

# Effective Altruism, Global Justice, and Individual Obligations

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## ABSTRACT

*On at least most accounts of what global justice requires, those living in severe poverty around the world are unjustly disadvantaged. Remedying this unjust disadvantage requires (perhaps among other things) that resources currently possessed by well-off people are deployed in ways that will improve the lives of the poor. In this article, I argue that, contrary to the claims of some critics, well-off individuals' effective altruist giving is at least among the appropriate responses to global injustice. In addition, I suggest that effective altruist giving will often be among the best ways for such people to satisfy obligations that they have in virtue of being beneficiaries of global injustice. The argument that I offer for this conclusion has at least two important implications: first, critics of effective altruism who claim that it is incompatible with taking global injustice sufficiently seriously are mistaken; and second, effective altruists have reason to reject the non-normative accounts of the movement's core commitments that have been advocated by some prominent proponents.*

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## INTRODUCTION

We live in an unjust world. This is surely among the most uncontroversial claims that one can make as a moral and political philosopher. And it is, at most, only slightly more controversial to claim that at least nearly all of those living in severe poverty around the world are unjustly disadvantaged.<sup>1</sup>

Cosmopolitan theories,<sup>2</sup> which deny the fundamental normative significance of national borders, will imply that severe poverty is unjust so long as they include any of the familiar distributive principles (e.g. a basic needs or other sufficientarian requirement,<sup>3</sup> John Rawls's difference principle<sup>4</sup> or an alternative prioritarian principle,<sup>5</sup> or an egalitarian principle<sup>6</sup>). Anti-cosmopolitan views, such as "statist" views, according to which the requirements of justice are more extensive within the borders of a state than across state borders, typically include at least a basic needs or somewhat more extensive sufficientarian requirement that applies globally, and implies that those living in severe poverty are unjustly disadvantaged.<sup>7</sup> According to some, even those whose views are, in principle, broadly statist should accept that contingent features of our globalized economic system make it the case that there are quite extensive requirements of justice that apply globally (of particular importance are the ways in which wealthy states have exercised, and continue to exercise, power within international institutions

1. Some would deny that the small number of people living in genuinely isolated societies that do not have, and have never had, any significant economic or other interaction with the broader world are unjustly disadvantaged, even if they are quite badly off. *See, e.g., North Sentinel Island - Home of the Last Known Isolated Tribe, The Sentinelese*, <https://northsentinelisland.com> [<https://perma.cc/HB53-9YAZ>] (last visited Feb. 2023) (describing the inhabitants of North Sentinel Island).

2. *See, e.g.,* CHARLES R. BEITZ, *POLITICAL THEORY AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS* (1979); KOK-CHOR TAN, *JUSTICE WITHOUT BORDERS: COSMOPOLITANISM, NATIONALISM, AND PATRIOTISM* (2004); SIMON CANEY, *JUSTICE BEYOND BORDERS: A GLOBAL POLITICAL THEORY* (2005); GILLIAN BROCK, *GLOBAL JUSTICE: A COSMOPOLITAN ACCOUNT* (2009).

3. *See, e.g.,* Harry Frankfurt, *Equality as a Moral Ideal*, 98 *ETHICS* 21 (1987).

4. *See generally* JOHN RAWLS, *A THEORY OF JUSTICE* (1999).

5. *See, e.g.,* Derek Parfit, *Equality or Priority*, in *THE IDEAL OF EQUALITY* 81–125 (Matthew Clayton & Andrew Williams eds., 2002).

6. *See, e.g.,* G.A. COHEN, *RESCUING JUSTICE AND EQUALITY* (2008). A strict luck-egalitarian view, according to which inequalities are at least permitted when they are the result of option luck, may imply that severe poverty is not unjust when those enduring it have made choices that justify treating them as responsible for their circumstances. This, however, would plausibly have quite limited implications with respect to the (in)justice of any severe poverty in the actual world, which is at least mostly the result of brute rather than option luck.

7. Rawls's view, for example, is that all states are entitled to the resources that are necessary to become "well-ordered." *See* JOHN RAWLS, *THE LAW OF PEOPLES* 4 (1999). And states, in turn, are subject to requirements of domestic justice that imply that severe poverty is unjust. *Cf.* Thomas Nagel, *The Problem of Global Justice*, 33 *PHIL. & PUB. AFFS.* 113 (2005). Statists sometimes reserve the concept of justice for the distributive requirements that apply within the borders of a state, and describe the obligations that apply across borders as, for example, humanitarian duties. For my purposes in this article, nothing of substance depends on how these potentially different and differently grounded duties are labeled.

that affect the realistic domestic policy possibilities and conditions in poor countries).<sup>8</sup> Similarly, broadly libertarian views will generally imply that those living in severe poverty are unjustly disadvantaged as a result of violations of their fundamental rights and/or violations of the rights of others (e.g. their ancestors), at least sometimes committed by, or influenced by the power of, states other than their own.<sup>9</sup>

There is a very broad consensus, then, that those living in severe poverty are unjustly disadvantaged. This implies that there are obligations to remedy this disadvantage. And remedying the disadvantage requires, perhaps among other things, that resources currently possessed by well-off people, many of whom are, according to the various theories of global justice, unjustly advantaged,<sup>10</sup> are deployed in ways that will improve the lives of those in severe poverty.

One way that the well off, or the unjustly advantaged, may deploy their resources so as to improve the lives of those living in severe poverty is via the kind of charitable giving recommended by effective altruist-aligned charity evaluators such as GiveWell.<sup>11</sup> The recommended organizations provide things like medicine or bednets that help to prevent malaria, supplements that prevent vitamin A deficiency, and incentives to ensure that children receive recommended vaccinations. GiveWell estimates that a life is saved for roughly every \$3,500-\$5,500 donated to these organizations. If these estimates are even roughly correct, then effective altruist giving has saved at least many thousands of lives in some of the world's poorest places, and has the potential to save many more.

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8. See, e.g., THOMAS W. POGGE, *WORLD POVERTY AND HUMAN RIGHTS* (2002); NICOLE HASSOUN, *GLOBALIZATION AND GLOBAL JUSTICE: SHRINKING DISTANCE, EXPANDING OBLIGATIONS* (2012); LEIF WENAR, *BLOOD OIL: TYRANTS, VIOLENCE, AND THE RULES THAT RUN THE WORLD* (2016).

9. For example, if, as many libertarians (and others) believe, the right to freedom of movement is a fundamental right, and it entails the injustice of coercive border controls, then every state that does not have open borders violates the fundamental rights of those living in severe poverty, and at least many are unjustly disadvantaged by the policies of at least some states (because, e.g., they would migrate if they could do so legally, and would be better off, or because their own society would be wealthier if states, including perhaps their own, had an open borders policy, and that would make them better off). See, e.g., BAS VAN DER VOSSEN & JASON BRENNAN, *IN DEFENSE OF OPENNESS: WHY GLOBAL FREEDOM IS THE HUMANE SOLUTION TO GLOBAL POVERTY* (2018).

10. Different theories will, of course, have different implications regarding which people are unjustly advantaged, although there will likely be at least a fair bit of overlap. For example, most views will presumably imply that at least most of the world's billionaires are unjustly advantaged.

11. See *Our Top Charities*, GIVEWELL (last updated Dec. 2022), <https://www.givewell.org/charities/top-charities> [https://perma.cc/XP82-2BBG]. For a moderately skeptical view about optimistic assessments of the benefits of even the best charitable organizations that aim to aid those in severe poverty, see generally LARRY S. TEMKIN, *BEING GOOD IN A WORLD OF NEED* (2022). Temkin is influenced by development economists who have raised similar concerns. See ANGUS DEATON, *HEALTH, WEALTH, AND THE ORIGINS OF INEQUALITY* (2013). For an earlier discussion of similar issues, see Leif Wenar, *Poverty Is No Pond: Challenges for the Affluent*, in *GIVING WELL: THE ETHICS OF PHILANTHROPY* 104–132 (Patricia Illingworth et. al. eds., 2011).

Despite the fact that there is strong evidence that effective altruist giving can save the lives of many among the global poor who would otherwise die from preventable poverty-related causes, a number of critics have suggested that such giving is the wrong kind of response from well-off people (and, indeed, from anyone) to global injustice.<sup>12</sup> According to some versions of this criticism, effective altruists tend not to take global injustice sufficiently seriously because preventing deaths from malaria, vitamin deficiencies, or vaccine-preventable diseases, in the way that effective altruist giving accomplishes these goals, does not by itself address the most fundamental justice-relevant matters, which at least tend to be institutional and systemic.<sup>13</sup> Responding appropriately to global injustice, according to proponents of this view, requires that individuals direct their efforts at, for example, promoting large-scale institutional changes that are required as a matter of justice.<sup>14</sup>

At the same time, a number of effective altruists have endorsed accounts of the movement's core commitments that preclude holding that, as a movement, effective altruism can be understood as explicitly offering a view (or, perhaps, a related set of views) about how well-off people can appropriately respond to global injustice, and in particular to their status as beneficiaries of such injustice.<sup>15</sup> To the extent that these accounts accurately represent effective altruist thinking about the reasons in favor of effective altruist giving that are entailed by the movement's core commitments, the charge that the movement does not take global injustice sufficiently seriously would seem in fact to be correct.<sup>16</sup> The

12. See, e.g., Amia Srinivasan, *Stop the Robot Apocalypse*, 37 LONDON REV. BOOKS 3 (2015); Tim Syme, *Charity vs. Revolution: Effective Altruism and the Systemic Change Objection*, 22 ETHICAL THEORY MORAL PRAC. 93 (2019). For relevant discussion, see Iason Gabriel, *Effective Altruism and its Critics*, 34 J. APPL. PHIL. 457 (2017); Iason Gabriel & Brian McElwee, *Effective Altruism, Global Poverty, and Systemic Change*, in EFFECTIVE ALTRUISM: PHILOSOPHICAL ISSUES 99–114 (Hilary Greaves & Theron Pummer eds., 2019). I offer a response on behalf of effective altruism to some early versions of this criticism in Brian Berkey, *The Institutional Critique of Effective Altruism*, 30 UTILITAS 143 (2018) [hereinafter Berkey, *Institutional Critique*].

13. On some views, which at least some critics of effective altruism may accept, justice is fundamentally about institutional arrangements, so that only actions that aim to affect institutional policies and practices can count as attempts to address injustice, strictly speaking.

14. It is worth noting that those who endorse this criticism of effective altruism need not, and at least some do not, deny that effective altruist giving is a morally good thing for well-off people to do. Their central claim is, instead, that it does not count as an appropriate response to global injustice in particular, and that because of this, those who advocate and engage in effective altruist giving, but do not advocate or do whatever they think is appropriate as a response to global injustice, do not take global injustice sufficiently seriously. In addition, it is worth noting that effective altruists can (consistent with their core commitments), and sometimes do, advocate and put resources toward attempts to promote large-scale institutional change.

15. See, e.g., Theron Pummer, *Whether and Where to Give*, 44 PHIL. & PUB. AFFS. 77 (2016); William MacAskill, *The Definition of Effective Altruism*, in EFFECTIVE ALTRUISM: PHILOSOPHICAL ISSUES 10–28 (Hilary Greaves & Theron Pummer eds., 2019).

16. Even if it were correct, however, many of the reasons offered by others for thinking that it is correct remain, in my view, unconvincing.

feature of the accounts that makes them unable to provide the basis for a view about how well-off people ought to respond to their status as beneficiaries of global injustice is that they are non-normative—that is, they do not entail that well-off people have any obligations to make sacrifices in order to benefit those in severe poverty, who are, according to the consensus described above, unjustly disadvantaged. Taking global injustice sufficiently seriously, however, would seem to require attributing to those who are unjustly advantaged obligations to make at least some sacrifices in order to benefit the unjustly disadvantaged and severely poor. It is striking, then, that prominent accounts of the core commitments of a movement that has its roots at least in part in philosophical arguments in defense of the view that well-off people have demanding obligations to make sacrifices in order to benefit the global poor<sup>17</sup> leave open the possibility that they have no such obligations, and therefore leave the movement more open than it might otherwise be to the charge that it does not take global injustice sufficiently seriously.<sup>18</sup>

My aim in the remainder of this article is to argue that effective altruism, as it is most plausibly understood, does take global injustice sufficiently seriously, and offers an appealing way of thinking about how well-off people who are beneficiaries of global injustice ought to respond to that injustice. In Section I, I will argue that at least some uncontroversial requirements of global justice are best understood as fundamentally outcome-based. Importantly, this does not mean that the requirements must be understood as fundamentally grounded in consequentialist theoretical commitments, or even in morally relevant considerations that are most clearly central within consequentialist theories. Instead, it means only that, regardless of how they are grounded, their satisfaction consists in certain states of affairs obtaining. For example, I will argue that the basic needs requirement, which provides perhaps the most widely shared and uncontroversial basis upon which to conclude that those living in severe poverty are unjustly disadvantaged,

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17. See, e.g., Peter Singer, *Famine, Affluence, and Morality*, 1 PHIL. & PUB. AFFS. 229 (1972); PETER UNGER, *LIVING HIGH AND LETTING DIE: OUR ILLUSION OF INNOCENCE* (1996). I discuss the intellectual roots of effective altruism in Brian Berkey, *Public Philosophy in Effective Altruism*, THE BLACKWELL COMPANION TO PUBLIC PHILOSOPHY 166–74 (Lee McIntyre et al. eds., 2022).

18. One explanation of the choice of some to advocate non-normative accounts of effective altruism's core commitments is that they have aimed to characterize the movement in ways that are as ecumenical as possible, given the essential features that distinguish effective altruism from competing views (and from other movements), such as its commitment to impartiality, or to being guided by empirical research and evidence. However, while the aim to be ecumenical in characterizing the movement's core commitments is appropriate, in my view some normative commitments, including a commitment to the view that well-off people have obligations to make sacrifices in order to benefit those in severe poverty who are unjustly disadvantaged, are essential. I discuss this issue in greater detail in Brian Berkey, *The Philosophical Core of Effective Altruism*, 52 J. SOC. PHIL. 93 (2021). For related discussion, see Amy Berg, *Effective Altruism: How Big Should the Tent Be?*, 32 PUB. AFFS. Q. 269 (2018); Chong-Ming Lim, *Effectiveness and Ecumenicity*, 16 J. MORAL PHIL. 590 (2019).

is best understood as satisfied if and only if every person in the world in fact possesses the type and amount of resources necessary to meet their basic needs.<sup>19</sup>

In section II, I will argue that effective altruist giving can clearly help to satisfy at least the type of requirement of justice discussed in Section I. Since these are clearly among the most morally important requirements of justice, there is, I will suggest, good reason to think that effective altruist giving is among the appropriate responses to global injustice for well-off people. And this, in turn, helps us to clarify how we should think about the relationship between effective altruism and the pursuit of global justice. Specifically, it gives us reason to reject both views on which, as some critics suggest, effective altruism is a distraction from the pursuit of global justice, which should take priority over the distinct aims that effective altruist giving promotes, and views on which, as some proponents have suggested, effective altruist giving is either a potentially justified alternative to the pursuit of justice,<sup>20</sup> or a “backup” for the failures of unjust institutions that promotes at least some of the same aims as those that just institutions would satisfy, but may not, strictly speaking, promote justice.<sup>21</sup>

In section III, I will argue that the discussion in sections I and II provides the basis for an argument that effective altruism can in fact take global injustice sufficiently seriously. In order to do so, however, effective altruists must, I will claim, reject the non-normative accounts of the movement’s core commitments that some proponents have defended. Instead, they should hold that the unjust disadvantages of severe poverty generate obligations for those who are unjustly advantaged, and that effective altruist giving will at least often be among the best ways of satisfying these obligations.<sup>22</sup>

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19. An argument with the same structure could equally be made with regard to somewhat more extensive sufficientarian requirements. These requirements should be understood as satisfied if and only if everyone possesses resources sufficient to meet the threshold specified by any such requirement.

20. See, e.g., Roger Crisp & Theron Pummer, *Effective Justice*, 17 J. MORAL PHIL. 398 (2020).

21. For the claim that effective altruist giving should be understood as a way that well-off individuals can satisfy “backup duties” that they possess in conditions in which institutions are unjust, see Elizabeth Ashford, *Severe Poverty as an Unjust Emergency*, in *THE ETHICS OF GIVING: PHILOSOPHERS’ PERSPECTIVES ON PHILANTHROPY* 103–148 (Paul Woodruff ed., 2018). It is unclear whether Ashford believes, as I do, that the satisfaction of these backup duties promotes justice itself, or instead promotes some of the same aims that justice prescribes for just institutions, without promoting justice itself. Her claim that they are duties, however, does commit her to rejecting non-normative accounts of effective altruism. In addition, her view that these duties arise in virtue of the fact that the well-off people who possess them are beneficiaries of global injustice, while those in severe poverty are unjustly disadvantaged, is a central feature of mine as well.

22. A stronger view would hold that the unjustly advantaged are required to satisfy these obligations via effective altruist giving, since such giving will be the means that available evidence suggests will most effectively promote the satisfaction of the relevant requirements of justice. I find this view plausible, but I will not defend it in detail in this article.

## I. THE NATURE AND IMPORTANCE OF SOME UNCONTROVERSIAL REQUIREMENTS OF GLOBAL JUSTICE

In order to consider whether the charge that effective altruism does not take global injustice sufficiently seriously is correct, it is important to clarify, as much as possible, how we ought to understand some of the most widely accepted requirements of global justice that are relevant to assessing that charge. There is, of course, a very wide range of views about what ought to be included in a complete account of what global justice requires, and about the range of fundamental values that contribute to explaining the requirements that competing theories entail. For the purposes of this article, however, I need not take a position on most of the issues in dispute among the various complete accounts of global justice. Instead, I can rely only on a much narrower set of claims about how a type of requirement that is shared across at least most theories ought to be understood, and, relatedly, about which fundamental values at least play a role in explaining the requirement.

As I noted above, the claim that those living in severe poverty are unjustly disadvantaged is among the most uncontroversial claims in contemporary moral and political philosophy. Proponents of nearly every plausible view about global justice accept that every person is entitled, as a matter of justice, to the resources that are necessary to ensure that their basic needs are met.<sup>23</sup> Since those living in severe poverty do not have the resources necessary to ensure that their basic needs are met, this rather minimal theoretical commitment implies that those living in severe poverty are unjustly disadvantaged.

The claim that everyone is entitled to the resources necessary to ensure that their basic needs are met is treated by many as, in effect, a baseline point of agreement, shared between them and those whom they consider their opponents on the more widely contested issues of global justice. Much of the debate among proponents of competing views has focused on the extent to which, above this minimal threshold, we should accept further requirements (distributive or otherwise) that apply across borders, and on how we should understand the fundamental normative grounds of whatever further requirements we might endorse.

The fact that the basic needs requirement is largely treated as a settled point of agreement that precedes much of the debate between proponents of competing theoretical accounts of global justice, rather than as a point of convergence that can be noted to follow from competing theories once they have been developed, suggests that there should be at least fairly widespread agreement about the

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23. Many endorse sufficientarian requirements that go beyond ensuring that everyone has enough to meet their basic needs, even if they deny that the distributive requirements that apply globally are as extensive as those that apply within the boundaries of states. For my purposes, it is enough to focus on the more limited basic needs requirement. Though it is not necessary for my purposes to take a position on precisely which needs count as basic, I assume that the list includes at least adequate food, shelter, clothing, and basic health care. There are, of course, a number of possible additions to this list that would strike many as plausible candidates for basic needs.

fundamental normative grounds of the requirement as well. This agreement does not need to be so thorough-going that every proponent, or even most proponents, of competing theories would ultimately explain the requirement by appeal to the very same list of fundamental values. Since a wide range of values might support the requirement, it is to be expected that those with competing views about broader matters of global justice might explain at least part of the justification for the requirement differently. It would be more surprising, however, if there were no explanatory common ground between those who tend to regard the requirement as something that any plausible theory must account for.

I suggest that the requirement is best understood as at least partially grounded in the concern that any plausible account of justice must embody for the most fundamental interests of persons. There are few interests more fundamental than the interest that we all have in being able to satisfy our basic needs. Individuals rationally care greatly about being able to satisfy their basic needs, and prioritize their satisfaction over the pursuit of at least most other values. Therefore, any account of justice that did not take the satisfaction of basic needs to be among the justice-relevant values, and indeed among the things that justice requires, would seem to lack appropriate regard for some of our most fundamental interests.

Of course, because the basic needs requirement is treated by most as a baseline point of agreement, few accounts are straightforwardly subject to the objection that they lack appropriate regard for the relevant fundamental interests. It seems to me, however, important to note that insofar as the requirement is grounded in a concern for the fundamental interest that individuals have in being able to satisfy their basic needs, it must be thought to be satisfied to the extent that people are in fact able to satisfy their basic needs. And this implies that, perhaps unlike some other requirements of justice, the basic needs requirement should be thought of as a fundamentally outcome-based requirement.<sup>24</sup> Outcome-based requirements have as the condition(s) of their satisfaction that certain states of affairs obtain. In the case of the basic needs requirement, the relevant state of affairs is that all individuals possess the resources necessary to satisfy their basic needs.

Importantly, conceiving of the basic needs requirement in outcome-based terms does not require holding that it is ultimately explained by a fundamentally consequentialist theory or grounded in the kinds of morally important considerations that typically feature most prominently within consequentialist theories. To see this, it is enough to notice that a wide range of moral requirements that are generally thought to be grounded in non-consequentialist considerations can have as their condition(s) of satisfaction that certain states of affairs obtain. For example, if I promise to pick you up at the airport tomorrow at 4:00, my promissory

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24. See Brian Berkey, *Obligations of Productive Justice: Individual or Institutional?*, 21 CRIT. REV. INT'L. SOC. POL. PHIL. 726 (2018) [hereinafter Berkey, *Obligations*] (discussing outcome-based requirements in more detail and contrasting them with other types of requirements, such as procedural requirements).



obligation has a particular state of affairs as its condition of satisfaction, namely that I am at the airport prepared to pick you up at 4:00.

There is a fairly simple argument for the claim that the basic needs requirement should be thought to have as its condition of satisfaction that everyone in fact possesses the resources necessary to satisfy their basic needs. If, as I have suggested, the requirement is grounded in a concern for fundamental interests, then it would seem appropriate for the condition of satisfaction to consist in what is necessary for those interests to be satisfied. Furthermore, it would seem inappropriate for the conditions of satisfaction to include anything that is not necessary for the relevant interests to be satisfied. When we isolate the basic needs requirement, then, and consider what is plausibly required for it to be satisfied, it seems as though what is required is a particular state of affairs—one in which everyone possesses the resources necessary to ensure that their basic needs are satisfied.

This kind of outcome-based requirement may be only one of many types of requirements of global justice. And while it is, as I have argued, most plausibly grounded in a concern for fundamental interests, other requirements might be grounded in other kinds of values.<sup>25</sup> Regardless, however, of the other requirements of global justice that one might endorse, and the values in which they might be grounded, if I am right then it should be taken as a point of agreement across a wide range of more complete views that some uncontroversial requirements are best understood in outcome-based terms. In addition, these requirements of justice are surely among the most important, in the sense that if we have to choose between promoting their satisfaction and promoting the satisfaction of other requirements (because, for example, we have limited resources with which to promote justice), there will generally be compelling reasons to promote the satisfaction of requirements like the basic needs requirement.

If requirements such as the basic needs requirement are best understood in outcome-based terms, then there are always marginal gains to be made with respect to the satisfaction of any one of these requirements by closing the gap, along the relevant dimensions, between the current state of affairs and the state of affairs that constitutes the condition(s) of satisfaction of that requirement. For example, if the basic needs requirement has as its condition of satisfaction that everyone has sufficient resources to meet their basic needs, then actions that make it the case that more people have sufficient resources to meet their basic needs than otherwise would have, and actions that make it the case that people who continue to lack such resources are at least closer to reaching the threshold, make it the case that the requirement is closer to being satisfied than it otherwise would have been. And because satisfying basic needs is among the most important requirements of global justice, there will generally be strong reasons to perform such

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25. There is, of course, a wide range of other values that have been argued to ground requirements of justice. These include liberty, reciprocity, social equality, non-domination, freedom from exploitation, and many others.

actions and, all else equal, to prioritize them over actions that might improve the satisfaction of other, less important requirements of justice.

## II. EFFECTIVE ALTRUIST GIVING AND THE SATISFACTION OF REQUIREMENTS OF GLOBAL JUSTICE

The central claims that I defended in the previous section imply that effective altruist giving will at least tend to promote the satisfaction of important requirements of justice. And if this is correct, then it would seem to limit the force of the claim, made by many critics, that effective altruism does not take global injustice sufficiently seriously.

If one requirement of global justice is that everyone has sufficient resources to meet their basic needs, then, all else equal,<sup>26</sup> actions that increase the number of people who have the resources necessary to meet their basic needs, or bring some of those who do not closer to the threshold than they would otherwise have been, make the world less unjust than it would otherwise have been. In addition, the claim that such actions make the world less unjust than it otherwise would have been is both independently plausible and can be provided further support by considering our intuitive response to a simple example.<sup>27</sup> Begin by considering the world as it is, with (as of 2018) roughly 8.6% of the global population living in severe poverty.<sup>28</sup> Now imagine that many well-off people who are, on at least most plausible views, unjustly advantaged, begin giving away large portions of their income and wealth such that half of those currently living in severe poverty are raised above the threshold, and become able to meet their basic needs.<sup>29</sup> It would be implausible to deny that the resulting state of affairs is less unjust than the initial state of affairs. And if this is right, then effective altruist giving, insofar as it contributes to reducing the number of people who are unable to meet their basic needs or reduces the extent to which some people's basic needs go unmet,

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26. Some critics of effective altruism have suggested that its proponents have not taken sufficiently seriously the possibility that some interventions aimed at benefiting the unjustly disadvantaged might be objectionable in virtue of important unintended effects, even if they do benefit those who are the direct targets of those interventions. See, e.g., Emily Clough, *Effective Altruism's Political Blind Spot*, BOS. REV. (2015). When it is true that an intervention will or may have unintended negative effects for those who are not the direct targets, all else is not equal, and this is important for effective altruists (and anyone concerned about promoting global justice) to take into account when assessing the reasons for and against it.

27. I make similar points about the kinds of actions of individuals and corporations, respectively, that seem capable of promoting justice, in Brian Berkey, *Against Rawlsian Institutionalism about Justice*, 42 SOC. THEORY PRAC. 702 (2016), and Brian Berkey, *Rawlsian Institutionalism and Business Ethics: Does it Matter Whether Corporations are Part of the Basic Structure of Society?*, 31 BUS. ETHICS Q. 179 (2021).

28. See WORLD BANK, APRIL 2022 GLOBAL POVERTY UPDATE FROM THE WORLD BANK (2022) <https://blogs.worldbank.org/opendata/april-2022-global-poverty-update-world-bank>, [<https://perma.cc/DYR2-Q3DZ>]. Severe poverty is defined as living on less than USD 1.90 per day.

29. It may be, of course that the USD 1.90 per day threshold does not in fact correspond to what is necessary for many, or even most people to be able to meet their basic needs, properly understood. For the purposes of the example, it is enough to imagine that half of those currently in severe poverty are raised above whatever the relevant threshold turns out to be.

makes the world less unjust than it would otherwise have been. The strongest version of the claim that effective altruism does not take global injustice sufficiently seriously, according to which effective altruist giving does nothing whatsoever to address global injustice, seems, then, clearly mistaken.

Some scholars claim that justice is, in some sense or other, fundamentally about institutional structures and policies, and not about individual actions, patterns of such actions, and their effects.<sup>30</sup> If this claim is correct,<sup>31</sup> then the voluntary redirection of resources in order to help more people meet their basic needs or bring people closer to the threshold at which they could meet their basic needs does not make the world any less unjust; only changes at the level of institutional structures or policies can do that.<sup>32</sup> Even if an institutional conception of justice were correct, however, it would render the claim that we ought to strongly prioritize promoting justice over promoting other morally important values (such as, if this view about the nature of justice were correct, providing for basic needs by non-institutional means) deeply implausible. The claim that justice is especially important, and that promoting it ought in general to take priority over promoting other values, could be compelling only if the promotion of justice were reliably connected to the promotion of the most important interests of persons (or, perhaps, other sentient beings) that ground the concern that we ought to have for justice. The view that we ought to prioritize efforts to promote justice even if doing this would do significantly less than an available alternative to promote the interests of those who are most unjustly disadvantaged cannot possibly be correct – indeed it seems clearly perverse.

Of course, the critics who claim that effective altruism does not take global injustice sufficiently seriously would be unlikely to explicitly endorse knowingly doing less to ensure that those living in severe poverty can meet their basic needs, or even doing what there is strong evidence will do less to promote this goal. Instead, these critics seem to believe that alternatives to effective altruist giving, often political action done with others and aimed at changing global institutional structures and policies, are better means of promoting justice, including the justice-relevant interests of those living in severe poverty.

There are, however, at least three problems with this criticism of effective altruism. First, at least with regard to much of what the critics believe well off

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30. This view has its contemporary roots in RAWLS, *supra* note 4; see also JOHN RAWLS, *POLITICAL LIBERALISM* (1993).

31. There are, in my view, strong reasons to reject it. See COHEN, *supra* note 6; Liam B. Murphy, *Institutions and the Demands of Justice*, 27 *PHIL. & PUB. AFFS.* 251 (1998). I argue against it in Brian Berkey, *Double Counting, Moral Rigorism, and Cohen's Critique of Rawls: A Response to Alan Thomas*, 124 *MIND* 849 (2015); Berkey, *supra* note 24; Berkey, *supra* note 27.

32. Those who hold this view typically focus on the issue of justice within particular societies, and often suggest that it is only the structures and policies of state institutions that matter fundamentally for justice. In order to accept a version of this view about global justice, however, one would likely face theoretical pressure to accept that the structures and policies of other kinds of institutions (e.g., the United Nations, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organization) matter as well.

people ought to be doing in order to promote justice, it is not true that we must choose between engaging in those actions and engaging in effective altruist giving. For example, spending some of one's time attending protests, engaging in political organizing, writing letters to elected officials or for public audiences, or participating in various forms of online activism in no way precludes one from donating 10 percent (or more) of one's income to charitable organizations that save the lives of many people living in severe poverty and improve the lives of many others. These alternative actions might promote justice, and there may be reasons to do many of them. It is implausible to claim, however, that those who donate a significant portion of their income in ways that help to ensure that people in severe poverty can better meet their basic needs, but do not engage much in other potentially justice-promoting actions, are generally and systematically guilty of taking global injustice less seriously than those who engage in various political actions of the kind described, but give little or none of their income to effective charities that benefit the most unjustly disadvantaged.

Second, if it were true, and there were good evidence that it is true, that engaging in political action aimed at changing global institutional structures and policies is the best means available to individuals of promoting the satisfaction of the most important requirements of justice, such as the basic needs requirement, then this is what the core commitments of effective altruism would recommend that they do. There would, then, be no conflict between effective altruist giving and promoting justice in the ways that many critics suggest we should.<sup>33</sup>

Third, when there is a conflict between pursuing political action (by, for example, directing funds to organizing efforts) and giving in ways that will help people living in severe poverty satisfy (more of) their basic needs without affecting institutional structures or policies, the impact of any particular individual's potential contribution to the political option depends on how many others join them in contributing. If relatively few others will contribute, then any particular contribution is likely to do very little, if any, good for those living in severe poverty. And there are surely strong reasons to avoid directing resources where they will in fact do little good when there are available alternatives that would do much more for the unjustly disadvantaged.<sup>34</sup>

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33. If this were the case effective altruists might encourage well-off people to give 10 percent of their income to organized efforts to promote valuable institutional changes the prospects for which appear to depend to a significant extent on how much in the way of resources are directed toward promoting them. I discuss this issue in more detail in Berkey, *Institutional Critique*, *supra* note 12. See also Gabriel & McElwee, *supra* note 12.

34. There are difficult issues about how individuals ought to act in cases with roughly the structure described that I cannot address in detail here. See, e.g., Alexander Dietz, *Effective Altruism and Collective Obligations*, 31 UTILITAS 106, 108 (2019); Stephanie Collins, *Beyond Individualism*, in EFFECTIVE ALTRUISM: PHILOSOPHICAL ISSUES 202–17 (Hilary Greaves & Theron Pummer eds., 2019); Max Khan Hayward, *Utility Cascades*, 80 ANALYSIS 433 (2020); Ryan Doody, *Don't Go Chasing Waterfalls: Against Hayward's "Utility Cascades,"* 34 UTILITAS 225 (2022). I respond to Dietz in Brian Berkey, *Collective Obligations and the Institutional Critique of Effective Altruism: A Reply to Alexander Dietz*, 31 UTILITAS 326 (2019).

I have argued that effective altruist giving is among the best ways for well-off people to promote the satisfaction of some of the most important requirements of global justice. If I am right, then critics who claim that effective altruism constitutes a distraction from the pursuit of global justice, which should take priority over effective altruist giving, are mistaken. That claim could be correct only if contributing to the satisfaction of basic needs among those most unjustly disadvantaged did not, in itself, promote global justice. But this is surely implausible. There is plausibly a great deal more to global justice than the satisfaction of the basic needs of the poor, and the kinds of political action and institutional change that critics call for may be necessary in order to achieve much of what is required.<sup>35</sup> But well-off individuals aiming to promote global justice surely take it sufficiently seriously when, in light of evidence about what will best promote the satisfaction of basic needs among those living in severe poverty, they give substantially to organizations that help to ensure that these needs are better met than they would otherwise be.

If this is right, then effective altruist giving should be recognized as a well-supported response to global injustice on the part of well-off people, at least when many of the most unjustly disadvantaged people in the world lack sufficient resources to meet their basic needs. And this provides grounds for thinking that even some of those who are broadly sympathetic to effective altruism have characterized its relationship to concerns about global injustice in a way that may concede too much to critics who claim that it does not take such injustice sufficiently seriously.

For example, Roger Crisp and Theron Pummer suggest that those concerned to fight injustice could develop a movement (they call it “effective justice”) that would share key structural features with effective altruism, but would focus on deploying limited resources toward the promotion of justice instead of toward benefitting others as much as possible.<sup>36</sup> On the whole, their characterization of the relationship that an effective justice movement might stand in to effective altruism seems to allow that there could be little or even no overlap in the kinds of actions that would be supported by each movement’s core commitments.

Despite this, in the concluding section of the paper, Crisp and Pummer say the following:

On many plausible conceptions of well-being and justice, and given plausible empirical claims, promoting more well-being by helping the world’s

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35. In the case of some requirements, this may be for merely causal reasons. In these cases, the conditions of satisfaction of the requirements could in principle be met without large-scale institutional change, but in fact would not be. Some other requirements, however, may be such that their conditions of satisfaction themselves include that certain kinds of institutional structures or policies be in place. My argument does not require denying that there can be such requirements, or that they might be quite important requirements. It requires only that the basic needs requirement is not among them, and that it is among the most important requirements.

36. Crisp & Pummer, *supra* note 20, at 412.

extremely poor people will reliably coincide with promoting more justice, and it is accordingly likely that particular global poverty fighting charities ranked as promoting the most well-being would also be ranked as promoting the most justice . . . There is thus an Effective Altruist case for Effective Justice.<sup>37</sup>

This seems clearly correct, and our conception of the relationship between effective altruism and the promotion of justice in an unjust world should be informed by it. In addition, just as there is, as Crisp and Pummer claim, an effective altruist case for supporting the effective promotion of justice, there is, at least as importantly, and as my arguments in this article have suggested, a case grounded in widely accepted claims about some of the most important requirements of justice for engaging in effective altruist giving. The central upshot here is that any divide that exists between the central aims and initiatives of effective altruism and what is plausibly supported by the concern that we ought to have to remedy global injustice is, at least in a world like ours, much more limited than critics of effective altruism have sometimes claimed.

Consider also Elisabeth Ashford's description of the duties that she believes well off people have to engage in effective altruist giving as "backup duties."<sup>38</sup> Ashford rightly notes that it would, of course, be better for global and domestic economic institutions to be reformed and made just, than for those living in severe poverty to be aided via donations from the well-off to effective charities.<sup>39</sup> But, she argues, we should think that so long as these institutions remain unjust, with the result that many people live in severe poverty, the well off have "backup duties" to give to effective aid agencies so that the lives of those who are profoundly disadvantaged by global injustice are improved as much as possible.<sup>40</sup>

My view shares in much in common with Ashford's,<sup>41</sup> although I think it is important to distinguish the senses in which well-off individuals' duties to give to effective charities really are backup duties. These duties are "backup duties" in the sense that, if we were all appropriately committed to ensuring that global justice is achieved, we could expect sufficient institutional reform to make giving unnecessary. It is only because we have collectively failed to implement just institutions that the obligation to give (as a backup to that failure) arises. They are also backup duties in the sense that while just institutions would at least largely ensure that the full range of justice-relevant values are realized,<sup>42</sup> effective giving

37. *Id.*

38. Ashford, *supra* note 21, at 110.

39. *Id.* at 117–119.

40. *Id.* at 108–109, 117–120. She also claims that framing duties to give effectively in this way helps to highlight the absurdity of the view, which a number of critics of effective altruism at least implicitly suggest in their discussions, that recognizing that unjust global economic structures are the "root causes" of severe poverty implies that we should not give to (even effective) aid agencies.

41. I discuss it in more detail in section III.

42. There are, in my view, reasons to doubt that just institutions, even in combination with full compliance with their rules and requirements, would necessarily be sufficient to ensure that even some relatively modest requirements of justice would be fully satisfied. See Berkey, *supra* note 24.

will typically promote only a subset of those values. In addition, in some cases, it can do so only to a limited extent, as well as only rather indirectly. For example, donations to the organizations recommended by effective altruist charity evaluators such as GiveWell help many people avoid death from preventable causes and improve quality of life for badly off people more generally. However, they will often do little, if anything, to promote, for example, egalitarian social relations in profoundly inegalitarian societies with high rates of severe poverty, or democratic control of natural resources in societies ruled by corrupt dictators.

There are, then, significant limits on what can be achieved, as a matter of promoting justice, through donations to effective charitable organizations. However, it is important to recognize that such donations can have *some* very important justice-relevant effects. Thus, the concern that we ought to have for justice can and does provide grounds for obligations to give. If giving to effective charities has at least some justice-relevant effects, then for individuals who are obligated to promote justice, giving is *not a backup to promoting justice*. Instead, it is perhaps the best means available to them of promoting it, given the circumstances in which they find themselves.

### III. TAKING GLOBAL INJUSTICE SERIOUSLY: AGAINST NON-NORMATIVE ACCOUNTS OF EFFECTIVE ALTRUISM

Thus far I have argued that some widely accepted and important requirements of global justice, such as the basic needs requirement, should be understood in outcome-based terms, and that once we recognize this, we should conclude that effective altruist giving is clearly a means of promoting the satisfaction of these requirements. I have also suggested that there are reasons to believe that effective altruist giving is at least among the most well-supported responses to global injustice for well-off individuals.

Even if all of this is correct, however, it is insufficient to rebut the charge that effective altruism fails to take global injustice sufficiently seriously. This is because taking global injustice seriously requires, at a minimum, holding that those who are unjustly advantaged have obligations to contribute to remedying the injustice from which they benefit. A view that acknowledges the injustice, but does not entail that those who benefit from it are obligated to make at least some effort, and take on at least some sacrifice, in order to mitigate it, can, I think, correctly be charged with failing to take the injustice sufficiently seriously.<sup>43</sup> Consequently, effective altruists can claim that their movement takes global injustice sufficiently seriously only if its core commitments include or entail that well-off beneficiaries of global injustice have obligations to engage in (perhaps among other things) effective altruist giving in order to promote justice.

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43. For a similar claim, see Daniel Butt, *On Benefiting from Injustice*, 37 CANADIAN J. PHIL. 129 (2007). See also Berkey, *Benefiting from Unjust Acts and Benefiting from Injustice: Historical Emissions and the Beneficiary Pays Principle*, in CLIMATE JUSTICE AND HISTORICAL EMISSIONS 123–140 (Lukas H. Meyer & Pranay Sanklecha eds., 2017).

Importantly, some accounts of effective altruism's core commitments include neither the claim that well-off beneficiaries of global injustice have obligations to contribute to remedying that injustice itself, nor any claims from which it follows that they have such obligations. For example, William MacAskill explicitly states that his account is "non-normative."<sup>44</sup> Instead, on his view effective altruism is fundamentally a project, which is itself made up of two sub-projects. The first project is intellectual, and its central aim is to determine which uses of limited resources will do the most good. The second project is practical, and aims to deploy resources in the ways that will do the most good. The account is non-normative because it makes no claim to the effect that anyone is obligated to take up the project of effective altruism or either of its component projects.<sup>45</sup> Of course, MacAskill clearly believes that there are strong moral reasons to take up the project—indeed, it seems at least plausible that it follows from his account's core commitments that taking up the project is an especially morally good thing to do, perhaps even among the very best things, morally speaking, that one can do.<sup>46</sup> Nevertheless, because the account does not include or entail a requirement that well-off beneficiaries of global injustice take up the project of effective altruism to any extent, it is subject to the criticism that it does not take global injustice sufficiently seriously.

In order to avoid this charge, effective altruists should reject non-normative accounts of the movement's core commitments. Specifically, they should hold that those who are unjustly advantaged are obligated to direct at least a portion of their resources in ways that will contribute most effectively to remedying the unjust disadvantages faced by others. One kind of argument for this view, which is, it seems to me, both independently plausible and consistent with the kind of normative account of effective altruism's core commitments that I am arguing should be accepted, begins with the thought that because some portion of the resources possessed by the well-off consists of benefits that they have received as a result of, for example, the operations of unjust global economic institutions that systematically benefit them and disadvantage others, we should regard them as lacking even a presumptive moral entitlement to those resources, of the kind that

44. MacAskill, *supra* note 15, at 14.

45. In contrast, Peter Singer's account is explicitly normative. He says, for example, that according to effective altruism, "we should do the most good we can." SINGER, *THE MOST GOOD YOU CAN DO: HOW EFFECTIVE ALTRUISM IS CHANGING IDEAS ABOUT LIVING ETHICALLY*, at vii (2015). More precisely, he claims that, according to effective altruism, "[l]iving a minimally acceptable ethical life involves using a substantial part of our spare resources to make the world a better place." *Id.*

46. The core commitments of effective altruism, according to MacAskill, are: (1) that it is "non-normative," and is instead a project that individuals can choose to take up; (2) that it is "maximizing," and therefore takes the point of the project to do as much good as possible; (3) that it is "science-aligned," that is, it is committed to employing scientific methods in order to determine how to do the most good; and (4) that it is "tentatively impartial and welfarist," meaning that doing the most good is at least provisionally understood as maximally promoting well-being, with everyone's well-being counting equally. MacAskill, *supra* note 15, at 14.



might ground permissible discretion about what to do with them.<sup>47</sup> If this claim is correct, then well-off beneficiaries of injustice have no grounds upon which to object either to the claim that they are obligated to give up the relevant portion of their resources, or to the claim that they are obligated to direct them where they will do the most good.

By endorsing a normative account of the movement's core commitments that includes a requirement that well-off beneficiaries of global injustice redirect at least some of their resources in ways that will most effectively promote the important interests of the unjustly disadvantaged, effective altruists can avoid the charge that they do not take global injustice sufficiently seriously, especially with regard to the injustice caused by the global economic institutions that, according to many critics, are the root causes of poverty. In addition, accepting that the obligations of the well off are explained, at least in part, by the fact that they are beneficiaries of global injustice allows effective altruists to avoid a related concern. As Ashford has noted, ways of framing effective altruism and thinking about its core commitments that do not take the deep injustice of global poverty to be central suggest that there may be nothing objectionable about the global structures that generate the combination of great wealth and severe poverty that puts affluent people in a position to do so much good by giving effectively.<sup>48</sup> Accounts like MacAskill's are especially vulnerable to this kind of worry, since they leave it open, as a matter of effective altruism's core commitments, whether well-off people are morally entitled to most or even all of their resources, and so how much, if anything, they are obligated to give up.<sup>49</sup>

If my argument is correct, then effective altruists need not, and ought not, endorse an account of the movement's core commitments that leaves open the possibility that prevailing global injustice gives rise to no obligations that apply to those who benefit from it. By rejecting non-normative accounts that do leave this possibility open, effective altruists can ensure that they are not subject to the charge that they do not take global injustice sufficiently seriously.

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47. Jeff McMahan claims that the very rich lack even a presumptive moral entitlement to at least a portion of their resources, but does not ground this claim in the fact that they benefit from injustice. See Jeff McMahan, *Doing Good and Doing the Best*, in *THE ETHICS OF GIVING: PHILOSOPHERS' PERSPECTIVES ON PHILANTHROPY* 78–102 (Paul Woodruff ed., 2018) [hereinafter *ETHICS OF GIVING*]. Both Ashford and Paul Woodruff endorse the justice-based version of the claim. See Ashford, *supra* note 21; Woodruff, *Afterword: Justice and Charitable Giving*, in *ETHICS OF GIVING*, *supra* note 47, at 204–20. Unlike Ashford, however, Woodruff claims that the fact that many well-off people “have profited from unjust structures” does not support obligations of the kind that effective altruists tend to endorse, and will often generate obligations to direct the relevant resources in ways that do not do the most good. *Id.* at 206–213.

48. Ashford, *supra* note 21.

49. Effective altruism, even on non-normative accounts like MacAskill's, is, of course, consistent with the view that the well-off, and indeed all of us, are morally obligated to make sacrifices, even very large sacrifices, in order to benefit the unjustly disadvantaged. These obligations, if they exist, are simply not among, or entailed by, the core commitments of effective altruism, on non-normative accounts.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Effective altruists and many of their critics share certain morally important goals, such as improving the lives of the global poor. I have argued that, contrary to what some critics have claimed, effective altruist giving is at least among the ways that the well off can contribute to making the world less unjust. I suggested some reasons for thinking that, in a world like ours, it is likely among the best ways individuals can contribute to mitigating injustice. By accepting a normative account of the movement's core commitments, effective altruists can, then, avoid the charge that they do not take global injustice sufficiently seriously. Perhaps more importantly, my argument implies that, properly understood, there is much more theoretical and practical common ground between those who think of themselves as effective altruists and those who think of themselves as advocates for global justice than much of the debate about the merits of effective altruism might suggest. There are, then, substantial opportunities for productive engagement and collaboration that could contribute greatly to improving the lives of those who are unjustly disadvantaged, which (as I have argued) would promote the satisfaction of some of the most important requirements of global justice.