

Carol J. Adams, Alice Crary, and Lori Gruen (eds.) *The Good it Promises, The Harm it Does: Critical Essays on Effective Altruism*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023), 280 pages. ISBN: 978-0-197-65569-6, 107.20€ (hbk.); 978-0-197-65570-2, 28.29€ (pbk.); 14.66€ (ebk.).

In this sharp, multi-voiced, and—above all—necessary book, the editors Carol J. Adams, Alice Crary, and Lori Gruen offer us a compendium of essays which boldly challenge and critique the arguments, philosophical assumptions, and actions promoted by the movement and school of thought dubbed “Effective Altruism” (EA), as well as its peripheral organizations. The title of the work, *The Good It Promises, the Harm It Does*, serves, in itself, as a statement of intent, something the editors seek to demonstrate through a heterogeneous collection of academic essays, personal experiences from various contributors, and insights from numerous activists with extensive experience in their respective fields. The unifying thread running through the work concerns the suffering experienced by non-human animals (hereafter ‘animals’) at the hands of humans, and how EA can cause harm—and inflict further damage—in their attempt to do the greatest good (p. 27).

The volume comprises seventeen chapters that can be thematically grouped into four broad blocks: the absence of historically silenced groups within society who are not present in the movement fosters a lack of reflection regarding injustices and issues of a structural nature; a critique of the philosophical stances to which the EA movement adheres; the negligence toward—and premeditated discrimination against—the work of animal sanctuaries, along with their marginalization; and, finally, an analysis of the strategies promoted within the food sector by EA. Indeed, all these issues are addressed to varying degrees throughout the different chapters; and while this grouping helps me establish a structure for this review, there is a overlap among the multiple themes mentioned here. Thus, this distinction is useful, but it could have been made differently. My main question is as follows: in what ways is Effective Altruism harmful and problematic regarding the situation of animals?

The first issue is that the EA movement lacks significant representation within its ranks from members of marginalized groups—i.e., racialized individuals or queer people; it fails to take into account existing social and community-based movements; and it is unable to identify the structures that shape injustices (chapters 1-6). As Sanders points out, the practice of evaluating an action as effective based on its return on investment is grounded in a white-centric view of activism that neglects other approaches and is discriminatory and racist in nature (pp. 1, 7). De Lima views this problem as related to how people within EA understand their fundamental concepts—for example, efficiency. The way EA understands and defines this term—far from being neutral and objective—is replete with ideology and follows Western thought as an idyllic chimera that seeks to quantify everything (p. 31). This issue entails a narrow view of how a particular action can be efficient in multiple possible ways, and imposes a specific mode of action. This imposition is what is known as a top-down approach (p. 11). Thus, following de Lima, this neutrality remains complicit in the very system that has caused the problems of animal exploitation, and reinforces the idea of a “Monoculture of the Activist Minds” (p. 23). To overcome animal exploitation, one cannot remain neutral regarding race; otherwise, one perpetuates injustices that have historically been used to exploit other animals, thereby rendering EA incapable of achieving its true objective. It is in this impossibility that, according to de Coriolis and colleagues, lies EA’s complicity in allying itself with large corporations—corporations that, instead of seeking real and profound change, reinforce the status quo (p. 49). In that sense, it is fair to say that the authors agree on the need to listen to existing groups and to pay attention to how injustices intertwine and influence one another (p. 83).

The second criticism that can be singled out as a major roadblock is the problem of adhering to utilitarianism as the ethical theory guiding the actions of EA (chapters 7-9, 15-17). Clough argues that utilitarian ethics—to which EA adheres—overly simplifies the analysis, the study of the problem and the response (p. 98). As such, quantification—and the attempt to measure everything using rational, scientific, and objective numerical values—is a flawed approach when seeking to evaluate the most

efficient way to donate money to help animals. This is because, on the one hand, evaluating social strategies is neither simple nor straightforward, given the multitude of different cases that exist. And, on the other hand, it implicitly entails specific ways of understanding concepts such as “good”, “greatest”, and “number” (p. 114). What, then, can be concluded if the philosophical basis upon which EA is grounded has so many problems (pp. 118–122)? Given the heterogeneity of the essays in this work, I believe there is room—once the problem has been diagnosed—to offer a range of remedies for the situation. This is what Adams, Sanbonmatsu, and Gruen do (in part); appealing, for instance, to feminist ethics of care, by deconstructing false dichotomies such as object-subject, reason-feeling, or quantity-quality, and by promoting approaches that value sensitivity and empathy toward those who face discrimination (as Lori Gruen defends in *Entangled Empathy: An Alternative Ethic for Our Relationships with Animals* (2015) or together with Alice Crary in *Animal Crisis: A New Critical Theory* (2022)). We can say that these remedies attempt to overcome the ignorance displayed by EA—according to various authors—and to promote activism based on care and sympathy.

A third criticism is the disdain for—and the act of discouraging people from—financially supporting animal sanctuaries, given that EA’s metrics, calculations, and charts advocate investing that money elsewhere (p. 192) (chapters 12–14). The case that perfectly illustrates this fact is the story recounted by Krista Hiddema regarding the pig Esther and the need to acquire a medical scanner to diagnose her, which cost \$650,000 and was funded through crowdfunding. Peter Singer—a staunch advocate and public face of EA—wrote that acquiring such a machine was not cost-effective and that the money could be better invested elsewhere, where it would have greater value and impact (pp. 176–181). But acquiring that machine had an impact not only on one individual—by making it possible to diagnose Esther—but also by enabling the diagnosis of other animals, saving their lives, and, at the same time, launching an entire campaign that stirred people’s emotions, an aspect that, as the authors of these chapters point out, seems to be overlooked by proponents of EA. Animal sanctuaries are not only a place where every animal is treated as a subject, but also “powerful vegan-makers” (p. 192).

The fourth and final critical block is the one concerning food-related aspects (chapters 10–11). Abrell and Simon argue that EA—by promoting investment in cultured meat research and focusing solely on alternative proteins—leaves unaddressed the other problems intertwined with animal exploitation. And not only that, the amount of money redirected—due to the advice of EA and its orbiting institutions—has created the illusion that such strategies are beneficial for progress; yet, they have failed to consider that, in doing so, they act as accomplices and participants in the profiteering of large multinationals responsible for a significant portion of animal exploitation, at least within the food sector (pp. 165–167).

As for the stylistic aspect of the work, given its nature of blending academic essays with personal experiences at animal sanctuaries and the expertise of specialists in the authors’ respective fields, I found reading the various chapters to be highly stimulating. While the topics addressed are difficult to digest—and, in some instances, I found myself angered by what was recounted and frustrated by the actions promoted by the EA—the editors’ work is excellent, allowing the chapters to instill in the reader a sense of motivation toward action. The impression left by reading *The Good It Promises, the Harm It Does* is that there is much work to be done to improve animal lives from new and better directions.

The work of Carol J. Adams, Alice Crary, and Lori Gruen, as editors, offers a panoramic, profound, and extensive overview of the multiple problems that exist within EA. From my perspective, the strong point of their work lies in the many nuances they have successfully brought together within a single collection—from authors ranging from anti-speciesist and anti-colonial activists to philosophers, critical theorists, or food experts—and in how these diverse viewpoints, despite their differing approaches, manage to reinforce one another and collectively offer a critique that is both solid and coherent. The fact of offering a compendium with so many heterogeneous backgrounds makes this work essential reading for anyone interested in understanding and delving deeper into the problems and

weaknesses inherent to EA. It serves as a good reminder that it is possible to do things in many different ways, that complex problems require the intervention of many different voices and perspectives, and that promises that sound overly ambitious and idyllic are often tainted, and can cause more harm than can be predicted beforehand.

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