

# Effective Animal Advocacy

Jeff Sebo  
New York University

## 1. Introduction

Imagine that you are a doctor, volunteering your time to save people in the aftermath of a natural disaster. There are many more people who need help than you have ability to help. How should you approach your work? Many people find it natural to say that you should triage. That is, you should try to do the most good possible with your limited resources. If you have to choose between treating two people, one of whom has a major injury and the other of whom has a minor injury, then you should prioritize the person with the major injury, all else being equal. Similarly, if you have to choose between treating two people, one of whom requires relatively few scarce resources and the other of whom requires relatively many scarce resources, then you should prioritize the person who requires relatively few scarce resources, all else being equal. Granted, it might seem callous to prioritize lives this way. But in a state of emergency, we naturally understand that triage is an expression of compassion, not callousness. If we want to save the most lives possible or relieve the most suffering possible, then we need to think carefully about how best to use our limited resources so that we can achieve this aim.

However, as MacAskill (2015), Singer (2015), and many others have noted, many people seem to forget this point when it comes to addressing other, more chronic problems.<sup>1</sup> For example, when we make choices about advocacy and philanthropy, many of us do what feels personally meaningful rather than think carefully about how to save the most lives possible or relieve the most suffering possible. Indeed, many of us spend more time researching which appliances to buy than which organizations to support with our time, energy, and other resources.

This is where effective altruism (EA) comes in. EA is the project of using evidence and reason to do the most good possible. For an effective altruist (also EA), the world is in a chronic state of emergency, with many more individuals who need help than we have the ability to help. So, we should triage: We should try to do the most good

---

<sup>1</sup> MacAskill (2015) motivates the idea of effective altruism with a similar example (pp. 29-32). This introduction, as well as much of the rest of this piece, is indebted to his work.

possible with our limited resources. If we have to choose between supporting two organizations, one of which would save or spare more lives than the other as a result of our support, then we should prioritize the organization that would save or spare more lives, all else being equal.

Effective animal advocacy (EAA), then, is EA in the context of animal advocacy. An effective animal advocate (also EAA) attempts to answer questions like: Can we do more good overall if we work on farmed animal advocacy or companion animal advocacy? Can we do more good overall if we take engage in moderate advocacy or radical advocacy? In each case, they attempt to use evidence and reason to answer these questions, and then they pursue the course of action that they estimate will do the most good overall.

This chapter will discuss how EAAs attempt to use evidence and reason to do the most good possible in animal advocacy, as well as conceptual, principled, and practical issues that this approach to animal advocacy faces. While I will mostly focus on summarizing these issues, I will also share my own views about them. In particular, I will claim that EAA sets the right goals for animal advocacy, but that its pursuit of these goals is still a work in progress. Thus, I will claim, if we want to do the most good possible in animal advocacy (as, I think, we should), then we should work to (a) improve our assessments of how we can do the most good possible and (b) supplement our use of these assessments with other, more indirect ways of doing the most good possible.

## 2. Conceptual issues

EAs use the following framework to decide which issues to prioritize. First, they think about the *scale* of an issue. If one issue involves more suffering or death than another issue, then it has higher priority for an EA, all else equal. Second, they think about the *neglectedness* of an issue. If one issue is more neglected than another, then it has higher priority for an EA, all else equal. Third, they think about the *tractability* of an issue. If one issue can be addressed more effectively or efficiently than another, then it has higher priority for an EA, all else equal. Finally, they think about *personal fit*. If one issue is a better match for your talents and interests than another, then it has higher priority for you as an EA, all else equal (though this consideration matters less than the other three).

What do EAs see as the most important issues to be working on right now, considering all these questions? For many EAs, the top priority is the category of *existential risk*, i.e., issues that risk greatly reducing the potential for flourishing in the world (Bostrom 2002). Examples include plagues, pandemics, biotechnology, nanotechnology,

nuclear technology, artificial intelligence, and totalitarianism (Bostrom and Cirkovic 2011). These issues are top priorities because, in each case, the harm at stake is massive (as well as potentially permanent), neglected, and tractable. Many EAs think that we should then prioritize global health and animal welfare, since, again, the harm at stake is massive (even if not potentially permanent), neglected, and tractable. Of course, many other issues are important too. However, many EAs see these as the most important issues to be working on in the present moment.<sup>2</sup>

What, then, do EAAs see as the most important issues to be working on right now in the context of animal advocacy, considering these questions? For many EAAs, the top priority is farmed animal welfare. To see why, compare farmed animal welfare with companion animal welfare and wild animal welfare, respectively.<sup>3</sup>

First, consider how farmed animal welfare compares with companion animal welfare. Farmed animal welfare ranks higher in scale, since many more farmed animals than companion animals suffer and die each year. Farmed animal welfare also ranks higher in neglectedness, since farmed animals receive less support than companion animals do. Finally, farmed animal welfare ranks higher in tractability, since it costs less time, energy, and money to prevent suffering or death for the average farmed animal than it does for the average companion animal. As a result, farmed animal advocacy ranks higher than companion animal advocacy in scale, neglectedness, and tractability. (We will consider objections to this analysis below.)

Now consider how farmed animal welfare compares with wild animal welfare. Wild animal welfare ranks higher in scale, since wild animals experience even more suffering and death than farmed animals do, as a result of hunger, thirst, illness, injury, and predation. Wild animal welfare also ranks higher in neglectedness, since wild animals receive even less support than farmed animals do.<sup>4</sup> However, wild animal welfare currently ranks much *lower* in tractability, since we currently have no reliable way to help wild animals at all. For many EAAs, the upshot is that we should focus mostly on farmed animals at present, while engaging in advocacy and research that lays the groundwork for helping wild animals in the future.<sup>5</sup> (We will consider objections to this analysis below as well.)

---

<sup>2</sup> For discussion of these cause areas from an effective altruist perspective, see the Open Philanthropy Project website: <https://www.openphilanthropy.org/focus>

<sup>3</sup> For discussion of these cause areas from an effective altruist perspective, see the Animal Charity Evaluators website: <https://animalcharityevaluators.org/advocacy-interventions/prioritizing-causes/#detailed>

<sup>4</sup> Note that I am not counting environmental conservation work as wild animal welfare work, since this work does not typically address the suffering of individual wild animals.

<sup>5</sup> For discussion of wild animal suffering, see Horta 2010, Sebo forthcoming, and Tomasik 2015.

What kinds of approaches do EAAs take to these issues? Consider farmed animal welfare. EAAs tend to take approaches such as consumer outreach, corporate outreach, and development of alternative food products such as plant-based meat. In contrast, they do not tend to take approaches such as rescue or sanctuary. Why the difference? Many EAAs think that when you take the former approaches, you are potentially helping more animals at once, and so you are potentially spending less time, energy, and money per animal. In contrast, they think that when you take the latter approaches, you are helping fewer animals at once, and so you are spending more time, energy, and money per animal. (We will consider objections to this analysis below as well.)

EAAs also aspire to take a pragmatic approach to this work. For example, when it comes to consumer outreach, many EAAs think that if we can help more animals by advocating for meat reduction than by advocating for meat elimination, then we should do so. When it comes to corporate outreach, many EAAs think that if we can help more animals by advocating for Meatless Mondays than by advocating for vegan menus, then we should do so. And, when it comes to development of alternative food products, many EAAs think that if we can help more animals by partnering with conventional food producers than by maintaining independence, then we should do so.<sup>6</sup> (We will once again consider objections to this analysis below.)

Over the past decade or so, a network of organizations has developed around the idea of EA in general and EAA in particular. With respect to EAA in particular, these organizations Animal Charity Evaluators (ACE), which is dedicated to finding and promoting the most effective ways to help animals. Among the organizations ACE recommends are Animal Equality, The Good Food Institute, The Humane League, the Albert Schweitzer Foundation, Compassion in World Farming, Faunalytics, L214, Otwarte Klatki, ProVeg International, The Nonhuman Rights Project, and Vegan Outreach. Some of these organizations are explicitly committed to EAA. Others are not, but they still do excellent work by EAA standards.

This is more or less the interpretation of EAA that many EAAs accept. However, this conception of EAA raises many conceptual questions. Consider two examples.

First, what is the relationship between EAA and different moral theories? Some people see a connection between EAA and utilitarianism, which holds that we morally ought to maximize well-being in the world. It makes sense that people would see this connection, since utilitarianism and EAA do share several core features. For

---

<sup>6</sup> For arguments in favor of these approaches, see Leenaert 2017. For arguments against, see Taft 2016.

example, they are both committed to *impartial benevolence*, i.e., to promoting well-being for all sentient beings. They are both committed to *aggregation*, i.e., to evaluating states of affairs in terms of how much well-being they contain. They are both committed to *maximization*, i.e., to producing the best possible state of affairs (though they might not agree on what counts as well-being and, thus, they might not agree on what counts as the best state of affairs). And more. In contrast, other moral theories reject some or all of these features. For example, Kantianism holds that we morally ought to treat others as ends independently of whether doing so produces the best possible outcome. Care theory holds that we morally ought to cultivate relationships of care independently of whether doing so produces the best possible outcome. Virtue theory holds that we morally ought to cultivate virtuous characters independently of whether doing so produces the best possible outcome. And so on.<sup>7</sup>

However, even if EAA has more in common with utilitarianism than with other moral theories, a non-utilitarian can take interest in EAA as well. There are at least two reasons for this. First, no matter what moral theory we accept, we might find that we have at least some reason to participate in EAA, within the moral limits set by this theory. After all, all moral theories hold that consequences are morally relevant, even if some moral theories hold that other factors are morally relevant too. For example, a Kantian, care theorist, or virtue theorist might think that we should, at least in part, promote a world in which everyone can treat each other as ends, be in relationships of care, or have virtuous characters. Moreover, even if these theories do not *require* us to pursue these goals, they might at least *permit* us to do so, within certain moral limits. Granted, each theory might require or permit the pursuit of different goals, might require more than the pursuit of these goals, and might prohibit some means of pursuing these goals. Still, insofar as they require or permit pursuit of particular goals, people who accept these theories can use an EAA framework to engage in informed, rational, effective, efficient pursuit of the goals required or permitted by this theory, within the limits set by this theory.

The second reason that it is possible for a non-utilitarian to take interest in EAA is that it is possible (and increasingly common) to interpret EAA in relatively general, theory-neutral terms, so that proponents of different moral theories can accept one and the same interpretation of EAA. For example, on a relatively general interpretation, EAA endorses the goal of *doing the most good possible in animal advocacy within certain moral limits*, but it does not endorse any particular conception of the good (such as pleasure theory or desire theory), nor

---

<sup>7</sup> For discussion of these moral theories, see Schlottmann and Sebo 2018, Chapter 3.

does it endorse the goal of doing the most good possible in animal advocacy *by any means necessary* (such as by violating the rights of human or nonhuman animals). This interpretation of EAA strikes a good balance between utilitarian and non-utilitarian values. It also coheres with how many people think about triage cases. For example, in a standard triage case, many people agree that one should attempt to do the most good possible without violating rights. But people do not agree about what it means to do the most good possible, nor do they agree about whether or not one should do the most good possible in ways that violate rights.<sup>8</sup>

So, which interpretation of EAA makes the most sense all things considered? This depends on how we answer a related conceptual question: What kind of role is EAA meant to play in our thinking about what to do? For example, is EAA meant to be a *moral theory* that tells us what makes right actions right in the context of animal advocacy? Is it meant to be a *project that we engage in as individuals*? Is it meant to be a *project that we engage in as a collective*? And so on. It can be tempting to think about EA in general, and about EAA in particular, in a way that combines all of these roles. Yet these roles are importantly different.

In particular, if EAA is a moral theory, then, as with any moral theory, we should evaluate it in terms of theoretical virtues such as simplicity, explanatory power, and prescriptive power. In this case, we would each select an interpretation of EAA that coheres with our moral theory of choice, such as a utilitarian EAA, Kantian EAA, care theoretic EAA, or virtue theoretic EAA. We would then debate which interpretation is correct by considering arguments from cases, arguments from thought experiments, and so on. This interpretation would probably be relatively specific, since a good moral theory will not leave important moral questions open.

In contrast, if EAA is an individual project, then, as with any individual project, we should evaluate it in terms of practical virtues such as: If I engage in this project, will that help me to do the things that I want to do in my life? In this case, we would each select an interpretation of EAA that can guide us in building and sustaining a life of effective animal advocacy, given everything that we know about ourselves as individual advocates. This interpretation would probably be more general than the previous one, owing to the need to accommodate our individual epistemic and practical limitations (as we will discuss below).

Finally, if EAA is a collective project, then, as with any collective project, we should evaluate it in terms of practical virtues such as: If we engage in this project together, will that help us to do the things that we want to do in

---

<sup>8</sup> Singer (1972) takes a similar approach by arguing that we have a moral obligation to prevent very bad things from happening if we can do so without sacrificing anything morally significant.

this movement? In this case, we would select an interpretation of EAA that can guide us in building and sustaining a movement of effective animal advocacy, given everything that we know about ourselves as a community. Once again, this interpretation would probably be more general than the previous one, owing to the need to accommodate not only our individual and shared limitations but also reasonable disagreement within our movement.

My own view, partly following Pummer and MacAskill (2019), is that EAA is best understood as a collective project, not as a moral theory or individual project. As a result, I think that we should accept a relatively general interpretation of EAA. In particular, I think that we should define EAA as the project of using evidence and reason to do the most good possible in animal advocacy, within certain moral limits. This interpretation strikes a good balance, since it creates a strong mission for the EAA movement, but it also allows the EAA movement to benefit from expanded membership, an expanded division of labor, and a healthy amount of epistemic humility. We can each then decide for ourselves, by considering our moral theory of choice (and our project of living a life that complies with that theory) to what degree and in what ways we should participate in this project.

### 3. Principled issues

The principled critiques that we will consider here are all based on the idea that EAA sets the wrong goals for animal advocacy. That is, they are all based on the idea that we are not morally permitted or required to try to do the most good possible in animal advocacy. Since many people interpret EAA in utilitarian terms, some of these critiques apply more to a utilitarian EAA than to other interpretations. Thus, as we will see, EAAs can reply to these critiques in at least three ways: They can accept that EAA has the relevant features and insist that these features are good. They can accept that these features are bad and deny that EAA has them. And, they can say that EAA is a project, not a moral theory, and so each of us can choose to participate in our own way.

Here, then, are four common principled issues that people have with EAA.

1. *We should not evaluate states of affairs in terms of aggregate well-being.* First, some critics take issue with the idea that we should evaluate states of affairs in terms of how much well-being they contain. In particular, if we evaluate states of affairs this way, then we will sometimes produce surprising results. For example, we might find that reducing farmed animal suffering or wild animal suffering by 1% is better than reducing companion animal suffering by 99%. After all, there are so many farmed animals and wild animals in the world that a minor reduction

in suffering per farmed animal or wild animal outweighs a major reduction in suffering per companion animal in the aggregate. Similarly, we might find that reducing insect suffering by 1% is better than reducing human suffering by 99%. After all, there are an estimated one billion insects for every human in the world. Thus, if we suppose that the average insect experiences one millionth the amount of well-being that the average human does at any given time (a conservative assumption in my view), it follows that the ratio of insect well-being to human well-being in the world at any given time is still about one thousand to one, in which case a 1% reduction of suffering per insect does, indeed, outweigh a 99% reduction of suffering per human in the aggregate. Yet one might find this kind of aggregation implausible. In particular, one might think that this kind of aggregation ignores the inherent moral value of individual human and nonhuman animals, as well as the inherent moral value of fairness, equality, and other such distributions of well-being in the world.<sup>9</sup>

2. *We should not harm the few for the sake of the many.* Second, some critics take issue with the idea that we should harm the few so that we can help the many. For example, suppose that we face a choice between promoting meat reduction and promoting meat elimination. If we stipulate that promoting meat reduction sometimes produces better outcomes overall, then we might think that the EAA framework implies that we should sometimes promote meat reduction, in spite of the fact that doing so will foreseeably harm some animals in the short term.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, suppose that we face a choice between using racism, sexism, and ableism in animal advocacy (for example, by making reductive and appropriative comparisons between human and nonhuman oppressions) and refusing to do so. If we stipulate that the former approach sometimes produces better outcomes overall, then we might think that the EAA framework implies that we should sometimes take the former approach, in spite of the fact that doing so will foreseeably harm some humans in the short term. Yet one might find these results implausible. In particular, one might think that we should never knowingly and willingly harm some individuals for the sake of helping others, even if we know for a fact that we would be doing the most good possible as a result.<sup>11</sup> (Note that we will later be questioning these assumptions about what does the most good possible.)

---

<sup>9</sup> For discussion of the ethics of aggregation, see Voorhoeve 2014 and Temkin 1996. For discussion of insect suffering, see Horta 2010, Sebo forthcoming, and Tomasik 2015.

<sup>10</sup> For discussion of reductarianism, see Kateman 2017.

<sup>11</sup> For discussion of racism in animal advocacy, see Harper 2010. For discussion of sexism in animal advocacy, see Gaarder 2011. For discussion of ableism in animal advocacy, see Taylor 2017.

3. *We do not need to neglect the few for the sake of the many.* Third, some critics take issue with the idea that we should neglect a small number of individuals if we can help a large number of individuals instead. For example, suppose that we face a choice between supporting supporting corporate outreach, on one hand, and supporting rescue and sanctuary, on the other hand. If we stipulate that supporting rescue and sanctuary sometimes produces worse outcomes overall, then we might think that the EAA framework implies that we should sometimes *not* support rescue or sanctuary, in spite of the fact that this activity would help many animals.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, suppose that we face a choice between multi-issue animal advocacy (i.e., animal advocacy that stands in solidarity with other movements) and single-issue animal advocacy (i.e., animal advocacy that does not). If we stipulate that a multi-issue approach sometimes produces worse outcomes overall, then we might think that an EAA framework implies that we should sometimes *not* take a multi-issue approach, in spite of the fact that this activity would help many humans. Yet one might find these results implausible too. In particular, one might think that we should feel free to support any good cause in our advocacy, even if we know for a fact that we would not be doing the most good possible.<sup>13</sup> (Note that, as above, we will later be questioning these assumptions about what does the most good possible.)

4. *We do not need to demand so much from ourselves.* Fourth, and relatedly, some critics take issue with EAA because they see it as too demanding, physically as well as psychologically. First, they see EAA as too *physically* demanding because, as we have seen, if our aim is to do the most good possible, then we need to apply this framework to every aspect of our lives. We need to apply it to what major we select in college, what job we accept after college, how we spend our nights and weekends, and so on. Moreover, while we might hope that living a happy life will allow us to produce better outcomes than living an unhappy life will, we also need to be prepared to sacrifice our own well-being for the sake of others if doing so is necessary, at least to a degree. Second, critics see EAA as too *psychologically* demanding because, as we have seen, if our aim is to do the most good possible, then what we should do depends on the product of a complicated calculation. We have to ask: Which action, of every action available to me, will do the most good possible from now until the end of time? This question is difficult if not impossible to answer with confidence. Thus, it is difficult if not impossible to know which of our actions, if any at all, are right and wrong according to an EAA framework.<sup>14</sup> Yet one might find these results implausible too. In

---

<sup>12</sup> For discussion of the moral and political value of sanctuaries, see Donaldson and Kymlicka 2015.

<sup>13</sup> For discussion of the ethics of multi-issue advocacy, see Sebo 2018.

<sup>14</sup> For discussion, see Kagan 1991, Lenman 2005, Railton 1984, and Scheffler 1982.

particular, one might think that there is a limit to how much we should demand from ourselves, physically and psychologically. We should be able to be happy in life, and we should be able to know which of our actions, if any, are right and wrong.<sup>15</sup>

With respect to all four of these principled critiques, an EAA has at least three replies available, which are complementary. The first reply available to an EAA is to accept that EAA has (some of) these features, and insist that these features are good. Granted, it might initially seem implausible that we should, say, sacrifice ourselves or others for the greater good. But, first, we might not have to make these sacrifices as often as we fear (for reasons that we will explore in the next section). Second, insofar as we do have to make these sacrifices, this implication might seem more plausible once we remind ourselves that everyday life is an emergency situation that requires triage. Third, every framework for deciding what to do will have at least some implausible implications. This is especially true in the modern world, since this world is much different – with people much more connected across space and time – than the world that our ancestors lived in thousands of years ago, when our current moral intuitions evolved. The point of practical ethics, then, is to consider the pros and cons of every framework holistically, so that we can select the framework that makes the most sense in our current context, given the problems that we now face.

The second reply available to an EAA is to accept that (some of) these features are bad, and insist that EAA does not have these features. For example, we can say that EAA is committed to aggregation only above a certain threshold of well-being. If we do, this would allow EAA to avoid certain seemingly implausible results, for example concerning insect well-being. (I personally think that we should accept full aggregation, but this reply is available to people who disagree.) We can say that EAA is committed to doing the most good possible without violating rights. If we do, this would allow for moral limits within EAA. (I think this is a good idea.) And, we can say that EAA is committed to any impartially benevolent conception of the good. If we do, this would allow for moral freedom within EAA. (I think this is a good idea too.) Insofar as we interpret EAA in these ways, EAA would not fully face the principled critiques that we have considered in this section. However, it might then face other principled critiques, such as the critique that it privileges some individuals over others and allows a great deal of preventable suffering and death in the world.

---

<sup>15</sup> For discussion of what life is like for people who try to live altruistically, see MacFarquhar 2016.

The third reply available to an EAA is to say, as discussed above, that EAA is a project, not a moral theory. Thus, as discussed above, we should evaluate EAA not by considering whether this framework is, say, simple and powerful, but rather by considering whether framework will help us build and sustain an effective animal advocacy movement. We can each then decide for ourselves to what degree and in what ways we should participate in this project. So, for example, if we think that EAA is a good project, with the exception that it involves too much aggregation, too much moral sacrifice, or too little moral freedom for us, then we can always proceed accordingly. For example, we can decide to spend 10% of our discretionary time, energy, and money participating in EAA, and we can then decide to spend the rest of our discretionary time, energy, and money on other morally permissible activities. Moreover, insofar as we participate in EAA, we do not have to decide between EAA values and our own values, since we can focus on the work that fits with both. From this perspective, even if EAA is a demanding project, a life that involves participating in EAA does not need to be similarly demanding.

My own view is that a combination of these three replies is best. As I said in the previous section, I think that we should interpret EAA as the collective project of using evidence and reason to do the most good possible in animal advocacy, within certain moral limits. On this interpretation, we should accept that EAA involves aggregation, maximization, and impartial benevolence, and we should insist that these features are good. However, we should also accept that EAA is not identical to utilitarianism, since EAA does not require us to accept any particular conception of the good, nor does it permit us to do the most good possible by any means necessary. Finally, we should say that, since EAA is a project rather than a moral theory, we can all decide for ourselves to what degree and in what ways we should participate. I think that these replies, considered holistically, are compelling. They describe a project in animal advocacy with appropriately high standards, while also describing a project that many different animal advocates can identify with and participate in.

#### 4. Practical issues

Whereas principled critiques of EAA attempt to show that EAA sets the wrong goals for animal advocacy, practical critiques attempt to show that EAA is not achieving its own goals. In particular, these critiques are all based on the idea that our current assessments of what will do the most good possible are not fully accurate. Thus, if we want to do the most good possible in animal advocacy (as, I think, we should), then we should work to (a) improve our

assessments of how we can do the most good possible and (b) supplement our use of these assessments with other, more indirect ways of doing the most good possible.

In particular, consider four respects in which one might worry that EAA thinking (i.e., using evidence and reason to assess what will do the most good possible, with the intention of acting accordingly) is not always the best way to achieve EAA aims (i.e., doing the most good possible).

*1. Evaluating states of affairs in terms of aggregate well-being is not always optimal.* First, EAA thinking could lead to a focus on aggregate well-being rather than on rights or justice. Yet, one might worry, this focus on aggregate well-being can be self-defeating in some cases in practice, since it might be that promoting rights or justice in the short term is necessary for promoting aggregate well-being in the long run. This could be true for many reasons. For example, it might be that if people see animals as mere “receptacles of utility” rather than as individuals who merit rights and justice, then people will be less likely to promote particular kinds of social, legal, and political changes for animals (e.g., they will be less likely to support moral personhood, legal personhood, and political membership for animals). And it might be that if we want to maximize aggregate well-being in the long run, then we should promote these kinds of social, legal, and political changes in the short term. This kind of reasoning, if correct, would support placing moral limits on aggregation in some contexts.<sup>16</sup>

*2. Harming the few for the sake of the many is not always optimal.* Second, EAA thinking could lead to a willingness to harm the few for the sake of helping the many all else equal. Yet, one might worry, this kind of moral math can be self-defeating in some cases in practice, since it might be that refusing to harm the few in the short term is a necessary means to helping the many in the long run. This might be true for many reasons. For example, it might be that if we often harm some animals to help other animals (e.g., by promoting meat reduction instead of meat elimination), then we will undermine efforts to promote rights or justice for animals, and, as a result, we will limit our ability to maximize aggregate well-being in the long run. Similarly, it might be that if we often harm humans to help nonhumans (e.g., by promoting animal rights in racist, sexist, or ableist ways), then we will undermine efforts to promote rights and justice for all (as well as to build coalitions across movements), and, as a result, we will limit our ability to maximize aggregate well-being in the long run. This kind of reasoning, if correct, would support placing moral limits on animal advocacy in some contexts.

---

<sup>16</sup> For discussion of a related conception of animal dignity, see Gruen 2014.

3. *Neglecting the few for the sake of the many is not always optimal.* Third, EAA thinking could lead to a willingness to neglect the few for the sake of helping the many all else equal. Yet, one might worry, this kind of moral math can be self-defeating in some cases in practice, since it might be that helping the few in the short term is a necessary means to helping the many in the long run. This might be true for many reasons as well. For example, it might be that if we never provide support for individual animals (e.g., if we never support rescue or sanctuary), then we will undermine efforts to show humans a different, more equitable kind of relationship with nonhumans, and, as a result, we might limit our ability to maximize aggregate well-being in the long run. Similarly, it might be that if we never provide support for humans (e.g., if we never stand in solidarity with other social movements), then, as before, we will undermine efforts to promote rights and justice for all (as well as to build coalitions across movements), and, as a result, we might limit our ability to maximize aggregate well-being in the long run. This kind of reasoning, if correct, would support embracing moral freedom within animal advocacy in some contexts.

4. *Demanding so much from ourselves is not always optimal.* Finally, EAA thinking can be extremely physically and psychologically demanding. Thus, one might worry, this kind of approach to animal advocacy might be self-defeating in some cases in practice, since it might be that spending at least some time, energy, and money on other activities is necessary for doing the most good possible in the long run. After all, we all have limited psychological resources, and so we will not always be able to assess what will do the most good possible and act accordingly – and if we try, we might make bad assessments. Moreover, we also have limited physical resources, and so we will not always be willing to assess what will do the most good possible and act accordingly – and if we try, we might burn out. This kind of reasoning, if correct, would support relaxing certain kinds of demands on animal advocacy (and life more generally). It would also support investing in self-care and community care as part of EAA, in spite of the fact that the benefits of such work can be difficult to measure.<sup>17</sup>

As discussed in the previous section, even if we accept these points in some cases, we might not accept them in all cases. That is, we might think that there are many cases where EAA thinking is optimal (and so we should attempt to do the most good possible directly) as well as many cases where EAA thinking is suboptimal (and so we should attempt to do the most good possible indirectly, by pursuing other goals directly instead). If so, then the challenge is to learn how to strike a virtuous balance in practice. We will return to this point in a moment.

---

<sup>17</sup> For discussion of self-care and community care in activism, see Jones 2007.

Why might one worry that EAA thinking will produce these kinds of suboptimal outcomes? There are at least two related reasons. First, there is arguably a risk of methodological bias in EAA thinking. In particular, if your aim is to use evidence and reason to do the most good possible, there is a risk that you will engage in cost-benefit analysis more often than you should (i.e. that you will use this decision procedure when other decision procedures would be better). And, insofar as you use cost-benefit analysis more often than you should, there is also a risk that you will develop a bias in favor of interventions whose benefits are relatively easy to measure or quantify and/or whose costs are relatively hard to measure or quantify, and against interventions whose benefits are relatively hard to measure or quantify and/or whose costs are relatively easy to measure or quantify.

Second, there is arguably a risk of standpoint bias in the current EAA movement. In particular, the current EAA movement has a relatively high percentage of utilitarians and other consequentialists. It also exists at the intersection of the effective altruism and animal advocacy movements, both of which have a reputation (partly earned, partly not) of consisting of wealthy white people. Moreover, the EAA movement functions as a social community too. This has many benefits, since altruism is easier when done in community with others. However, it also has risks, since it can create a social barrier between the EAA movement / community and other movements / communities. This, in turn, can make it hard for the EAA movement / community to expand its membership, as well as for it to collaborate and communicate effectively with other movements / communities.

The worry, then, is that these methodological and demographic issues might conspire to create a risk of bias in favor of, for example, working within current systems to bring about moderate reforms. And, at least to a degree, the EAA movement does seem to have this priority. However, we need to be careful here. First, even if this priority makes sense in light of bias, that does not mean that it is a product of bias. Second, even if it is a product of bias, that does not mean that it is incorrect. Third, other movements and communities are susceptible to bias as well, so it is not as though risk of bias is unique to EAA. Fourth, one virtue of EAA is a commitment to taking seriously the effects that biases and heuristics can have on our thinking about what to do. So insofar as EAAs detect a risk of bias, they will be motivated to try to mitigate that risk.

Supposing, then, that the risk of methodological bias and standpoint bias are real (as I think they are), what can EAAs do to preserve the benefits of this framework while mitigating the risks? Here are two complementary steps that they can take, both of which many are already taking.<sup>18</sup>

First, EAAs can work to *improve* their use of EAA thinking. They can strike a balance between quantitative and qualitative assessments, as well as between assessments of individual interventions and of sets of interventions. For example, they can study the history of social movements to see what sets of interventions tend to work well and what sets of interventions tend to work badly. Then, with respect to the sets of interventions that seem to be effective for other movements, they can then study the degree to which the animal protection movement is relatively similar, and the degree to which the animal protection movement is taking a relatively similar approach. Of course, this will not eliminate the risk of bias. But insofar as EAAs strike a virtuous balance between quantitative and qualitative reasoning and between individualistic and holistic reasoning, it will at least reduce this risk of bias.

Second, and relatedly, EAAs can work to *supplement* their use of EAA thinking. They can strike a balance between cost-benefit analysis and other decision procedures in everyday life. In particular, insofar as we have reason to think that engaging in cost-benefit analysis will be useful, we should use this decision procedure. Insofar as we do not, we should use other decision procedures. For example, Kantian thinking can help us to establish valuable rules to follow. Care theoretic thinking can help us to cultivate valuable relationships within and outside the movement. Virtue theoretic thinking can help us to cultivate valuable character traits. EAAs may or may not think that these moral theories are correct. But even if they do not, they can still benefit epistemically and practically from using these theories as practical guides in certain cases.

As part of these efforts, EAAs work to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion within the movement and links across movements. This can take the form of pursuing unity (working with people in other movements), solidarity (helping / not harming people in other movements), and mutual understanding (sharing information and arguments with people in other movements). This will allow EAAs to expand the demographics of the movement and build coalitions with other movements – all of which will benefit the EAA movement epistemically (by allowing it to incorporate a wider range of perspectives) and practically (by allowing it to incorporate a wider range

---

<sup>18</sup> The remainder of this section draws from, and overlaps with, the suggestions made in Sebo and Singer 2018.

of skills).<sup>19</sup> This, in turn, can help mitigate the risk of methodological bias and standpoint bias, since other methodologies and standpoints will start to become more prevalent within the movement.

Fortunately, many EAAs are working to improve and supplement their application of direct utilitarian reasoning in exactly these ways. For example, Animal Charity Evaluators, Faunalytics, Sentience Institute, and other such nonprofit organizations are conducting and promoting quantitative as well as qualitative research about particular interventions as well as sets of interventions. This includes research about farmed animal advocacy and wild animal advocacy, confrontation and conciliation, institutional change and individual change, and more. Moreover, organizations such as Encompass are working to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion within the EAA movement, such that it can retain its focus on impartially benevolent farmed animal advocacy while expanding and diversifying the range of people who hold positions of power within the movement.

Of course, there are risks involved with some of this work. For example, insofar as EAAs promote non-utilitarian decision procedures and promote viewpoint diversity within the movement, they will likely invite disagreement into the movement about what to do and how to do it. People will disagree more about facts (e.g. what kind of political system would do the most good) as well as about values (e.g. whether we should be trying to do the most good). And while disagreement can have benefits (e.g., it can help everyone learn), it can also have risks. For example, it can result in conflict. It can result in value drift, i.e., in the EAA movement deviating from its current mission. It can also result in fragmentation, i.e., in the EAA movement fragmenting into multiple movements with multiple missions. It can even result in dissolution, i.e., in the EAA movement dissolving entirely.

How should we assess these risks and benefits? Especially given the possibility of bias, we should proceed carefully. On one hand, conflict, value drift, fragmentation, or dissolution would clearly have bad effects. On the other hand, they might not happen, and even if they did happen, they could also have good effects. Conflict could lead to necessary epistemic and practical change. Value drift could lead to a mission that preserves the current strengths of EAA while overcoming the current limitations. Fragmentation could lead to multiple movements that accomplish more collectively than a single movement could individually. Dissolution could lead current EAAs to do similar work in the context of animal advocacy in general, whether or not this work is still labeled as EAA.

---

<sup>19</sup> For discussion of the epistemic benefits of diversity, see Kitcher 1990 and Strevens 2003.

I will not try to reach an overall assessment of these risks and benefits here. Instead, I will simply express my own general hope for the future of EAA. In my view, the ideal EAA movement would resemble the current EAA movement in many ways, e.g., it would aim to do the most good possible in animal advocacy, within certain moral limits, and it would use cost-benefit analysis to pursue these ideals whenever possible. However, it would also improve and supplement cost-benefit analysis in the ways discussed above, so that the EAA movement can expand and diversify, can communicate and collaborate more effectively with other movements, and can allow for creativity, improvisation, and toleration of difference.

What kind of balance the EAA movement should strike at any given point is, in part, a function of how influential it is within the broader animal advocacy movement at that point. 10 years ago, EAAs had relatively little influence. Thus, it makes sense that they spent most of their time, energy, and money on approaches that seemed most likely to be effective, to complement the work that other people were doing. However, at present, EAAs influence an estimated 25% of donations in animal advocacy (Edgerton 2019). Thus, it makes sense that they would now strike more of a balance between (a) supporting approaches that seem most likely to be effective (insofar as EAAs are still complementing work that other people are doing) and (b) supporting the development of a broad, pluralistic animal advocacy movement that involves different people taking different approaches (insofar as EAAs are now influencing the shape of the movement as a whole). My hope is that as the EAA movement develops, we can continue to ask what kind of balance between direct and indirect approaches is best and proceed accordingly.

## 5. Conclusion

EAA is the project of using evidence and reason to do the most good possible in animal advocacy. As I have claimed in this chapter, I think that this is the correct goal for animal advocates to pursue. However, I also think that we should build certain moral limits and freedoms into our pursuit of this goal. Moreover, I think that, if we want to pursue this goal effectively, then we should work to (a) improve our assessments of how we can do the most good possible and (b) supplement our use of these assessments with other, more indirect ways of doing the most good possible. Among other things, this means supporting the development of a broad, pluralistic animal advocacy movement that includes many different people taking many different approaches.

## Acknowledgements

Thanks to Aaron Call, Leah Edgerton, Bob Fischer, and Tyler John for helpful feedback and discussion.

## References

- Bostrom, Nick, 2002. "Existential risks," *Journal of Evolution and Technology* 9:1.
- Bostrom, Nick and Milan Cikovic, eds., 2011, *Global Catastrophic Risks* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Donaldson, Sue and Will Kymlicka, 2015. "Farmed animal sanctuaries: the heart of the movement?" *Politics and Animals* 1: 50-74.
- Edgerton, Leah, "Strategic considerations for the future of effective animal advocacy," 2019 EA Global, San Francisco
- Gaarder, Emily. 2011. *Women and the Animal Rights Movement* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press).
- Gruen, Lori. 2014. "Dignity, captivity, and an ethics of sight." in Lori Gruen, ed., *The Ethics of Captivity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press): 231-247.
- Hare. R. M. 1982. *Moral thinking: its levels, methods and point* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Horta, Oscar, 2010. "Debunking the idyllic view of natural processes: population dynamics and suffering in the wild," *Télos* 17, 73-88.
- Harper, Breeze (ed.), 2010, *Sistah Vegan: Black Female Vegans Speak on Food, Identity, Health, and Society* (New York: Lantern Books).
- jones, pattrice. 2007. *Aftershock: confronting trauma in a violent world* (New York: Lantern Books).
- Kagan, Shelly. 1991, *The Limits of Morality* (Oxford: Clarendon Press).
- Kateman, Brian (ed.), 2017, *The Reductarian Solution* (New York: TarcherPerigee).
- Kitcher, Philip, 1990, "The division of cognitive labor," *Journal of Philosophy* 87: 5-22.
- Leenaert, Tobias, 2017, *How to create a vegan world: A pragmatic approach* (New York: Lantern Books).
- Lenman, James. 2005. "Consequentialism and Cluelessness," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 29:4: 342-370.
- MacAskill, William, 2015, *Doing good better: How effective altruism can help you make a difference* (New York: Gotham Books).

MacFarquhar, Larissa. 2016. *Strangers drowning: impossible idealism, drastic choices, and the urge to help* (New York: Penguin).

Midgley, Mary. 1998. *Animals and why they matter* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press).

Mill, John Stuart. 2008. *On liberty and other writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

----- 2004. *Utilitarianism and other essays* (London: Penguin).

Parfit, Derek, 1986, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Pummer, Theron and William MacAskill. 2019. "Effective Altruism," in Hugh LaFollette (ed), *International Encyclopedia of Ethics*.

Railton, Peter, 1984, "Alienation, consequentialism, and the demands of morality," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 13:2: 134-71.

Reese, Jacy, 2018, *The End of Animal Farming* (Boston: Beacon Press).

Samuel Scheffler, 1982, *The Rejection of Consequentialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Schlottmann, Christopher and Jeff Sebo, 2018, *Food, Animals, and the Environment: An ethical approach* (New York: Routledge).

Sebo, Jeff and L.A. Paul, forthcoming, "Effective Altruism and Transformative Experience," in Hilary Greaves and Theron Pummer, eds., *Philosophy and Effective Altruism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Sebo, Jeff and Peter Singer, 2018, "Activism," in Lori Gruen, ed., *Critical Terms for Animal Studies* (Chicago: Chicago University Press).

Sebo, Jeff, 2018, "Multi-issue food activism," in Anne Barnhill, Tyler Doggett, and Mark Budolfson, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Food Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Sebo, Jeff, forthcoming, "Animals and climate change," in Mark Budolfson, Tristram McPherson, and David Plunkett (eds.), *Philosophy and Climate Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Sentience Institute, 2018, "Summary of Evidence for Foundational Questions in Effective Animal Advocacy": <https://www.sentienceinstitute.org/foundational-questions-summaries>

Sidgwick, Henry, 1981, *The Methods of Ethics* (Indianapolis: Hackett).

Singer, Peter. 1972. "Famine, affluence, and morality." *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1:1: 229-243

Singer, Peter, 2015. *The most good you can do: how effective altruism is changing ideas about living ethically* (Yale: Yale University Press).

- Strevens, Michael, 2003. "The role of the priority rule in science," *Journal of Philosophy*, 100:2: 55-79.
- Taft, Casey, 2016, *Motivational methods for vegan advocacy: A clinical psychology perspective* (Danvers: Vegan Publishers).
- Taylor, Sunaura. 2017. *Beasts of Burden: Animal and Disability Liberation* (New York: New Press).
- Temkin, Larry, 1996. "A continuum argument for intransitivity." *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 25:3: 175-210.
- Tomasik, Brian, 2015. "The importance of wild animal suffering," *Relations* 3:2: 133-52.
- Vinding, Magnus, 2018, *Effective altruism: How can we best help others?* (The Neuroethics Foundation).
- Voorhoeve, Alex, 2014, "How should we aggregate competing claims?" *Ethics* 125:1: 64-87.