

1-31-2017

Effective altruism and Christianity: possibilities for productive collaboration

Alida Liberman

University of Indianapolis, libermana@uindy.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.pacificu.edu/eip>

Recommended Citation

Liberman, Alida (2017) "Effective altruism and Christianity: possibilities for productive collaboration," *Essays in Philosophy*: Vol. 18: Iss. 1, Article 2. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7710/1526-0569.1576>

Essays in Philosophy

ISSN 1526-0569

Volume 18, Issue 1 (2017)

Effective altruism and Christianity: possibilities for productive collaboration

Alida Liberman

University of Indianapolis

Abstract

While many Christians accept the claim that giving to support the poor and needy is a core moral and religious obligation, most Christian giving is usually not very efficient in EA terms. In this paper, I explore possibilities for productive collaboration between effective altruists (EAs) and Christian givers. I argue that Christians are obligated from their own perspective to give radically in terms of quantity and scope to alleviate the suffering of the poor and needy. I raise two important potential stumbling blocks for EA-Christian collaboration. First, Christians (especially those who believe in an infinite heaven and hell) cannot assess outcomes using a straightforward utilitarian calculus of the sort preferred by many EAs, lest they run into a *reductio*. Second, Christians will want to give to support aims such as worship and evangelism that are not shared by secular EAs and that are not easily commensurable, making the allocation of giving resources more difficult. I conclude with some tentative suggestions about how Christians who are sympathetic to EA might become more effective in their giving.

Essays Philos (2017)18:1 | DOI: 10.7710/1526-0569.1576

Correspondence: libermana@uindy.edu



© 2017 Liberman. This open access article is distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

1. Introduction

To date, effective altruism (EA) has been a mostly secular phenomenon. The best known EA organizations have no religious affiliation, and the majority of self-identified effective altruists are atheist or agnostic.¹ There has also been very little explicit outreach to religious communities by secular EAs. My aim in this paper is to begin to explore possibilities for productive collaboration between EAs and religious givers; while I focus specifically on Christians, I am optimistic that similar outreach can be done with other religious groups.²

EAs attempt to convince the public of two truths: first, that those who live in countries that are affluent in absolute terms ought to be giving away significant portions of their surplus income to alleviate suffering among the world's neediest people,³ and second, that we ought to be using the best economic and scientific tools we have at our disposal to maximize the good done with this giving. The idea that charitable giving is not just nice but morally obligatory strikes many people as unintuitive, which is a challenge for EA messaging about this point. But Christians are generally already on board with this claim; as I'll argue below, there is a long-standing Christian tradition according to which sharing one's resources to support the poor and needy is a core moral and religious obligation. However, Christian giving is usually not very efficient in EA terms. Many Christians give directly to their local church and/or to parachurch organizations without thinking much about whether the outcomes of their giving are as good as they could be, and most funds are not used to achieve typical EA goals like improving global health and alleviating the most severe poverty in the world. Religious Americans give more money to charity than their non-religious peers, and nearly three-quarters of American giving goes to religious-

¹ In a 2015 demographic survey of over 2,300 self-identified EAs conducted by the website EAHub, 87% of those who answered the question about religious affiliation identified as "atheist, agnostic, or non-religious." See <https://eahub.org/sites/effectivealtruismhub.com/files/SurveyReport2015.pdf>

² I will also focus on the ways in which Christians might be encouraged to support the EA aims of giving to improve global health and alleviate global poverty, rather than on support of other EA aims such as ending animal suffering or preventing existential risks. While I suspect that it will be more difficult for EAs engage in productive collaboration with Christians about these concerns, there might be points of overlap (for example, with Christians who advocate for veganism for religious reasons; see <http://www.all-creatures.org/cva/honoring.htm>)

³ Some EAs frame giving as morally obligatory, while others frame it as a tool or opportunity to allow those who already want to do good to have a greater impact. For example, see: <https://whatiseffectivealtruism.com/#everyone>

ly affiliated organizations.⁴ Since so much giving is religiously affiliated, and because there has been so little explicit discussion within Christian communities about making giving more effective, EA outreach to Christian communities could be extremely fruitful.

In this paper, I argue that there is a strong case to be made that Christians are obligated from their own perspective to give radically in terms of quantity and scope to alleviate the suffering of the poor and needy, and to be good stewards of resources by giving effectively. I then note that there are further aims that Christians will want to support with their giving which are not shared by secular EAs: the maintenance of local churches and faith communities, communal worship (often in designated worship spaces), and evangelism. The aim of this discussion is twofold: to encourage Christian readers to be open to EA aims, and to encourage secular EA readers to engage in outreach to Christian communities by highlighting points of overlap with—as well as potential sources of resistance from—Christian givers.

I then raise two important potential stumbling blocks for EA-Christian collaboration. First, Christians cannot assess outcomes using a straightforward utilitarian calculus of the sort preferred by many EAs. This problem is especially pressing for non-universalist Christians who believe in heaven and hell; the possibility of causing infinite bliss or avoiding infinite pain becomes a swamping consideration that leads to morally perverse results when weighing utilities. Rather, Christians must adopt some non-utilitarian standard of goodness that includes deontic side constraints on permissible human ends and acknowledges non-human goods, such as the goodness of God. Second, cause allocation is more difficult for a Christian EA than it is for a secular EA, as the goods that Christians aim to support are not easily commensurable; how does one weigh the importance of alleviating human suffering against the importance of leading others to eternal salvation, or the importance of worshipping an infinitely good God? While I do not presume to offer anything close to an adequate answer to this question, I conclude with some tentative suggestions about how Christians who are sympathetic to EA might become more effective in their giving.

2. The Christian Obligation to Give Radically

Christian belief is not monolithic, and Christians will have a wide range of opinions

⁴ 41% of American charitable giving goes directly to religious congregations, and another 32% to religiously identified organizations. The same study found that 65% of religiously affiliated Americans give to charity, while 56% of non-religiously affiliated Americans do so; the majority of this difference is due to giving to religious organizations. See McKittrick et al. 2013.

about the importance of charitable giving. However, there is broad support within a wide range of Christian traditions for the claim that Christians are morally obligated to share their surplus resources with the world's needy and poor. The first starting point is scriptural; there are 2,350 Bible verses about money, and over 60 that are specifically about giving to the poor.⁵ Many of the parables of Jesus emphasize the spiritual dangers of accumulating too much wealth and the importance of sharing your wealth with others. For example, Jesus tells a young rich man, "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me" (Matt. 19:21 NRSV). In another parable, Jesus likens sharing resources with and caring for the least fortunate members of society to sharing resources with and caring for God directly.⁶

2.1 *Giving in radical quantity*

The obligation to give away large amounts of one's surplus income to sustain the poor is firmly ensconced in church history. Some Catholic theologians demand significantly more of us than most EAs, arguing that your surplus possessions are not rightfully yours if someone else is in need of them. For example, Ambrose, the 4th century Bishop of Milan, says that when you give to charity, "You are not making a gift of what is yours to the poor man, but you are giving him back what is his. You have been appropriating things that are meant to be for the common use of everyone" (Paul IV, 1967.) Similarly, the *Decretum Gratiani*, a core compilation of medieval Catholic canon law, states that "a man who keeps for himself more than he needs commits theft," and "the bread that you hold back belongs to the needy, the clothes that you store away belong to the naked" (Tierney 1997, 380, 70). Thomas Aquinas goes even further, claiming that as a matter of natural law it does not count as stealing for a person in need to take surplus wealth from someone else:

⁵ See this indexed list of all 2,350 Bible verses about money compiled by Howard Dayton: www.compasseuropartners.eu/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/2350-verses-on-money.pdf

⁶ "Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me'" (Matt. 25:34 – 41 NRSV).

Hence whatever certain people have in superabundance is due, by natural law, to the purpose of succoring the poor. Nevertheless, if the need be so manifest and urgent, that it is evident that the present need must be remedied by whatever means at hand (for instance when a person is in some imminent danger, and there is no other possible remedy), then it is lawful for a man to succor his own need by means of another's property, by taking it either openly or secretly: nor is this properly speaking theft or robbery (*ST* 3057, II:II Q66, Art 7).

There are strong precedents for giving in radical quantity in the Protestant tradition as well. For example, John Wesley, the 18th century founder of the Methodist church, lived frugally and donated all of his surplus income to the poor. Wesley records that in a year when his living expenses were £28 and his income £30, he gave away £2; as his income steadily rose, he continued living on £28 and giving the rest away, even in years in which his income was over £1400 (White 2016). Again, Wesley is much harsher than contemporary EAs, proclaiming, “If you have any desire to escape the damnation of hell, give all you can; otherwise I can have no more hope of your salvation, than that of Judas Iscariot” (Sermon 116; see also Sermon 50).

More recently, 20th century Protestant writer C.S. Lewis takes a kinder tone but a no less demanding approach:

I do not believe one can settle how much we ought to give. I am afraid the only safe rule is to give more than we can spare. In other words, if our expenditure on comforts, luxuries, amusements, etc., is up to the standard common among those with the same income as our own, we are probably giving away too little. If our charities do not at all pinch or hamper us, I should say they are too small. There ought to be things we should like to do and cannot do because our charities expenditure excludes them (Lewis 2001, 86).

In *God and Money*, a recent book about money management written for a popular evangelical Christian audience, John Cortines and Gregory Baumer echo the need to give radically in quantity, outlining concrete strategies for capping your living expenses at a reasonable level, saving moderately, and giving abundantly. They argue that:

A faithful reading of Scripture leads not to the question “How much should I give?” but rather to the question “How much do I need to keep?” Flipping the question this way is a very countercultural thing to do, even within the church. But it is exactly the mindset we must embrace in order to truly honor God through our generosity (Cortines and Baumer 62).

In sum, multiple historical and contemporary Christian sources argue for an obligation to give that is even more demanding than that advocated for by most secular EAs.

2.2 *Giving with a radical scope*

While not as immediately apparent as the obligation to give radically in quantity, there is also a strong Christian precedent for the obligation to give universally in scope, and to be generous not only to your near neighbors, but to poor and needy people wherever they happen to be. The Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25 – 37)—in which Jesus answers the question “Who is my neighbor?” by telling the story of a cultural outsider who helps an injured man when the members of his own group ignore him—is often used to support the idea that our obligation to do good is universal. As contemporary Protestant theologian Eric Gregory notes:

Appeals to the Good Samaritan, taking up a Lucan emphasis on universalism and concern for the outsider, often ground a strong egalitarian ethic (known as “*agapism*”). In many ways, *agapism* parallels the morally demanding views of a consistent utilitarian like [Peter] Singer (Gregory 2008, 24–25).

Contemporary Catholic theologian Charles Camosy argues that “Peter Singer and the Roman Catholic Church are stunningly similar when it comes to articulating our duties to the poor” (Camosy 2012, 141). Both assume that we are equally morally culpable for what we do and what we fail to do. Moreover, both have a universal focus: Camosy cites the Good Samaritan and Peter Singer’s drowning child analogy in tandem as narratives that make similar points about the obligation to help others without regard for their proximity to you (Camosy 2012, 140 and Singer 1972).

Cortines and Baumer also argue that the Bible demands that Christian giving be broad in scope:

As we studied Scripture, we became increasingly convinced that this [reaching into the world as God calls us to] means reaching out to help the poor and the marginalized. Helping our high-income church to construct a new wing or retreat center is wonderful, but we became convinced that if we did this while ignoring the neediest in our society, we would be entering some dangerous territory in the eyes of God (Cortines and Baumer 2016, 185).

In short, there indeed appears to be significant overlap between EA and Christian conceptions of the obligation to give radically in both quantity and scope.

2.3 Does proximity matter more for Christians?

Might proximity matter more for Christians than it would for secular people? There is an idea going back to Augustine and more fully developed by Aquinas that there exists an *ordo amoris*, or divinely-ordered hierarchy of loves. Part of this idea is the claim that it is legitimate to give moral preference to one's friends, family, fellow citizens, and co-religionists, and that obligations to people who are proximate to you can trump obligations to the distant needy. Aquinas argues that we should focus on doing good works for those who happen to be near to us in time and place. If he is right, this undermines the EA ideal of doing good wherever your efforts can go the farthest, even if this means focusing on distant strangers instead of those in your community.

Eric Gregory (2008) defuses this worry by arguing that our modern era of globalization changes the concept of neighbor. Because our world has become so interconnected—we now have much more consciousness of distant others, and our local actions can affect distant others to a much greater extent than they used to—there is a very real sense in which we “happen to be” near everyone on earth, including distant strangers. Gregory argues that Aquinas's understanding of ordered moral obligation primarily has to do with the practical opportunity to provide immediate aid. Today, we are easily able to assist people across the world in a way that we weren't before. To choose not to do so is to be willfully and culpably ignorant of the needs of those who are in front of us, in the same way as the passersby who ignore the injured man in the Good Samaritan parable.

Camosy makes a similar point, highlighting the concept of solidarity within Catholic social teaching:

Solidarity means that, even apart from personal connections like pictures and letters, we are all personally connected to each other in a very intimate way—whether we live next door or on the next continent. Truly, ‘we are *all* really responsible *for all*’” (Camosy 2012, 160).

At very least, there is a strong Christian case to be made for the claim that we are obligated to give radically in quantity and scope. These arguments are independent of—and, for Christian audiences, can serve as valuable supplements to—typical EA arguments for the same claims.

3. The Christian Obligation to Steward Resources Effectively

There's a central Christian idea that humans don't actually own any of their earthly possessions. Rather, the world and everything in it belong to God, and humans are entrusted with stewarding or caring for it on God's behalf. Given this perspective, it is natural to think that we are not entitled to use our resources in whatever way we wish, but are obligated to use them well. For that reason, most Christian churches engage in some sort of official financial accountability and/or assessment process, often in the form of a stewardship committee.

There is much in the Christian tradition that implies that stewarding resources well involves using them as effectively as you can. This idea is echoed in the Parable of the Talents, in which Jesus tells the story of a man who goes on a trip and leaves his money in the care of his servants while he is gone.⁷ The first two servants invest the money in their master's absence, and in doing so double the amounts they were entrusted with. The third buries the money in the ground for safekeeping. When the master returns, he praises and rewards the first two servants but berates the third, calling for his punishment. Efficient stewarding of resources is praised, while merely *non-efficient* use is condemned; the third servant is denounced not for wastefully spending the money, but for failing use it as effectively as he could.

Moreover, many of the same Christian authors who call for radical giving also call for effective giving. For example, Gregory argues that "Christians should pay attention to the best social-scientific and economic literature to find ways to reduce poverty and make empirical judgments about how best to provide aid" and to "engage the best philosophical work in ethics" (21). Cortines and Baumer note that "giving is best when it is done with maximum effectiveness" and that "this is a self-evident statement" (180). Strikingly, they invoke explicitly EA language when they exhort their fellow Christians to measure the returns on their giving investments, proclaiming, "let's maximize souls-saved per dollar, emotional-healing per dollar, poverty-alleviated per dollar, etc." (192).

3.1 Are there alternate conceptions of good stewardship?

The mere existence of a stewardship committee does not ensure giving that is effec-

⁷ Versions of this story are told in Matthew 25:14–30 and Luke 19:12–27. In the version of the story appearing in Luke, one servant yields a 10x return on the investment, while the other yields a 5x return. The servants are rewarded proportionally: the first is given 10 cities to rule over, while the second is given 5 cities to rule over. Again, efficiency is valued, and the more efficient servant is rewarded more than the less efficient one.

tive in EA terms, as these processes are not always outcome focused, and they do not typically involve an attempt to measure the impact or financial efficiency of various programs.⁸ Some approaches to stewardship deliberately de-emphasize outcomes. For example, a sample stewardship committee guideline from the Catholic Archdiocese of Saint Paul and Minneapolis states that one of the primary duties of a parish stewardship committee is

“convey[ing] to the parish at-large that the way we participate in stewardship is more important than getting something done. In a Christian community, urgency and efficiency are not our primary values in determining what we do. While we would like to be efficient in our efforts, it is more important to act in a manner that is consistent with Gospel values and to consider the good of the whole community” (Office of Development and Stewardship, 2014).

Likewise, the authors of a book about defining success in Christian ministry published by the Evangelical Council of Financial Accountability (a non-profit, non-denominational Christian financial accreditation organization) argue that:

“Keeping in step with the Spirit must be our sole focus. Reliance upon anything else—money, human wisdom, or our own skills, plans, and strategies—may result in worldly measurements of success, but by the biblical definition they will not produce kingdom outcomes. . . . Consequently, we believe we must employ qualitative metrics linked to faithfulness rather than quantitative metrics that look at results alone for measuring success. We must assess how we serve people in a manner that aligns with the teachings of Jesus and not just the number of people served. We must look beyond measuring our church in terms of numbers, our schools in terms of enrollment, and our evangelistic efforts in terms of conversions” (Hoag et al. 2014).

Other stewardship resources do not mention outcome assessment at all. For example, the stewardship manual of the Presbyterian Mission Agency urges congregations to carefully track how much money is pledged in response to various fundraising efforts and assess whether these efforts are effective, and to regularly thank congregants for their financial gifts and accurately report how these gifts have been used. But the

⁸ I discuss three representative examples from Catholic, evangelical Protestant, and mainline Protestant sources. My aim is not to imply that Christian groups never assess outcomes or attempt to measure the effectiveness of their programs, but simply to illustrate that these EA suggestions are not already universally adopted by Christian groups.

manual offers no suggestions about how this money should be allocated, and at no point discusses evaluating the impact of various programs.⁹

For these reasons, one might worry that there are alternate conceptions of what good stewardship consists in, and that Christians who accept such conceptions will not be on board with an EA approach to giving.¹⁰ Perhaps good stewardship does not permit us to squander resources or spend them however we wish, but doesn't require efficiency in a maximizing sense. For example, maybe good Christian stewardship is primarily about acting with integrity, and distributing resources in accordance with your personal values—which might include giving inefficiently to causes that you personally admire, or to support your local community even when greater needs exist outside of your community. Or maybe good Christian stewardship is about figuring out what God has called you to do and acting accordingly—and perhaps God calls some Christians to deworm children and fight malaria, and calls others to send the church youth group kids to summer camp, or to support the opera, or to donate to their already well-endowed *alma mater*. This last concern might sound glib, but it isn't meant to be. A Christian who believes that God is calling her to give money to cause X has what she takes to be an excellent reason to give to X. This reason won't be shared (or even understood) by secular EAs, and it cannot be easily argued away. This could be a major potential stumbling block to EA/Christian collaboration.

I don't claim to have conclusive replies to these serious worries, but I can offer some preliminary remarks. First, integrity and effectiveness need not be at odds. If you feel passionate about or called by God to give to cause X, you can still use EA tools to reason about the most effective way to support X.¹¹ Second, many Christians believe that people are not entitled to decide entirely for themselves what to do with their time, money, and talents; the will of the individual must sometimes be subsumed to the will of God, who might call you to do something you're not antecedently inclined to do. While this might lead people to support ineffective causes, it might also lead them to support effective causes even if they don't feel a compelling emotional connection to

⁹ See <http://www.presbyterianfoundation.org/getattachment/2a2140ca-8ac1-47e5-8c8b-29c66be913a4/PCUSA-Stewardship-Manual.aspx>

¹⁰ Thanks to Alex Rattee for raising this possibility to me in conversation.

¹¹ EA charity evaluator *Giving What We Can* recommends that donors remain cause-neutral if possible, and support whichever causes are most effective. But they recognize that not every donor will be cause-neutral, and they make recommendations of non-standout but still excellent charities that donors who are dedicated to particular causes can support. See <https://www.givingwhatwecan.org/cause/medical-research/>

them. For example, your preference for having a personal connection to an individual child through an ineffective child-sponsorship program might not matter if you believe that God is calling you to improve the lives of many more children by funding deworming or micronutrient supplements instead. Finally, Cortines and Baumer address this concern in the following way:

We acknowledge the primacy of the heart [in choosing ends], but also strongly believe that actions matter, and amounts matter! Christians are called to be generous stewards, and that implies real action. We suspect that ‘I did not feel led to give’ will not stand as a reasonable defense when Jesus questions our giving habits (Cortines and Baumer 2016, 233).

Ultimately, while there are certainly some hurdles, it looks like Christians can accept two fundamental EA claims from their own perspective: that we should be giving in large quantity to the world’s neediest, and that we should be using the best tools at our disposal to make sure we do the most good that we can with our money.

4. Other Aims of Christian Giving

In addition to the aim of giving to help the poor and alleviate suffering, Christians are likely to support three further aims that will not be shared by secular EAs. There is much discussion within Christian communities about whether and why these aims are important, and how to best achieve them. I’m going to presume that many or most Christians will share these ends, rather than arguing for this claim. This is an innocuous presumption, for collaboration with secular EAs will be easy and straightforward for any Christians who do not share these aims.

First, Christians value giving to maintain local churches and faith communities. This usually includes maintaining a designated building or other worship space and paying the salaries of professional clergy, administrative staff, maintenance crew, etc.; almost half of the donations local churches receive go to staffing costs, and just over a quarter go to maintenance costs such as a mortgage or rent, utilities, caring for the building and grounds, property insurance, and office supplies and equipment.¹²

Second, Christians value giving to enable engaging in communal worship of God. This usually includes maintaining designated worship spaces and worship tools, which vary

¹² See <http://www.churchlawandtax.com/blog/2014/august/how-churches-spend-their-money.html>, which summarizes data from a 2014 survey.

across traditions and denominations (e.g., hymnals, professional musicians or singers, a sound system, printed bulletins, screens to project song lyrics, etc.) For many Christians, worship also includes the creation of beautiful objects, buildings, and art meant to reflect and help congregants appreciate the glory and power of God.

Finally, many Christians will value giving to support evangelism, or preaching about Christianity to others with the ultimate goal of converting them to the faith. Evangelism will matter most to Christians who accept the following three claims, and whom I will refer to as *Evangelical* for ease of discussion:¹³

1. **Literal afterlife:** There exists a literal and infinite afterlife of either eternal goodness or eternal badness. (Note that this need not be a heaven of harps and angels and a hell of fire and brimstone; it might be something like infinite union with God vs. total and eternal absence from God.)
2. **Non-universalist:** Participation in a good afterlife isn't guaranteed to everyone; some will participate in an infinitely bad afterlife (or perhaps in no afterlife.)
3. **Non-fatalistic and interventionist:** Whether one goes to heaven or hell depends on an individual's holding certain beliefs or attitudes, and the actions of other people can influence whether someone holds those beliefs or attitudes.¹⁴

However, evangelism might matter even to Christians who believe that every person will participate in an infinitely good afterlife, or who believe that talk of an afterlife is merely metaphorical, so long as they believe that participation in a Christian community is a valuable good that can bring this-worldly benefits.

5. Why Christian EAs Cannot be Utilitarians

EAs seek to maximize the good that they do, which requires that they have some standard by which to weigh competing options and disparate goods against each other.

¹³ The term 'evangelical' is often used to refer to a wide range of characteristics (e.g., a belief in biblical infallibility, participation in certain denominational traditions, an emphasis on undergoing a "born again" experience.) I don't mean to build any of this into my specialized use of 'Evangelical.'

¹⁴ I assume that one could accept the doctrine of predestination—i.e., the idea that who will be saved and who won't be is determined in advance—without being fatalistic, if you believe that evangelistic efforts will play some role in the saving of those who are predestined to be saved.

Utilitarianism gives an easy and straightforward framework for making such calculations. Although not all EAs are thoroughgoing utilitarians, most adopt a consequentialist framework at least for the purpose of assessing outcomes. This often involves calculating which interventions lead to the greatest increase in total quality-adjusted life years (QALYs), or years of life adjusted by quality of life as mitigated by disease and disability.¹⁵

It is problematic, however, for Christians with certain theological views to adopt this sort of EA framework. For if Evangelicals—that is, Christians who are non-universalist interventionists about a literal and infinite heaven and hell—employ a straightforward utility calculus of the sort used by most consequentialist EAs, they will quickly run into morally perverse results.¹⁶ For the possibility of causing someone to experience *infinite* bliss (and thereby preventing them from experiencing *infinite* torment) by converting them to Christianity through evangelism is a swamping consideration that entails that all resources should be funnelled to evangelism, even at the exclusion of effective alleviation of suffering in this world. For example, it would increase utility (in the form of QALYs) more to convert one non-Christian to Christianity (leading to an *infinite* gain in utility/QALYs in heaven) than it would to greatly improve the earthly lives of any number of people by any amount (leading to a *very large but finite* gain in utility/QALYs on earth).¹⁷ Converting one person would also maximize utility/QALYs more than would preventing any number of already Christian people from dying of preventable causes (leading to a *very large but finite* loss of utility/QALYs on earth). Yet few (if any) Christians believe it would be better to convert one non-Christian to the faith than it would be to save the lives of one million suffering people who are already Christians.

These utility calculations can become even starker, at least in theory. Utilitarianism is often accused of having implications that many take to be perverse about the permissibility of causing harm to one in order to benefit many others. If you can save ten

¹⁵ Other EAs have a broader focus and aim to maximize years of happiness or well-being, rather than focusing exclusively on pain-free years of life. For example, see the discussion of QALYs vs. other standards (such as well-being adjusted life years, or WALYs) at the Effective Altruist forum: http://effective-altruism.com/ea/pu/we_care_about_walys_not_qalys/

¹⁶ Thanks to Alex Foster and Jay Quigley for discussion of this point.

¹⁷ Taking any action that makes a conversion *more likely* also seems to be a swamping consideration, even if the action does not lead to an actual conversion. For an action that increases the probability that an infinitely good outcome will occur itself has infinite expected utility. Thanks to Josh Crabill for raising this point in discussion.

people by killing one, on the face of it a simple act utilitarian calculus demands that you should do so. These implications are even more startling if we allow infinite values into the mix. Suppose that killing ten Christians could somehow cause the conversion of one non-Christian who could not be converted otherwise. Killing ten (or 100, or 1,000, or 1,000,000) Christians to save the soul of one non-Christian appears to maximize utility, as it leads to an infinite gain that outweighs the large but finite loss caused by the killing. Granted, this example is unrealistic; it's highly unlikely that such a scenario could ever arise (in part because the outrageous action of murdering existing Christians in order to create new Christians would likely have a counter-productive effect on the total number of converts to Christianity.) But it nevertheless highlights a serious hurdle for engaging in calculations of utility using infinities. Maybe cases like these are a *reductio* on the possibility of engaging in such calculations. Or maybe such calculations are possible, but the perverse moral implications serve as a normative *reductio*. Either way, Evangelical Christians cannot appeal to simple utility calculations when determining which outcomes create the most good. Consequentialist frameworks in general cannot easily accommodate infinite values.

Moreover, even non-Evangelical Christians may find maximizing accounts of goodness problematic in another way. Consequentialists presume that the only proper response to the good is to do your best to attain more of it. But many Christians believe that God is a qualitatively unique and infinite source of good, and that a proper response to God's goodness cannot be attempting to seek more of it, but must be of some other sort (e.g., engaging in worship as an expressive action).¹⁸ A straightforward utilitarian account of right action will be seen as deeply impoverished from a perspective in which there are independent sources of goodness that call out for some response other than maximization.

6. Suggestions for Moving Forward

So far, I've argued that Christians have good reason from their own perspective to accept two central EA claims: that we're obligated to give radically in quantity and scope, and that our giving should be effective. I've also argued that Christians will value giving to support aims that are not shared by secular EAs, and that at least some Christians will be unable to adopt a typical utilitarian framework for assessing effectiveness. In the last part of this paper, I offer preliminary suggestions about how to move forward with EA-Christian collaboration in light of these claims.

¹⁸ Thanks to Mark Murphy for raising this point to me in conversation.

6.1 *An alternate standard of effectiveness*

Christian EAs must adopt some non-utilitarian account of goodness that will put deontological side-constraints on what sorts of behavior one can permissibly engage in order to attain good ends, that will support central Christian aims (including sustaining local churches, engaging in communal worship, evangelizing, and global alleviation of suffering), and that will be expansive enough to accommodate expressive (and perhaps other sorts of) goods. I leave it to particular Christian communities to determine for themselves what this standard is; I suspect that it will include loving God and loving others—and in doing so, providing for their unmet material needs—as a central component. Determining how to assess outcomes and weigh competing ends in light of such a standard will be difficult. But I am optimistic that it can be done, in part because early efforts at EA-Christian collaboration are already occurring.

6.2 *Existing EA and Christian collaboration*

While the majority of EAs are secular, and the majority of Christians are not aligned with EA goals, there is some existing overlap. There have been very limited secular EA attempts to reach out to Christian givers. For example, Peter Singer cites Ambrose and Aquinas in support of a moral obligation to give in his book *The Most Good You Can Do* (Singer 2015, 26 – 28). A blog post on the Oxford-based Centre for Effective Altruism draws on interviews with Christian EAs to highlight similarities between Christianity and effective altruism: both emphasize proselytizing about their message, both are sometimes considered to be radical or counter-cultural movements, and in both groups “community is leveraged to encourage in-group members to act positively in ways they might not otherwise” (Ritchie 2015).

There are also Christians who are actively working to bring EA ideas into Christian communities. For example, there is a Facebook group called “Christians and Effective Altruism” with over 200 members, whose members are predominately (although not exclusively) Christians and whose “main purpose is to explore EA issues from a Christian perspective and to see what implications EA ideas might have for Christians.”¹⁹ Members of this group are currently in the process of developing a website with the specific aim of introducing Christians to EA and discussing EA issues from a specifically Christian perspective.²⁰ The 2015 EA Global Summit (the largest annual EA event) included a brief talk and panel discussion about Christian-

¹⁹ See <https://www.facebook.com/groups/741228169272427/>

²⁰ At time of writing, the URL for the website is <http://www.effectivegood.com>, and its stated aim is “Bringing Effective Altruism to the Christian Community.”

ity and EA, which highlighted areas of potential collaboration (di Stefano 2015). And Cortines and Baumer openly admire Peter Singer’s approach to poverty and giving, noting:

Earning six figures before business school, we each chose to give 10 to 15 percent away. We are Christians, called to love the world by the God that we worship. Meanwhile, an atheist professor at Princeton [Singer] was giving more than 20 percent? Motivated by nothing but a utilitarian concern for his fellow man? With no belief in the afterlife or in a God that was telling him to do it? Ouch (Cortines and Baumer 2016, 77).

They then call on Christians “to out-do these [secular EA efforts to fight global poverty] with pledges and movements of our own” (*ibid.*, 108).

The PIF (Pay It Forward) Foundation is a Christian foundation that explicitly endorses EA and uses EA approaches in choosing which causes to support. On their webpage, the PIF Foundation links to their own white paper about EA that is the sort of document that might be found on any secular website; they use QALYs as a metric for assessing poverty alleviation and lives saved, and they do not address evangelism.²¹ They encourage donors to give in order to save a life, fight poverty, or “save a soul.” The charities they choose to save lives and fight poverty—the Against Malaria Foundation and Evidence Action, respectively—are non-religiously affiliated NGOs that are endorsed by top secular EA charity evaluators.²² To save souls, the PIF Foundation supports the evangelism efforts of Global Media Outreach (GMO) on the basis of a cost effectiveness report from ROI (Return on Investment) Ministries, an organization that evaluates the monetary effectiveness of a number of Christian NGOs, including those that focus exclusively on evangelism.²³ ROI calculates that the “cost per decision

²¹ See <http://www.payitforward.foundation/pages/effective-altruism>

²² GiveWell, The Life You Can Save, and Giving What We Can all recommend the Against Malaria Foundation and Evidence Action’s “Deworm the World” initiative. The PIF Foundation also supports Evidence Action’s “Dispensers for Safe Water” initiative, which is not recommended by secular EA charity evaluators.

²³ See GMO’s website at <http://globalmediaoutreach.com/about/how-it-works>, and ROI’s at <http://www.roiministry.org/>

for Christ” for GMO is 37 cents.²⁴ GMO runs websites, web ads, and mobile apps in multiple languages in countries around the world. These websites and apps give users information about Christianity and the Bible, invite them to pray a “sinner’s prayer” acknowledging Jesus as their savior, and then ask users whether they have done so. GMO counts a soul as saved every time someone indicates “yes.” They then connect people to (mostly volunteer) online missionaries who pray for them, answer questions, and connect them to more resources.

ROI’s estimate of GMO’s efficacy is surely overly optimistic. It does not take into account the possibility of double-counting; surely some of the GMO website users who click “yes” on one of their webpages or apps will already have undergone a conversion experience and will simply be affirming it.²⁵ There is also a counterfactual concern about whether the conversion experiences GMO is tracking would have occurred anyway. In general, when gauging the effectiveness of an intervention one must factor in what results would have happened anyway had that particular intervention not occurred (MacAskill 2015). GMO targets many of their websites and ads to people who are actively searching for information about God and/or Christianity. Someone who is already searching for information about Christianity on the internet may very well already be on a path to conversion, and would perhaps undergo a conversion regardless of whether they encountered a GMO website.

One striking feature of the PIF Foundation’s recommendations is the large discrepancy in the quality of the data about the effectiveness of the Against Malaria Foundation and Evidence Action compared to the quality of the data about GMO’s effectiveness. Data about the former two charities is extremely robust, while data about the latter is not. This is, presumably, because efforts are almost never made to quantify the outcomes of evangelism; the PIF Foundation must rely on imperfect data about the efficacy of evan-

²⁴ See ROI’s 2015 report on GMO at http://www.roiministry.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/ROI.2015.GMO_Final.pdf. The PIF Foundation offers 44 cents as a more conservative estimate of GMO’s cost per conversion based on follow-up survey data from website users showing a 20-30% rate of attrition from Christian beliefs and practices in users after 6 months. See <http://sub-zero-designs.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/CGI-Handout.pdf>

²⁵ Matthew Moses, the founder of the PIF Foundation, is aware of this concern, and is encouraging GMO to alter their methods in light of it. He writes: “a YES indication does not mean a NEW indication for Christ and is therefore subject to double counting of existing Christians. We are in the process of preparing a recommendation to GMO to add an additional confirmation to their process that would make this data more clear. A simple follow up question to those who answer yes of ‘Is this your first time committing Jesus as Lord and Savior?’ would help alleviate skepticism for Christians that focus on EA” (personal correspondence).

gelism from ROI because it is one of the only options available to them. There is much room for growth here, and an opportunity for Christian evangelism NGOs to develop innovative methods to quantify their outcomes, compare the efficacy of various approaches, and adopt those that are most effective.

6.3 *Precluding secular EA worries*

Because most Christians endorse non-utilitarian moral theories and non-hedonistic accounts of value, and because utilitarians like Peter Singer hold views about, for example, abortion, infanticide and euthanasia that many Christians find repugnant, there is likely to be a lot of initial resistance to EA collaboration among Christians. For this reason, most of my focus has been on offering reasons why Christians are likely to be on board with some EA goals. However, there might also be resistance among secular EAs to collaboration with Christians. From a secular standpoint, using resources to support local churches, worship, and evangelism is wasteful at best, and might even be actively harmful. Why should secular EAs attempt to collaborate with people whose goals and aims are fundamentally different from theirs?

The simplest answer is that secular EAs should not let the best be the enemy of the better, and should acknowledge that more effective giving is better than less effective giving, even if the giving is not as effective as it could be. This is a relatively uncontroversial claim among EAs; even when addressing secular audiences, EAs usually advocate for lifestyle changes that lead to doing *more* good, since few (if any) humans are willing or able to live in a way that does the *most* good possible.

Furthermore, atheist EAs should be careful not to be uncharitable in assessing the value (or disvalue) of Christian aims that they don't share. For example, it's plausible that belonging to a supportive and inclusive local church community and engaging in communal worship can improve people's levels of subjective well-being and happiness, regardless of whether the God being worshipped exists and whether the metaphysical and theological beliefs endorsed by the church are true. It is also widely acknowledged by a wide range of Christian denominations that Christian evangelism is subject to independent permissibility constraints that rule out using coercion, violence, and decep-

tion.²⁶ In light of this, atheist EA worries about the harms caused by evangelism are likely overblown. This is not to suggest that there will be no insurmountable points of contention. For example, there are likely to be fundamental disagreements between some Christians and most secular EAs about sexual morality, abortion, and contraception. But such disagreements do not entail that there are no other areas in which EAs and Christians can productively collaborate.

Secular EAs should also recognize that there is a lot that they can learn from Christian givers. First, Christian approaches to evangelism might be sources of inspiration for EA movement-building. Effective altruism is a relatively new social movement that does not yet have much demographic diversity, and a major challenge for EAs who wish to grow the movement is spreading its message to a wider range of people.²⁷ The Christian tradition has thousands of years of experience with effectively spreading the word to a wide range of people across the world. While many components of Christian evangelism are inseparable from the Christian message, some of these methods and approaches might be able to be productively adapted for non-religious contexts.

Second, many Christian communities excel at creating accountability to a community when it comes to giving: members are encouraged to make (sometimes public) pledges to donate, and are supported in their efforts to be generous by other mem-

²⁶ “Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World,” a document unanimously endorsed by representative organizations of Catholics, mainline Protestants, and evangelical Protestants (the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, the World Council of Churches, and the World Evangelical Alliance, respectively) sets constraints on permissible evangelism, including:

- (a) “Christians are called to reject all forms of violence, even psychological or social, including the abuse of power in their witness”
- (b) Christians are called to “overcome all arrogance, condescension and disparagement” because “even when the gospel challenges certain aspects of cultures, Christians are called to respect all people,” and
- (c) Christians should “listen in order to learn about and understand others’ beliefs and practices, and are encouraged to acknowledge and appreciate what is true and good in them. Any comment or critical approach should be made in a spirit of mutual respect, making sure not to bear false witness concerning other religions.”

See http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/christian_witness_in_multi-religious_world_english.pdf

²⁷ Of the self-identified EAs who took the 2015 survey cited in note 1 above, 73% identify as male, around 60% are in STEM fields or philosophy, most are under 30 years old, and around three-quarters live in English-speaking countries.

bers (see also Ritchie 2015). Secular EAs have already begun to adopt some of these strategies. For example, there are in-person EA Meetup groups in cities around the world that are meant to encourage real-life EA communities. And the *Giving What We Can* pledge asks people to publicly commit to giving 10% of their income to highly effective charities, noting in their FAQ page that 10% is chosen as a benchmark in part because of the strong Judeo-Christian tradition of tithing.²⁸ EAs should continue to investigate the ways in which Christians create and sustain robust and accountable communities of giving, and should consider employing similar methods.

Finally, as noted in Section 2.1, Christians often frame charity not as the superfluous sharing of one's personal resources, but as rightfully giving to others what is owed to them as a matter of justice. Some EAs reach a similar conclusion for different reasons, and argue on utilitarian grounds that charity is not supererogatory but morally obligatory. Perhaps because many people find the harsh demands of strict utilitarianism unappealing or implausible, EAs do not often frame charitable giving as morally obligatory in their public outreach. Rather, they presume that people want to do good, and present EA as a tool to help them do good better. The great successes of Christian charity, however, might spur EAs to seriously consider adopting a secular analogue of this approach, in which charitable giving is presented as obligatory not on consequentialist grounds, but because of the demands of *justice*, or due to the *right* (God-given or otherwise) that people have to minimum standards of welfare.

6.4 Proposals

Christian communities that wish to adopt EA approaches will have to grapple with how to allocate their giving among the four main aims—sustaining the local church, engaging in communal worship, evangelizing, and alleviating global suffering and poverty—that they support. While I recognize that this is a difficult question that will not have a one-size-fits-all answer, I will conclude by offering a few suggestions for how Christian charitable giving might be more effective in EA terms.

First, Christian EAs should think creatively about how they might be able to cut inessential operating expenses and sustain themselves with fewer resources. Do churches really need state-of-the-art sound systems, professional musicians, or glossy printed bulletins every week in order to flourish? Does each congregation really need its own designated church building? Perhaps multiple congregations can share one building that they use at different times; this would be especially likely to occur if more

²⁸ See <https://www.givingwhatwecan.org/about-us/frequently-asked-questions/#43-why-10>

churches considered gathering at times other than Sunday morning. Smaller congregations might meet in rented spaces or even in people's homes, and congregations who own their church buildings might rent them out during the week to help pay for maintenance expenses. How much of what churches spend on their gathering spaces and worship tools is essential for creating an environment conducive to worship, or is a sincere response to the goodness of God—and how much of it is unreflective habit, or hanging on to tradition at any cost, or an expression of vanity or power, or merely keeping pace with what the churches down the street are doing?

Second, Christian EAs should do more to attempt to gauge the effectiveness of evangelistic efforts, and focus on those that cost least while yielding the best results; as noted in the discussion of ROI, there is a lot of room for improvement in this area. (Even atheist EAs who are opposed to evangelism should be on board with this claim, for if less money goes to evangelism, more can go to causes like global health and poverty reduction.) My suspicion—which I admit is made from the armchair and would need to be confirmed with empirical data—is that evangelistic efforts in one's own community are likely to be most effective when they occur within existing personal relationships. Telling your friends and loved ones about your religion and inviting them to participate in it with you costs little to nothing. And when it comes to evangelism efforts in developing countries, in most cases training and supporting locals as missionaries is much more cost-effective than is sending foreigners as missionaries—and, because local missionaries are already fluent in the language, familiar with the customs, and entrenched in the community of the people they are serving, likely to be more effective in terms of outcomes, as well.²⁹

Third, Christian EAs should strive to make their giving to alleviate global suffering as effective as it can be. One component of this is increasing the amount of money that goes to support this aim compared to the others. Currently, very little of the money most churches take in goes towards alleviating poverty and suffering.³⁰ To fend off any temptation to spend more than they need on themselves, EA churches could figure out what their realistic operating expenses are and commit to giving the rest away—or could even seek pledges and donations from congregants only up until their core operating expenses are covered, and then direct congregants to donate directly to efficient NGOs beyond that point.

²⁹ For example, see <http://www.christianaid.org/AboutUs/CostComparison.aspx>

³⁰ On average, 4% of church income goes to domestic mission support and 5% to international mission support, which includes both evangelism and suffering alleviation. See note 12 above.

Another component of this is giving more efficiently. Most churches do not have the capacity to do efficient work on a global scale themselves. If churches are serious about helping the neediest people in the world in the most effective way that they can, they should donate money to well-vetted NGOs to do this work for them. Local churches are likely better able to do effective work in their own communities (e.g., by running food pantries, homeless shelters, holiday toy drives, etc.). But they should remain open to the possibility that local NGOs might be more effective at this sort of work than local churches can be—for example, that more people can be fed by funding a regional food bank than can be fed by each church operating its own food pantry.

This is not to say that Christian EAs should completely disengage from their local communities. There is great value in forming personal relationships with your (geographic) neighbors by helping them, value of a sort that cannot be realized by delegating tasks to a third party. But such relationship-building efforts could be thought of as being primarily about community-building, and could be undertaken with this aim in mind. Some alleviation of suffering will result from these community-building efforts, but they should not be the only way in which Christian EAs seek to alleviate suffering in their local communities.

Likewise, short-term mission trips (in which volunteers, usually from the developed world, travel abroad for a short amount of time, usually to the developing world, to engage in evangelism or other work) are valuable in that they help build cross-cultural relationships and often lead to transformative experiences for the participants. But such trips are almost always a highly ineffective use of funds when it comes to outcomes. For example, Robert T. Lupton notes that

U.S. mission teams who rushed to Honduras to help rebuild homes destroyed by hurricane Mitch spent on average \$30,000 per home—homes locals could have built for \$3,000 each. The money spent by one campus ministry to cover the costs of their Central American mission trip to repaint an orphanage would have been sufficient to hire two local painters and two new full-time teachers and purchase new uniforms for every student in the school (Lupton 2011, 5).

The organizers of such mission trips should ensure that the work being done is actually needed and is actually helping—or at least not hurting—and should consider explicitly framing the trip as primarily being about cross-cultural exchange. Funding such trips should not be the core way in which Christian EAs do good in the world, but could be

thought of as “bonus” or discretionary giving.³¹ Participants in such trips could recognize that the trips are as much (or more) for their own benefit as they are for the benefit of those who are served, and could fundraise accordingly (e.g., seek donations from friends and family to fund the trip in lieu of birthday or holiday presents.)

Finally, Christian EAs could emphasize teaching about generosity and giving in their Christian educational programs. In the words of Cortines and Baumer:

We believe giving levels are so low in the Church today partially because of a lack of education about generosity. If the Church invested the same time and energy into educating young men and women on the topic of generosity that it does in educating them on the topics of service or sexual purity, we might see a very different story in the graphs of giving levels today (Cortines and Baumer 2016, 220).

Given the divergent normative starting points of EA and Christianity, it is unrealistic to expect that all or most Christians will be convinced to adopt EA methods and goals. However, I aim to have shown that EA outreach to Christian communities is a worthwhile task that could potentially be very fruitful. While there will be points of disagreement and challenging questions to grapple with, there is more overlap between EA and Christianity than there might at first appear to be.³²

References

Aquinas, Thomas. *Summa Theologica*.

Camosy, C.C. (2012) *Peter Singer and Christian ethics: Beyond polarization*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139043304>

Baumer, G. and Cortines, J. (2016) *God and money: How we discovered true riches at Harvard business school*. Carson, CA: Rose Publishing.

³¹ Di Stefano (2015) suggests giving to whatever causes you prefer as a form of discretionary giving on top of core EA giving.

³² Thanks to Greg Clapper, Josh Crabill, Peter Murphy, Jay Quigley, Alex Rattee, and the participants of the 2016 Second Annual Theistic Ethics Workshop at Georgetown University for valuable discussion of this paper.

di Stefano, L. (2015) "Christianity and effective altruism." EA Global Melbourne 2015. Available at: <https://www.eaglobal.org/talks/christianity-and-effective-altruism/>

Gregory, E. (2008) "Agape and special relations in a global economy: Theological sources." In Hicks, D.A. and Valeri, M. (eds.) *Global neighbours: Christian Faith and moral obligation in today's economy*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

Hoag, G.G., Rodin, R.S. and Willmer, W.K. (2014) "3 core characteristics of kingdom outcomes." CLA Higher Thinking Blog. Available at: <http://blog.christianleadershipalliance.org/2014/04/11/3-core-characteristics-of-kingdom-outcomes>

Lewis, C.S. (2012) *Mere Christianity*. London: HarperCollins Publishers.

Lupton, R.D. (2012) *Toxic charity: How churches and charities hurt those they help (and how to reverse it)*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers.

MacAskill, W. (2015) *Doing good better: How effective altruism can help you help others, do work that matters, and make smarter choices about giving back*. New York: Avery.

McKittrick, M., Landres, J. S., Ottoni-Wilhem, M. and Hayat, A. D. (2013) "Report: Connected to give: Faith communities." Jumpstart.

Office of Stewardship and Development (2014). "Stewardship: a way of life: 2014 parish stewardship planner." Archdiocese of Saint Paul and Minneapolis. Available at: http://www.archspm.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/1392_072414_ArchdioceseStewardshipToolkit4c.pdf

Paul IV (1967) *Populorum progressio*: Encyclical of Pope Paul VI on the development of peoples. Available at: http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_26031967_populorum.html

Singer, P. (2015) *The most good you can do: How effective altruism is changing ideas about living ethically*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Singer, P. (1972) "Famine, Affluence, and Morality." *Philosophy and Public Affairs*. 1.3: 229 – 243.

Tierney, B. (1997) *The idea of natural rights: Studies on natural rights, natural law and church law: 1150-1625*. Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press.

Wesley, J. (1872) "Sermon 50: The use of money." Available at: <http://www.umcmmission.org/Find-Resources/John-Wesley-Sermons/Sermon-50-The-Use-of-Money>.

Wesley, J. (1872a) "Sermon 116: Causes of the inefficacy of Christianity." Available at: <http://www.umcmmission.org/Find-Resources/John-Wesley-Sermons/Sermon-116-Causes-of-the-Inefficacy-of-Christianity>.

White, C.E. (2016) "What Wesley practiced and preached about money." *Christianity Today*. Available at: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/1987/winter/8711027.html>.