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Effective Altruism and Anti-Capitalism: An Attempt at Reconciliation

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Abstract

Leftwing critiques of philanthropy are not new and so it is unsurprising that the Effective Altruism movement, which regards philanthropy as one of its tools, has been a target in recent years. Similarly, some Effective Altruists have regarded anti-capitalist strategy with suspicion. This essay is an attempt at harmonizing Effective Altruism and the anti-capitalism. My attraction to Effective Altruism and anti-capitalism are motivated by the same desire for a better world and so personal consistency demands reconciliation. More importantly however, I think Effective Altruism will be less effective in realizing its own ends insofar as it fails to recognize that capitalism restricts the good we can do. Conversely, insofar as anti-capitalists fail to recognize the similarity in methods which underlie Effective Altruism thinking about the world, it too risks inefficiency or worse, total failure in replacing capitalism with a more humane economic system. I first argue that Effective Altruism and anti-capitalism are compatible in principle by looking at similarities between Effective Altruist theory and some Marxist writing. I then go on to show that the theoretic compatibility can be mirrored in practice. I demonstrate this by considering and replying to objections to anti-capitalism as they might be raised by Effective Altruists and by replying to objections to Effective Altruism as they might be raised by anti-capitalists. I conclude by suggesting that their reconciliation would lead to better outcomes from the perspective of a proponent of either view. In short, an “Anti-Capitalist Effective Altruism” is not just possible, it’s preferable.

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1. Introduction

Jacobin recently published a critique of the Effective Altruism (EA) movement titled “Against Charity.”¹ Author Matthew Snow summarized the article thusly:

Whenever anyone brings up the evils of global poverty, anyone not in the snares of capitalist ideology/bourgeois morality first thinks of this as a reductio of global capitalism’s constitutive features and only then thinks of what other causes might be worth supporting in this context.²

The contrasting assumption is that effective altruists at best fail to note, and at worst fail to see capitalism’s shortcomings. In an earlier critique of dominant forms of charity; “The Fallacy of Philanthropy,” Paul Gomberg argues that “the philanthropist assimilation of problems of poverty to duties of rescue rivets attention on saving the victims. Thus it tends to deflect attention away from the investigations of the institutional causes of hunger and from practical proposals that would attack those institutions.”³ In this essay I attempt to reconcile EA with the leftist orientation Snow, Gomberg, and myself, among others, share. My attraction to EA and anti-capitalism are motivated by the same desire for a better world and so personal consistency demands reconciliation. More importantly however EA will be less effective insofar as it fails to recognize that capitalism⁴ restricts the good we can do. Conversely, insofar as anti-capitalists fail to recognize the similarity in methods which underlie EA thinking about the world, it too risks inefficient or even unsuccessful change. The focus of my paper is the intersections of EA or anti-capitalism. Objections to EA or anti-capitalism as such are outside the scope of this essay. In other words, I’m interested in two points, first, what effective altruists, as effective altruists, should say about anti-capitalism. Secondly, what should anti-capitalists, as anti-capitalists, say about EA. I think proper consideration of these questions will make a few effective altruists out of anti-capitalists and a few anti-capitalists out of EA. Nothing said here will move a reader sympathetic to neither position. For individuals in this camp I recommend picking up Singer’s seminal essay “Famine, Affluence, and Morality” or watching

¹ Snow, Mathew. “Against Charity.” Jacobin, August 25, 2015. Snow admits in personal correspondence that the title is a bit of a misnomer.

² Snow, personal correspondence on August 27, 2015.

³ Gomberg, Paul. 2002. “The Fallacy of Philanthropy”. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 32 (1)., 63.

⁴ In an attempt to avoid sectarianism I leave the definition of capitalism employed here vague. A rough approximation would be: an economic system where some (capitalists) are able to acquire the means of production (capital) and are free to prevent these means (or the goods produced by them) being distributed in the most useful ways. For example, keeping food from the hungry or medicine from the sick.

his TED talk⁵ as well as reading G.A. Cohen's short book *Why Not Socialism?*⁶ alongside this essay.

In section 2 I define EA and anti-capitalism as I use the terms in this essay. In section 3 I argue that EA and anti-capitalism are not theoretically incompatible I do this by first rebutting one vulgar objection as motivationally inert for anyone not already committed to anti-capitalism. In section 4 I show that (at least Marxist influenced) anti-capitalism and EA have some significant similarities in their relation to morality and attempted use of reason and science. In section 5 I show why any effective altruist objection to anti-capitalism qua EA would be essentially a technical objection grounded in disagreements over how anti-capitalism scores given some metrics of effectiveness. I then show how anti-capitalist must respond to actually justify anti-capitalism as effective to effective altruists. In section 6 I engage the core of the paper by considering some practical leftwing and political objections to EA which I think, as an anti-capitalist, are most important for effective altruists to consider if we want to be the most effective we can. I start with a look at the charge that EA is bourgeois understood as a methodological problem and consider what is right and wrong about this objection. I then transition to a more specifically applied objection to EA, namely that EA has difficulties in applying its method to problems whose source or solutions are centered in the state or social movements. Finally, before concluding, I speculate in section VII about what producing an anti-capitalist effective altruist theory might entail.

2: Effective Altruism and Anti-Capitalism Defined

The EA movement can be traced back explicitly to the mid-2000s. Today there are many organizations and thousands of adherents. A quippy, but accurate, definition of EA is this:

A social movement that combines both the heart and the head: compassion guided by data and reason. It's about dedicating a significant part of one's life to improving the world and rigorously asking the question, "Of all the possible ways to make a difference, how can I make the greatest difference?"⁷

⁵ Singer, Peter. 1972. "Famine, Affluence, and Morality". *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 1 (3). Wiley: 229–43. And Singer. (2013, March). "The Why and How of Effective Altruism [Video file]." Retrieved from https://www.ted.com/talks/peter_singer_the_why_and_how_of_effective_altruism?language=en

⁶ Cohen, G. A. *Why Not Socialism?* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009.

⁷ "What Is Effective Altruism?" *Effective Altruism*. Accessed March 12, 2016. <http://www.effectivealtruism.org/about-ea/>

Effective altruists appeal to a variety of metrics to help them make the greatest difference. I appeal to three in this essay and expand on them in section 4. They are importance,⁸ tractability, and neglectedness.⁹ A course of action is effective insofar as it compares to others on these metrics. Effective altruists argue we ought to be effective as well as altruistic¹⁰ with our aid most prominently in two recent books; Peter Singer's *The Most Good You Can Do* and William MacAskill's *Doing Good Better*. In practice, popular causes among effective altruists include eradicating global poverty¹¹ and promoting health,¹² protecting animal welfare (or realizing animal liberation),¹³ and ensuring the long term future of humanity by avoiding X-risks.¹⁴ However in theory, EA is cause neutral. Depending on our values, different causes will look appropriate. As such, one effective altruist research area is "cause prioritization" sometimes christened as the search for "Cause X."¹⁵ In other words, EA is essentially an instrumentalist view, it demands no specific commitments on what is Good, Right, or Valuable except insofar as the incitement to be effective and "make the greatest difference" amounts to smuggling in some specific ethical commitments.

⁸ 'Scope' is often used in the same sense as 'importance.' I use the latter term so as to avoid confusion with the use of 'scope' in a quotation of Andrew Kuper in section VI.

⁹ Metrics like these show up frequently effective altruist work, for one somewhat arbitrary citation see: Todd, Benjamin. "A Framework for Strategically Selecting a Cause - 80,000 Hours." *80,000 Hours*. December 19, 2013. Accessed November 22, 2016. <https://80000hours.org/2013/12/a-framework-for-strategically-selecting-a-cause/>

¹⁰ "Altruism" does not imply optional, rather, as Peter Singer argues in "Famine, Affluence, and Morality" these 'altruistic' actions are obligatory.

¹¹ For a possible objection to EA that is coming down the academic pipeline is a critique of the concept of poverty that effective altruists and many other philanthropists use. In particular a Kantian/Hegelian critique worth noting is an (as of yet unpublished) paper by Carlos Pereira Di Salvo titled "Poverty as Unfreedom." In it he argues that poverty ought not to be explained as a form of material deprivation but rather as a sort of 'unfreedom.' Unfortunately, I did not engage this argument here.

¹² GiveWell (www.givewell.com) and Giving What We Can (www.givingwhatwecan.org) are two organizations working on poverty related causes.

¹³ Animal Charity Evaluators (ACE) (www.animalcharityevaluators.org) and Sentience Politics (www.sentience-politics.org) are two organizations working on animal issues.

¹⁴ Oxford's Future of Humanity Institute (www.fhi.ox.ac.uk) is probably the most famous X-risk organization.

¹⁵ See Vaughan, Kerry. "Three Heuristics for Finding Cause X." *Effective Altruism*. Accessed November 22, 2016. <https://www.effectivealtruism.org/three-heuristics-for-finding-cause-x/>. One organization working in this area is the Global Priorities Project (www.globalprioritiesproject.org).

I doubt it is possible to uncontroversially define anti-capitalism.¹⁶ However, a definition of some sort is necessary so I offer a broad definition with which I hope to avoid too much sectarianism. For my purposes here a ‘leftist’ or ‘anti-capitalist’ is anyone who assents to what I call the anti-capitalist thesis:

Some socialist alternative to capitalism is both achievable given our current material (and ideological) conditions and this transition is desirable.

Of course, various positions exist within this framework. One pole advocates revolutionary (or ruptural) action while the other end advocates social-democratic (or reformist) alternatives.¹⁷ Similarly, there are numerous ways to be a non-leftist on my account. Obviously we are not leftists if we are pro-capitalism, but we can fail to be capitalists in a weaker sense if we assent to a Thatcherite “there is no alternative” view. I want to note two possibly controversial details which follow from my definition but which I will not defend here. First, counterintuitively, nihilistic leftists will not assent to the anti-capitalist thesis and so do not count as leftists or anti-capitalists on my picture. This is a cost but I regard it as irrelevant in this paper especially because only leftists who think another world is possible can be understood as offering an alternative to effective altruists. Secondly, my thesis will be regarded as more or less imprecise depending on the particular political ideology each reader holds. For example, I am happy to understand the thesis as making room for left wing social democracy operating under market socialist conditions as an “anti-capitalist alternative” while more hardline leftists might object to that scheme as mere “redistributive capitalism.” My attempted reconciliation here will look like a more plausible but also more trivial reconciliation depending on how ideological debates like these strike the reader. Importantly, for the purposes of this paper, whether one is a leftist is largely an epistemic stance that will lead you to think one set of actions or another is reasonable.

¹⁶ For a skit relatable to anyone active in left-wing politics see the “splitters” skit in Monty Python’s *Life of Brian*. Directed by Terry Jones. Written by Monty Python. United Kingdom: Cinema International Corporation, 1979.

¹⁷ Example of the revolutionary picture include followers of Lenin and Trotsky. In the western world, social-democratic political views have been more popular with Eduard Bernstein being the most famous early proponent. Though many modern social-democratic parties still hold that view. Marxists after the Soviet Union’s collapse, and followers of Analytical Marxism have also coalesced around the non-ruptural position.

3. Why Effective Altruism and Anti-Capitalism are Compatible in Theory

I do not believe there is a theoretical incompatibility between being an effective altruist and being a leftist, and I doubt most effective altruists or leftists would disagree. Nevertheless, I think it is worth clearly defending this position so that the objection in section 5 and 6 are clearer.

One perceived incompatibility between EA and anti-capitalism is an epistemic disagreement rather than a theoretical one. Consider a leftist who objects to EA because of its support for “earning to give” by working in the finance sector a la 80,000 Hours or for a neo-liberal response to famine. In cases like these the leftist is not objecting to EA, they are objecting to a belief about the world that a specific effective altruist holds. More importantly, the objection offers no justificatory force to the effective altruist. To actually motivate the objection to the effective altruist the leftist must show that the anti-capitalist thesis is correct or grant the pro-capitalist assumption and move the effective altruist from there. It is plausible to me, as both a leftist and an effective altruist, that funding or joining some anti-capitalist social movements or worker cooperatives in the third world could be effective uses of the money or skills I might have, but this is dependent on my beliefs about capitalism (and the available movements). In short, that neither intervention is a regular recommendation by EA groups does not suggest a theoretical mistake inherent to EA. Instead, it suggests what I think is the core debate among leftists and effective altruists, namely, whether or not capitalism is overall a net-negative or not.

Another common argument for how EA is incompatible with leftism is that the sorts of actions we do are part of a zero-sum political game and for various reasons you cannot be both an effective altruist and an anti-capitalist. Gomberg is not a target of this vulgar objection, but he does make a claim that has similarities to it. He notes that in engaging in philanthropy we often engage less in political movements.¹⁸ Of course, in practice this might often be true, still, it should be obvious that no logical impossibility obtains which makes donating to a particular charity (or rescuing a starving child) incompatible with also working for a universal basic income or a communist revolution that would eradicate poverty. Moreover, even if there is in practice a sense in which we participate in a zero-sum game with respect to where we devote our resources there still fails to be a theoretical incompatibility. After all, either devoting my resources to some social movement, or participating in some political organization either is or is not the most effective use of the power I have. It is

¹⁸ Gomberg. “The Fallacy of Philanthropy”, 53.

no objection to EA or results oriented anti-capitalism to suggest I could had a different but less efficient effect elsewhere.

4. Theoretical Similarity in Effective Altruism and Anti-Capitalism

I now want to transition to a focus on how EA looks positively amiable to leftism, specifically a generically Marxist variant. Two parallels are central to this argument. The first is that they have analogous views on morality and secondly, they share a scientific orientation toward solving problems which overlaps in important ways.

Consequentialism

Starting with the moral relationship I maintain that a harmony with consequentialism seems to animate Marx's writing. Relatedly most major effective altruists are consequentialists.¹⁹ There is a large and contentious debate about how Marx thinks about morality and every conceivable metaethical position from moral objectivism to moral subjectivism seems to be a candidate in some reasonable scholar's view. Charles Mills provides a helpful diagram of these positions.²⁰ I sidestep this debate about his official position and instead engage the question more broadly.²¹ Allen Wood suggests that Marx is concerned with what Wood, somewhat opaquely, calls "nonmoral evils." The claim is that things such as "poverty, alienation, [and] unfreedom" are central to Marx's explanations of the shortcomings of capitalism.²² Marx attacks Bentham directly, and in characteristically aggressive fashion. Still, as Wood points out, Marx and utilitarians agree that "nonmoral" goods are of supreme importance.²³ Of course, there are deontological and virtue ethical readings of Marx, and individuals of every normative ethical

¹⁹ A survey of the EA community in 2014 suggests that 69% of EA's identify as consequentialists with 24% identifying as other or not responding at all. Only 7% specified deontology or virtue ethics as their normative view. See Hurford, Peter. "Effective Altruism Forum." *The 2014 Survey of Effective Altruists: Results and Analysis* -. Accessed March 12, 2015. http://effective-altruism.com/ea/gb/the_2014_survey_of_effective_altruists_results/

²⁰ Mills, Charles W. "Marxism, 'Ideology,' and Moral Objectivism" in *From Class to Race: Essays in White Marxism and Black Radicalism*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003., 61

²¹ I largely argue from the premise that Marx seems consequentialist in important ways. One point worthy of note, is that insofar as Marx might be a moral non-realist, his position would mirror the fairly large minority of EA's who hold non-realist views (and makes up a large portion of the "other" choice in this 2014 EA survey).

²² Wood, Allen W. *Karl Marx*. New York: Routledge, 2004., 153.

²³ Wood. *Karl Marx.*, 148.

persuasion make up the EA community. Still, an obvious reading of Marx puts him in the same camp as many effective altruists who endorse similarly consequentialist reasons.²⁴

Rationality and Science

A second and seemingly superficial overlap is in the form and style of critique favored by effective altruists and Marxists. Firstly, Friedrich Engels expresses the Marxist concern that critique of capitalism be “scientific”, a method he contrasts to “utopian socialism.” By this Engels meant that critique of capitalism must be grounded in the materialist reality of the world which it is considering.²⁵ Marx’s sharing of this view is evidenced by his focusing his condemnation of the same views as “fantastic” and ignorant of the facts of history rather than attacking their character or virtue.²⁶ Whether they succeeded in being scientific is another question.²⁷

Similarly, effective altruists attempt to choose between competing options by relying on the best evidence and reasoning available. The important point is not whether EA or Marxism is often, or ever, right but that there is a shared desire to use a common method to reach the most justified conclusions whether the justification is grounded in empirical evidence, rational analysis or both. In the same vein as Marx, though less polemically, effective altruists are not only concerned that one agrees we have some duty to help others (or that socialism is desirable) but that we use the best evidence available select the most effective interventions for whatever problem we hope to resolve.

This last parallel looks at first ridiculous but I think this first response is wrong as is made clear when we consider Marx’s objections to the Gotha Program and that programs endorsement of “bourgeois right.”²⁸ In that objection he asserted that “it was in general a mistake to make a fuss about so-called distribution and put the principal

²⁴ This is not an insignificant point insofar as effective altruists want to argue that EA is not necessarily consequentialist. For philosophical difficulties with this claim see David Killoren’s unpublished paper “Direction and Quantity of Charitable Giving.”

²⁵ Engels, Friedrich. *Socialism, Utopian and Scientific*. Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1975.

²⁶ Marx. *The Communist Manifesto in Karl Marx: Selected Writings*. Edited by David McLellan., 262-270.

²⁷ Popper, Karl R. *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971.

²⁸ Marx. “Critique of the Gotha Program” in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*. Edited by David McLellan. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000., 614.

stress on it.”²⁹ Wood argues, correctly I think, that the way to read Marx here is that morality is “historically impotent.”³⁰ In other words, a core problem with moralizing is that it wouldn’t have any effect! Effectiveness is important for EA but interestingly, even this relegation of ‘moralizing’ to a subordinate role in order to reach the important (arguably moral) ends is common in EA engagements with cause areas like animal welfare.³¹ All the organizations recommended by the EA aligned Animal Charity Evaluators (ACE) downplay moralizing messages in favor of strategies that more effectively lower animal product consumption.³² For example, rather than telling someone that veganism is the only morally acceptable position given our duties to animals, animal advocates argue for incremental changes like “meatless Mondays.”³³ This is not because they do not think moral reasons condemn animal use but because moralizing has been deemed largely ineffective (or impotent!) if our end is improving the lives of other animals.³⁴ This is not an insignificant point insofar as ethicists of various stripes, most notably Kant and Kantians reject or at least worry about means-ends reasoning on moral questions.

I think this section makes clear that worries about a fundamental incompatibility between anti-capitalism and EA are misplaced, and that moreover, there are some important similarities in theory. However, I do not wish to oversell. The compatibility I

²⁹ Marx, “Critique of the Gotha Program”, 615.

³⁰ Wood. *Karl Marx.*, 146.

³¹ Nearly every individual I have met when I worked in animal rights suggests they think that veganism is the only morally tenable position given our duties to other animals; still, the messaging employed praises “Meatless Mondays” and cutting back on animal products rather than demanding that one go completely vegan right now. Many animal advocacy organizations even work on campaigns to ensure animals stuck in farms have larger “enriched” cages or are produced in facilities which are “cage free.”

³² “Top Charities | Animal Charity Evaluators.” Animal Charity Evaluators. Accessed March 17, 2016. <http://www.animalcharityevaluators.org/recommendations/top-charities/>

³³ Deontological advocate of animal rights, Philosopher Gary Francione takes this downplaying of morality as evidence that major animal protection groups are doing something wrong. He notes how we treat the idea of “humane pedophilia” versus “humane meat” as evidence that animal protection groups have given up the cause. Effective altruists prefer a world where we react the same way but they doubt Francione’s method is the surest path there. See Francione, Gary. “‘Humane’ and ‘Compassionate’ Pedophilia - Animal Rights: The Abolitionist Approach.” Animal Rights The Abolitionist Approach. November 11, 2010. Accessed March 20, 2016. <http://www.abolitionistapproach.com/humane-and-compassionate-pedophilia/>

³⁴ Cooney, Nick. *Change of Heart: What Psychology Can Teach Us about Spreading Social Change*. New York: Lantern Books, 2011.

defended here is in various ways either superficial or merely theoretical. In the following two sections I engage with some objections about this capability in practical terms. If I was right here, this is precisely the compatibility leftists and effective altruists will be most concerned about.

5. Effective Altruist Objections to Anti-Capitalism

This essay is an attempt to reconcile two positions that sometimes seem to stand in conflict. Symmetry seems to demand that the paper consider objections to anti-capitalism that effective altruists might raise qua EA.³⁵ In this section I consider this point but I first note a caveat. Insofar as I am right that EA is essentially instrumentalist, the sort of objections effective altruists would raise against anti-capitalism in their capacity as effective altruists will always be fundamentally instrumental. In this way disagreements between effective altruists and others (including other effective altruists) will always be either disagreements about what the evidence actually says or disagreements outside of EA over what is actually valuable. This contrasts even with my fairly instrumentalist reading of anti-capitalism insofar as I've assumed anti-capitalists are committed to the idea that socialist alternatives are possible and preferable.

I hinted in the previous section that effective altruist routinely appeal to three metrics as a basis for comparison between candidate interventions:

Importance: If this intervention or course of action succeeds, how valuable would that success bring for the things we care about? Both considering immediate and indirect effects

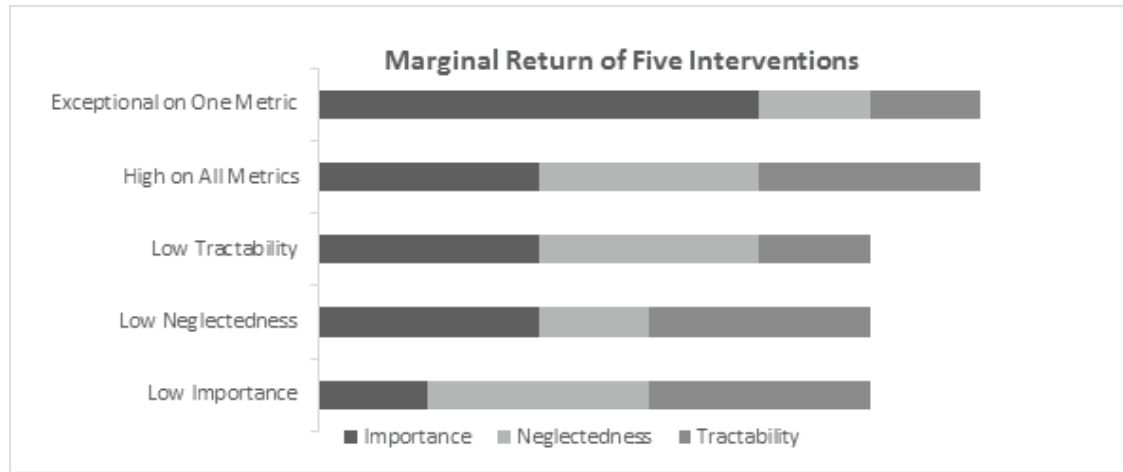
Tractability: What evidence is there that this intervention will succeed? What might go wrong?

Neglectedness: How many others, especially with my resources, are working on this intervention (how crowded is it)? Are their occasions for progress that others have not yet made?

Effective altruists try to institute that option which is the most important, is tractable, and least likely to be done by others. This is because EA is about maximizing the marginal effect (i.e. “being effective”) of our actions, thus doing the most good. The standard effective altruist objection to any candidate intervention would be that the intervention under consideration is less cost effective than alternatives. This can be because it scores too low on one or more the metrics or because some alternative scores

³⁵ Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this comment.

significantly higher. Consider the following simplified chart of 5 interventions:



As it stands an effective altruist would regard the first two as equally effective and the last three as equally ineffective. An effective altruist opponent of a focus on anti-capitalism might object to an intervention in either of the last three ways. Perhaps the actions we could take today offer little chance of effecting the replacement of capitalism by a socialist alternative (low tractability). Alternatively, it may be that too many people are already working on that replacement and so our resources or better expended elsewhere (low neglectedness). A third option might be that capitalism is not as bad as opponents make it out to be, and moreover a transition to socialism would threaten other things we care about, perhaps by stifling creativity or encouraging laziness (low importance).

The point is, whatever argument we might offer, the proponent of a focus on anti-capitalism as a cause area needs to show one of two things. Either, that working to institute socialism promises to be more effective on whatever metric is criticized than the opponent suggests, thus representing something like “Good on All Metrics.” Or, they must show that while it does score low on one or more of the metrics, it scores so highly on the other metric(s) that in the end it competes equally with other interventions as in “Exceptional on Some Metric.”

To see this in terms more specific to our debate suppose that an effective altruist says the anti-capitalism is an ineffective cause area because it is not neglected. The anti-capitalist can respond by noting that in fact, the field is actually more neglected than it looks. Especially for someone with her resources (e.g., as a computer scientist, woman, Spanish speaker, wealthy heiress or mother of a politician). Conversely, she can admit it

is not very neglected but appeal to the exceptionally high importance or tractability of socialist alternatives. She may do this by showing that replacing capitalism would not only eliminates poverty and ensures a higher standard of literacy and health but may also enable interventions to counteract climate change or promote wild-animal welfare that capitalism, for whatever reasons, prevents. Or she might appeal to the high tractability of anti-capitalism, perhaps because the labor movement might be made to be so effective that its relatively low neglectedness does not translate into low marginal return because each additional union organizer has such a large effect on promoting system reform.

As we can see, the effective altruist response type here is the same as in other cases. Is there an abundance of evidence supporting the intervention such that our extra resources translate into a lot of good? If not, are there persuasive accounts of why evidence is limited in this case? What does the latest research in economics, sociology, political science, and so on suggest? The general point is that the objections and their responses in the anti-capitalist case are essentially the same sort practical objections as would be used in any other case. EA's cause neutrality ensures that no fundamentally effective altruist objection to any intervention is possible.

This is not to say that effective altruists' objections are necessarily unspecific. Consider one objection raised by Scott Alexander on his "Slate Star Codex" blog.³⁶ Alexander is sympathetic to EA and worries that a focus on political questions such as anti-capitalism would put effective altruists between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand, if effective altruists focus on politics but they disagree on the issues then the resources devoted to each side will cancel each other out. In contrast, those resources could have clear effects on problems like global poverty or the Malaria epidemic. Unlike electing a Republican or Democrat to the senate, no one actively fights to preserve poverty or Malaria so we do not risk canceling ourselves out. On the other hand, if the clear majority of effective altruists abandon cause neutrality and, implausibly, come to agree on some issue then EA risks alienating newcomers. For example, if nearly all effective altruists support Open Borders but only a tiny fraction of the general population does, EA risks becoming associated with Open Borders. This relegates EA to being a minority position thus limiting its ability to improve the world as measured by lack of progress on the wide range of uncontroversial cause areas such as reducing poverty or preventing disease.

³⁶ Alexander, Scott. "Beware Systemic Change." *Slate Star Codex*. September 22, 2015. Accessed November 24, 2016. <http://slatestarcodex.com/2015/09/22/beware-systemic-change/>. Note: [Scott Alexander is a pseudonym](#)

This objection offers the sort of specificity that makes it important to consider. In the more general terms we considered previously Alexander's point is that political cause would risk much lower importance than other interventions available. Rather than appealing to the high tractability or neglectedness of anti-capitalism as a cause area I think the best response responds directly to the importance consideration. Alexander is right that working against other effective altruists nullifies our effects but it is possible to take into consideration these points and be strategic in the sorts of focuses available. For example, devoting resources to unionization of farm and slaughterhouses workers is a straightforward means of building the worker power that could be directed at building socialism. At the same time, it shares indirect effects of raising the costs of animal products which will appeal to effective altruists concerned about animal welfare or the existential risk of climate change.

Of course, the previous response risks strawmanning the objection. What about the harder problem that the significant population of libertarian effective altruists poses? I think here too common ground can be found. Leftists and libertarians share common ground on various issues such as opposing corporate welfare and regulatory capture. However, disagreement on the fundamental question of whether capitalism is net-negative or not means that effective altruists could easily end up working at cross purposes in the way Alexander worries. This means effective altruist anti-capitalist should downgrade the expected value of anti-capitalism as a cause area insofar as they can expect other effective altruists to work against them. However, this is not essentially different than how effective altruists respond to the fact that Big Tobacco or the animal agriculture industry will oppose higher cigarette taxes or stricter animal welfare standards. The point is just that an intervention needs to score better than it otherwise would on the three metrics to make the cut. This a point all but the most doctrinaire anti-capitalist would accept insofar as they'll want to be avoid ineffectiveness whatever their ends are.

6. Anti-Capitalist and Political Objections to Effective Altruism

In this section I engage a general sort of objection that the actual methods utilized by effective altruists in practice produce problems for EA. While not all of the specific objections were in fact raised by leftists, they are amenable to leftwing use against EA. Andrew Kuper captures the thrust of these objections when he attacks Singer's practical ethics for its alleged "methodological individualism" and "limited scope" in a critique easily extended to EA. He writes: "it's not enough to say that all persons have equal moral claims on us; we need to ask how best to organize ourselves politically

and economically to meet those claims.”³⁷ I start this section with a look at the claim that EA problematically endorses a bourgeois morality and explore the ways it is and is not a problem for EA. In particular I consider how we can understand the bourgeois morality problem as a methodological difficulty. I then engage what seems to me to be the strongest practical objection to EA methodology: its perceived inability to effectively confront systemic issues like the state or capitalism as well as its inability to theorize about social movements, and thus, to take advantage of them.

Effective Altruism as Bourgeois Morality

After praising the bourgeoisie’s historical role in developing productive capabilities far beyond feudalism’s capacity, Marx transitioned to ridiculing them for their hypocrisy on moral questions (in particular their sanctification of private property).³⁸ Marx had hostile words for fellow socialists in the SPD (German Social Democratic Party) whose program he thought conceded to “bourgeois right” and misunderstood how our conceptions of “equal right” and “fair distribution” are themselves constrained by capitalism.³⁹ Leftwing critics claim similar problems mark EA.⁴⁰ Snow argues that EA is grounded in “bourgeois moral philosophy”, and “abstract[s] from—and thereby exonerate[s]—the social dynamics constitutive of capitalism.”⁴¹ In part III I argued that one way of framing this objection mistakes a difference of belief about the world with a moral or theoretical disagreement between EA and anti-capitalism. An alternative understanding of the objection to bourgeois morality is not that effective altruists make a moral mistake and fail to see that capitalism is immoral. Rather, like Marx alleged against supporters of Ferdinand Lassalle and the SPD, the real problem is that this misunderstanding leads to serious problems in instituting what all agree are their goals, whether these goals are the eradication of poverty or the institutionalization of socialism.

The question is how exactly does bourgeois morality limit EA? Recall that Gomberg argues that the fallacy of philanthropy is that it assimilates the problems of hunger and

³⁷ Kuper, Andrew. “More Than Charity: Cosmopolitan Alternatives to the ‘Singer Solution.’” *Ethics & International Affairs* 16, no. 02 (2002): 112.

³⁸ Marx. *The Communist Manifesto.*, 255-262.

³⁹ Marx. “Critique of the Gotha Program”, 610-616.

⁴⁰ Recall that there is a question about Marx’s metaethical views and so it is unclear if he would agree with these critics that there is a non-bourgeois and therefore appropriate morality.

⁴¹ Snow, “Against Charity”.

poverty to our duty to rescue (a la the drowning child case).⁴² Gomberg thinks this is wrong, in particular because of a misunderstanding about the role of norms in shaping morality. But he also raises a more topical objection that the fallacy is harmful insofar as it encourages us to fail to realize certain facts. Iason Gabriel notes that effective altruist metacharities (e.g. GiveWell, Giving What We Can, ACE, etc.) attempt to harness the available scientific research in order to identify the areas in which they can have the highest impact. But, given the heuristics they use they are vulnerable to three issues which together he calls “methodological blindness.”⁴³

Gabriel characterizes “observational bias” as undue focus on the sorts of data which are already known or can be easily verified.⁴⁴ For example randomized controlled trials (RCTs) enable us to answer certain questions with a high degree of certainty such as whether bed-nets or free schoolbooks produce a larger effect on income later in life. However RCTs cannot easily measure whether a particular campaign to stop corruption in regional governments (or to decline loans tied up with structural adjustment demands) is effective in this way. This can lead to the unjustified preference for the first sort of interventions. Moreover, the sorts of interventions anti-capitalists traditionally organize around are often difficult or even impossible to set up RCTs for.⁴⁵

Gabriel points to “quantification bias” which is characterized by the reliance on data that can be quantified and the use of concepts like disability adjusted life years (DALYs). These metrics enable us to try to compare otherwise disanalogous issues.⁴⁶ “How bad is a year of blindness compared to 3 months with untreated HIV/AIDS?” These metrics produce answers. However, things like Truth, Justice, or the level of

⁴² Gomberg. “The Fallacy of Philanthropy”, 30.

⁴³ Iason Gabriel. “Effective Altruism and Its Critics.” *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, February 12, 2016., 7

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Imagine the difficulty of producing an RCT to test revolutionary seizure of state power, market socialism, or even a basic income high enough to secure a decent standard of living.

⁴⁶ Gabriel. “Effective Altruism and Its Critics.”, 8.

exploitation of one scenario versus another are not so easily quantified.⁴⁷ Relatedly, Christine Peterson argues that some very early questions are not amiable to RCT style evidence and reliance on theoretical analysis is our only tool and effective altruists need to be careful to not be dismissive of that tool.⁴⁸

Finally, Gabriel uses “instrumental bias” to illustrate how effective altruists sometimes fail to perceive “the effect of politics on outcomes” and instead “tend to favour technocratic rather than democratic solutions to moral problems.”⁴⁹ Gabriel has us imagine a case where contractors can produce better sanitation systems for less. Given this fact, effective altruists might support this suboptimal intervention over another in which community members produce the system themselves if this bias blinds them to the effects of community members participating more directly.⁵⁰ What they might miss is how participation sometimes leads individuals to become invested in a project. For example, a community might use the less functional system more often because they identify with it, or they might become politically empowered as they begin to identify with others of their community enabling them to make more effective demands on their state or the economic actors in the area.

These methodical biases can be glimpsed in other ways. It can look like effective altruists in effect “let capitalism off the hook” when they recommend solutions for poverty that take that economic system for granted. The problem is that the very workings of capitalism, in particular the “commodification of necessities” is what turns “billions of people into drowning strangers” which effective altruists demand we attempt to help.⁵¹ The objection to EA is not that it fails to see capitalism violates some duty such as a categorical imperative to not profit off the vulnerable. Instead, EA fails to confront capitalism directly, constraining the solutions effective altruists recommend, in so doing EA is

⁴⁷ Though, interestingly, on a Marxist account of exploitation economic analysis can help us see fairly precisely how much exploitation a particular worker is undergoing given the difference between their wages and the value they create. To be clear however, most socialists reject the labor theory of value and the Marxist account of exploitation. Some even reject the value of exploitation talk for Marxists at all. For the view see John E Roemer. “Should Marxists Be Interested in Exploitation?” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 14, no. 1 (1985): 30-65. For a recent revival of that debate see Nicholas Vrousalis. “Exploitation, Vulnerability, and Social Domination” *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 41, no. 2 (2013): 131-157.

⁴⁸ Christine Peterson, “Upstream Altruism: applying EA principles to early-stage action.” August 7, 2016 at EA Global 2016.

⁴⁹ Gabriel. “Effective Altruism and Its Critics.”, 8-9.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 10-11.

⁵¹ Snow, “Against Charity”.

ineffective by its own lights. Put most strongly, this failure is not merely a mistake but it is a characteristically effective altruist mistake. This problem is particularly acute when the focus is systemic change.⁵² The general form of this objection is that EA is not radical, it fails to challenge the root causes of the problems it is most concerned about.⁵³ EA is guilty of smuggling in a bourgeois morality insofar as this failure to confront capitalism is based on a failure to recognize capitalism as harmful.

This understanding of bourgeois morality, understood as a methodological inadequacy, offers an illuminating source of insight for EA. However, I do not think it causes a problem for EA as such. First, more obviously, any of these critics can be helpfully raised by effective altruists themselves on precisely EA grounds. Recognizing and responding to any of the three biases permits effective altruists to more accurately score interventions by their three metrics. As critics themselves note, effective altruists could accept all of these objections, and thus be more effective on their own terms.⁵⁴ As I have repeated throughout, EA is cause neutral and so any objection that leads to more effectiveness is going to be valued by effective altruists. This is in contrast to the inert, and question begging, form of the bourgeois morality objection which merely notes that effective altruists who are not anti-capitalists are operating within a bourgeois morality. This may be true, but it is impotent in a way both Marxists and effective altruists would deride.

Systemic Change: Effective Altruism's Problem with States and Social Movements

There are a few reasons it is sensible to try to uphold cause neutrality or be non-political.⁵⁵ However, a commitment to neutrality can obscure effective tools. Emily Clough points out, the state has immense power.⁵⁶ Amia Srinivasan points to the economic

⁵² Gabriel. "Effective Altruism and Its Critics.", 12

⁵³ Hunt-Hendrix, Leah. "So You Want to Be a "Radical' Philanthropist?" *The Huffington Post*. May 4, 2015. Accessed March 12, 2016. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/leah-hunthendrix/so-you-want-to-be-a-radical-philanthropist_b_7181248.html.

⁵⁴ Snow, "Against Charity". Srinivasan, Amia. "Stop the Robot Apocalypse." *Review of Doing Good Better: Effective Altruism and a Radical New Way to Make a Difference*, by William MacAskill. *London Review of Books* 37 no. 18 (2015): 3-6, <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v37/n18/amia-srinivasan/stop-the-robot-apocalypse>.

⁵⁵ For example, you do not want to alienate individuals or governments that would otherwise be willing to help implement policies that could be effective in eradicating a particular disease or implementing an animal welfare policy.

⁵⁶ Clough, Emily. "Effective Altruism's Political Blind Spot." In *Boston Review*. July 14, 2015. Accessed March 12, 2016. <https://bostonreview.net/world/emily-clough-effective-altruism-ngos>.

power of particular agents.⁵⁷ A sensible recommendation for neutrality can shift into a methodological bias like those above if we fail to see that neutral commitment as merely instrumental. The central objection in this section is whether or not EA is ill-suited to encourage systemic change, especially through use of state and social movement power.

Effective altruists are able to recognize that some corrupt or incompetent governments are ineffective recipients of aid and this is an important recognition, especially compared to organizations that ignore these facts. However, insofar as effective altruists let “the state drop off entirely” a problem arises.⁵⁸ Consider a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) and a state who are both able to provide some service. If the NGO better provides the service, EA would recommend the NGO be funded. However, this move can have harmful indirect effects such as when the most discerning poor people, who also were most likely to lobby the state and monitor implementation, move to the NGO service and shift their advocacy to the NGO. A scenario like this can lead to a net harm because the reach of the state is usually wider than the reach of the NGO.⁵⁹ This mirrors a common objection to charter schools in the US context whereby charter schools are supposed by critics to lead to further deterioration of the public alternative even if they do provide a better education for the individuals inside them.

This failure to perceive clearly the role of the state can be compounded as a social movement problem or a problem of political quietism. Consider again the discerning poor are less likely to come together and throw out their incompetent governments when their advocacy target shifts from the state to the NGO. This reduction in political agitation makes less likely the formation of political movement capable of wide-ranging and self-sustaining solutions. Gomberg argues that philanthropic oriented individuals, as some effective altruist are, sometimes shift focus from concrete sociopolitical analysis to “abstract philosophical argument” about the “moral obligation to rescue.”⁶⁰ The point is not that this is a philosophical mistake but that the mistake undermines their own ends. Gabriel points to research by Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink on a problem with the EA heuristic that we should concern ourselves with our marginal impact.⁶¹ “Constancy of purpose” is important to enable agents to produce 1) special-

⁵⁷ Srinivasan. “Stop the Robot Apocalypse.” *London Review of Books* 37 no. 18 (2015)

⁵⁸ Clough. “Effective Altruism’s Political Blind Spot”.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Gomberg. “The Fallacy of Philanthropy”, 64

⁶¹ Gabriel. “Effective Altruism and Its Critics.”, 12-13.

ized knowledge and refine their message, 2) win over supporters (in particular due to a show of their integrity, 3) persevere even against the odds, and finally 4) test the status quo. These four points were important for achieving results like the end of chattel slavery in the US.⁶² The worry is that had abolitionists been acting like effective altruists they would have abandoned the abolitionist movement when it looked too unpopular to produce change, precisely when it seems it is most necessary that they are vigilant. Moreover, when a social movement does become ascendant, rather than encouraging the ability of that social movement to capitalize on its own growing popularity, effective altruists obeying the heuristic will seem to jump ship at precisely the most inopportune moment.

The Systemic Change objection is that effective altruists would want to recognize the worries evoked here to be most effective on their own terms. However, in practice some EA heuristics make that recognition difficult. Moreover, unlike the three sorts of bias Gabriel points to, the commitment to highest marginal return seems to be at the core of what it means to “do the most good” as effective altruists understand it. I think there is an obvious reply, though it risks coming off as evasive. The reply is that we, as effective altruists, should recognize the various cases where critics like Finnemore and Sikkink are right. Focusing on my individual marginal return can be self-defeating if my goal is to maximize my own individual marginal return. Therefore, taking a page from the rule-consequentialist playbook, we ought to accept that some rules or heuristics, even counterintuitive ones, sometimes promote the ends we care about. This reply is not implausible, effective altruist readily admit that human beings regularly fall victim to irrationalities. In fact, recently the effective altruist organization 80000 Hours has been downplaying the importance of considering one’s comparative advantage because of arguments like those laid out here.⁶³

7. Toward an Anti-Capitalist Effective Altruism

Funding or participating in anti-capitalist movements might be the most effective altruism available but this requires an argument just as any other proposed intervention. In section 3 I argued that there was no deep theoretical incompatibility between EA and anti-capitalism, and noted in section 4 some theoretical similarities. In Section 5 I considered effective altruist objections to anti-capitalism and then in section 6 I looked

⁶² Finnemore, Martha, and Kathryn Sikkink. “International Norm Dynamics and Political Change.” *International Organization* 52, no. 4 (1998): 887-917.

⁶³ See Todd, Benjamin: “Why Earning to Give Is Often Not the Best Option.” 10 June 2013 and. “The Value of Coordination.” 16 Aug. 2016 at 80000hours.org.

at what I think are the most powerful objections to EA from leftists. In this final section I want to help lay out the groundwork necessary for an anti-capitalist and effective altruist reconciliation. In many ways this section is underspecified, in particular, unless one is already sympathetic to EA or anti-capitalism I offer little to motivate the view.

Like feminists and liberation theologians, I agree that the personal is political. However, it is also important to remember that the personal is political. Kuper argued persuasively that effective philanthropy demands (i) a theory of justice, (ii) a theory of political economy and (iii) a theory of political sociology, which he suggests together is a demand for a political philosophy.⁶⁴ My purpose in this section is to show how answering Kuper's call for a political philosophy enables EA to respond to the objection that EA morality is bourgeois objection and that EA has a substandard conception of the state and social movements which prevents it's harnessing their power.

It is probably obvious that an anti-capitalist EA's theory of justice would include the desirability part of the anti-capitalist thesis I mentioned in section 3. I noted that the charge of bourgeois morality seemed to clarify some important points but that I doubted its motivational efficacy for generic effective altruists. However, as a leftist and an effective altruist the charge is motivating even when it is understood as more than a methodological error. This is because unlike effective altruists who are proponents of capitalism, anti-capitalists like myself do regard the use of the wealth capitalists possess in effectively the same way we regard the wealth of anyone else. Namely, the wealth could be directed toward better or worse outcomes. In response I want to gesture at a theory of justice which is effective altruist but non-bourgeois.

An anti-capitalist EA critique would suggest that capitalism is evidence that society should not be characterized as anything like John Rawls' "cooperative venture for mutual advantage."⁶⁵ To recognize it as such would be both false and contributory to the mystifying effect of bourgeois moralities on our conceptions of the right and good. False because capitalism is more accurately characterized by something like domination or exploitation of one class by another or at least as grossly inefficient in its use of the vast productive capability that we possess. Mystifying, and therefore problematic, because it disables us from seeing the way forward.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Kuper. "More Than Charity: Cosmopolitan Alternatives to the 'Singer Solution.'" 114

⁶⁵ Rawls, John. *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999.

⁶⁶ The anti-capitalist effective altruist critique can even be generalized into a critique of ideal theory. See Mills, Charles W.. 2005. "'Ideal Theory' as Ideology." *Hypatia* 20 (3): 165–84.

Consider the critique in practice. It is clear to an anti-capitalist that the capitalist wrongs people when they fail to release some essential good such as medicine to the sick. However for an effective altruist it is similarly obvious that objecting to the behavior of the capitalist is not enough. If they won't use their power appropriately that does not exonerate me from using the power I have, even when it is mediated by capitalism, to stop a particular harm. In other words, the harm I might do in regularly buying a (soy) chai latte rather than letting that money be used to feed someone is only different in degree from the harm a capitalist does in not directly releasing grain to the hungry. The power is of the same kind. That either party fails will look similarly unjustified. If this seems counterintuitive imagine a wealthy heir's failure to help compared to a petty bourgeois shopkeeper's. It is unclear how the difference between the heir's non-capitalist relation to their wealth and the shopkeeper's directly capitalist relation to their wealth produces a disanalogy in their duties to others. Cohen engages with the question of whether duties of justice are purely political in his classic paper "If You're an Egalitarian, How Come You're so Rich?"⁶⁷ This case is a clear case in which Cohen would correctly claim we are unjustified in refusing to help.

An anti-capitalist EA would accept a theory of political economy that endorses the "possibility of socialism" portion of the anti-capitalist thesis. Moreover, it would claim that our current society ought to recognize our economic system as dominating, exploitative, or grossly inefficient.⁶⁸ Most importantly in response to critics of EA, it would not assume the state and economic system is fixed. This makes clear that there is a wider realm of candidate interventions for effective altruists to engage in and puts systemic questions in the mix from the start. Of course, the effective altruist part of our picture militates against the sort of doctrinaire theorizing that sometimes characterizes socialism and Marxism.⁶⁹ Instead, left EA interventions would appeal to the sort of theorizing that characterizes Erik Olin Wright's "Real Utopias Project."⁷⁰

Finally, I think many critics are right about the ways in which EA sometimes struggles with a too individualist picture of moral action. In particular, it is clear that

⁶⁷ Cohen, G. A.. 2000. "If You're an Egalitarian, How Come You're so Rich?". *The Journal of Ethics* 4 (1/2) January-March. Springer: 1-26.

⁶⁸ Of course, it might still be better than some "state of nature" but this would be a fortuitous rather than necessary consequence.

⁶⁹ In particular after the success of the Bolshevik revolution made more experimental anti-authoritarian socialisms lose ground to what looked like the success of the USSR.

⁷⁰ Wright, Erik Olin. *Envisioning Real Utopias*. London: Verso, 2010.

EA has not been as good at applying sociology as it has been at applying psychology. Doubtlessly this explains some of the objections with respect to social movements that we engaged in the last part of section VI. I can only echo Kuper's call for a political sociology. Clearly, it is important to use fields like sociology, behavioral economics, and political science to ensure that we institute interventions that do not lead to unnecessarily unforeseen problems. That said, of the three parts of a political philosophy as Kuper sees it, I think EA has been improving most on this front. My evidence is largely anecdotal as I have seen forums and social network groups have more discussions which are political in nature. Less anecdotally, an organization called Direct Action Everywhere (DxE) has burst into the animal liberation scene focusing on using social and political first model of animal advocacy in contrast with the largely apolitical and individualistic focus of other mainstream animal advocacy groups.⁷¹

8. Conclusion

I hope I have given credible reasons to find my reconciliation of EA and anti-capitalism persuasive. After all, it is no fun to hold contradictory beliefs. There are other questions (and projects) I ignored completely or was unable to engage substantially in this fairly cursory and speculative essay. One I am particularly invested in is seeing fleshed out is a political philosophy for EA. Given my current intuitions I think that the correct form of this philosophy will be left wing, and section VII was an attempt at speculating about some of what that philosophy might look like, though it was clearly not an argument for the view in particular. However, despite answering a (less) important question: "Can EA and anti-capitalism be reconciled" the message I hope we leave with is that our focus should be on whether or not the reconciliation pays off in improving the lives of the animals, human or not, who inhabit our planet. With that in mind I end in the stereotypic style of a philosophy paper on Marx by noting his most famous thesis on Feuerbach. I think in this case it is especially ap-

⁷¹ The organization attempts to use nonviolent direct action to spread memes widely throughout the public as a means to change beliefs about animal use. This is not to imply I am sure that DxE is effective. I think the dissimilarity between human social justice movements and nonhuman ones makes their move to confrontational tactics too hasty. For more on DxE see Wayne Hsuing in "Effective Meme Spreading" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8wV0yydpCAA> YouTube. November 5, 2013. Retrieved 3/16/2016 Though ACE did not evaluate DxE, the organization has been given a lot of attention by effective altruists working on animal issues given how small their budget is relative to the media attention they garner, some directors of ACE even donated substantial sums to the organization. For that point see Edgerton, Leah. "Where the ACE Staff Members Are Giving and Why | Animal Charity Evaluators." Animal Charity Evaluators. December 21, 2015. Accessed March 12, 2016. <http://www.animalcharityevaluators.org/blog/where-ace-staff-are-giving-and-why/>

appropriate to heed Marx's worry, after all, philosophers have, and continue to, spend a lot of time thinking about the world. Where leftists and effective altruists agree is that "the point is to change it."⁷²

⁷² Marx, Karl. "Theses on Feuerbach" in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*. Edited by David McLellan. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000., 173.