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Background

Back in early 2013, Tom Ash and Peter Hurford planned to write at least a partial defence of global poverty as a cause. Progress since then has been... slow. So Tom at least is aiming to get it done by September 30th, the end of the current EA Blogging Carnival, which is on cause selection. And we're inviting anyone and everyone to contribute in this publicly editable Google doc. You can add suggestions to drafts of the post itself and/or contributing notes, comments and suggestions. This Google doc is open to all, but a work-in-progress draft, not something we'd want to widely publish.

Sources

- Tom's original speech at the 2013 CEA weekend away - notes at https://docs.google.com/document/d/1-UdPWyyEGNuAjbPoxQJUZgkGX-uWhP3OyoxdzMcdfuE/edit# (only shared among a few people)
- Lucas at https://www.facebook.com/groups/effective.altruists/permalink/679760818746945/?comment_id=679830955406598&offset=0&total_comments=4
- Peter at http://lesswrong.com/lw/i6f/why_im_skeptical_about_unproven_causes_and_you/
- Joey's and Tom's points at https://docs.google.com/document/d/1-UdPWyyEGNuAjbPoxQJUZgkGX-uWhP3OyoxdzMcdfuE/edit (only to be shared among a few people)
- http://lesswrong.com/lw/i7p/how_does_miri_know_it_has_a_medium_probability_of/

Selected parts of Tom's original speech

More talk-ready notes from January 2014 presentation skills training

- *Intro*
  - Thank you [introducer].
  - Today I'm going to talk about why global poverty might be one of the very best causes you can donate to.

    - I'm going to do this very briefly, so will only sketch the issues involved.
- *Framing: what's the issue?*
    - First of all, I'd like to define the issue I'm discussing.
    - It's actually a very practical and concrete one, because some time this year I'm going to £5,000 to charity. [Can put it on the table to make the issue real]
    - So my question is whether to give it to a highly cost-effective global poverty charity like AMF - or to an organisation working on another cause.
    - Note that this means I need a specific alternative to AMF - it's no use to me to say that some existential risk charity is better but we don't know what it is.
- *Framing: what do I mean by 'best'?*
    - Now, you might wonder what I mean by the "best" cause? What metric should we use?
    - The answer is that it depends on your moral view.
    - For the sake of the argument, let's use total utilitarianism. On that the best charity is the one that increases the welfare of sentient beings, trading off positive conscious states against negative ones - e.g pleasure against pain.
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    - That's plausibly the view that's friendliest to some alternative causes such as animal welfare and x-risk allev.
    - If you have another moral view, chances are that you're going to favour combatting pov even more than I do. Let me go through some examples of why.
        - Firstly, many views assign weight to things that apply to humans far more than they do to animals, or don't apply to animals at all.
            - Examples would be preferences and higher pleasures
        - Secondly, many views assign no value to future people.
        - And thirdly, many views think we have duties to people who are poor as a result of the current unjust economic system
    - I'm not endorsing or rejecting those views, just noting that many very intelligent and thoughtful ppl hold them, and most of us would consider it unwise to completely rule them out.
        - This has an important implication for where I ought to give my money.
            - The implication is that I ought not to be completely conf that my morality is correct and that others are wrong. Instead I ought to assign some credence to other moralities, and adjust my choice of char accordingly. To put it another way, I should hedge my bets.
            - As I've explained, that strengthens the reasons to help the global poor.

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- So let's look at how much good giving this £5,000 to a global pov charity like AMF could do.
    - Luckily, GWWC has a calculator to help you work out just that.
    - Fig we use for AMF is GW's est that $2500 can save a life. [nb has increased since then]

    - That's £1600, and I'll be giving more than that (e.g. £5,000/everything over £14,000) will plausibly save at least one life (in expectation - though for stylistic economy I won't generally spell this qualification out).
    - So if I pick AMF for my £5,000 I can have a pretty amazing impact.
    - Let's take a moment to appreciate just how enormous that opportunity is.
        - When a doctor saves a life, we see it as one of the best things they can do. There's no reason why doing the same by donating to AMF should be seen as any less important.
        - It means that someone who would have died will now live. Looking at life exp in the countries where AMF ops, that's getting someone 40 extra years to pursue their dreams and spend with those they love. It means preventing the tragedy and heartbreak involved in a child dying of malaria.
        - *This would be a very good thing.*
    - NB not just about saving lives - also about improving them. That's what SCI does, prevents horrible suffering. So don't have to worry about the issues that come up when you're saving lives, like overpopulation, or more complex ethical issues.
- This enormous impact is the reason I think global poverty is such a good cause to donate to. Any alternative needs to make an equally compelling case that it's high impact.
    - That's what I want to rest most of claim on. But I'm not going to labour it, cos you're prob already pretty familiar with these points. Instead I'll quickly run thru other ways in which it could do good, although I don't rest my claim on them.
        - Eco dev : flow-thru effects. Ppl not ill so ecos grow more.
            - Eco dev does lotsa good. Pinker. All metrics - crime, civil rights, etc.
            - In itself may be best way to limit x-risk.
        - Chance to convince more people
            - Thus best gateway to spreading EA, which may be one of the best 'broad' interventions (albeit one we should be conscious is speculative and often done ineffectively, and poses certain traps that we ought to be careful to avoid.)
- Finally, I'll turn to the two alternative causes in the debate - animal welfare and x-risk - and sketch some issues with them (without trying to do a total take-down).
    - One problem is that the charities working on these are typically much more speculative than AMF.
        - Problems with the particular charities
        - The EV calcs involved are pretty shaky - so shaky they're plausibly way out.
        - Assign greater weight to empirical evidence than theoretical arguments - like the multi-chain just-so stories that some charities offer for how they'll do good. These sorts of args generally shouldn't move us from our prior much.
            - People keen on these args often seem to assign to assign little

weight to strong pieces of empirical evidence, like the past failures of charities similar to their favoured one.
    - People generally make their priors far too optimistic, and shift their priors too strongly based on weak evidence.
    - Biases often at work upping the EV
        - Especially when the numbers involved are finger-in-the-wind
        - Overconfidence in people's abilities - often their own abilities
        - Bias towards cool or fun activities - esp. when you're working on them directly, but even when you're not
        - even if you are very smart and know about the biases this does not mean you are not affected by them. In fact the smartest people tend to make the best rationalizations for their own biases.
    - EVCs are just really difficult, and there are plenty of egs of talented ppl doing them wrong - eg errors in DCP2.
    - EVCs tend to oversimplify.

Responses to other causes

(Not intended as complete take-downs, only part of the story.)

General points

- Talking about the subjectively rational donation choice. Tom isn't claiming that the single charity which'd *actually, ex post facto* turn out to do the most good with a marginal £5,000 donation from him is a global poverty charity - he'd bet against it! But that's not the action relevant question as he doesn't know what that charity is in advance.
- There may be some small donation opportunities which beat GiveWell recommendations. Tom thinks that there are.
    - But...
- Don't necessarily switch based on one deductive armchair arg just because you [don't know which premise is false]
    - http://squid314.livejournal.com/350090.html

Animal rights/welfare

X-risk

Other far future

Meta charities