

Dominic Roser  
Stefan Riedener  
Markus Huppenbauer (Eds.)  
Effective Altruism  
and Religion  
Synergies, Tensions, Dialogue

P V E R  
V A L A  
E R N G  
L A G O |  **Nomos**

Religion — Wirtschaft — Politik 23



# Effective Altruism and Religion

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# Religion – Wirtschaft – Politik

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## Foreword

When I first heard about effective altruism, I assumed it was a Christian movement. Followers of effective altruism were trying to put into action the commandment to love their neighbour, or trying to abide by Jesus's words to the rich man: "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor."<sup>1</sup> To my surprise, not only was effective altruism not primarily a Christian movement, but many Christians seemed suspicious of it.

As discussions of effective altruism came up, two worries were voiced most frequently among the Christians with whom I spoke. The first was that the focus on being "effective" – on saving the most total lives or on maximising the lives saved per dollar – reduces humanity to a mass to be weighed and measured, leaving no room to love one's neighbour as an individual made in the image of God: an individual who deserves our attention regardless of the cost of helping him. The second was that some of the more "fringe" elements of the movement, focused on extending human life indefinitely or colonising other planets, located the salvation of the world in human progress and a future utopia, rather than in something less bound in temporal existence. Not human enough, and too human.

I am a Christian, so I am particularly attuned to the reception of effective altruism among Christians. But I suspect that those from other religious traditions have had similar experiences. Effective altruism can initially seem like a movement that *embodies* their religious commitments, but their co-religionists turn out to be suspicious of it.

Effective altruists do not appear all that impressed with religion, either. The vocal majority of those involved in the effective altruist movement are non-religious, some having explicitly left the religious tradition of their youth. And they have worries about religious practitioners. Some simply worry that religious people are not particularly prone to thinking through things rationally—that they prefer tradition, authority, or plain old superstition to evidence-gathering. Others worry that the religious focus on spiritual things distracts from meeting the immediate and pressing needs

<sup>1</sup> Matt. 19:21, New Revised Standard Version.

of food, shelter, and health; or that the focus on eternal things leads to complacency about temporal suffering.

Both religious commitment and effective altruism demand a singular focus. They both demand that one keep a particular aim at the forefront of one's mind, and make the bulk of one's life decisions with this aim in view. And they each can see the other as a competitor for that singular focus. As we know, you can only serve one master.

But, curiously, religious commitment and effective altruism are united in telling us we should not serve *mammon*. They are united in claiming that the ordinary, 21<sup>st</sup>-century American and Western European way of living has gone *drastically* wrong, and that we need to create a different way of living from the ground up. They are united in thinking that people who are not part of our everyday social group should occupy a *much larger* part of our concern. They are united in thinking that our focus should be on others rather than on ourselves, not just part of the time, but as a way of life.

So it seems that we ought to rethink the relationship between religious commitment and effective altruism; and that is just what the essays in this volume aim to do. While there have been some notable volumes addressed to religious audiences urging them to be both more altruistic (e.g., Ronald Sider's *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*) and more effective (e.g., Bruce Wydick's *Shrewd Samaritan*), nothing has been written directly on the relationship of religious commitment and effective altruism as a distinct movement that goes by that name.

The essay writers are commended not only for their insights, but for framing the questions and shaping the discussion, since they are writing against a background of very little that has come before. Dominic, Markus, and Stefan are especially commended for bringing together a volume on this topic. While volumes are often praised for moving the conversation forward, this one does something much more difficult, for it begins an entirely new conversation, one that I hope will continue.

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