donating to causes one cares a lot about as opposed to where resources will do more good.
- Donating without looking into evidence about the effectiveness of different organizations.

Some Core EA Commitments:
1. *Strong Interest-Based Reasons*: the needs and interests of individuals give us strong reasons for action.
2. *Cosmopolitan Impartiality*: the needs and interests of all persons are, and should be treated as, equally morally important, at least in donating decisions.
3. *Evidence-Based Decision Making*: we should gather as much evidence as we (cost-effectively) can about what is achieved via different efforts to improve the world, and decide what to do on the basis of that evidence.

II. How Ecumenical Can EA Be?

II.1: *Rights and Deontological Constraints*
- There’s nothing in the core commitments that I’ve identified, or in the recommendations of EA charity evaluators or the kinds of things that EA’s, *qua* EA’s, tend to do or say, that’s inconsistent with rights or deontological constraints.
- This shouldn’t be surprising, since EA is about beneficence, and although consequentialists tend to accept more stringent obligations of beneficence than others, there’s nothing inconsistent about accepting that there are strong moral reasons to help others in need and also holding that there are rights or deontological constraints that must be respected.
II.2: Justice and Distributive Principles
- There’s also nothing in the core commitments that’s inconsistent with accepting non-utilitarian distributive principles (e.g. egalitarian or prioritarian principles).

II.3: Political Action and Institutional Change
- The EA commitments to Strong Interest-Based Reasons and Evidence-Based Decision Making do seem to rule out the kind of non-contingent commitment to pursuing institutional change rather than direct aid that some critics of EA endorse.
- But notice that on this issue, the critics claim that EA is too ecumenical, in that it lacks this non-contingent commitment. This allows the movement to include people who disagree substantially on issues of appropriate government policy (e.g. libertarians and socialists).

II.4: Obligations and Demandingness
- The arguments offered by some (e.g. Bowen and Pummer) for the view that EA need not include a core commitment to unconditional obligations of beneficence fail because they undermine the basis for many of the moral criticisms that EA’s tend to make of individual choices.
- For example, both views would leave EA’s with no basis for criticizing those who genuinely care much more deeply about benefitting wealthy universities than they care about benefitting the global poor, and give accordingly, or those who spend all of their disposable income on themselves. More importantly, both views are incompatible with accepting Cosmopolitan Impartiality as a core commitment of EA.
- EA can, however, be fairly ecumenical about the demandingness of our unconditional obligations of beneficence, since Strong Interest-Based Reasons and Cosmopolitan Impartiality don’t commit EA’s to any particular view about how our commitment to the equal moral importance of everyone’s needs and interests can or cannot be balanced against potentially competing considerations such as personal projects.

II.5: Permissible Partiality and Special Obligations
- EA can be rather ecumenical about the degree of permissible partiality to loved ones and friends, and about the existence and extent of special obligations to such people. The core commitments (including the commitment to unconditional obligations of beneficence) entail only that there’s some portion of a well off person’s resources that she’s obligated to devote to effectively improving the world. It’s consistent with this view to hold that with her remaining resources she’s permitted to be partial to loved ones, and/or that she has obligations to devote some of those resources to particular people.

III. An EA Overlapping Consensus
The three core commitments identified in section I, along with unconditional obligations of beneficence, can be thought of as the philosophical core of EA. They might be thought to play the same role within the EA movement that commitment to core principles of justice plays within Rawls’s political liberalism. On this view, just as commitment to an “overlapping consensus” of core liberal values allows fair social cooperation to be maintained despite deep disagreements about a range of other moral issues, commitment to the philosophical core of EA can allow cooperative pursuit of EA’s central moral goals, despite deep disagreements about other moral issues.