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Pragmatism and Effective Altruism: An Essay on Epistemology and Practical Ethics

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Pragmatism and Effective Altruism: An Essay on Epistemology and Practical Ethics

Abstract

This paper hopes to provide an American Pragmatist reading of the Effective Altruism philosophy and movement. The criticism levied against Effective Altruism here begins from one of its founding principles, and extends to practical aspects of the movement. The utilitarian leaders of Effective Altruism consider Sidgwick's 'point of view of the universe' an objective starting point of determining ethics. Using Quality Adjusted Life Years (QALYs), a popular measure in contemporary welfare economics, they provide a "universal currency for misery" for evaluating decisions. Through this method, one can calculate exactly the value of each moral decision by identifying which one yields more QALYs, and, apparently, objectively come to a conclusion about the moral worth of seemingly unrelated situations, for example, whether it is more moral to donate money so as to help women suffering from painful childbirth-induced fistulas, or to donate to starving children in famine-ridden areas. What's more, not making the choice that yields more QALYs is "unfair" to those one could have helped more, thus immoral.

This paper provides, first a pragmatist conception of epistemology (or lack of it), in contrast to the Sidgwickian one held by the utilitarian effective altruists, and then explores how holding either epistemological position affects our ethical viewpoints and actions. It argues that the utilitarian conception is the wrong place, and way, from which to view all ethical action. It contends that Effective Altruism, in seeking to reorder society to meet its abstractly conceived teleological utilitarian moral ideal (as measured by QALYs—a measure settled upon by the movement's leaders), is undemocratic, and ultimately misses much of the complexity and messiness provided by contingencies, personal and cultural, that is present in, and important to, human life. Altruism done this way is atomizing and thoughtless; and it depicts to a high degree what William James referred to as a "certain blindness in human beings" - the lack of recognition that different things matter to different people, and that it is impossible to aggregate these claims relative to a moral standard that exists outside their particular individual and societal experiences.

The paper then provides a pragmatist reading of meliorism, as found in the works of John Dewey, William James, Richard Rorty and Jane Addams; a view of meliorism that hearkens towards solidarity and not objectivity; one that is not only democratic, cognizant of contingencies and focused on habit, but also, by its insistence on viewing ourselves as members of communities and societies, saves us from the moral atomization of Effective Altruism and its insistence on individual moral responsibility and action in line with "objective truths", as opposed to collective and political action to address contingent issues.

Disciplines

Arts and Humanities

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PRAGMATISM AND EFFECTIVE ALTRUISM: AN ESSAY ON EPISTEMOLOGY AND PRACTICAL ETHICS

John Aggrey Odera

2018-2019 Wolf Humanities Center Undergraduate Research Fellow

A Thesis submitted to The Department of Philosophy,
At The University of Pennsylvania
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Bachelor of Arts (Honors)
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Supervisor: Karen Detlefsen.

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charity and questioned with skepticism. Most of all, to Karen Detlefsen, who guided me kindly and patiently throughout it all.

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Pragmatists hope to make anti-philosophical points in non-philosophical language.

Richard Rorty

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ABSTRACT

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¹ Srinivasan, Amia. (2015). "Stop the Robot Apocalypse". Review of "Doing Good Better: How Effective Altruism can Help you help Others, Do work that Matters, and Make Smarter Choices about Giving Back" by William MacAskill. London Review of Books.

² MacAskill speaking about his visit to Hamlin Fistula Hospital in Ethiopia: "*When I'd visited Ethiopia several years before, I'd visited this hospital. I'd hugged the women who suffered from this condition, and they'd thanked me for visiting them. It had been an important experience for me: a vivid first-hand demonstration of the severity of the problems in the world. This was a cause I had a personal connection with. Should I have donated to the Fistula Foundation, even knowing I could do more to help people if I donated elsewhere? I do not think so. If I were to give to the Fistula Foundation rather than to charities I thought were more effective, I would be privileging the needs of some people over others for emotional rather than moral reasons. That would be unfair to those I could have helped more. If I'd visited some other shelter in Ethiopia, or in any other country, I would have had a different set of personal connections. It was arbitrary that I'd seen this particular problem at close quarters.*" DGB, pg. 41.

³ MacAskill, William. (2015). Doing Good Better, pg. 42

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The paper then provides a pragmatist reading of meliorism, as found in the works of John Dewey, William James, Richard Rorty and Jane Addams; a view of meliorism that hearkens towards solidarity and not objectivity; one that is not only democratic, cognizant of contingencies and focused on habit, but also, by its insistence on viewing ourselves as members of communities and societies, saves us from the moral atomization of Effective Altruism and its insistence on individual moral responsibility and action in line with “objective truths”, as opposed to collective and political action to address contingent issues.

⁴ James, William. (1899). *On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings*. Penguin
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INTRODUCTION

Philosophy is often accused of not being engaged with the world; of being conducted from the “armchair”, such that the questions it troubles itself with have more to do with abstract theorizing than with the actual lived lives of human beings. This thesis is, first and foremost then, an exploration of two philosophies - Effective Altruism and American Pragmatism- that repudiate this contention; that actively involve themselves in meliorism - engagement with the world in a bid to improve it.

Much more importantly, however, this thesis discusses how these philosophical movements go about their work. In doing this, it presents a critique against the Effective Altruism philosophy and movement, beginning from its epistemological framework (the meta theory about knowledge that grounds it) and extending to its practical aspects. Conversely, the thesis champions the methodological anti-epistemological framework of the American Pragmatists, and argues that this framework leads to much better practical consequences.

The primary material informing this thesis comprised, on the one hand; books, journal articles, newspaper & magazine essays and profiles, YouTube videos & other online resources, and correspondence with members of the Effective Altruism movement and philosophy, as well as some engagement with older texts on utilitarianism that provided the grounding epistemological framework for Effective Altruism. On the other hand, I made use of books, articles and encyclopedia entries that dealt with the American Pragmatist school of philosophy, with particular emphasis on the works of John Dewey - whose papers I accessed through Southern Illinois University, William James, Jane Addams, Richard Rorty and

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Charles Sanders-Peirce. I also read many books on related non-philosophical topics, particularly in development and welfare economics, social choice theory, history, and sociology.

The thesis is structured as a series of three extended essays meant to be read together. The first essay, *Objectivity, Contingency, Solidarity* provides an overview of the epistemological debates grounding both schools of philosophy discussed here. On the one hand, Henry Sidgwick's utilitarian "Point of view of the Universe" which undergirds Effective Altruism. This view holds that any notion of "good", and therefore of meliorism, is to be understood as being grounded on an objective truth - arrived at from an impartial and maximizing point of view. The view thus presents a universal currency, one of utility, under which any melioristic program can be measured against. If we have two issues that we care about, then this view demands that we subject them to this maximization test, and the one that maximizes becomes the one that we are rationally and ethically compelled to adopt or champion.

On the other hand, pragmatist anti-epistemology. By this view there is no such thing as an objective, metaphysical truth. Truth, rather, is a human creation that enables us to attain certain preferable states and consequences in the world. By this view, attempts at meliorism should not refer back to an immaterial objective truth - as Sidgwick does, but should instead seek to engender democratic consensus and solidarity about how to best tackle the problems we face in the world.

The second essay, *Shall We Leave it to The Experts*, explores what I consider to be the flaws of Effective Altruism, based on its adoption of Sidgwick's epistemology. I argue extensively that Effective Altruism's adoption of objectivity promotes moral heedlessness - by promoting moral "experts" ; that it does not engage sufficiently with systemic and structural change; and, as with all utilitarian philosophies, that it demands too much, morally, from us.

The third essay, *Democratic Vistas*, explores how meliorism might look like if we are to adopt the (anti) epistemological framework of the American Pragmatists as opposed to that of the utilitarians. It sets forth a democratic, contingent, and pliable account of improving the world; one that insists on political solidarity as the framework for meliorism, as opposed to one that appeals to objectivity.

The conclusion of the thesis urges that we turn away from epistemological accounts of objectivity, and instead to political accounts of solidarity as the grounding for our engagement with the world; to, in our melioristic endeavors, ask the political question - "what are the consequences of this?" as opposed to the epistemological question - "what is this?" Doing this, I argue, results in better practical consequences in the world, and in a philosophy that is truly engaged.

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PART ONE

OBJECTIVITY, CONTINGENCY, SUBJECTIVITY

*There's some peculiar in each leaf and grain,
Some unmark'd fiber, or some varying vein,
Shall only man be taken in the gross?
Grant but as many sorts of mind as moss.*

Alexander Pope, Epistle 1 to Richard Temple, Viscount Cobham.

Published. 1734.

In his work, *The Method of Ethics*, the Victorian philosopher Henry Sidgwick undertook a remarkable defense of utilitarianism. Sidgwick sought to provide what he deemed the correct way of, “obtaining reasoned convictions as to what *ought*⁵ to be done”⁶. Pleasure, he thought, was the only thing that was “intrinsically good”. Ethical conduct, he held, was therefore “objectively right” when its principal consideration was what would “produce the greatest amount of happiness on the whole; that is, taking into account all whose happiness is affected by the conduct”⁷. Despite its “cumbrousness”, Sidgwick referred to this principle as “Universalistic Hedonism”⁸

⁵ My emphasis

⁶ Sidgwick, Henry., 1874, “The Method of Ethics”. *London: Macmillan and Co. 1874*

⁷ Ibid (Book 4 Chapter 1).

⁸ Ibid 7

But of course objective universalistic hedonism could not be arrived at subjectively. We humans are beings with different, many times conflicting, points of views, interests, allegiances, and so on. Moreover, we invariably tend to unfairly attach more weight to our own interests, and to those of our loved ones, as compared to those of strangers and others far from us. This, naturally, could not count, Sidgwick believed, as what we *ought* to do. Many times, actions carried out in this way would surely not produce the greatest amount of happiness on the whole.

Furthermore, he strongly believed, the good of one being, no matter who they were to us, *not even when they were us ourselves*, was not more important, *ethically* speaking, than the good of another. Sidgwick therefore, unlike his utilitarian predecessor - John Stuart Mill, was not willing to simply leave matters at the “harm principle”⁹ - that our actions be limited only when they harmed others, which is to say, that we had a negative duty not to cause harm to others. Sidgwick extended this, believing that we had a positive duty to ensure that utility was evenly and impartially distributed- beneficence as the balancing of the moral books.

The recourse was therefore to approach ethical action from the point of view of a neutral observer - and neutral in this sense could not mean just any third party “human person”. For despite our wonderfully human capabilities for rationality, our inclinations

⁹ It is interesting to note that some pragmatist appropriate Mill or claim him as one of their own. William James, for example, dedicates his book, “Pragmatism”, to Mill - “*To the memory of John Stuart Mill, from whom I first learned the pragmatic openness of mind, and whom my fancy likes to picture as our leader were he here today*”. Rorty, in page 63 of *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, while briefly discussing the harm principle, says, “*J. S. Mill's suggestion that governments devote themselves to optimizing the balance between leaving people's private lives alone and preventing suffering seems to me pretty much the last word*”.

towards justice; we were all by virtue of our humanity, knowingly or unknowingly, either contaminated by allegiance, or simply ignorant of what was 'truly good'. Instead of this inherent subjectivity, Sidgwick called upon us to imagine what a truly reasonable, perfectly neutral, observing entity - neutral insofar as they were, of course, impartial, but also very importantly, maximizing- would hold. And this was supposed to be the viewpoint we were ethically and rationally compelled to adopt. Sidgwick termed this the "point of view of the universe".

This view has long since dominated the utilitarian school. According to it, like Gradgrind's fact pitchers¹⁰, we are supposed to think of ourselves simply as containers for utility. In a detached way therefore, what it means to do good and to be good, is to redistribute that utility as impartially and as efficiently as possible so as to be maximizing. The view has influenced the work of philosophers with a utilitarian bent into areas of inquiry outside philosophical ethics (though obviously with deep implications within ethical theory). For example, in philosophy of mind, Derek Parfit, a highly influential utilitarian philosopher, very much influenced by Sidgwick, wrote a brilliant account, exploring issues such as the unity of consciousness and brain bisection, to argue why personal identity does not matter¹¹, which is to say, why the particular contingencies of individual life do not matter. The corollary in ethics to this question in the philosophy of mind is obvious (even if it may be

¹⁰ See: Dickens, Charles. (1854). "Hard Times for these Times". London: Chapman & Hall. Here, Dickens parodies Thomas Gradgrind, the utilitarian headmaster of a school - who has also named all his children after famous utilitarians, including Thomas Malthus. Gradgrind insists that the students in his school learn only "useful" knowledge - "facts, facts, facts". Gradgrind conceives of the children as nothing more than repositories for these facts.

¹¹ Parfit, Derek. 1984. "Reasons and Persons". Chapter 12: "Why our Identity is not What Matters". *Oxford University Press*.

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argued that the connection I draw here is tenuous): If individual personal identity, the starting point of all subjectivity, does not matter, how could ethical viewpoints arising from it?¹²

What matters, in both mind and ethics, these accounts hold, is something above and beyond, something objective.

Other contemporary utilitarians, too, seem to have doubled down on Sidgwick. Peter Singer and Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek in their book “*The Point of View of the Universe: Sidgwick and Contemporary Ethics*” as well as in other works¹³, advance several arguments on disparate issues, for example the evolutionary basis for moral judgements; whether preference utilitarianism is preferable to hedonistic utilitarianism; the call for universal beneficence - and its demandingness, and many other issues of the like. The central foundation upon which the arguments of these contemporary utilitarians lie is this idea that Sidgwick’s point of view of the universe is the correct standpoint from which to view these ethical issues.

Non-utilitarian philosophers have also explored the question of an objective point of view. Thomas Nagel, famously a Kantian, in his temperate exposition of ethical viewpoints, outlined a contrast. The first: A “view from nowhere”¹⁴, a supposedly objective “place” (which is “nowhere in particular, really”¹⁵) where the only valuable insights are ones reached

¹² The pragmatists I discuss here do not deny the existence of this contingency. But they diverge from the utilitarians in that they think this contingency does matter. In fact, they assert that it matters so much that anything prescribing an objective view over and above it is ridiculous

¹³ De Lazari-Radek, Katarzyna., Singer, Peter. (2012). “The Objectivity of Ethics and the Unity of Practical Reason”. *Ethics*, Vol. 123, No. 1 (October 2012), pp. 9-31

¹⁴ Nagel, Thomas. 1986., “The View from Nowhere”.:

¹⁵ *Ibid* page 14

“independently” - which is to say - detached from any individual perspective. Insofar as there is a world of things, contends Nagel, there is an objective standpoint from where we can view that world over and above our interests and experiences; an objective perspective of world *qua* world.

The second: a subjective view, the stuff of everyday individualized experiences, drawn from consciousness - joy, taste, pain, color perception, love, passion, etcetera. We consciously feel and perceive things, consciously have experiences of this second kind, but the best we can do is to analogize them for others - I feel pain in this way, other feeling beings are like me *qua* feeling, so they must feel pain in this way too. But, Nagel holds, we can never objectively understand the “stuff” of these subjective experiences; it is the realm of *qualia*. What is it like to be a bat?¹⁶ How do scrambled eggs taste to a cockroach?¹⁷ - It is not solipsism, for we do not deny that other minds exist, and that other beings think and feel; it is instead a case of epistemic inadequacy, one not acknowledged by physicalist theories in philosophy of mind when attempting to explain consciousness.

There is such a thing, Nagel thinks, as phenomenal experience; *what it is like* to be a particular conscious being. And try as we might, we cannot objectively detail the exact substance of these subjective experiences. In this sense, we cannot have a “point of view of the universe” about these issues. What this would mean, Nagel’s account implies, would be that a good theory of ethics, like a good theory of mind, would need to take into account the

¹⁶ Nagel, Thomas, 1974. “What is it like to be a bat?” *The Philosophical Review*, October 1974

¹⁷ *Ibid* 16

existence of this subjectivity. This, of course, is not to say that a good ethical theory needs to be relativistic; that is far from what Nagel means.

Nagel's solution is to not prefer one viewpoint over another. For him, objectivity can never completely override inherent subjectivity, or vice versa. Instead, he concludes that both views, subjective and objective, must learn to coexist alongside one another; that though this is a difficult balance, it is what we must nevertheless consistently aspire to¹⁸. For Nagel, we must somehow learn to juggle the demands of both viewpoints. We must be careful that the call of the subjective affect does not entirely relieve us from the demands of the 'objective' ethical. But we must also guard that we are not puritanical with ethical objectivity at the cost of all subjectivity, that we maintain a level of recognition for the inherent subjectiveness of human perspectives and experiences.

This solution is deeply honest, even if not satisfying. Nagel is not simply interested in us being good by "doing good" i.e. maximizing utility, as the utilitarians would have it. He also acknowledges our basic individuated humanity, and is interested in us being good in a subjective sense; as conscious individual beings, with thoughts and feelings and desires that are unique; with experiences that are non-generalizable and deeply personally meaningful. Here Kantianism and other non-consequentialist philosophies provide a refreshing reprieve from the 'demandingness'¹⁹ of utilitarianism.

¹⁸ Williams, Bernard. 1986. "A Passion for the Beyond". *Review of "The View from Nowhere" by Thomas Nagel. London Review of Books. Vol. 8, No. 14. 7 August 1986.*

¹⁹ The word demandingness is placed in quotes since its use here may be contentious. The way the word is usually used, as regards to utilitarianism, involves the idea that following the logic of consequentialism, some actions we typically deem to be supererogatory (praiseworthy but not obligatory) become obligatory. For example, if we are to be persuaded by argument that it is morally
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Nevertheless, this is not the view of the pragmatist school, which is the main focus of this work, and which shall substantively be outlined within the course of this essay.

American Pragmatism has a tenuous relationship with epistemology - something that Cornel West called an “evasion”²⁰ of Philosophy. Pragmatists reject the idea, seen as the goal of philosophy since Plato, of philosophy as proceeding towards truth; of the task of epistemology being the *discovery* of a certain knowledge about the world. Typically, many philosophers think of the world, and of morality, as an already formed analytical unit, with its own rules and ways of working- ways of working that we come to discover through science, philosophy, and other forms of inquiry²¹, and then live correctly with respect to.

For the pragmatists, however, the world and things in it exist, sure, and human beings, like other animals, exist in the world too. But that is it. There is no inherent sense of right or

required of us, not just that it would be praiseworthy, to donate a certain amount of our income to charity. The effect is that we may then reject what the argument requires of us, even though we have accepted the argument itself, because the argument so violates our intuitions and our usual way of doing things. The way I use the word ‘demandingness’ here at the very least complicates the relation of superogation/ obligation behind it. I hearken to a distinction made by Nagel; that of agent-neutrality and agent-relativity. Agent-neutral situations are the parallels to Nagel’s view of what is “objective”, as in, it applies indiscriminately for everyone: “everybody, generally speaking, has a reason to want pain to stop, even if it is not his pain” - that is an ‘objective’ standpoint from which we can view pain. The agent-relative situation, on the other hand, would apply only to particular individuals, for example, “I want to graduate in May, so I must stay in school”. Nobody else really cares if I don’t graduate in May, though. Agent-relative situations, like agent-neutral situations, have degrees of importance, and these agent situations cannot be mapped onto each other one to one. If an agent-relative situation would seem to me, in my judgement, to require much more of my attention and resources than an agent-neutral one, contends Nagel, then in his view, it is not immoral to choose the agent-relative situation. This complicates the idea of the demandingness objection.

²⁰ West, Cornel. (1989). “The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism”. University of Wisconsin Press.

²¹ This conception of epistemology, as Elizabeth Anscombe suggested, makes sense if one believes in intelligent design, yet many philosophers who reject intelligent design, Peter Singer for example, still hold on to this view of epistemology.

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wrong, true or false, that exists in the world *before* conscious subjects give it meaning - and this happens through language. It is not that the *qualia* Nagel mentions constitute a subjective truth of some sort that is unknowable because of epistemic inadequacy, or that, in the same vein, there are objective truths that are knowable through epistemology. It is, rather, that there are no truths outside of the experiences and linguistic structures of human beings; no teleologized ideals. Pragmatists deny epistemology in its entirety - they do not have one, much less a relativistic one. Philosophy, the pragmatists think, should thus reorient its goals from a search for truth, to an attempt to understand the products of the interactions of human habits and impulses which produce social and moral conditions.

John Dewey says on this:

*“When it is acknowledged that under the disguise of dealing with ultimate reality, philosophy has been occupied with the precious values embedded in social traditions, that it has sprung from a clash of social ends and from a conflict of inherited institutions with incompatible contemporary tendencies, it will be seen that the task of future philosophy is to clarify men’s ideas as to the social and moral strife of their own day. Its aim is to become, as far as is humanly possible an organ for dealing with these conflicts”*²²

There is thus a third way that pragmatism offers in this tussle between teleologized essentialism and abject relativism: the recognition of contingency. Contingency is certainly not objectivity, but it is also *not* subjectivity in the relativistic sense - it is not a trivialism

²² Quotation lifted from: West, Cornell. (1989). *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism*. Chapter 4; pg. 112.

which renders us incapable of action because all possible choices are of equal merit²³.

Contingency, rather, is the predication of some things/events on other things/events, such that we realize that things could be (or could have been) otherwise, that the world is always presenting us with new information to challenge any beliefs we hold, and therefore that no beliefs stand on absolute solid ground. But at the same time, it is the recognition of the fact that within the world as it is now, there are intersubjective agreements (obviously not universal) on how certain things are, or should be, in order to best serve present purposes, and that for practical reasons, if one were to try to assert claims of subjectivity upon certain agreements within certain communities, one would not be taken seriously.

The result of this is an acknowledgment that the truths we hold now are not inherent or immutable, they are changeable, but that it is useful to hold them - even to advocate strongly for them - because they serve particular *present* purposes for *us*. When doubt arises in us about the value of these truths, an acknowledgement of contingency calls on us to assess practicable results, to make any changes we do on the basis of these potential results (while acknowledging their contingency), not to instead refer to some objectivity that exists outside of ourselves, as the determining factor in judging which truths we should then adopt; nor to throw up our hands and relativistically, hopelessly, claim it is all the same. At the center of this acknowledgement of contingency however, must always be democratic experience. Changes made must always be agreed upon by the broadest group of people they will affect, and not instigated by coercion, nor accepted purely on authority.

²³ Wieland, J. W. (2012) Can Pyrrhonists act normally? *Philosophical Explorations: An International Journal for the Philosophy of Mind and Action* 15(3):277-289.

For example, Carlin Romano²⁴ in his discussion of Richard Rorty's work, gives the example of the sentence "Beijing is the capital city of China". This "fact" is rooted in our language and shared intersubjective agreement, such that if today someone were to say that "Shenzhen is the capital city of China", we would think him "objectively" wrong. This person could not reasonably say that it was his "subjective" opinion that Shenzhen is the capital city of China; that that was what was true *to him*. This supposed 'objectivity' in Beijing being China's capital, however, is not a function of the world. There is nothing inherent in Beijing that necessitates that it is the capital of China, and if tomorrow the government of China decided to make Shenzhen the capital, we would quickly update our language and ways of behaviour. "Shenzhen is the capital city of China" would be the new "objective" fact.

But these "facts" , as I have been arguing, are contingent on our intersubjective agreement; they are not facts from nowhere, independent of us. If a critical mass of us continued acting as if Beijing were still the capital city of China, then the government of China might have a problem on its hands, and for practicable reasons, might be forced to redesignate Beijing as China's capital.

In other terms, an acknowledgement of contingency would mean a "stuttering conviction", as Alexander Livingston suggests from his reading of William James. Stuttering convictions are unlike both relativism and absolutism; they are "at once principled and

²⁴ Romano, Carlin. Carlin. (2017). "America the Philosophical". Chapter on "Rorty's Revolution". Pg. 126-160. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group.

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reflective, held passionately but not blindly”²⁵- which is to say that they enable us to act in the world, to act on our convictions, but to be open enough to revising them in the face of new evidence.

This is only possible when we reorient ourselves not to think teleologically. When we change our convictions in the face of new evidence, that is not to say that the convictions we previously held were “wrong” and the ones we now hold are “right”. Rather, it is to say that those convictions served our purposes best *then*, and these other ones do so now - perhaps because we have come across new information, or perhaps because we have expanded the boundaries of who we consider “us” to be. When we attempt to convince others to adopt our convictions similarly, the idea is not that our convictions have a better relation to an objective impartial immaterial criterion of truth than theirs. Rather, what we are trying to do is to have them join us in our intersubjective community of agreement, with the knowledge that this broader community of agreement makes practicable action in the world easier, and of more use to everyone involved.

The pragmatists therefore do not accept Nagel’s objective “view from nowhere”. They do not deny that we could agree on how to view particular scenarios, as argued above; that we could have a shared language for speaking about particular experiences of and in the world. What they *do* deny, is that there could be such a thing as “objectivity” existing over and above human beings and their activities; a neutral arbiter out in the world that balances the activities of human beings in terms of absolute wrongs and rights. Both Dewey and James

²⁵ Livingston, Alexander. (2016). *Damn Great Empires!: William James and the Politics of Pragmatism*. Pg. 106.

disapprove of the “quest for certainty” which they see mainstream philosophy to be engaged in. For James, the existence of objective truth is “just one more subjective opinion which one can add to their list of other subjective opinions”²⁶.

For Richard Rorty who perhaps does the most work in outlining contingency, language is contingent; selfhood is contingent, and the assertion of an objective “truth” in any domain is simply a failure to recognize this contingency. For him, as for Dewey and James, there are no essences, no grander truths out there; and we do not discover or realize truths or meaning out in the world, or through some Mathematical process: we create it as it serves our purposes, and we discard it when it stops doing so. Rorty thinks that only propositions developed in sentences - which are parts of vocabularies developed by human beings- could be true or false. Things in the world cannot be true or false; things in the world just are.

Because propositions and sentences and languages are human creations, and because only propositions can be true or false, it serves that “truth” too is a human creation. The more interesting question to ask of something in the world, therefore, is not whether it is real, or true/ false, but rather, “What use is it?”²⁷ In this sense, the notion that oxygen, and not phlogiston, was responsible for combustion, as Johann Becher convinced the European scientific world of the 17th century, or that black people are ‘equal’ to white people (Rorty’s example)²⁸ which has now come to be accepted by all non-racists as an immutable “fact”, was

²⁶ James, William. (1896). *The Will to Believe*.

²⁷ See, Romano, Carlin. (2017). “America the Philosophical”. Chapter on “Rorty’s Revolution”. Pg. 126-160. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group.

²⁸ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity* - Pg. 77

not an objective fact we came to “discover”. Rather, it was simply a new vocabulary we came to adopt because it came to serve our purposes better, or, as in the case of slavery, because we (“we” here being initially white Americans) expanded our notions of who “we” were (to include blacks)²⁹.

This notion of being trapped within our linguistics and ethno-cultural contexts too, is the idea of Deweyan Pragmatic Instrumentalism: that “real objects are nothing but the things it pays for *us* to have names for in certain schemes of interactions”³⁰.

Rorty says on this:

For pragmatists, the desire for objectivity is not the desire to escape the limitations of one's community, but simply the desire for as much intersubjective agreement as possible, the desire to extend the reference of "us" as far as we can. Insofar as pragmatists make a distinction between knowledge and opinion, it is simply the distinction between topics on which such agreement is relatively easy to get and topics on which agreement is relatively hard to get³¹.

This then is a pragmatic acknowledgment of the contingency of the relationship in which we stand to the world. The assumption people like the utilitarians, and to an extent

²⁹ This presents an interesting discussion when we consider issues involving what we deem the ethical treatment of animals. What would expanding the “we” to include animals look like? How do we do this outside a metaphysical and epistemological grounding of something shared?

³⁰ Glaude, Eddie. (2007). “In the Shade of Blue”. Pg. 63.

³¹ Rorty, Richard. (1998). *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth Century America*. Harvard University Press. Pg 169

Nagel, make when they make claims about “objectivity” is to think that there is, as Rorty says, such a relation of “fitting the world or being faithful to the true nature of the self in which language might stand in relation to non-language. This assumption goes hand in hand with the assumption that “our language” is somehow ... a unity, a third thing which stands in some determinate relation with two other unities, the self and reality³². If we think of language as contingent, and therefore do not conceive of it as a “medium” for representation of the world to the self; if we do not think that there are “non-linguistic things called ‘meanings’ which it is the task of language to express, and non-linguistic entities called ‘facts’ which it is the task of language to represent”, then we cannot possibly have a “view from nowhere”³³.

This essay weaves these themes of contingency, subjectivity and objectivity throughout their discussion of how the Effective Altruism movement has marshalled the idea of an “objective” moral truth to present its core claims. The sleight of hand here is that once the idea of an “objective truth” and the teleology following from it is accepted, then action begins to be judged relative to this abstraction, and any notion of democracy in determining ethical action is thus deemed unnecessary, even wasteful. One then hears concepts of “immorality” invoked, to refer to ideas and actions which diverge from this teleogized objectivity.

³² Rorty, Richard. (1989). *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*. Cambridge University Press (Pg. 13.)

³³ For more clarification see chapter 1 of *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*. “The Contingency of Language”.

The subsequent parts of the essay assess Sidgwick's idea of the point of view of universe with respect to beneficence - our duty to aid, and with specific regards to the contemporary Effective Altruism movement. The essay then contrasts the idea of the point of view of the universe with a different account provided by the American pragmatist philosophers, mainly John Dewey, William James, Richard Rorty, and Jane Addams. It outlines Dewey's criticism of teleological -ultimate end- philosophy, rejecting, as Dewey does, any *a priori* "fixed reference point outside of conduct"³⁴.

This essay does not go as far as proposing a detailed, practical pragmatist program for beneficence, especially the kind of beneficence that the Effective Altruists are involved in. Many philosophers have developed rich accounts for conceptualizing such issues, the ones that readily come to mind being the Capabilities Approach championed by Amartya Sen³⁵ and Martha Nussbaum³⁶, and some approaches which attempt to extend Rawlsian principles of justice to international societies, for example those presented by Thomas Pogge³⁷. Even though I may periodically refer to some of these approaches and sometimes even critique

³⁴ See: Dewey, John., 1922. "Human Nature and Conduct: An Introduction to Social Psychology" Chapter 1. Henry Holt and Company; New York.

³⁵ Sen, Amartya. (2001). "Development as Freedom". Oxford University Press.
Sen, Amartya. (1992). "Inequality Re-examined". Russell-Sage Foundation
Sen, Amartya. (1985). "Commodities and Capabilities". Elsevier Publishing

³⁶ Nussbaum, Martha. (2006). "Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership". Belknap Press/Harvard University.
Nussbaum, Martha. (2011). "Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach". Belknap Press/Harvard University.

³⁷ Pogge, Thomas. (1989). "Realizing Rawls". Cornell University Press.
Pogge, Thomas. (2008). "World Poverty and Human Rights: Cosmopolitan Responsibilities and Reforms". Polity.

them briefly, the scope of these works is beyond me, and my goals are altogether much more humble.

Indeed Pragmatism cannot provide such an account - for such an account is independent of contingency. To say that this is what pragmatism thinks beneficence should look like is to fall into the same trap of asserting supposed objectivity. All Pragmatism can do is to recommend that we abandon all teleology, that we consistently doubt our beliefs, that we make use of every available evidence; that our beliefs be developed with regards to human action and not abstractly. In this way, Pragmatism presents “less a doctrine than a manner of orienting oneself towards a world of competing and conflicting moral ideals”³⁸. Yet in taking up this orientation, our actions and their consequences would look remarkably different, and that has important implications for the consequences of our beneficent actions.

It is, of course, of importance to note that the work the Effective Altruists are involved with is timely and necessary. And it is also important to note that with the arguable exception of Kantianism and Aristotelian Virtue Ethics, no other school of thought has contributed to moral philosophy as much as utilitarianism. This then is not a critique of everything utilitarian, or of all (even most) of what Effective Altruism stands for. Indeed, both Deweyan pragmatism, of which I am a strong believer, and utilitarianism are, typically, in intention, ameliorating. Quite rightly too, many influential philosophers within the Effective Altruism movement have pointed out that to a large extent, the issues that the movement concerns itself with - matters concerning urgent and great human (and animal)

³⁸ Livingston, Alexander. (2016). *Damn Great Empires!: William James and the Politics of Pragmatism*. Pg. 111. Quote originally derived from James’s essay “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life”.

suffering, issues like widespread famines, deaths from preventable diseases, factory farming; and matters concerning grander questions of species survival, like climate change and ‘technological singularity³⁹’ - can be addressed⁴⁰.

To this effect the core claim of the Effective Altruism movement is a simple and relatively non-controversial one - one that underlies pragmatism itself: that “evidence and reason should be used to benefit others as much as possible, and that action should be taken on that basis”⁴¹. It does not matter to a starving person that we are pragmatists, utilitarians or deontologists. I believe this is correct. Furthermore, As William MacAskill eloquently puts it, “Applying data and rationality to a charitable endeavor does not rob the act of virtue”⁴².

Indeed, a lot of money, and other resources, is wasted, whether it is by charities which spend inordinate amounts on costs such as high employee salaries as opposed to spending on achieving their core missions, or charities whose methods simply are mediocre at accomplishing the results they hope for. All charities are not created equal (based, of course, on fungible criteria that we agree on), and we should not be resistant to information that enlightens us to which charities work better than others based on these criteria. As I have

³⁹ For more on technological singularity - and its connection with the Effective Altruism Movement - see : Bostrom, Nick. 2014. “Superintelligence: Paths, Dangers, Strategies”. Oxford University Press.

⁴⁰ Parfit, Derek. 2015. “Reasons, Persons and Effective Altruism”. *Talk delivered at Harvard University*.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q6glXJ7dVU0>

⁴¹ MacAskill, William. 2017. “Effective Altruism: Introduction”. *Essays in Philosophy, Volume 18, Issue 1, Article 1. Pg. 2-5. Jan. 2017.*

⁴² MacAskill, William. (2015). “Doing Good Better: How Effective Altruism Can Help You Help Others, Do Work that Matters, and Make Smarter Choices about Giving Back”. Penguin Random House.

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argued, Effective Altruism in this sense; in its insistence on evidence and intelligent reflection, in its meliorating push, is remarkably pragmatic.

Still, the ways we evaluate this evidence, what it comes to mean to us, matter. And this is the critique that is provided in this essay. The turn from seeking consensus and using science and technology to create more desirable outcomes, all while acknowledging contingency, to instead asserting the objectivity of some claim, and then using this as the reference point for everything, as the Effective Altruists have done, is what I argue against here.

The claims of Effective Altruism are not just restricted to which charities are most effective based on some agreed upon criteria. They not only go ahead to decide which criteria to be used - and cloak this in objectivity- but they then also go as far as making claims about which causes are “objectively” more effective, which careers one should go into, and so on. They also go on, from their perch of objectivity, to make comparisons between issues of such wide disparities, for example, as noted in the abstract, whether it is *more* moral to donate money so as to help women suffering from painful childbirth-induced fistulas, or to donate to starving children in famine-ridden areas.

These subsequent issues raise many questions, for not only do they then have implications on what kinds of life we are to live⁴³- and who should determine these, they also

⁴³ 80,000 Hours, an organization affiliated to Effective Altruism, acknowledges that this (80,000 hours) is the average amount of time the average person spends working. They thus provide advising services on which careers people should go into to maximize their social impact (as measured by QALYs, of course).

raise important questions about whether we can meaningfully aggregate and analyze different issues such as the ones exemplified above, from a removed, supposedly objective, point of view, and, importantly, whether charity donations by individuals are the best means of approaching these issues. Like recruits to the military, following Effective Altruism means we would defer to the movement's leaders to tell us what actions to take, which issues *should* matter, what careers to pursue.

Philosophy, done this way, then turns from an actual engagement with life in all its complexity and messiness, to a process of calculation; of figuring out how best to achieve “objective” ideals and teleologies. We would not only rid our lives of exploration and experimentation, of wonderful “non-moral” things and endeavors that are important in our lives⁴⁴, but more significantly, we would be cogs in the ethical machine of Effective Altruism, constantly waiting for the calculations to be done so we can adjust our lives accordingly. I sincerely believe moral philosophy has more to offer than this.

Negative philosophy of the kind I hope to undertake here is therefore necessary, even in matters like these. It does matter to our own lives and to the lives of others the philosophical lenses through which we view the world; these determine which actions we take and how. The undemocratic sleight of hand that the utilitarian leaders of Effective Altruism are attempting here - “these issues are very important, you admit, therefore, yield the ethical realm of determining what the “right” way of addressing them is to us, the ethical experts. Do as we say, and using our methods. We (and QALYs) know better” - this assertion

⁴⁴ See: Wolf, Susan. 1982. “Moral Saints”. *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 79, No. 8 (Aug., 1982), pp. 419-439

of objectivity, which has deep implications to our lives as well as to the lives of those we seek to aid, cannot simply be accepted just because the issues we are thinking about are so serious.

My hope is therefore that a close reading of pragmatist philosophy, by offering a mode of orientation, a methodological maxim based on actual consequences (“Consider what effects, that might have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object”⁴⁵), will help us with exploring how we can both maintain a democratic conception of ethical good that acknowledges contingencies, and still hope to address pertinent problems in the world today.

(The second part of this essay delves deeply into the claims made by the effective altruism movement, and discusses what I think is wrong with the movement)

⁴⁵ Peirce, Charles Sanders. 1878. “How to Make Our Ideas Clear”. *Popular Science Monthly*, Volume 12, 1878. This is commonly known as the “pragmatic maxim”.

PART TWO:

SHALL WE LEAVE IT TO THE EXPERTS?

It is so easy for the good and powerful to think that they can rise by following the dictates of conscience, by pursuing their own ideals, that they are prone to leave those ideals unconnected with the consent of their fellow-men

Jane Addams

Martha Nussbaum's review⁴⁶ of Peter Unger's book⁴⁷ is strongly disapproving. Unger's argument, in line with Peter Singer's famous essay⁴⁸, *Famine, Affluence and Morality*, concerns the notion that affluent people, especially in western countries, are culpable in increased human misery. The key reason for this claim, for Unger as well as for Singer, is a distinction that many affluent people seem to have made between causing harm and allowing harm to occur. Unger argues that this distinction is irrelevant, and in typical consequentialist fashion, that what matters is that harm occurs - and those who allow it to occur are not in any way less morally culpable than those who commit it.

⁴⁶ Nussbaum, Martha. (1996). "If Oxfam Ran the World". Published in "Philosophical Interventions: Reviews 1986 - 2011".

⁴⁷ Unger, Peter. (1996). "Living High and Letting Die: Our Illusion of Innocence". Oxford University Press.

⁴⁸ Singer, Peter. (1972). "Famine, Affluence and Morality". *Philosophy and Public Affairs*. Vol. 1, No.3. (Spring 1972). 229 - 243.

Unger gives here Singer's famous example of a child drowning in a pond to illustrate his point⁴⁹. We are morally obligated to save the child, he affirms, so long as doing so does not cause us anything morally comparable. And we are morally obligated to do so even if other people around us are not doing so. Therefore, drawing the analogy back to global poverty and deprivation, affluent people have a moral duty to mitigate the harm and suffering caused by global deprivation. To this effect, Unger argues that an affluent person "like you and me, must contribute to vitally effective groups, like Oxfam and Unicef, most of the money and property she now has, and most of what comes her way for the foreseeable future"⁵⁰

Unger's account is already a difficult one on its own merits, for it is one whose intuitive appeal is shared usually by only consequentialists, and not by adherents to many other philosophical schools. One could simply deny the charge that causing harm is morally equivalent to allowing harm to occur⁵¹. And having rejected this basic premise, it is difficult to see how the consequentialist would proceed. But Nussbaum further misrepresents -or

⁴⁹ In Singer's famous thought experiment, one is headed towards something important, say, a job - or to give a lecture. On the way there, one sees a child drowning in a pond. If one jumps and saves the drowning child, one will run into several inconveniences: one might be late to work or lecture, one might ruin one's expensive clothing etc. Singer then asks, would one jump in to save the child despite knowing that one would ruin one's clothing? Most people answer, yes. Singer then asks a follow up question: Would one fail to jump into the pond - and thereby let the child die - simply because other people around were not jumping in to save the child? - Most people, from intuition, say, no. Here, Singer draws out a principle that he thinks underlies these intuitions. We think it is morally wrong, he affirms, to let someone die if we can do something to save them without sacrificing something morally comparable (as in the clothes, or being late for work), and we think this still holds even if other people are not doing anything to save them. Singer then extends this to discuss our obligations concerning moral beneficence.

⁵⁰ Quote lifted from Nussbaum's review and not from Unger.

⁵¹ The only way to deny this is by an appeal to intuition, but I believe that the only way to assert it is also by appealing to shared intuition.

misunderstands- Unger's argument, constructing a hypothetical dystopia - a morally diminished world where Unger's suggestion is taken literally, and therefore charity organizations like OXFAM and UNICEF run the world. This, for her, means that democracy would be threatened, that "poverty and misery would almost certainly get much worse, as global health efforts fell into disarray, as the "green revolution" stalled for lack of intellectual input, and as debates about different types of economic organisation languished for lack of financial support".⁵²

In providing this argument, Nussbaum ignores the obvious implication of Unger's argument, which Peter Singer (and Unger himself) points out in the comments section of her piece: that since what Unger aims to do is to change the contingent world, the world to which he aims is not a world in which his philosophy is necessary. Which is to say, that if enough people donated to these "effective organizations" such that they could better tackle and solve the problems we consider pertinent, then there would be no need for other people to keep donating⁵³, there would be no breakdown in global institutions or movements - neither OXFAM nor UNICEF would rule the world. Thus Nussbaum's apocalyptic prophecies are mostly irrelevant, for Unger's argument is predicated on contingency, on the fact that not everyone is going to take his recommendation.

Of course Nussbaum's contention should not be thrown off so lightly. She is an institutionalist, and she justifiably wonders what would happen in a world where these aid

⁵² Ibid 48

⁵³ Unless of course one subscribes to the defeatist belief that the world's problems are unsolvable or cannot be tackled at all given our resources, which neither Unger nor Nussbaum does.

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organizations had become so powerful but no longer necessary. Would we simply disband them? Would they allow that? Important as these questions she asks are, they are speculative in a way that is not helpful for guiding practical action in the contingent world. The only time we could know whether it was possible to disband a future very powerful OXFAM would be in the future when OXFAM was already powerful and needed disbanding.

Moral Imbeciles and "Impact"

But Nussbaum gets many other things right. Unger's book is a direct ideological predecessor of the current Effective Altruism movement, and in her criticism of Unger, Nussbaum, in her typical incisiveness, points out another facet of Unger's work, which it shares with Effective Altruism, and which is critical to my project here: the audience of Unger's book.

She notes:

"His implied reader is a moral imbecile, an affluent person who repeatedly tosses appeals from charitable organisations into the wastepaper basket and heedlessly goes on living the high life. This imbecile is not already thinking about how to do good, and can be reached only by being bullied and hectorred. Unger keeps giving us phone numbers and addresses of charities, on the apparent (p.190) assumption that we don't know how to find them for ourselves. His sentences are full of slogans and capital letters (the View that Ethics

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is Highly Demanding, or Pretty Cheaply Lessening Early Death). He writes as if trying to speak to someone who is not only obtuse but deaf. Even his examples presuppose moral heedlessness”⁵⁴

Indeed, according to the leaders of Effective Altruism, even though they themselves are utilitarian, one need not be utilitarian to be an Effective Altruist. In fact, one need not subscribe to *any* philosophical school of thought at all. All one need be interested in, is how to do good, and Effective Altruism will show you how to “do good better” - Much like what Nussbaum is accusing Unger of doing in the paragraph above. Which is to say, you don’t have to be a utilitarian if all that is required of you is to do what the utilitarians tell you.

The idea put forward by the Effective Altruists then, to support Unger’s claim regarding our moral duty to donate, is that people living in the west⁵⁵, at this moment in time, are at the “top of the heap”. “If you earn more than \$52,000 per year, then, speaking globally, you are the one percent. If you earn at least \$28,000 [...] you are in the richest five percent of the world’s population”⁵⁶. This remarkable ‘fortune’ (of being at the top of the heap) should not be wasted. It is our greatest tool; for because we are so rich, “the amount by which we can benefit others is vastly greater than the amount by which we can benefit ourselves”⁵⁷.

⁵⁴ Ibid 48

⁵⁵ typically countries mainly composed of people of European descent, who claim a shared intellectual and cultural community deriving from ancient Greece and Rome.

⁵⁶ Doing good better, pg. 18.

⁵⁷ Ibid 55.

Will MacAskill, the movement's figurehead, cites studies of subjective well being by two very respected economists that analyze the relationship between income and well-being. The relationship, the economists find, is "roughly log-linear": subjective well-being increases as income increases, and if at all there is a "satiation" point when this is no longer the case, most of the world is yet to reach this point. The corollary here is that the subjective benefit somebody in the west gets from having their salary doubled is the same that anybody, anywhere, gets from having *their* own salaries doubled⁵⁸.

The implications of this are astounding to those who, like myself, had never thought of them before. Based on the average (in 2015) American wage of \$28,000 p.a and the average Indian wage (also in 2015) of \$220⁵⁹, it would take another \$28,000 - thus an annual salary of \$56,000, for the average American to be twice as happy. It would only take an additional \$220 - thus an annual income of \$440, for the average Indian to be as happy.

From this, comes the Effective Altruist's "100* Multiplier" : the American is many times over more privileged than the Indian, so if one (an American/ Westerner) is an effective altruist, then they should expect to do at least 100 times as much to benefit other people as they can to benefit themselves. The idea is to maximize this "impact". Sure, a normal effective altruist on a normal American wage, with just a few adjustments in living style, can save 100 people (in a lifetime) - or do 100 times the equivalent of the good he could have

⁵⁸ Stevenson, Betsey, & Wolfers, Justin. (2013). "Subjective Well-Being and Income: Is there any Evidence of Satiation?" *American Economic Review. Papers & Proceedings 2013*, 103(3): 598–604

⁵⁹ MacAskill's statistic is \$220 p.a; though there are competing ones - such as a Gallup poll that puts it at \$660. Regardless, this does not affect his argument, for we are interested in the ratio of the two incomes rather than the actual minutiae of the figures. So we'll work with the statistics MacAskill provides.

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done for himself. But most of the people MacAskill is talking to are not “normal Americans” with normal American earning potentials; they are brilliant students and professors at prestigious educational institutions who have the capacity to earn more than four or five times the wages of the normal American.

This maximization principle goes not just for donations that we ourselves give. It also goes for the kinds of careers we choose. Don’t be a philosopher; be a banker. Don’t be a political scientist; be a politician. MacAskill entreats us to think “marginally” and “counterfactually” about these.

Here’s how to think marginally: Why do New York City transit workers earn more (\$77,991 p.a) than New York City teachers (\$68, 151 p.a)? Presumably, teachers’ effect on society is more than that of city transit workers - for teachers affect the fundamental rubric of our societies, determining what kinds of adult human beings end up existing and making decisions about important stuff. There are also more teachers than there are city transit workers, so ideally one would expect that teachers - say if they unionized - would have greater bargaining power than city transit workers.

However, the results play out counterintuitively. If city transit workers went on strike today, the effects would be much worse than if teachers went on strike. Children missing a few days of school is, it seems, a more preferable consequence when compared to a city whose garbage has not been collected, whose toilets have not been washed, and whose public transport systems have not been functioning, for a few days.

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The city could thus always use another city transit worker, for the fact that they are so few in number makes each of them very important. The city will, however, be fine if ten, or a hundred, more teachers are not added to its ranks; partly because public education is just not a priority in America right now, and partly because those posts will be easily filled with young graduates, eager to work for Teach for America and such other programs. So while the *total* value of teachers to society outweighs that of city transit workers, transit workers have a much higher *marginal* value.

In a similar thought process, (MacAskill's example), if one wants to be a doctor, then one ought to be a doctor in a developing country, where one is really needed - and thus has much higher marginal value, and where one's impact would be much larger (one would then do 100 times more good) than if one were a doctor in a developed country, where the supply for doctor far outstrips the needs of the populace, and the good one would do would be much less (measured in QALYs).

And here's how to think counterfactually: What if, before signing up to do medicine in the first place, one evaluated the expected good from the occupation of being a doctor *vis a vis* other occupations? One QALY represents a year lived in perfect health. As a doctor in a developing country, one would save, say, 300 lives (10950 QALYs - assuming an additional life span in perfect health of 36.5 years i.e. 36.5 QALYs per life on average) over a career spanning 40 years⁶⁰. But if one did not take up the doctor's job, someone else would step

⁶⁰ Statistic derived from Srinivasa.

right in (MacAskill refers to this as replaceability). There is, he thinks, no shortage of well-intentioned people -including doctors - seeking to help others in need.

The alternative: In 2017, the starting salary of a first year lawyer at New York Law Firm Cravath, Swaine and Moore was \$ 190,000, with bonuses of \$5,000. This went up yearly, with seventh year associates earning base salaries of \$340,000 and bonuses of \$25,000⁶¹. If, over a forty year career, one worked at a law firm such as Cravath, and one donated, say, 50,000 for the first few years, increasing it progressively as one climbed up the ranks to when, say, one is a senior partner earning roughly \$2,000,000 p.a., and donating say, half of this for the last ten years of their career, one would have donated roughly \$15,000,000 by the time they retire. A donation of \$3400 to the Against Malaria Foundation, by MacAskill's estimates, would save one life. That means \$15,000,000 would save roughly 4412 lives. At the rate of 36.5 QALYs per life, why, that would be a whopping 161,038 QALYs!

The task is thus set for the effective altruist: thinking marginally and counterfactually tells us that what you should do is put yourself in a position where you can earn as much as you can, then give as much as you can - maximize, be efficient. There is intense thought applied to the calculations detailed above. Yet one cannot help thinking that there is a certain thoughtlessness to them as well, particularly that of the person choosing the career - the one being entreated to earn to give. For example, for some years, the 80,000 hours website recommended investment banking as a career choice with immense donating potential,

⁶¹ "Cravath has Spoken - and Beats Millbank for Senior Associates".
<https://abovethelaw.com/2018/06/cravath-hath-spoken-and-beats-milbank-for-senior-associates/>

sometimes outright denying that any form of earning to give caused more harm than good⁶² ⁶³. However, calculations were later done. It was “shown” that going into investment banking actually did cause harm.

Amia Srinivasan notes:

“MacAskill says he no longer recommends that people go into banking, or at least not the parts of it that he thinks cause direct harm: creating risks that will be borne by unsuspecting taxpayers, or selling products that no properly informed person would buy. Instead 80,000 Hours now encourages people to take what it sees as morally neutral or positive jobs: quantitative hedge-fund trading, management consulting, technology start-ups. (You can take a careers quiz on the 80,000 Hours website; I was told to become a consultant, because of its earning-to-give potential and the general business education it provides. When I changed my answers to say that I was bad at maths I was told to go into politics.)”⁶⁴

What follows? Ideally, the many effective altruists who had gone into investment banking quit this “morally controversial” career, and pursue those other morally ‘neutral’ or ‘positive’ careers, for example those listed above - management consulting, technology start-ups, etc. But now that McKinsey, perhaps the world’s top consulting company, has been

⁶² Todd, Benjamin. (2013). “Show me the Harm: Does Earning to Give Cause more Harm than Good?” 80,000 hours blog. <https://80000hours.org/2013/07/show-me-the-harm/>

⁶³ Redwood, Zander. (2012). “Is Banking Harmful?” 80,000 hours blog. <https://80000hours.org/2012/01/is-banking-harmful/>

⁶⁴ Srinivasan, Amia. (2015). “Stop the Robot Apocalypse” London Review of Books. Volume 37. No 18.24.

shown to cooperate with authoritarian leaders who persecute ethnic minorities⁶⁵, and has even been shown to have helped in providing information on critics who criticize these governments⁶⁶ - information which then led to the death of said critics; and now that tech companies such as Facebook have been shown, among other things, to have increased levels of social anxiety among users, and to have grossly mishandled user-data, both leading to pernicious consequences, not least of which was influencing the outcome of an American election, and with it the lives of quite literally everyone in the globe, is it perhaps time to recalculate?

It is this thoughtlessness of the typical effective altruist, and the consequent amount of moral decision-making that then becomes the purview of moral “experts” like MacAskill, that worries. (S)he - the effective altruist- is given respite from actual thinking; from personally wrestling with difficult decisions of what most of us consider genuine moral conundrums, and of the practicable consequences of her decisions - so long as, in general, they are seen to generate more QALYs. Instead, these decisions are relegated to the utilitarian experts, who then “objectively” assess them in a bid to maximize QALYs, and when their measurements are found wanting (as with the investment banking case), then the effective altruists simply make adjustments, and move on to whatever new recommendation is to be given; whatever maximizes QALYs at this moment.

⁶⁵ <https://www.businessinsider.com/mckinsey-china-ughur-corporate-retreat-china2018-12>
<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/15/world/asia/mckinsey-china-russia.html>

⁶⁶ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/michaelposner/2018/12/18/how-mckinsey-co-fails-as-a-global-leader/#5570f523376d>

Of course, one could think of this as pragmatically learning from mistakes - they thought investment banking was good, they realized it wasn't, they updated. But this learning, from the pragmatic point of view, is in many ways flawed because it holds as its teleology what it considers an objective good; it does not so much pay heed to what practicable results may be preferable, and for whom. And it does not recognize that what are to be considered preferable outcomes are contingent, and differ from group to group. Rather, it is simply interested in achieving its priorly stated objective end, in QALYs. It is not a learning that recognizes the messiness of the world, and that therefore necessarily includes democracy in determining value, but one that seeks to fine-tune a system - in a sense, to exchange democracy for objectivity; so that those who participate in it can go about with their lives with as little moral thinking as possible.

The insistence on maximization and effectivity, at every turn, recalls Sidgwick's "point of view of the universe". Good can only be maximized fairly if no one has any direct stakes (except in good *qua* good). Democracy is thus a second order priority here; one only incidentally sought out. Sure, maximization of QALYs might usually go hand in hand with democratic values, but whenever these two don't go together, the actions of the Effective Altruists seem to suggest: Let us serve a higher imperative than democracy - objectivity.

Through all these attempts at Sidgwick-ian objectivity however, we witness that even for the utilitarian "moral experts", the messiness of the world asserts itself. The failures in prediction of the calculations of the effective altruists signify the inherent inability of the world to be understood and mastered entirely through models or moral theorization. At every

turn, we are brought back to understandings of the world which some of us view as common sense, due to membership of our respective communities, and which some of us reject, also due to being members of particular communities. The resolution to these differences in views, if there is one, is necessarily political. Some of us think prisons need to be abolished; some think prisons are absolutely necessary for a well-functioning democratic society. Some of us think sweatshops are abominable, some (including the effective altruists⁶⁷) think that there is a moral case to be made for sweatshops.

After all of that has been said, we realize that if there is an argument that will change our minds and compel us to adopt a new position over the one we previously did, it will not be a calculation showing what generates more QALYs; for not only do we disagree on whether some things can be compared or quantified in the first place, but even when we do decide to compare some things, we find it impossible to agree on what value to attach to each of them. How many people are you willing to see die before you can sacrifice your child? - It is a silly question, yet it is questions of this sort that the sort of emphasis on maximization that effective altruism - and utilitarianism, broadly construed, - champions, compels us to ask.

And even when we have statistics, what data we view as relevant is, I argue, in the first place determined by our points of view (i.e. communities of belonging) that we already had before we came into contact with the data. This is the essence of what William James called the “Will to Believe”⁶⁸ - that the evidence of whether certain beliefs are to be

⁶⁷ Doing Good Better, pg. 131. “Because sweatshops are good for poor countries. If we boycott them we make people in poor countries worse off”.

⁶⁸ James, William. (1896). “The Will to Believe”. In perhaps his most famous article, James took to tackle the relationship between faith, reason, and evidence. James argued that there were two kinds
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considered true or false hinges, first and foremost, on those beliefs being taken up without evidence, in the traditional sense.

What might change our minds, if they will be changed at all, will be to be convinced to adopt what Richard Rorty termed the “language”⁶⁹ of our interlocutors - to join their community of intersubjective agreement, through a process he called “humiliation”. It will be to be convinced that our interlocutor’s point of view is “right” because we think it presents the best practicable outcomes for the broadest range of what is considered “us”.

And even in pursuing this agreed upon “right”, we will have no choice but to acknowledge that we might be wrong i.e. that the outcomes of our choices might not yield desirable practicable consequences. As Srinivasa notes, “effective altruists ... ” despite their claims to supposed objectivity, “like everyone else who wants to make the world better, must do what strikes them as best, without any final sense of what that might be, or any guarantee that they are getting it right”⁷⁰.

We are thus here led to see the futility of “moral experts” such as the effective altruism leaders - and the undesirable consequences of creating “moral imbeciles”. If there were a possibility that they (the moral experts) could be “objectively” right with respect to

of beliefs - hypothesis venturing, and self-fulfilling, where it was rational to believe without evidence. In the first case, think of when a scientist deeply has a hunch about something - without the evidence for it, and goes about proving it, until she finds the evidence. And in the second case, think of the famous doctrine of double determination in Homeric Epic, whereby the hero, by believing that he was under the influence of a God, went on to accomplish much greater feats in battle than he would have had he not had this belief.

⁶⁹ Rorty, Richard. (1989) “The Contingency of Language” in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*.

⁷⁰ *Ibid* 63

some objective teleology, if this whole life thing was just a series of calculations, then there would be use for them. But as I have been arguing, in the absence of this overriding objectivity, what's left is all of us stumbling around - and the only way to make this stumbling more bearable for everyone; the only way to produce the most preferable results for the broadest "us", is to seek the broadest agreement on how to best stumble together.

Democratic experience is thus what is most fundamental here, and this is exactly what is lost when moral imbeciles are created, moral imbeciles who, as Jane Addams notes, pursue their own ideals, leaving those ideals unconnected with the concerns of their fellow man. By positing maximization as the objective standard, the effective altruists promote Nussbaum's "moral heedlessness" by those who are keen to maximize their "impact" yet are unwilling to confront the messiness of the world - and all the bad practicable results that this sort of moral heedlessness brings about.

The Markets. The Markets! ...And Structural Reform

This moral heedlessness, leftist critics of Effective Altruism have argued, shores up oppressive superstructures (particularly market capitalism) - superstructures which are themselves the causes of the problems that Effective Altruism seeks to fix. By focusing entirely on the market as what is capable of solving the pressing problems we face, Effective altruist do not question their roles and positions within this market, and what this continued participation in the market means for those they are trying to help.

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Influential thinkers such as Mike Davis⁷¹ and the earlier⁷² Amartya Sen^{73 74}, for example, have written on how markets are complicit in causing human deprivation and suffering. For the Effective Altruists however, the insistence on markets arises from the belief that, on average, markets do *more* good than harm. Effective altruists are not against anti-market schools of thought *per se*, they are pro whatever is efficient and maximizes QALYs - it just happens that right now, it is market capitalism that does that. Does the “free” market have problems? Sure, they agree. But as long as no feasible alternative is available, the effective altruists prefer to work within it, for as of now, it is what produces “the most good”.

Critics however point out that Effective Altruism’s strategy - and that of charity in general - is one where three relations exist: the donor, the aid agency, and the person to be saved. All these relations are mediated by the market, which determines the costs of life necessities that the person to be saved requires. This is to say, if the donor does not transfer the money to the aid agency, then the person to be saved perishes. This market logic holds for more than just donations: Effective altruism also argues for things such as sweatshops using it.

⁷¹ Davis, Mike. (2001). *Late Victorian Holocausts: El-Nino Famines and the Making of the Third World*. Verso.

⁷² Later Sen, (particularly in “Development as Freedom, 1999) after developing the influential capabilities approach, looks at markets more favourably for their abilities to contribute to bringing freedoms and doing away with what he calls “unfreedoms”.

⁷³ Sen, Amartya Kumar. (1981). *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation*. Clarendon Press, Oxford

⁷⁴ Sen, Amartya Kumar. (1973). *On Economic Inequality*. Clarendon Press, Oxford.

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“Those who protest sweatshops”, they contend, “by refusing to buy the goods produced in them, are making the mistake of failing to consider what would happen otherwise...(Here’s the counterfactual again) In poor countries, sweatshop jobs are the good jobs. Because sweatshops are good for poor countries, if we boycott them we make people in poor countries worse off”⁷⁵.

And when speaking about climate change: while cutting down our consumption of meat and dairy products, reducing our travel, and being more mindful of the amounts of water, gas and electricity we consume in our homes are all fine and dandy, what the effective altruists think really works is called “offsetting”. What this means is that rather than reducing one’s own greenhouse emissions, one instead pays “for projects that reduce or avoid greenhouse gas emissions elsewhere”⁷⁶. The QALYs show these are the most effective approaches.

This entrenched focus on the market as the harbinger of solutions entirely ignores the systems that produces the problems to be fixed in the first place. If we are to take Sen’s and Davis’ criticisms seriously, then we are, it seems, being forced to play the charade of paying “the market” what it demands so it can solve the problems it had a large part in creating.

Effective Altruism, in this sense, aside from its promotion of the above mentioned heedlessness, does not historicize. There is no thought paid to systems like colonization,

⁷⁵ Ibid 67, pg. 130

⁷⁶ Ibid 67, pg 137

economic exploitation, market-instigated gender discrimination etc. that led to the problems it is trying to fix. It does not speak of how people in the west came to be in a position to “save the world” in the first place. It is apolitical to the core. Instead, the moral guilt (for the suffering of others, as in Unger’s example at the beginning of part 2) is directed at individuals, and in the same way, the responsibility for fixing these problems is also so piecemeal-ly affixed.

Michael Snow notes:

“If we look at the institutions that make and allocate the resources others so desperately need, we must ask whether it is wrong to withhold these resources from others for the sake of payment and profit. Doing so not only seems morally reprehensible, it is morally reprehensible for precisely the same reasons effective altruists argue it is wrong not to donate money to charities: it is wrong to value some small sum of money (or what it might buy) over a human life or a minimum standard of living”⁷⁷

It is therefore not shocking that the world’s capitalist elite prefers the kind of philanthropy advocated by effective altruism, and other kinds of atomized, non-political ways of dealing with the structural issues effective altruism aims to tackle, as opposed to methods that are political and systematic. As Anand Giridharadas notes, this is the typical case where the people who will most lose if actual social change occurs place themselves at the forefront

⁷⁷ Snow, Michael. (2016). Against Charity. Jacobin Magazine.
<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/08/peter-singer-charity-effective-altruism>

of leading said social change⁷⁸ - i.e. by making sure it does not happen in the first place, or, at the very least, not in ways that threaten them. For example, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, a foundation run by the second richest person in the world, has expressed strong approval for MacAskill's work on Effective Altruism⁷⁹ and its *modus operandi*; Michael Dell, the billionaire founder of the eponymous Dell Computers, argued against a tax hike for those earning above \$10,000,000 so as to address pertinent structural issues, saying that private foundations were much better suited at allocating funds and dealing with societal problems than were governments⁸⁰.

But even more, Effective altruism's strange relation to the market is also, for the morally heedless person, touted as a way to achieve self worth and a stable sense of self in a consumerist world in shambles.

Peter Singer says:

“The hedonic hamster wheel of a consumer lifestyle: You work hard to get money. You spend that money on consumer goods which you hope you will enjoy using. Then the money is gone. You have to work hard to get more and spend more to maintain the same level

⁷⁸ Giridharadas, Anand. (2018). Winner Takes All: The Elite Charade of Changing the World. *Alfred A. Knopf Books*.

⁷⁹ Desmond-Hellmann, Sue. (2015). The Case for Putting your Head where your Heart is. Medium. <https://medium.com/bill-melinda-gates-foundation/the-case-for-putting-your-head-where-your-heart-is-e5523da22f50>

⁸⁰ “Dell CEO joins Davos Debate on 70% tax rate: ‘Not Supportive’ “. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-01-23/dell-ceo-joins-davos-debate-on-70-tax-rate-not-supportive>

of happiness. You never get off the hamster wheel, and you never really feel satisfied. You become spiritually exhausted and wonder if your life is worth living. Becoming an effective altruist gives you that meaning and fulfillment. It enables you to have a solid basis for self-esteem on which you can feel your life is really worth living.”⁸¹

This feel-good guide, which recommends individual donating action as what brings about meaning and fulfillment in life, depicts a lack of what C. Wright Mills called a “Sociological Imagination”⁸² - that personal experiences are inextricably interconnected with public issues. Just like the issues that the effective altruists are trying to chip away at - poverty, racial and gender discrimination, etc. are structural, so too the source of this lack of personal fulfillment, one with Mills’ sociological imagination would argue, are structural.

What is needed, for both the ills that effective altruism tries to work on, and for a “solid basis for self esteem”, as they call it, i.e. for a turn from moral heedlessness, is structural reform and deeper community engagement. To remove oneself from a “consumerist” lifestyle while continuing to contribute to the structures that make it possible in the first place is farcical.

But the Effective Altruists have answers to these charges that they neglect systemic political change in exchange for atomized market action. First, they argue that “Effective Altruists *love* systemic change”⁸³. They provide a list of initiatives to show this. This list

⁸¹ Singer, Peter. Instagram post. <https://www.instagram.com/p/BsrFBgiAMdl/>

⁸² Mills, C. Wright. (1959). “The Sociological Imagination”. Clarendon Press: Oxford University

⁸³ Wilbin, Robert. (2015). “Effective Altruists Love Systemic Change”.. 80,000 hours Blogpost. <https://80000hours.org/2015/07/effective-altruists-love-systemic-change/>

includes their open philanthropy project⁸⁴- whose mission it is “to give as effectively as we can and share our findings openly so that anyone can build on our work”, the Open Borders project⁸⁵ - which seeks to address issues of immigration, especially as pertaining to the United States but also related to the broader refugee crisis, and finally, GiveWell⁸⁶ - which seeks to transform attitudes towards giving.

Secondly, the effective altruists give the argument provided in reply to Nussbaum’s contention (at the beginning of this second part of the essay- and also alluded to at the beginning of this section on markets). They argue that of course, systems are important, but that while the systems do not yet exist, they are much more concerned with what individual actors can do to address contingent problems in the meantime. In fact, they argue that sometimes these individual actions chip away at systems and lead - eventually - to the bettering of these systems, such that they are no longer seen as morally nefarious. Supporting sweatshops, for example, provides the best available option for workers in poor countries. Effective Altruists tacitly invoke modernization theory, typically used in international relations theory here: sweatshops are an inherent part of development, and as more sweatshops arise, more alternatives are available to workers. This increases their (workers’) bargaining power to such an extent that the resulting working conditions and wages are not exploitative anymore⁸⁷. The market eventually stabilizes itself- just look at China!

⁸⁴ <https://www.openphilanthropy.org/>

⁸⁵ <https://openborders.info/>

⁸⁶ <https://www.givewell.org/>

⁸⁷ Powell, Benjamin. (2008). “In Defense of ‘Sweatshops’”. The Library of Economics and Liberty. <https://www.econlib.org/library/Columns/y2008/Powellsweatshops.html>

On the first of their replies: perhaps we disagree on what “systemic change” means. For most people, organizations - the kinds that the effective altruists mention, are a necessary precondition to systemic change. But they are not sufficient. What matters more than just the existence of organizations doing *something*, is the issues that those organizations concern themselves with - and typically, these are issues structural social, political and economic, usually created and maintained by markets and political structures.

Even more importantly, what matters is the potential political efficacy of those organizations - and this efficacy requires democracy and political solidarity for it to be attained. Addressing these requires political organizing and lobbying, mass action, and the democratic inclusion of the broadest swathes of people potentially affected, and those together in solidarity, in discussing, planning, and carrying out whatever actions are agreed upon democratically. For most of us, systemic change does not consist in telling rich and middle class western people where to best donate, as GiveWell, one of their examples of “systemic change” - does. So if the initiatives outlined above are their example of systemic change, I simply deny the charge that effective altruists *love* systemic change.

One the second answer: while the contention provided here - that of addressing contingent problems while the systems are still absent- works well against Nussbaum’s dystopian visions, it does not do so well against the challenge of the leftists. The leftists contend that it is a zero-sum affair: the atomization that effective altruism, by concentrating on individuals, promotes, is actually detrimental to structural organizing. Paul Bamberg

argues that the kind of activity the effective altruists are engaged in promotes “political quietism”⁸⁸ - which is a similar charge to Nussbaum’s heedlessness.

In effect, some leftists, in a bid to show that this argument from contingency does not hold here, call into question⁸⁹ Singer’s analogy of the child drowning in the pond that Unger - and the effective altruists- make use of. In Singer’s case of the drowning child, the beauty of the thought experiment is its simplicity. It does not matter that there are other children drowning elsewhere, or that the city council should have built fences to ensure that children do not fall into muddy ponds and drown. The fact of the matter is that I am here, and I can save *this* drowning child. Should I refuse to do so because I would rather be pursuing systematic change? No. In the same way, there are people dying right now - and these deaths are preventable. The Effective Altruists ask: are we going to let them die simply because we are intent on pursuing systematic change?

But this - the shift from the case of the child, to that of market-caused problems, is a disanalogy. It is not that the child has fallen into the pond and we must save him; it is, as Snow notes, that capital has pushed the child into the pond (in this case, by causing famines, for example, or by continued global trade and finance policies that continue to disenfranchise “third world” countries), and it then requires that we pay it what it demands so it can save the child. The needs of the people effective altruism concerns itself with are life-sustaining: food,

⁸⁸ Bamberg, Paul. (2002). “The Fallacy of Philanthropy”. Canadian Journal of Philosophy. Volume 32, No. 1, March 2002, pp. 29-66.

⁸⁹ Ibid 77

medical attention, better working conditions; and the resources to address these needs do indeed exist - as shown by the mere fact that they can be bought in the “free” market.

These needs can be structurally provided for through people-centered government services, redress of historical wrongs, and projects like universal basic income (UBI), progressive taxation, fairer trade policies, cracking down on corruption - particularly that between western multinationals and “third world” governments, etc. These are fights that require critical mass and political organization; that demand political will instead of piecemeal donation, and fulfilling our moral quotas by donating, as effective altruism recommends, much as this makes us feel good about ourselves and supposedly “gives us a sense in purpose” as Singer argues, just will not do.

But even setting these objections aside, suppose that we provisionally decide to buy into Effective Altruism’s argument of maximization and efficiency, the question then becomes, is the “free” market really what is efficient and maximizing? Some people would want to express uncertainty, and argue that we really cannot tell i.e. that we do not - cannot - have sufficient data, that there are too many variables involved for us to be able to tell conclusively on a global scale. Making such a claim, they think, would be to sacrifice nuance at the feet of a principle of parsimony- and the problem with this, they think, is that the world is simply not simple: sacrificing nuance renders the entire project useless. The unstated premise here, of course, is that in the hypothetical that we could gather sufficient data, we

could be able to conclusively tell whether the world had become *better* or *worse* as a consequence of market capitalism⁹⁰.

Others would like to think that the “facts” just don’t lie. They would point out how many people have been “lifted out of poverty” since China opened itself to the “free market”, and since the collapse of the Soviet Union made American-led liberal capitalism the dominant political-economic superstructure⁹¹, ⁹². Others, of whom I am one, would point to a different set of “facts”, to the damages instigated by markets: famines, economic exploitation of some countries by others, climate change. In fact, they would argue that all the problems that effective altruism is trying to address - including technological singularity - were directly caused by the markets - which the effective altruists are now relying on to address these issues.

There is no way to put a number to any of these views that will satisfy everyone involved. It comes down to, as we pragmatists argue, expressions of community belonging. The point here is that even when we accept (and remember, this is hypothetical acceptance) the principal of maximization as a desired consequence, there are still no “objective” ways of dealing with the problems we identify - of knowing what exactly maximizes - of agreeing on what is to be maximized. Of course all these parties would want to say that their view coheres

⁹⁰ Rothman, Joshua. (2018). “Are Things Getting Better or Worse? : Why Assessing the State of the World is Harder than it Sounds”. The New Yorker.

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/07/23/are-things-getting-better-or-worse>

⁹¹ Pinker, Steven. (2011). “Better Angels of our Nature”. Viking Books

⁹² Rosling, Hans, Ronnlund, Anna Rosling, Rosling, Ola (2018). “Factfulness: Ten Reasons we are wrong about the world - and why things are better than you think”. Flatiron Books;New York.

best with reality - but that just confirms the argument I am making here. We are, it seems, still left at the feet of multiple versions of “common sense”; at the feet of contingency- what sounds good to *our* community based on the values *we* think *we* have, on our shared historical understanding, and *our* agreed upon ways of viewing the world.

Even here then, the best⁹³ course of action is political and democratic - we are brought back to stuttering convictions, and our best recourse is solidarity in attempting to combat the challenges we face. A defense of the markets (based on its inherent preferability due to some perceived objective correspondence with reality, when this preferability cannot be measured or stated conclusively in the first place) renders effective altruists intellectually dishonest. There is therefore a need by effective altruists to take these leftist critiques of the market system seriously, and, as I have been arguing all along, to replace their ideas of objective truths, one being the supposed efficacy of the market right now, with democratically agreed upon preferable consequences.

The Best Causes // I am Me

⁹³ My usage of the term “best” here is just another exemplum of how trapped within our language we are. By “best”, I intend the term as a general flexible commendation for my own point of view - to signify my (and my community’s) preference of it over other points of view. As Rorty argues, the terms “true” (and “best”) mean the same in all cultures, just like the equally flexible terms “here”, “there”, “good” and “bad”. But the identity of meaning is of course compatible with the diversity of difference, and the diversity of procedures for assigning the terms”. So the pragmatist deems herself free to use the terms as general forms of commendation - as everyone else does - and in particular to commend her own views.

You are taking a walk when you see a house on fire, and several people outside it. You go to see what's happening, as undoubtedly most people there have. When you get there, you are told that there's a child trapped inside the burning house. No one is willing to go inside to save the child, much as they feel for him. It's just too risky for their own lives; the fire's too strong.

You are of the same opinion, even though you are deeply saddened about the child dying. But then you look up at the house, and on a window ledge in the second floor, you see a beautiful Siamese cat trapped inside. Now, for whatever reason, you care very very deeply about cats, and Siamese cats are just your favorite. There's no way you're letting this cat die. You dash into the house, run past the child trapped on the first floor, straight to the second floor where the cat is. You grab the beautiful creature, cradle it, and run back outside. Luckily, neither of you is hurt. You are glad you have done something good, the beautiful cat is safe. Pity about that boy though. The other people outside look at you. They are angry. How dare you save the cat instead of the boy? "But at least I did *something!*" You shout. "What did the rest of you do?"^{94, 95}

The intuition this little story is trying to get at is contained in the following question:

Even though you did more than the other observers at the fire, is there reason to think that

⁹⁴ Thought experiment paraphrased- and slightly altered (examples), from Theron Pummer's account. In Pummer, Theron. (2016). "Whether and Where to Give". *Philosophy and Public Affairs*. Volume 44, Issue 1. Winter 2016. Pp. 75 - 95.

⁹⁵ In Pummer's example, the animal is a bird, but I personally like cats better. One should feel free to put in whatever placeholder animal they deem necessary here; the intuition being targeted is the same.

you have done something morally wrong, that perhaps you are even more morally reprehensible than they are, by saving the cat and not the boy?

Theron Pummer answers, “Yes”.

Here’s another one: It costs \$42,000 to train a guide dog, thus, by proxy, \$4200 per year to provide “eyesight” for one blind person for ten years (assuming the average lifespan of a guide dog to be ten years). The charity you donate to does not have overhead costs - or these costs are taken care of by other donors, and you are assured that every cent of your money will be used to train the dog. On the other hand, another charity, though using only seventy percent of its donations (the rest of the funds being used for administrative purposes) says it costs \$35 to provide cataract surgeries for people in third world countries - in which case a donation of \$42,000 would mean you would provide eyesight for 840 people⁹⁶. If you choose to donate to the charity training dogs instead of the one providing cataract surgery, have you done something morally wrong?

The Effective Altruists think so.

The principle the effective altruists are trying to establish here is that sometimes, we can be fine with people not donating or not doing good, but that once one has decided to do good, if they do not do the *most good* they could have done, then they have done something morally wrong.

⁹⁶ Yakubchik, Boris. (2011). “It is Effectiveness, not overhead, that Matters”. 80,000 hours blog. <https://80000hours.org/2011/11/it-is-effectiveness-not-overhead-that-matters/>

Now here's another one. Nick Bostrom works at the University of Oxford and directs the Future of Humanity Institute (FHI)⁹⁷. Bostrom's work concerns the possibility of human extinction, primarily extinction that comes about as a result of artificial intelligence (AI). The probability of AI induced extinction is not high - it is quite low in fact. But were it to happen (and this is *probable*, even if *not likely*, don't forget), its consequences would be "near infinitely bad". Thus even the tiniest step to reduce this probability is "near infinitely valuable".

Bostrom says;

*"If there is a one percent chance of this (extinction) happening, the expected value of reducing an existential threat by a billionth of a billionth of one percent would be worth a hundred billion times the value of a billion present day lives"*⁹⁸

Based on the principle outlined above - that if one has the opportunity to do good, and one does not do the most good they can, then one has done something morally wrong - it thus serves, for the effective altruists, that, in QALY terms - if we are to take Bostrom's calculation seriously, donating to artificial intelligence research trumps anything else. Despite

⁹⁷ <https://www.fhi.ox.ac.uk/>

⁹⁸ Khatchadourian, Rafi. (2015). "The Domsday Invention: Will Artificial Intelligence Bring us Utopia or Destruction?" . The New Yorker.

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/11/23/doomsday-invention-artificial-intelligence-nick-bostrom>

the lower likelihood of an intelligence explosion, what we *really* should be directing most of our energies towards is not global poverty and exploitation; not eradicating disease; not discrimination based on race and/or gender or sexual orientation (even though, of course, we should allocate whatever *spare* time and energy we have towards these).

No, it is artificial intelligence research. And since one accepted the maximization argument in the first two cases (boy vs. cat in the burning house case, and the guard dog vs. cataract surgery case), one *must*, logically, accept this one too! It is no wonder that, once again, the world's capitalist elite has jumped on this bandwagon. Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, Richard Branson et al. For all these rich men, the colonization of outer space to 'save humanity' from possible extinction has become an agendum of the highest priority, and Bostrom's book, *Superintelligence*⁹⁹, has been a lighthouse for them.

It is these strange analogical leaps that are troubling. Demandingness¹⁰⁰ is often posed as an objection -or support, depending on your school of thought- to utilitarianism. But the demandingness objection rests on intuitions regarding actions that one deems supererogatory - praiseworthy but not obligatory. As Pummer points out, both of the options are at first seemingly supererogatory. No one compels, and not many people think it morally required, for one to jump into the burning house to save the boy at risk of their own life in the first case. And in the second case, donating itself is deemed supererogatory for most people

⁹⁹ Bostrom, Nick. (2014). "Superintelligence: Paths, Dangers, Strategies". Clarendon Press: Oxford University.

¹⁰⁰ Explained in Footnote 19.

(although of course some utilitarians argue that it is not), before one even decides whether to donate to training the guard dog or to providing cataract surgery.

The catch comes once one recognizes another layer of demandingness. The Effective Altruists contend that once one decides to perform an action, one is then *morally required* to perform the best action of that kind. To not do “the most/best good”¹⁰¹ one can do then becomes an avoidance of moral obligation, a moral transgression.

Many non-utilitarians reject this argument. As I have been arguing all through this section, we do not want to be told what to care about just because it is what’s maximizing - even though sometimes maximization may be a factor. And even though some maximizing cases might augur with some of our intuitions - like the case with the boy vs. the cat and the case with the cataracts vs. the guide dog - not all such cases strike our intuitions the same way, especially not when they relate to *us* having to make a choice between something *we* care about, and some other thing that is supposedly more important, but not as relevant to *us*, or not of direct impact to *our* lives.

It is therefore not of much practical value to posit a principle that seemingly underlies these cases as a logical imperative. We want to support cancer research because of contingent reasons; because *our* grandparents died of cancer; even though we realize that Malaria is a bigger killer disease. We fund cerebral palsy research centers because *our* kid suffers from cerebral palsy, even while acknowledging that for humanity - considered abstractly, artificial

¹⁰¹ Singer, Peter. (2015). “The Most Good you can do: How Effective Altruism is Changing Ideas about Living Ethically. Yale University Press.

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intelligence research is perhaps more significant. At every turn, we are reminded of our contingency: that most of the time, we care about things as they happen to *us*, we view everything through *our* eyes and through the lenses of *our* experiences - experiences shaped by communities of belonging, and personal and historical contingencies.

The idea I am reiterating here then is that while maximization can indeed be something important, it is not the thing that overrides everything else in importance. It has to compete with other facets of our lives as we experience and attach value to them. If, therefore, philosophy is to succeed as an agent of social change, it must speak to our lives and our experiences, to the ethical conflict that goes on in them; it cannot abstract from them by presenting supposed objective logical principles that constitute moral imperatives.

Here, Bernard Williams¹⁰², that most sustained critic of utilitarianism, provides much insight. Williams was primarily interested in the perspectives that actual human beings, living through moral conundrums, had. His rejection of rule-based (primarily deontology) and

¹⁰² It is of utmost necessity that I be careful to elucidate my usage of Williams here. Williams famously argued (in *Truth and Truthfulness*, 2002) against some versions -the Rorty-ian kind - of the conceptions of truth that I present here. He contended that human societies needed to think of both truth and truthfulness as values, and, correspondingly, sincerity and accuracy as virtues that went along with these values.

It seems to me that what Williams is doing, by positing Robert Nozick's "potential explanations" of how things/notions could have arisen, is simply seeking what Rorty terms a larger community of agreement for what is practicable. I have no doubt that most who believe as Williams did will disagree with me, but that's another argument. Nevertheless, Williams deep recognition of the messiness of life and his rejection of codified ethics; his belief that philosophy was something that accompanied life itself, not replaced it or directed it abstractly, is something he shares with the pragmatists and differs with the utilitarians on. I thus believe that a discussion of Williams' ethics can be presented in support of a largely pragmatist argument - even while recognizing the disagreements Williams had with the pragmatists - without doing damage to Williams.

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end-based (primarily utilitarianism) philosophy was based on an interest in “life itself”. Life, he thought, was not nearly as neat - or as boring - as moral philosophy made it out to be.

To attempt to understand Williams’ thought, it is necessary to historicize him - though I of course risk barbarizing his thought in the process. But I will try my best.

Williams came of age as a philosopher at a time when Universal prescriptivism, first introduced by R.M. Hare in his 1952 book - *The Language of Morals*¹⁰³, (itself reeling under the influence of the logical positivists) was hugely popular in moral thought in England. The logical positivists, inspired by the earlier Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus*¹⁰⁴, attempted to scientize all activity that they thought was philosophical by maintaining that the only meaningful statements were those which were verifiable - those that satisfied an empirical criterion of meaningfulness. Einstein’s proposition about mass-energy equivalence was meaningful because it could be verified: $E = mc^2$ held true empirically for every instance. The same could not be said for “Thou shalt not commit adultery” or “Maximize utility”.

To express moral beliefs then, because they (moral beliefs) could not be empirically verified, was merely to express certain attitudes - and therefore not at all a philosophical activity. For example, for A.J. Ayer, one of the most prominent logical positivists, for me to say “You were wrong in stealing that money” was nothing more than to express the

¹⁰³ Hare, Richard. Mervyn. (1952). *The Language of Morals*. Clarendon Press, Oxford University.

¹⁰⁴ Wittgenstein, Ludwig. (1922). *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Harcourt, Brace and Company. New York.

proposition “You stole that money”¹⁰⁵ - the “were wrong” expressing merely my attitude, and providing no useful propositional content. From this, Hare’s universal prescriptivism came up, as a grounding for a notion of morality that did not rely on verificationism.

Hare argued that moral utterances did not try to describe the world so much as they tried to provide prescriptions - how it *ought* to be, and how one *ought* to act in it. In the spirit of Kant’s categorical imperative, Hare argued that the sort of prescriptions contained in moral utterances were therefore universalizable. If I said one *ought* not steal, I meant that *relevant factors* remaining the same, this imperative held for everyone. It is wrong for *anyone* to steal.

From this, the prescriptivists came up with a moral system, whose most important (at least to me) facets that I hope to briefly discuss here were 1.) the impossibility of moral conflict, and 2.) the idea that every obligation was but an instance of a more general obligation, acceptance of the former naturally signifying an acceptance of the latter, and the latter subsuming the former.

The first facet of the moral system that I point out posited that whenever two *oughts* *seemed* to be in conflict, one of them was eliminable. This was because morality, for the prescriptivists, was practical in a way that allowed only one course of action. If, for some reason, two of my moral commitments were in conflict, I needed to simply deliberate again, and upon doing so, would realize that one of them either was not *truly* a moral commitment, or that it crumbled under the other.

¹⁰⁵ Ayer, Alfred Jules. (1936). *Language, Truth and Logic*. Penguin. Pg. 106

And here entered Williams.

Williams, in two articles^{106 107} written in the mid 1960s, took this prescriptivist system to task. In these articles, he argued not just for fragility - that luck and chance had some space in our moral lives, but he also declared absurd the idea that moral commitments were eliminable under one another. In a hearkening to Aristotle's discussion of *Akrasia*¹⁰⁸, Williams points to the obvious existence of moral regret as evidence that moral claims did not fold under one another. An example of this, provided by Martha Nussbaum in her first book¹⁰⁹, illustrates Williams' point perfectly.

In the Iliad, Agamemnon, the leader of the Greeks, needs to go to war against the Trojans. The Trojan Prince, Paris, has stolen Agamemnon's brother's (Menelaus) wife (Helen), and Agamemnon, as the head of the family, needs to lead the war to save the family's *kleos* - honor. However, upon consulting the oracle at Delphi, Agamemnon is told that the Greek ships will not sail unless he sacrifices his daughter, Iphigenia, to the Gods.

Agamemnon could certainly have gone the utilitarian way of calculating what maximizes (and perhaps he did, for he killed his daughter and went to war). But in my view,

¹⁰⁶ Williams, Bernard. (1966). Consistency and Realism. The Inaugural Address - Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society. Supplementary Volumes Vol. 40 (1966), pp. 1-22 (22 pages)

¹⁰⁷ Williams, Bernard. (1965). Ethical Consistency. Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society. reprinted in Bernard Williams, Problems of the Self (Cambridge: University Press, 1973)

¹⁰⁸ Aristotle. Nicomachean Ethics. Book 7, Chapter 2.

¹⁰⁹ Nussbaum, Martha. (1986). The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy. Cambridge University Press.

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and that of Williams and Nussbaum, Agamemnon was placed under a true moral conundrum. This was a tragedy, and neither of the options could fold under the other; regret necessarily followed whatever option he chose.

Either Agamemnon sacrificed his daughter - someone he loved and cared deeply for - and an act that had grave consequences in itself; or he could not go to war, losing his family's *kleos* - the most important thing to a Greek, forever. It was cases like this that Williams used to demonstrate the faults in the arguments of the prescriptivists. These cases showed, leaving very little doubt, that the moral system the prescriptivists had come up with failed to recognize this valid competition of demands, this fragility and presence of moral luck, within people's moral lives.

On the second mentioned facet of the prescriptivist moral system, Williams' argument brings us to perhaps the first sustained argument against demandingness. Williams thought that this sleight of hand - of absorbing obligations under one another - would lead to a situation where we were supposedly *rationaly* compelled to hold views that we did not *truly* hold. Within a systemic framework, a general obligation is of course derivable, as shown at the beginning of this section with the discussion of maximization (boy vs cat, guide dog vs. cataracts etc). You believe maximization should occur in this particular case, and in this one, and in this one; therefore you hold maximization to be a general principle, of which the particulars are instantiations.

However for Williams, as for the pragmatists, who both rejected this idea of a systemic morality, the idea that a general duty could derive from a particular one did not hold - except perhaps trivially. Deriving such a general duty, for Williams, was an implausibly demanding view of morality - and whereas the utilitarians thought (and think) that this view outlined the extent of our moral commitments to us, bringing forth more stringent imperatives, Williams simply thought we should do away with it. It was unrealistic.

Furthermore, the prescriptivists - as with the utilitarians - held fast to an impartial account of morality, and this again, Williams thought, went against how life just was. Working under their system, one had no special obligations to those closer to them - one's particular obligations were subsumed under the general one. I had no special particular obligation that said, say, "save your sick child" that was not subsumed under the general obligation "save sick children".

In this schema, *my* child was just *a* child. Williams thought that this missed the point completely. I wasn't saving *this* child because it was my general obligation to save children. I was saving this child because of the particular place she occupied in *my* life, as *my* child. Moral obligations, Williams thought, could not exist over and above life itself, directing and dictating what ought to happen.

This brief discussion of Williams' ethical thought helps us put into perspective the discussion on maximization that have dominated this section. Maximization implies eliminability. To have a moral imperative to do the "most good" implies that our other moral

commitments fold under this maximizing principle - and it necessarily implies that we have to be impartial. It is to further buy into the idea of particular obligations subsumed under general ones; to say that we should donate to artificial intelligence research instead of cancer research- despite the fact that our kid died from cancer - because that is what we *ought* to do, what we are *rationally compelled*, by the principles we hold, to do. And the reason why this is so is because having accepted the maximization rule with regards to the particular, we are rationally compelled to accept it in the general as well, and to live correctly with regards to it.

But as Williams very persuasively argued, this just will not do. The idea of a moral system, of rules and obligations that derive from it and contain imperatives, “deny - or at the very least declare irrelevant, from the outset”, as Nakul Krishna puts it, “the fact that I am me”¹¹⁰. Williams held that while, indeed, ethical life was important, it was not the sole component to life, and certainly not the only one that had importance. Ethical considerations had to accompany life, had to be *a facet* of it. *Oughts* could not be the lords that reigned tyrannically over life - telling us what we, at pain of being illogical or ‘immoral’, were rationally compelled to do. Maximization, the Effective Altruist instantiation of this - with its dictates of what was *objectively right*, what we *ought* to do, despite our other commitments to life, to family, to our own contingencies, should be rejected on the same grounds that Williams rejected the prescriptivist moral systems, grounds that I have carefully outlined above.

¹¹⁰ Krishna, Nakul. (201). Add Your Own Egg. The Point Magazine.
<https://thepointmag.com/2016/examined-life/add-your-own-egg>

(The third and final part of this essay will present a pragmatist reading of beneficence. It will aim to detail how, in very hazy detail, our ethical lives may look like once we accept the pragmatic view of epistemology (as against the utilitarian one) outlined in the first part of the essay.)

PART THREE:

DEMOCRATIC VISTAS

Democracy, and the one true good, are synonymous to me.

John Dewey

The pragmatist is one who turns away from abstraction and insufficiency, from verbal solutions, from bad a priori reasons, from fixed principles, closed systems, and pretended absolutes and origins. He turns towards concreteness and adequacy, towards facts, towards actions, and towards power. It means the open air and possibilities of nature as against dogma, artificiality, and the pretence of finality.

William James

To attempt to attain a social morality without a basis of democratic experience results in the loss of the only possible corrective and guide, and ends in an exaggerated individual morality but not in social morality at all.

Jane Addams

"We have met the obligations of our family life, not because we had made resolutions to that end, but spontaneously, because of a common fund of memories and affections, from which the obligation naturally develops, and we see no other way in which to prepare ourselves for the larger social duties." Such a demand is reasonable, for by our daily

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experience we have discovered that we cannot mechanically hold up a moral standard, then jump at it in rare moments of exhilaration when we have the strength for it, but that even as the ideal itself must be a rational development of life, so the strength to attain it must be secured from interest in life itself”.

Jane Addams

It is possible to cultivate the impulses of the benefactor until the power of attaining a simple human relationship with the beneficiaries, that of frank equality with them, is gone, and there is left no mutual interest in a common cause. To perform too many good deeds may be to lose the power of recognizing good in others; to be too absorbed in carrying out a personal plan of improvement may be to fail to catch the great moral lesson which our times offer.

Jane Addams

Jane Addams' Hull House in Chicago was an archetype of pragmatist social reform. Addams practice was founded on what she called the "three R's"¹¹¹: 1.) Residence - that Hull house was to work in concert with the local community whose problems it sought to address, 2.) Research - That there was to be in depth scientific study of the causes of poverty¹¹² (in West Chicago); on what the factors that engendered dependence and deprivation were, and 3.) Reform - That the results of these scientific studies were to be openly communicated to the public, that public engagement and agreement had to be sought in figuring out the way forward, and that active and persistent campaigns for legislative and social reform had to then take place.

Addams, like Dewey, was a heavy believer in participatory democracy. Just like for Dewey the town hall was the highlight of democratic life and the basis for social reconstruction, so too, for Addams, a deep and enduring engagement with the community, a firm belief that the community members had the biggest say in tackling what impacted them, was the essence for social action.

Addams project was highly laudable (among many other achievements, with Dewey, she helped found the American Civil Liberties Union, and she became the first American woman to win the Nobel Prize, for, among other things, founding the field of Social Work as we know it today). Yet to propose Addams' kind of social reform, as I aim to do here, as a

¹¹¹ Wade, Louise. (1967). "The Heritage from Chicago's Early Settlement Houses". *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*. 60 (4). Pg. 411-441 - pg. 414.

¹¹² Proxy for whatever social problem was being investigated

guideline for the sort of social reform and moral progress the Effective Altruists are engaged in, seems laughable.

For one, the pragmatist conception of shared experience as the basis for intelligent social deliberation and action (as demonstrated by the first R, residence) seems, *prima facie*, incredibly parochial in geography, if not insular in the scope of the issues it concerns itself with. Addams' practice was focused entirely on the challenges facing particular immigrant communities in the West Side of Chicago, whereas the concerns of Effective Altruism transcend not just geography, but also species membership.

But I think this contention of parochialism is a misplaced worry. In response to it, I argue here that "Residence", for Addams, was a proxy for "community" - a term denoting the scope of people, and the bases under which these people were afflicted by certain social problems, and could therefore come together to create practicable solutions to these problems. At the time Addams was doing her work, that community, for her, happened to be European immigrants in the west side of Chicago, and the problems she was addressing were, whilst indicative of larger social concerns¹¹³, particular to certain immigrant communities in the West side.

Yet the idea of what is considered community does not need inherently to be confined to physical residency within bounded atomized geographic areas for meaningful practicable action to occur. Communities of belonging that people identify with, that attempt to define an

¹¹³ Which Addams did, in fact, address. See, for example, *Democracy and Social Ethics* (1927) , *On Education* (2017), and her famous essay, "*Utilization of Women in City Government*"(1907).

“us”, exist within and outside geographical boundaries - think the daughters of the American revolution, people of African descent, the feminist movement, Black Lives Matter, the Ku Klux Klan, etc. The challenge is simply to make them broader, and to provide bases for doing so.

Perhaps then, before moving on, it would be useful to address exactly what kinds of community, the bases, Addams thought these ideas referred to.

In just their bare stating, the three R’s seem to be value neutral: white nationalists, for example, could come together to jointly address problems affecting them (residence); they could conduct in-depth studies on how to tackle said problems - say, in-depth studies in eugenics (research); and they could then put these ideas into practice to address whatever it is they think is the problem- say, the extermination of non-white people among them (reform). These three R’s must therefore, if we are to properly understand Addams’ thought, be understood in conjunction with her ideas concerning social meliorism.

One of the advantages of living in defined societies of some sort (The United States, western civilization etc.) is that the norms concerning ideas such as good and bad, moral and immoral, have largely been passed down historically. This does not mean, at least in societies that Popper termed “open”¹¹⁴, that debate and deliberation does not go on concerning these ideas, or that such factors as fragility do not abound. Rather, it means that, by and large, the

¹¹⁴ See, Popper, Karl. (1945). “The Open Society and its Enemies”. Routledge.

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nature of what is “moral” has entered the realm of public common sense, and has largely been intertwined with the nature of practicable consequences.

Western notions of what was “moral” had moved through history - changing and being altered to fit particular circumstances, and some remaining the same - from the ancient Greeks and Romans, to the scholastics, through to the European enlightenment, and to us today. Don’t kill people; do not steal; care *somewhat* about your neighbors.

The milieu Addams found herself during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, when she was most active, was dominated by this historical contingency. She was a member of this community called “the west”, and this community had come to agree, mostly with good reason derived from experience, that there were some states and conditions in the world that were “good”, and some that were “bad” - and therefore could, or needed to, be ameliorated.

In advocating for the three R’s then, Addams was in part influenced by these historical contingencies - that there was some things we agreed to be bad or good due to practicable consequences witnessed through historical experiences. Mass poverty was bad and had bad practicable consequences; feeding people who did not have food was good and had good practicable consequences. We were social beings steeped in history, and Addams acknowledged that.

On the other part, Addams was influenced by a pragmatist insistence on continued experimentation, on the rejection of dogma. We had received a lot from history; but times changed, and what provided the most preferred practicable consequences then, did not necessarily do so now. Or the “us”, the community, affected by the consequences of some action, had changed and/or broadened, and thus required that we re-evaluate our ideas concerning what the best practicable consequences were - and for whom.

Agreements deriving from history thus had to be constantly questioned. Addams balanced these two perspectives in her work. She was at once a prominent public intellectual who debated the nature and value of our ideas concerning citizenship, gender equality, social justice; and she was also a dedicated reformer who wrote books, lobbied, provided food and counselling, to implement those things, as a public, we agreed were good, and to do away with those we agreed were bad.

Her idea of community then, involved advancing these conceptions of good, and doing away with those of bad, while constantly questioning what these terms meant within our own historical and cultural contingencies. We had good reason to think that white nationalists represented “bad”. And so for Addams, the three R’s were not neutral of value; they were guidelines for communities in their attempts at moral progress, and moral progress was defined, in the pragmatist way, as ever expanding solidarity based on agreed upon practicable consequences.

Rorty explained this idea of “ever expanding solidarity” best¹¹⁵. Rorty thought that there were two frameworks which human beings, in an attempt to situate the “meaning” of their individual existences within a wider world, relied on. The first one was, as discussed in detail in sections above, objectivity - what philosophy had relied on since Plato. It involved reference to a “non-human reality”, one entirely divorced of community, and accessible to everyone so long as they possessed the necessary tools to access it (which, funnily for all its allusions about truth and permanence, had changed through time - and once included divine selection, but essentially, after the enlightenment, involved sensation, logic and reason). Rorty called the believers of objectivity “realists”. Realists believe(d) that “truth” - an immaterial category which corresponded with reality- was to be pursued for its own sake. They believed in a metaphysics which distinguished true from false beliefs, and in justificatory procedures not bound by communal attitudes; in procedures which were global and natural.

The second way was to appeal to solidarity. It involved an individual “telling the story of their identification” to a particular community - as mentioned above: western society, the Daughters of the Confederacy, Feminists etc. These were the pragmatists.

Realists sought to reduce solidarity to objectivity; they sought to say that we agreed on some things not because we simply agreed due to practicable consequences, but because there were some objective, natural, and global facts that compelled us to do so. Pragmatists on the other hand, sought to reduce objectivity to solidarity; to say that we were “nothing

¹¹⁵ Rorty, Richard. (1990). “Solidarity or Objectivity”. Published in Landesman, Charles & Meeks, Robin (eds.) (2002). “Philosophical Skepticism”. John Wiley & Sons. Pp. 344 - 360.

more than our historical moment”, and that what human progress constituted was not in “heading to a place which had been prepared for humanity in advance” (i.e. a *telos*), but rather in the ability for all of “*us*” to “do more interesting things and be more interesting people”¹¹⁶, and, in the same vein, to expand who “*us*” was, so these others too could do these interesting things and be these interesting people.

My aim in this part of the essay therefore is to provide a way that we could put forward the idea of moral progress -as Addams saw it with her three R’s- and human responsibility to the broadest sense of what could be considered “*us*” - the notion of an ever-broadening community, as Rorty outlined it, without grounding these in external metaphysical and/or epistemological foundations which either ring hollow and do not provide much basis for practicable action (e.g. telling a racist who already believed that he was better than a black person, that he was objectively wrong, and expecting the racist, due to this argument from objectivity, to then fundamentally alter his views and interactions with black people), or are relativistic enough - and therefore so arbitrary, that they make meliorism impossible in the world.

In the Addams and Dewey inspired view of community that I am presenting in this third part of the essay then, our task of confronting the sorts of problems effective altruism involves itself with lies in continually expanding the boundaries of who our “community” is - Addams; first R, and then in applying Addams’ two other R’s in our meliorating work. We form community when we stop cleaving to notions of objectivity. We then fundamentally

¹¹⁶ Ibid 115, pg 352.

change the ways we interact with others, both from our own intellectual and cultural traditions, as well as from other backgrounds. When we conceive of (human) progress within such a framework of solidarity; when democratic dialogue aimed at achieving solidarity replaces quests for objectivity, then we stop being directed by a teleological place, or ideal e.g. QALYs.

Instead we start to think of practicable results affecting members of our (ever expanding) community as the basis for social action, action based on the the other two Rs - research and reform. If we think of the values we share as members of a community as having no external foundations except “*shared social hope and the trust created by such sharing*”¹¹⁷, then our recourse is to reconfigure our actions so that, in the globalized interconnected world we live in, where actions in one part of the globe affect others, we reorient ourselves so that our task becomes figuring out how we can intentionally *include* (not recognize) those others as members of our ever broadening community¹¹⁸, and then in conducting research and enacting reforms which reflect this solidarity.

This notion of shared hope is grounded in experiences we are capable of having as beings of particular biological kinds - relating to pain, pleasure, shared - and ever broadening-

¹¹⁷ Ibid 115

¹¹⁸ This is the reason why Dewey and Rorty were so keen on promoting liberalism. Both believed that care - or friendship - could not be called upon spontaneously, as an intellectual demand. Rather, care was cultivated by community. Yet it seemed implausible to think that one would think of every human being - let alone every human being and animal, as part of one's communities. Liberalism, they thought, got around this, because a liberal community is defined necessarily by its openness to others. When I declare myself a liberal qua Rorty or Dewey - or even Mill, I am saying that what defines me is my toleration towards others and their ways of life (within the bounds of the harm principle) - by definition, my bearing is open and welcoming to difference - and this is how Rorty thought we could have an ever expanding community that we could attain solidarity with.

understandings of humiliation etc (and thus this may broaden to include concerns about animal welfare as well). The pragmatist yields to the fact that we are beings of particular biological kinds, but, unlike the realist, he does not think that that tells us anything about how, gives us reason why, we ought to be treated in particular ways, or what obligations we are owed. “You have a heart or a mind” is not providing a reason as to why I shouldn’t stab you.

Animals, possessed of similar biological capacities for pain as we humans, are, for example, killed and mistreated everyday, and many people do not concern themselves much with this, because we lack solidarity about what this means for *our* community. When those of us who advocate that animals be not treated in such ways ground our reasons for doing so on objectivity, then, as Rorty says, “we leave ourselves open to the pointlessly skeptical question “Is this solidarity real?” For some people will simply say, “I am not, objectively, like these animals in these various ways”, or they will say that such a connection is trivial, and so they do not see how this argument grounds a sense of obligation. The consequence then is that “we leave ourselves open to Nietzsche's insinuation that the end of religion and metaphysics should mean the end of our attempts not to be cruel.”¹¹⁹

On the other hand, a grounding on solidarity invites us to not have this Nietzschean insinuation, for, from the outset, we do not operate with the notion of “realness” or of objective likeness. Having solidarity as our grounding is to detail the experiences we have had regarding these shared biological capacities - pain, pleasure, humiliation, and then

¹¹⁹ Rorty, CIS, Pg. 134

making conscious attempts to include others so that they share in the good practicable outcomes, and avoid the bad ones. We have no non-circular ways to justify the values we hold to be good - freedom of speech and toleration, the capability to love whoever one chooses. We have no criterion except a detailing of the practicable consequences we have seen occur, through history, when those values have been put in place, and an attempt to convince others that these sorts of consequences are what are preferable.

My task here is therefore twofold: It is first to provide a basis for solidarity, for the kind of global community which can stand in proxy for Addams' first R. It is then, after that, to show how this community might come together to achieve the other two R's - research and reform; how once we start thinking of other beings in various parts of the world as constituting "us", we can embark on a program of meliorism that is grounded in experience and actual consequences, and that is not imposed but takes heed of democratic sentiment.

What is the proxy for the First R then?

Essentialism?... of some sort?

In this attempt to create a wider community, perhaps positing social hope, like I did above, as the basis for solidarity brings questions of its own. The challenge here comes from both the objectivists and the relativists. On the one hand, the objectivist wants to ask, isn't social hope just another proxy for something more objective, something like utility, that can be measured and represented using QALYs?

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On the flip side, the relativists asks, why is social hope not just another arbitrary categorization of what we (pragmatists) deem important as what defines our shared community, and if so, what grounding does it have such that we should prefer it over other arbitrary categorizations? Which is to say, why is social hope not as good as, or as bad as, any other reason for justification? Why can't the fact that *we* all have noses (the "we" here being any being that possesses a nose), instead of the idea that we share social hope (based on similar biological experiences relating to pain, pleasure and humiliation), be the metric under which we form a community, and all unite to derive a sense of obligation to other beings? And if it is this arbitrary, why don't we then acknowledge that every way to live life is as good as the other, and thus abandon the notion of trying to fit everyone into some program, instead letting every community live as they please, constructing their own cultural conceptions of meaning?

These two challenges are ones that the pragmatist wishes to avoid. She wants to avoid, on the one hand, a supposedly objective, purely essentialist, conception of human functioning that is so teleogized as to present us with the problems outlined in part two of this essay. She rightly thinks these conceptions are wrong, for they are reductive in their attempts at finding out that one thing - or set of things - that matter in human life - and then ordering human action relative to them. She wants to avoid a situation where we take our cultural position on some issue and impose it upon others as the objective, correct one, *based on its supposed correspondence to a certain reality*. She thinks that such a program ignores

democratic experience that is essential to achieving the preferable practicable consequences she seeks.

On the other hand, she also wants to avoid the relativism that Bhimrao Ambedkar called the “placid view of the anthropologist” - that “there is nothing to be said about the beliefs, habits, morals and outlooks on life which obtain among the different peoples of the world, except that they often differ”¹²⁰. She wants to avoid these sorts of relativistic conceptions because she thinks that they do not provide grounds for practicable action: how do we do anything in the world if every point of view, every course of action, is the same as the other? The defeatism of these relativistic views does not augur well with the meliorism inherent in pragmatism.

Pragmatists want to say that there is such a thing as making the world better. They only insist that “better” is a standard of democratic agreement about the value of shared experience- not an objective fact nor an arbitrary standard.

In one attempt at tackling this issue, Martha Nussbaum¹²¹ puts forth a most eloquent (non-pragmatist) conception of the human good; one which avoids both metaphysical realist essentialism, and relativism¹²². Kant, Nussbaum thinks, struck the first nail in the coffin of

¹²⁰ Ambedkar, Bhimrao. (2016). “Annihilation of Caste”. Pg. 312. Verso Books.

¹²¹ Here again, as with Bernard Williams in the previous section, it is essential to note that Nussbaum is an Aristotelian, not a pragmatist. Whenever there is a conflict between her views and those of the pragmatists, I will be sure to point it out.

¹²² Nussbaum, Martha. (1992). “Human Functioning and Social Justice: In Defense of Aristotelian Essentialism”. *Political Theory*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (May, 1992), pp. 202-246.

metaphysical realism (the kind espoused by the objectivists), and 20th century philosophers of language and science such as Wittgenstein, W.V.O. Quine, Donald Davidson, and Nelson Goodman, shut and buried that coffin¹²³. These philosophers all argued, convincingly, Nussbaum thinks, that the only defensible conceptions of truth and knowledge bound these two notions inextricably with human cognitive activity within history. An attempt to provide an unmediated essential account outside human cognition within history therefore, these philosophers argued, was an absurd attempt that achieved nothing. “To cling to it (such an account of essence) as a goal”, Nussbaum, in words very reflective of those of Bernard Williams, holds, “is to pretend that it is possible to be told from outside what to be and what to do, when in reality the only answers we can ever hope to have must come, in some manner, from ourselves”¹²⁴.

But Nussbaum’s greatest contention is with the relativists - most typified by French academics enamoured by Derrida’s assault on the “metaphysics of presence”¹²⁵. These relativists hearken back to Ambedkar’s placid view of the anthropologist. They would

¹²³ In “Antwort der Frage, was ist der Aufklaerung”, as well as in his other more prominent works.

¹²⁴ Ibid 117. Pg. 207.

¹²⁵ Derrida thought that philosophy, from Plato onwards, had fallen too far into the clutches of metaphysics - a metaphysics which created a dualistic opposition - and privileged one part of this duality over another, the common example being presence over absence. Here, Derrida borrows heavily from Heidegger, who in *Being and Time* (1927) argued that we understood the beings of entities - think time, beauty, etc. with respect to a definite mode of time - the present. Heidegger thought that we has shifted our attention to the study of particular beings, thus avoiding the ontological question of being itself - what is being? What does it mean to be? The result is that we forget to pay attention to what brought the present about - to the absent. In *Speech and Phenomena*, Derrida contends that the present is always compromised by a residue of previous experience - a residue that can never allow us to be in a self-contained “now” moment. The recourse is that there can never be a definite meaning to anything: anytime we try to pin down what something means in itself, the meaning slips us in the now. In the context of the discussion above on relativism, what the French relativists do is make use of Derrida’s metaphysics of presence to reject any sort of essentialism: whenever we try to pin down anything as essential, they think, we are merely privileging the now, the present., the culturally closer, over the then, the absent, the far.

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contend, Nussbaum argues, that the introduction of the smallpox vaccine in India was a bad thing, a case of western contamination of Indian values - for the introduction of this vaccine apparently led to the eradication of the cult of Srilata Devi (even though the vaccine saved millions of lives - but that's a moot point).

And these relativists would contend, that India, unlike the west, experiences an “embedded way of life” - where the same values that prevail at home prevail in the workplace, and that this embedded way of life should not be disturbed by the imposition of those dirty western values. An example of this embedded life that Nussbaum provides: A menstruating woman is not allowed in the kitchen because she is believed to pollute it. So too, in the workplace, where the looms are kept, she is not allowed in, because she is believed to pollute the looms. What consistency.

Nussbaum rightly points out that these relativist accounts are repellent; the examples they provide are abominable rather than admirable. In their attempts at radical relativism, they end up justifying practices and consequences we have very good reason to find detestable. Nussbaum proposes, in response, what she terms an “internalist essentialism”¹²⁶. By this, she means, we could well reject metaphysical realism but still be left with a *somewhat* essentialist account of human life, one deriving from understandings of human history and biology.

¹²⁶ An earlier, similar idea, the “internalist conception of Philosophy”, concerning knowledge grounded not metaphysically but experientially, had been put forth by Hilary Putnam in his *Reason, Truth and History* (1981).

She thinks that we can say that the ability to choose and act is more fundamental to, and more reflective of, a human life, than, say, the ability to earn \$60,000. She thinks that we should privilege saving human lives over advancing the cult of Srilata Devi. She thinks that we are rarely ever in doubt when we encounter another human being - and this is for very precise reasons: because our understandings of history and biology (which are not metaphysically but experientially grounded) have provided us with some sort of essentialist account of what it means to be a human being, and what it means not to be one¹²⁷.

Even though pragmatists do not hold an essentialism of any kind¹²⁸, Nussbaum's account, in many ways, gets to the very heart of what I termed above as pragmatist social hope (as Rorty called it) or social efficiency (as Dewey called it). Rorty sought to ground his views about social hope as the basis for creating community on accounts of avoidance of cruelty - with regards to biological capacities relating to pain and pleasure, and on historically contingent factors such as cultural humiliation.

¹²⁷ This idea of recognizing other human beings as human beings, or, say, a dog recognizing another dog, was first stated by Franklin Henry Giddings in his 1896 work, *The Principles of Sociology*. Giddings called this "consciousness of kind", which he defined as "a state of consciousness in which any being, whether high or low in the scale of life, recognizes another conscious being as of like kind with itself". See 2004 edition, pg. 17 (Cosmo Publications).

¹²⁸ We agree with Nussbaum, but refuse to categorize this as essentialism - arguing that it is only a case where we have studied consequences and causal relations of particular kinds in particular situations at particular times, and are moved to action due to some kind of agreement on desirable consequences.

For Dewey, social efficiency¹²⁹ was propped by conceptions of freedom. It meant that the individual was afforded the capacities to choose and develop her competencies, and from this, to engage critically with, and to contribute meaningfully to, the functioning of her society - broadly construed. Dewey's pragmatic ethics were fundamentally grounded on experience. He thought that what ethical inquiry constituted in was the use of reflective intelligence to improve our judgements - and this only came about *after* acting on those judgements, not *a priori*. Moral progress, for Dewey, came about when, upon reflection, we revised our judgements to cohere with the preferable practicable consequences for the broadest range of people affected by them - and this was our community.

We have seen people die from smallpox, and from lack of food and water - and this relates to capacities they possess biologically. We have not, so far as I can tell, seen people die because they can no longer worship Srilata Devi or Zeus or Jesus Christ. We have, further, seen the humiliation - irrespective of cultural contexts, and assaults on freedom, that women all over the world suffer, due to various cultural practices and systemic frameworks; how they have been denied the freedom to self-determine. We have seen that their conditions do not represent the best practicable consequences for them - for when afforded choices to alter these consequences, they have taken them. We seek, as pragmatists interested in meliorism, to pursue moral progress by helping them attain the capacities to choose what to do with their lives. In this sense, we aim to think of them as members of our community.

¹²⁹ The term was first introduced into academic parlance by Benjamin Kidd in his 1884 book, "Social Evolution". Kidd was a social Darwinist - and the consequences of his school of thought are largely abominable to most of us right now. When Dewey took up the term, he sought to imbue it with a humanism. Relating especially to his views on education, Dewey made "social efficiency" a good and humanistic value to aspire to.

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But just like we have genuine differences about some issues even within our liberal community, these differences exist too with these other members of our created community. And just like, within the bounds of some harm principle, we do not force members of our liberal community to do things they do not wish to, and instead seek to persuade them, so too, with these members of our created community, we do not force upon them the choices we ourselves think are good; we only present them with the capacity to choose. They are free, if they so wish, to, in our view, waste those choices - to reject the smallpox vaccine and continue worshipping Srilata Devi. So long as they have that choice to “waste”, and so long as they are reasonably informed about the practicable consequences of whatever course of action they decide to take.

This gets us to Addams’ second R - research. The essence of this Deweyan notion of reflective intelligence and social efficiency is not applicable only in creating a framework for solidarity, but also in outlining what orientation this community then takes when it makes decisions concerning practicable outcomes. When we conduct scientific experiments, we hypothesize, and then test to see whether the results confirm the hypotheses. So too, with value judgements, putting them into practice and seeing whether we like the consequences in the ways the judgement predicted, is the only way of confirming or disconfirming them (i.e. making a habit of repeating or not repeating the same action) until we have further experience. Nussbaum would like to call the tested judgements we have come to have so far essential; we agree with her in practice, but because pragmatists are skeptics, we leave room for doubt - for the possibility that the world may yet provide us with information that alters our conceptions.

For Dewey then, in conducting Addams' research about what presents the best practicable outcomes, we must remember that though intelligent value judgements proceed from this logic of experimentation, they involve more than just this sort of experimenting to see if we value the consequences. For a clearer picture of the limits of experimentation only, imagine how it would look like if we all took to tasting any foreign looking objects to see if they could kill us!

Intelligent value judgements consist, rather, in drawing analogous judgements concerning potential consequences between novel scenarios and past experiences. It involves constantly incorporating these new consequences into the wider framework of what we consider "experience", such that the next time we have a novel scenario, the consequences of the judgements we made in past scenarios affect how we look at the new one.

The result of this is that we come to have some sort of provisional knowledge about what to do and what not to do, based on the consequences of doing or not doing those things; a knowledge based entirely on experience and intelligent judgement as opposed to an essentialist account of any sort, and therefore a knowledge that could always potentially change based on future experience. We refuse to say that any question is settled; but we think we have good reason to act in certain ways in order to attain certain consequences we think to be good. This is the essence of contingency.

So while Nussbaum's internalist essentialist account gets to similar points as what we pragmatists believe, unlike Nussbaum, in speaking about amelioration, we refuse to provide a list of criterion, even a very vague, fungible one, of what makes a human life worth living; or regarding what exact conditions we think need to obtain for a life to be considered "well lived". We pragmatists, in advocating for the spreading of the values *we* champion - values that we think meliorate, resort to the unsatisfying tactic of stating Mill's example about Haydn and the oyster¹³⁰, we simply describe our experience - "this is what we do" - and then invite comparison.

We say that our (liberal) values are experientially grounded on "comparisons between societies which exemplify these habits and those which do not, leading up to the suggestion that nobody who has experienced both would prefer the latter"¹³¹. We insist that experience has shown us that with regards to pain, pleasure and humiliation, the consequences of some actions have been preferable, and the consequences of some not so- or if at all, for very few of us.

This is to say, that fewer children who are vaccinated die from childhood diseases than children who are not vaccinated; that those who eat usually live, and those who do not

¹³⁰ In this example, very well outlined by Roger Crisp in his book, *Mill on Utilitarianism (1997)*, one is offered the choice of living the life of Joseph Haydn- a wonderful composer, traveller, man of letters - basically someone who lived, in our conception, a rich and fulfilling life - but only for seventy seven years. Or one is offered the life of a lobster, consisting of "only mild sensual pleasure, rather like that experienced by humans when floating very drunk in a warm bath" - but for a million years. The idea is that most human beings would choose Haydn's lie over that of the lobsters, for having experienced the "higher pleasures" which Haydn experienced, and the "lower pleasures" which we suppose the lobster experiences, we could not but choose Haydn's life. So too, we pragmatists want to say that anyone who has lived in a society which promotes toleration and freedom of speech, and in a society which does not do so, will, if given the choice, choose the one that promotes these values.

¹³¹ Ibid 113, pg 356

eat usually die - and that life is a preferable consequence as compared to death. When faced with situations requiring action, the pragmatist grounds her conduct on an intelligent appraisal of these consequences, and chooses the course of action with the most preferable consequences for the broadest range of people, if she already knows what that is, or she seeks agreement on what this preferable consequence might be if she does not already know. This is both the basis for our notion of shared community which we seek to expand as widely as possible, as well as the framework for research regarding what we think meliorates

Making Space for Democracy

With this conception of anti-essentialism in mind, I now turn to the interaction of democracy and beneficence in pragmatist ethics in tackling that third R: Reform

A rejection of these sorts of essentialism leaves us pragmatists at a sort of halfway house in the kind of work the effective altruists are engaged in. On the one hand, we think that, as regards those things which experience and research has so far shown to be necessary for the continued existence of human beings and animals (we think existence is good) - based on their status as beings of particular biological kinds - we have good reason to desire these things, and we think beings similar to us in these biological facticities also have good reason to desire these things (and to shun the converse of these things).

This is the (circular) intertwining of the first two R's: We have created a notion of community based around these commonalities regarding pain, pleasure and humiliation, and from this notion of community, we have this shared understanding of common experience, of what results are preferable, to whom among us, and what results are not - this constitutes our "research".

So we think - when it comes to the third R - reform, as the effective altruists do, for example, that animals should not be subjected to pain and torture, and to all the other kinds of malaise that comes with such things as factory farming, and we work collectively to convince others about this, and to realize the consequences we hope for. We think that human beings should have access to things such as food and shelter and medical care, and we think think that they should have similar freedoms as those we have in our liberal community. On the basis, grounded from our other two R's - the notion of community deriving from intelligent understanding of and research on shared experience, we seek to realize these practical goals.

In our activity concerning reform, we extend our understanding of ourselves based on these biological facilities to others who share them too. And we think that based on these biological commonalities, these others also have reason to desire the things that we do, due to our shared possession of these facilities. But we do not hold that there is such a thing as an inherent moral obligation, one from outside, grounding our beliefs; such a thing as a one to one mapping between our beliefs and reality that demands things from us. We think, that if any meaningful action is to occur concerning these things, that we need to convince people to believe as we do about these things, and the only way to do so is not by asserting objectivity,

but by describing our position in the best ways possible; by giving reasons why we consider it good, and then providing the option that each of *us* might chose what strikes them as providing the best practicable consequences.

On the other hand, we recognize our ethnocentrism, such that even though we think we have good reason to deem some things good because of their consequences to us, we recognize that for various reasons - historical and cultural contingencies, for example, other people and other cultures might not value the things that we value, or to the same extents. We thus realize that we cannot impose anything. We understand that any engagements with these other people, in the hope of changing their minds - or ours - so as to produce the best preferable outcomes, is going to involve reason giving and receiving. We are open, as pragmatists interested in social melioration, and as skeptics, to be transformed by the reasoned conversations we have with others, just as much as we hope that they too retain some pliability within their convictions; a pliability which might enable potential transformation on their part.

The result of this is state of continued discussion mediated by democratic experience. We understand that even in the process of beneficence and reform, we cannot divorce what we think is important, from what others, most importantly those who are the targets of our beneficence, think is important.

Let us turn to “the fats”, as William James put it. How would this possibly look like in practice?

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Part of the challenge of my project here - which means it can never be as neat as a typical philosophical theory, is that trying to put forth a pragmatist theory (of anything) constitutes a paradox. Pragmatists are contextualists; they do not think it is possible to state an overarching theory of anything. Dewey says, “The standard of success for value judgements is developed internally to the practice at hand, relative to the people’s descriptions of their problems”¹³². Dewey thought that there was no way we could have standards of valuation that were external to context and practice, and that were unbound from learning gained through trial and error, and then extended to intelligent judgement.

But perhaps for a clearer understanding of exemplums of how I think pragmatist democracy, as a hazy school of thought, may instantiate Addam’s third R; may deal with the problems we currently face, it would be better to look at specific cases.

There were three main problems that I pointed out in the second section of this essay, three main things I thought were wrong with effective altruism. These were 1.) Effective Altruism’s reliance on “moral experts”, and therefore cultivation of moral imbeciles, 2.) Effective altruism’s lack of engagement with meaningful structural reform, and its heavy reliance on “the markets”, despite the well-documented role of the markets in causing deprivation, and 3.) What I called the “Bernard Williams critique”: the idea that Effective Altruism’s deep emphasis on maximization, a supposedly objective moral imperative that abstracts from our lives, presents a philosophy that simply asks too much from us, and leaves

¹³² Dewey, John. (1922). *Human Nature and Conduct*. Pg. 208.

us very vulnerable to that Nietzschean question: Is this solidarity real? And thus to a relativist rejection of any notion of moral progress.

Here, I will briefly explore how pragmatism deals with the first two of these very particular examples (I believe Bernard Williams said everything that was there to be said concerning the third critique, and that his position was not one that the pragmatists would disagree with).

On Moral Experts and Imbeciles

Deweyan Pragmatism's insistence on radical democracy as necessary for reform automatically precludes the notion of "moral experts", and all the pernicious consequences that come with them. Dewey's views on radical democracy were influenced, to a very large extent, by Charles Sanders Peirce . Declared the "founder" of pragmatism by William James, Peirce was a brilliant logician, mathematician and philosopher who was also, early on in his life, an undemocratic racist¹³³.

In one of the earliest pieces of writing to be considered "Pragmatist" philosophy,¹³⁴ Peirce laid out four methods he thought people came to ground their beliefs. The first one was the method of tenacity - whereby one, by repeating something to themselves, by saying it

¹³³ A funny anecdote: Peirce, influenced by his brilliant and racist father, Benjamin Peirce - perhaps the greatest American Mathematician of his generation, so rejected the equality of 'negroes' that he took the syllogism "All men have equal political rights, negroes are men, therefore negroes are equal in political rights to white people" to be indicative of a failure in traditional logic.

¹³⁴ Peirce, Charles Sanders. (1877). The Fixation of Belief. Popular Science Monthly, 12. Pg. 1-15.

until they themselves bought it, came to believe whatever it was they were saying. This was the essence of Lyndon Johnson's phrase "what convinces is conviction"¹³⁵. Peirce thought this method unsustainable, the "social impulse" was against it; for if we encountered other people who believed differently and just as strongly, then our confidence in our own beliefs would be shaken.

The second method was that of authority - where there was an authority that provided ideas about what to believe, and policed how people went about doing this; a chief means of upholding certain "theological and political" doctrines - the church, the king. While this method could be accompanied by immense cruelty (cue in the crusades, colonialism, etc) Peirce thought it was by far superior to the method of tenacity. Peirce, ever the elitist, believed that the method of authority was sufficient for most human beings, but insufficient for the more brilliant minds. It was also flawed, for no institution could hope to regulate opinions on everything.

The third method was the *a priori* method, most exemplified by "metaphysical philosophy", where systems of belief were adopted not in reference to "facts", but, as with my criticisms of effective altruism and broader teleological and deontological philosophy above, because "their fundamental propositions seemed 'agreeable to reason'". Peirce contended that this was the most intellectual method (of the three so far discussed), but its failing was that we had to resort to the metaphysicians view of what this unifying, overarching reason was, and even the metaphysicians themselves disagreed on this.

¹³⁵ See, Caro, Robert, A. (1990).. *The Years of Lyndon Johnson, Volume 2: Means of Ascent*. Pimlico
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Knowledge, by this conception, Peirce thought, became a matter of taste - that of the metaphysical authority. In his view, we were free to continue to believe in the supremacy of this uninvolved reason until we are awakened with “rough facts”.

Finally, Peirce laid out what he termed the Scientific method, one that constituted a matching of contingent fact and opinion - and a willingness to change opinion when confronted with negating facts - to adopt a new contingency so as to better deal with life. This method championed constant and conscious reflection and doubt, and a rejection of authority, tenacity or *apriorism*. It insisted that belief could not be permanently “fixated”, but that it was possible to engage intelligently with both our contingent beliefs concerning the world, and the brute facts that the world continued presenting to us, requiring us to substitute these beliefs for new ones when prompted to do so.

Dewey was not unconvinced by Peirce’s typology. But unlike Peirce and his misanthropy, Dewey refused to believe that the method of authority was sufficient for most of humanity. Dewey’s radical rejection of teleology led to a deep and abiding charity to, and respectful consideration of, the views of everyone who was potentially affected by an issue¹³⁶, a charity that sometimes seemed to verge on the naïve. Indeed, Dewey, together with Tolstoy

¹³⁶ Dewey’s book was part of a sustained conversation with the famous public intellectual Walter Lippmann (Credited with introducing the terms “Cold war” and “stereotype”). In his two books, *Public Opinion* (1922) and *The Phantom Public* (1925), Lippmann argued for a technocratic elite as best placed to serve the public interest. Lippmann recognized the stakes that “the public” held in political life, he simply argued that they (the public) lacked specialized knowledge, were too ill suited to exercise political power. Their desires were too uncoordinated and unthought out, and if let to reign free, would spell doom for society.

and Rousseau, is the most prominent modern thinker who respected the intelligence of the common man without irony.

In his 1927 work¹³⁷, Dewey presented his pragmatist conception of democracy as the most viable means of achieving a public interest. In his later work¹³⁸, Dewey expounded on this, construing democracy as a continuous project, a “way of life and an experience built on faith in human nature, faith in human beings, and faith in working with others”¹³⁹.

Dewey’s idea was not, as Walter Lippmann, his fiery interlocutor, feared: that an involvement of the public in public affairs would lead to a case where we had millions of points of views put across concerning the public good, many of them competing and conflicting, some of them downright mediocre, therefore leading to an inability to do anything. On the contrary, Dewey thought that, yes, these ideas ought to and would be put forward, but he did not believe that doing this would derail progress or action. If anything, he thought it would sharpen our ideas concerning what was contingently good, and produce better consequences. The town hall, as I mentioned at the beginning of this third section, was the hallmark of Deweyan democratic life, and the idea was that this was where public engagement occurred.

Public engagement leading to reform, for Dewey, involved primarily reason giving and reason asking. One person put forth their point of view, gave reasons as to why they

¹³⁷ Dewey, John. (1927). *The Public and its Problems*. Henry Holt.

¹³⁸ Dewey, John. (1939). *Creative Democracy: The Task Before Us*.

¹³⁹ Kadlec, Alison. (2007). *Dewey’s Critical Pragmatism*. Lexington Books. Pg. 125.

thought this point of view presented the best consequences for the public. The rest of us debated this, giving reasons - based on some form of research, as to why we thought it preferable or not; proposing alternate, sometimes contrary, points of view; and engaging in debates concerning these too. The search was for an agreement concerning a course of actionable reform regarding the issue at hand, and sometimes these agreements would not be easy to come by. When this happened, Dewey thought the process of deliberation even more necessary at such times.

In our increasingly globalized times, our task is to extend the concept of the town hall (i.e. community) to the interwebs, to blogs and online forums and books and radio and tv shows; to the decision-making chambers of global organizations, and to any ways that we have to communicate with each other; any ways that seeks to engage with pertinent issues concerning shared consequences that we suffer as a (global) public - think, climate change, threats from AI, disease, hunger, immigration etc.

Some, like Lippmann, seeing this democratic attempt at reform, would characterize it as the “invasion of the idiots”¹⁴⁰; they would view it as an exemplum of how, in democratizing forums of discourse, our public discourse deteriorates, and how due to this deterioration in discourse, practical action in the world is the worse for it. They would

¹⁴⁰ Quote from Umberto Eco. The quote in Full: “Social media gives legions of idiots the right to speak when they once only spoke at a bar after a glass of wine, without harming the community. Then they were quickly silenced, but now they have the same right to speak as a Nobel Prize Winner. It is the invasion of the idiots... The drama of the internet is that it has promoted the village idiot to the bearer of truth”. Quote lifted from *La Stampa Cultura. Umberto Eco: “Con i social parola a legioni di imbecilli”*. <https://www.lastampa.it/2015/06/10/cultura/eco-con-i-parola-a-legioni-di-imbecilli-XJrvezBN4XOoyo0h98EfiJ/pagina.html>

hearken back to Peirce's description of authority, demanding that we, the public, leave the important issues to the experts, who can discuss them dispassionately and expertly.

Dewey, on the other hand, would argue that what was wrong was not the democratization of discourse, but rather the fact that it was not conducted intelligently or with good faith; that it did not efficiently make use of Addams' other two R's i.e. that either its conception of community was warped - too parochial so as to not take into equal consideration others who were also affected by the consequences of some actions, or that it did not involve the giving and taking of validly held reasons, and sometimes if it did, that these reasons were held so blindly as to not be pliable to the views of others¹⁴¹.

For Dewey, hearkening back to Peirce's scientific method, even authority ("science", nobel laureates etc.) were to be held to the principle of reason giving and receiving. It was only with robust public engagement that any policy put forth, any idea suggested, that required the cooperation of the public to be implemented, could move forward.

Yet even within this public proliferation of ideas, Dewey did not think that all ideas had equal merit. He thought that we could intelligently evaluate the practical consequences of some of them, and provisionally reject them, and that we could provisionally adopt those

¹⁴¹ In fact Dewey thought that experts were much more at risk of such a scenario of unliability than the public was. *In Human Nature and Conduct*, Dewey wrote of how the various intersecting habits and impulses of various communities and individuals in democratic societies affected each other, meaning that if individuals and communities had any hope for survival, their views necessarily had to be pliable to reason (here's Darwin's influence again). For example, say I strongly believed a certain herb to be an appetite enhancer, and others within my community, based on experience, believed it to be poisonous. If I was not pliable to their reason-giving, and ended up consuming the herb and thus dieing, then that would be it for me. Experts on the other hand, while important, worked necessarily from abstraction, and as Peirce pointed out in the criticism of authority, they just could not regulate opinions, ways of practice and living in the messiness of real life.

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which promised preferable consequences. He only insisted, much like John Stuart Mill, that these ideas be put out there; he thought, along with Mill, that a democratic basket full of ideas presented the best chance for social reconstruction, for the more ideas we had, the greater the chance that we would have good ones among them. Good ideas, Dewey thought, were not the preserve of experts; we would not leave it to them.

What does this mean in the specific case of beneficence? It means, to begin with, as I have been arguing throughout, that under the pragmatist conception, we cannot have, from the outset, moral experts declare what is important due to some metric agreed upon by some authority, insist on its maximization, or its supremacy, and then impose it on others based on this supposed objectivity. It means that in our attempts at reform - Addams' third R, we have no choice but to hearken back to the other two R's - to create a notion of community due to shared experience based on the commonalities I outlined above, and to conduct research on this common experience, and what the preferred practicable consequences are for all members of that community.

This necessitates that we acknowledge the messiness of the world; that if we have ideas that we think are good and that we think merit attention, then our recourse is to convince others about the preferable consequences of these ideas giving reasons, and by realizing that those reasons might conflict with other validly held reasons. A (now global) society that engaged in this activity of reason giving and receiving without resorting to teleologies, Dewey thought, constituted a *public*, in the best sense of the word, and was best

suited to tackle any issues that faced it, avoiding the notions of moral experts - and subsequent moral imbeciles.

This meant that when we decided if and where to donate, it was not because it was objectively “better” to donate to AI research as opposed to cancer research due to some objective moral duty to maximize, but rather because we had intelligently engaged with the problems facing us, and decided (or not) to take a particular course of action. It meant that as long as our views were pliable to reason, we were bound to have our minds changed whenever we encountered it; that as long as we thought of those others as part of “us”, we were bound to engage with the problems affecting them, without asserting our own categorizations and rankings of those problems, nor an objective metaphysics to ground them.

This does not leave us at a neat place, with all the numbers crunched and the precise courses of action outlined; but it leaves us at an honest place. We pragmatists cannot say whether AI research is more important than Malaria research - we do not think such a ranking of such disparate things affecting different people in different ways is possible - for there is no teleology to ground them. But we think both are problems. The pragmatist view then is that of seeking solidarity to attempt to tackle both these problems intelligently. If deliberation comes up with the idea of which one of different causes requires the majority of our resources, that idea will be subject to potential change, and it will be grounded on our agreement as to what issues we deem most pertinent, and how to ensure that those members of our public affected by other issues, and who also have a say on this issue, are sufficiently

cared for. There is no eliminability here - no one issue being subsumed by another. So long as the issue affects our public, we seek to address it. But how to address it?

On Structural Reform

Much of the essence of John Dewey's pragmatist philosophy was concerned with the fact that he thought philosophy had become a discipline that did not engage with life; abstracted too much from the "questions of men", and instead dealt with the questions of philosophers - questions which were not of practical use to the values and social conditions of everyday life. Dewey set forth to reimagine philosophy; to reconstruct it as a "general theory of education" or as a "criticism of criticisms" - an activity that interdependent organisms participated in so as to intelligently engage with their environing conditions. This, to be done well, required democracy - "a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience"¹⁴²

In this process of engaging with public life so as to promote the ideals of democracy, Dewey wore many hats. He was the foremost educational reform advocate in the United States; America's leading public intellectual of the first half of the twentieth century; easily the most prominent Pragmatist - perhaps, as a school of thought, America's greatest (only?) original contribution to western philosophy; one of the most prominent psychologists - and founders of the field (and still one of the most cited); founder of many organizations, and member of many boards, which sought to engage with public life - for example, the

¹⁴² Democracy and Education, pg. 93

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organizations that later became the NAACP¹⁴³, and the ACLU; a prominent supporter of women's suffrage and the settlement house movement (led by Addams); President of the League for Industrial Democracy; Chairman of the Congress for Cultural Freedoms, just to name a few.

For the same reasons, Dewey was also actively involved in the plight of intellectuals and activists during his time. He edited a volume on the "Bertrand Russell Case"¹⁴⁴, and, at the influence of his student, Sidney Hook, was head of the eponymous Dewey Commission which cleared Leon Trotsky of the accusations against him made by Joseph Stalin¹⁴⁵. Dewey was a great admirer of Eugene V. Debs, sympathising with Debs' views on the Pullman Strikes¹⁴⁶, and, at a time when it was incredibly unfashionable, Dewey declared himself a democratic socialist¹⁴⁷, strongly advocating for Georgist proposals to tax land values so as to lessen economic inequalities¹⁴⁸. He was, for most of his adult life, viewed as "dangerously radical"¹⁴⁹

¹⁴³ National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

¹⁴⁴ Regarding the prominent British Philosopher, Lord Russell's denial of permission to teach, and demotion from position as Professor, at the City University of New York due to charges that Russell, in his works, propagated "indecent" i.e. was an atheist, and advocated for sex before marriage.

¹⁴⁵ The Case of Leon Trotsky: Reports of Hearings on the Charges Made Against Him in the Moscow Trials ... by the Preliminary Commission into the inquiry on the charges made against Trotsky in the Moscow Trials. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1937/dewey/index.htm>

¹⁴⁶ Encyclopedia Britannica: Pullman Strike. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Pullman-Strike>

¹⁴⁷ though he fervently refused to associate with the communists,

¹⁴⁸ See, Dewey, John (1927). "An Appreciation of Henry George". From An Introduction to "*Significant Paragraphs from Progress and Poverty*".

¹⁴⁹ See, Caspary, William R. (2000). Dewey on Democracy.

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Here Dewey, I argue, showed to a remarkable extent what an engaged public life, and one that was attuned to the works of systems, looked like. Dewey's core concern which marked all his work was, by nature, structural. Social life, he thought, could only be sustained when it was conceived of as an organism - and individuals as its constituent parts. If the well-being of one part was not taken care of, then the well-being of the organism was compromised; to ameliorate the individual part, we would have to ameliorate the organism, and vice versa.

He was thus at once concerned about publics coming together to solve problems that affected them collectively, hence his huge role as a public intellectual and as an involved actor in tackling social problems; as he was about what he considered "inchoate publics" - those publics lacking "the critical education, time, and attention necessary for inquiry" that presented "democracy with perhaps its most significant and undermining condition"¹⁵⁰ - those who, for various reasons, some of them market caused, could not participate in public "inquiry".

To tackle this, Dewey came up with conception of individualism that he believed was humanistic enough to address these broader structural issues.

To begin, Dewey conceived of individual freedom as "a distinctive way of feeling the impacts of the world, and of showing a preferential bias in response to these impacts"¹⁵¹. But

¹⁵⁰ Quote original from Dewey in *The Public and its Problems*, cited here from the entry on Dewey on the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/dewey/#PoliPhil>

¹⁵¹ Dewey, John. (1930). *Individualism Old and New*.

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this idea of freedom as making choice possible was social, for the very notion of individuality was borne upon, and shaped by, social conditions - there was no individual thriving that occurred without a social environing that made it possible. Consequently, to attempt to solve individual problems without tackling the social conditions that engendered them was a waste of time.

Dewey's politics reflected this. Especially in the 1930s, when the effects of the Great Depression ravaged America, Dewey insisted strongly that individuality -in the sense he construed it - could only be supported by a socialized economy. To this effect, he strongly fought for reforms that he believed advanced this conception: - the strengthening of workers' rights - especially as regards unionization; and the democratization of the workplace, both in terms of ownership structures and hierarchy. This, he thought, would provide room for those inchoate publics to become part of our deliberation and inquiry.

For all these desired ends, democracy was the means. Dewey could not help but see that there was politics to everything; in the family, in the school yard, and yes, in charity. If, therefore, charity - or anything really, was to address "the problems of men", it had to enable this concept of individual freedom that Dewey was so taken by¹⁵². To some extent, this

¹⁵² In this sense, the Deweyan conception of individual freedom is quite similar to the capabilities approach championed by Sen and Nussbaum. The differences, of course, are that Sen's and Nussbaum's conceptions do not attach as strongly an importance to the social environment as Dewey's, and, like Sen but unlike Nussbaum, Dewey refuses to provide a list of these freedoms or capabilities.

required historicizing; research on what the roots of certain social ills were¹⁵³, on the publics affected by said problems, on whether they were “inchoate” or not.

This was why Dewey was so captivated by Addams, whose three R’s perfectly typified this notion of structural reform. Residence (community) - from the outset, articulating the social nature of the problem; Research - democratic inquiry and deliberation into what factors engendered said problems, and into what ways to tackle it; and Reform - the communication and implementation of solutions that had been arrived at through a democratic process. This, Dewey believed, was the proper framework for approaching structural reform; for he thought that it got to the heart of his project: ameliorating the part and the whole.

¹⁵³ This was best typified by both William James and Dewey who, upon reading DuBois’ (who was James’ student at Harvard) *Souls of Black Folk*, understood the specificities of the case of the African American in America, and the necessity of historicism in understanding the practical consequences of issues such as systemic racism.

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CONCLUSION

“Philosophy leaves everything as it is”, Wittgenstein said, in his posthumously published *Investigations*¹⁵⁴. Wittgenstein’s book ushered in the Linguistic turn in philosophy (which Neopragmatists like Rorty greatly made use of), where the role of philosophy, done correctly, came to be viewed as descriptive rather than prescriptive - eliminating contingent misunderstanding by providing continuous attempts at clarity, rather than detailing norms about what was acceptable.

The latter task, Wittgenstein thought, was the work of science, art, religion, politics etc. In this framework, philosophy’s task was seen as, by its power to attempt to describe the ever changing vagaries of life, clearing the way for those other things to act in the world. “What we are destroying is nothing but houses of cards, and we are clearing up the ground of language on which they stood”¹⁵⁵.

In this sense, American Pragmatism is both philosophical and anti-philosophical. It is philosophical in so much as it coheres with Wittgenstein’s description of activity that *he* considered “philosophical” - that which clears space without offering non-contingent norms. It is anti-philosophical in so far as it flies in the face of what was, since Plato, considered proper philosophy - that activity that authoritatively prescribed norms, and ruled over life abstractly. The function of philosophies such as pragmatism is to provide therapy for those

¹⁵⁴ Wittgenstein, Ludwig. (1953). *Philosophical Investigations (Philosophische Untersuchungen)*. Pg. 124. Translated from the German by Elizabeth Anscombe. Wiley-Blackwell; 2009 Edition.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid*, Pg. 118.

other kinds of philosophies which make absolute claims about reality. The utilitarianism typified by Effective Altruism is “philosophical” in the second way (in the sense that pragmatism is anti-philosophical) - it offers absolute claims based on objectivity.

This project has been an attempt to look at these two kinds of philosophies (their epistemologies, really), and the sort of practical ethics that arise from them, particularly regarding meliorism. I have argued that the framework of orientation that undergirds pragmatism, by its skepticism and its attunement to context, tragedy, and contingency, provides much better grounds for social meliorism. And I have argued that the pernicious consequences that I see Effective Altruism as having, in terms of its promotion of moral heedlessness, its lack of attention to systemic reform, and its demandingness, are related to its status as the kind of objectivity-invoking philosophy which Wittgenstein was referring to.

Our task then, as I have constantly reiterated, is to start hearkening to that first question posed by Peirce - What are the practicable consequences of this? - rather than that one posed by Plato/ Socrates - What is this? Our beneficent actions, and our notions of moral progress, I strongly believe, will be better off for it.