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Effective Altruism: Implications for the Social Work Profession: Part II

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Abstract

The concept of effective altruism has been prominent in moral philosophy since 2009. Effective altruism is a philosophy and social movement which applies evidence and reason to determine the most effective ways to improve the world. The core tenets of effective altruism are remarkably consistent with social work's values and mission. Ironically, social work's literature does not include any in-depth discussion of effective altruism. Part I discussed the concept of effective altruism; identified its core components; and explored the relevance of effective altruism to social work's principal aims as defined by the National Association of Social Workers *Code of Ethics*. This article (Part II) focuses on two key elements of effective altruism as the concept pertains to social work: distributive justice and empiricism. To be fully implemented, effective altruism enhances the allocation of limited resources in a fair and just manner. Further, to

achieve its aims of impactful giving, effective altruism requires empirical evidence of effectiveness.

Keywords: Altruism, distributive justice, effective altruism, empiricism, equality

This discussion is Part II of a two-part article on effective altruism in social work. Effective altruism is a philosophy and social movement which applies evidence and reason to determine the most effective ways to improve the world. Part I discussed the concept of effective altruism; identified its core components; and explored the relevance of effective altruism to social work's principal aims as defined by the National Association of Social Workers *Code of Ethics*. This article (Part II) focuses on two key elements of effective altruism as the concept pertains to social work: distributive justice and empiricism. To be fully implemented, effective altruism enhances the allocation of limited resources in a fair and just manner. Further, to achieve its aims of impactful giving, effective altruism requires empirical evidence of effectiveness.

The Centre for Effective Altruism states that its principal goal is using evidence and reason to figure out how to benefit others as much as possible (MacAskill, 2015). This explicit goal includes two key philosophical concepts that are linked to altruistic efforts: distributive justice and empiricism. Social workers who are committed to effective altruism must fully grasp these concepts and their practical implications. To assist others "as much as possible" requires judgments about the most ethical distribution of aid-related resources. Distributive justice is a complex concept that requires rigorous analysis by social workers who seek to assist people to the greatest extent possible. Indeed, the philosophical literature features diverse distributive models and protocols with varying strengths and limitations.

Further, to assess the efficacy of their efforts to allocate limited resources, social workers must necessarily focus on outcomes. That is, what impact do our resource allocation efforts have? How should social workers measure this impact? Answers to these questions require judgments about the role of empiricism in social work.

Distributive Justice and Effective Altruism

Distributive justice has been of enduring concern among political philosophers, dating back at least to the ancient Greeks. Aristotle offered one of the earliest conceptualizations of justice when he distinguished between *corrective* justice, relating to punishment and retribution, and *distributive* justice, relating primarily to the allocation of resources (Spicker, 1988).

Distributive justice can be defined and understood in several ways (Olsaretti, 2018). The eighteenth-century philosopher David Hume, for example, viewed justice as an extension of property rights. That is, justice is determined in part by principles related to the acquisition of property, transfer of property, occupation of property, and so on. For Hume, extreme concentrations of wealth and property may not be a problem as long as established property rights are respected. However, extreme concentrations of wealth and property may clash with effective altruists' wish to assist people to the greatest extent possible. Philosophers who view justice in terms of property rights tend to be critical of any sort of redistributive program designed to reduce inequality. Aside from their various economic arguments concerning disincentives introduced by redistribution of property or wealth (for example, related to hard work or financial investment in production), these critics claim that redistribution would be a form of coercion and theft (Spicker, 1988).

In contrast, Herbert Spencer, the nineteenth-century English philosopher, defined justice in terms of *desert*, in that what people have a right to is a function of what they contribute to the broader society (Olsaretti, 2018). This perspective, too, may clash with effective altruists' views as embraced by social workers, given that social workers typically do not make decisions about whom to assist based on potential recipients' ability to contribute to the broader society. For example, some individuals—such as those with severe health and behavioral health challenges—may have very limited ability to contribute to the broader society in the form of employment, although they may be able to contribute in many nonmonetary ways.

For Peter Kropotkin, the Russian anarchist, justice is determined by individual need and may require some form of redistribution (Spicker, 1988). Kropotkin's view is more compatible with a traditional social work perspective.

The concept of equality is central to effective altruism and any meaningful discussion of distributive justice that occurs in a way that maximizes benefit, a key aim of effective altruism's proponents (Dworkin, 1981; Skelton, 2016; Syme, 2019). According to effective altruism, unequal distribution of resources can have negative consequences, including resentment, domination, and the erosion of public goods.

Concerns about equality and inequality strike at the heart of social workers' traditional concern about disadvantage, oppression, and exploitation. According to the National Association of Social Workers ([NASW], 2021) Code of Ethics, "The primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty" (p. 1). Further, the Code states "Social workers should advocate for resource allocation procedures that are open and fair. When not all clients' needs can be met, an allocation procedure should be developed that is nondiscriminatory and based on appropriate and consistently applied principles" (standard 3.07[b]). As the English historian R. H. Tawney (1964) observed in his classic *Equality*:

What is repulsive is not that one man should earn more than others, for where community of environment, and a common education and habit of life, have bred a common tradition of respect and consideration, these details of the counting house are forgotten or ignored. It is that some classes should be excluded from the heritage of civilization which others enjoy, and that the fact of human fellowship, which is ultimate and profound, should be obscured by economic contrasts, which are trivial and superficial. What is important is not that all men should receive the same pecuniary income. It is that the surplus resources of society should be so husbanded and applied that it is a matter of minor significance whether they receive it or not. (p. 113)

The concept of equality has been defined in a variety of ways, particularly as the concept pertains to social work, social welfare, and equity (the quality of being fair and impartial when allocating resources). These perspectives are important to consider given the aim of effective altruism to enhance human well-being to the greatest extent possible. First, there is what some philosophers refer to as *absolute equality*, where resources (wealth, property, access to services, and so on) are divided equally among people (Dworkin, 1981; Olsaretti, 2018). This is sometimes known as *equality of result* (Spicker, 1988). There is also *equality of opportunity*, which is concerned less with the ultimate outcome of distributive mechanisms than with the opportunity individuals have to gain access to desired resources. Examples include the use of a lottery or the principle of “first come-first served” to distribute limited resources. The concept of equality of opportunity also might entail the provision of remedial services to enhance opportunities for individuals who are disabled to compete for scarce or limited resources. Altruistic programs sponsored by social workers that provide opportunities for people who are low income to apply and compete for a limited number of subsidized housing units or appointments in healthcare clinics that serve uninsured individuals might also reflect equality of opportunity.

Rae (1981) suggests that four practical (and somewhat overlapping) mechanisms can be used to enhance equality and minimize inequality, a common goal of effective altruism. The first is the *maximin* policy (maximizing the minimum), where minimum standards for housing, education, health care, employment, welfare benefits, and so on are raised. A second approach is to address the *ratio* of inequality, or increasing the resources of those who are worst off in relation to those who are best off. A third policy aims for the *least difference*, where the goal is to reduce the range of inequality. And the fourth is the *minimax* principle, whose goal is to reduce the advantage of those who are most privileged, that is, to minimize the maximum.

Social workers who are concerned about historic patterns of inequality often wrestle with issues of discrimination and affirmative action. In theory, efforts that promote effective altruism must be cognizant of these

challenging phenomena (Alon, 2015). In principle, affirmative action strategies are designed to provide individuals disadvantaged by institutional discrimination with greater access to resources and equal opportunity (and the requisite skills) to compete for available resources, especially when resources are allocated in ways that are biased and discriminatory.

Critics of affirmative action claim that this form of distributive justice is, in fact, unjust in that it simply stimulates a new form of discrimination against the more privileged (Alon, 2015). As Spicker says, “If positive discrimination is egalitarian, it is because it compensates people in one sector for disadvantage in another, or because it makes up for past disadvantage. It may achieve equality of result overall, but it does so at the expense of equal treatment and equal opportunity. The argument is that inequality in one respect may lead to greater inequality in others” (p. 132).

John Rawls: A Theory of Justice

A considerable portion of contemporary social workers’ thinking about distributive justice has been influenced by John Rawls’s (1971) modern philosophical classic *A Theory of Justice*. Rawls’s views have close conceptual links with effective altruism (Berkey, 2021; Gabriel, 2017).

Rawls bases much of his argument on the concept of a social contract that is to be used to establish a just society (Wolff, 1977). He derives two core principles to enhance justice: First, liberty is the most important rule of social justice, and a just society must preserve liberty. Second, whatever inequalities exist must be acceptable to everyone.

Rawls’s theory assumes that individuals who are formulating a moral principle by which to be governed are in an “original position” of equality and that each individual is unaware of her or his own attributes and status that might represent relative advantage or disadvantage. Under this “veil of ignorance” it is assumed that individuals will produce a moral principle that protects the so-called least advantaged. This is a particularly important argument for social workers committed to effective altruism, given its clear

alignment with the profession's commitment to serving society's most vulnerable people.

Rawls's "difference principle," which states that goods must be distributed in a manner designed to benefit the least advantaged, includes a requirement to aid those in need and provides an important safeguard against applications of classic utilitarianism that might sacrifice the needs of the disadvantaged for a greater aggregation of good. In a just society, according to Rawls, some differences in wealth and assets would be acceptable only if those less well-off benefit as a result.

Rawls argues that these principles of justice can best be practiced in the context of competitive markets and some degree of government intervention to correct market imperfections and to facilitate equal opportunity. Although Rawls favors competitive markets to enhance economic incentive and efficiency, he sees competitive markets as an important device for ensuring equal liberty and equal opportunity. For Rawls, markets protect the important liberty of free choice of occupation in a competitive environment.

Rawls is particularly concerned about income derived through labor. By investing in educational and training opportunities, another key goal of effective altruism, the supply of skilled individuals would increase; at the same time, the supply of persons who, for whatever reason, must take unskilled jobs would decrease, thereby increasing their income. As Rawls says, with many more persons receiving the benefits of training and education, "the supply of qualified individuals is much greater. When there are no restrictions on entry or imperfections on the capital market for loans (or subsidies) for education, the premium earned by those better endowed is far less. The relative difference in earnings between the more favored and the lowest income class tends to close" (p. 307).

For Rawls, the economic and social advantages some people enjoy because of the "natural fortune" into which they are born—with accompanying initial endowments of natural talent, property, skill, and luck—are morally arbitrary. Ensuring greater equality in the initial distribution of property and skill level would lessen the need for significant redistribution of wealth by tax and transfer programs administered by the welfare state. This is

Rawls's principal argument for an adequate "social minimum," progressive inheritance taxation across generations, some degree of income redistribution, public policies that promote equal opportunity in education, and so on. These goals align with effective altruism and core social work values.

Rawls's conceptualization of social justice has been viewed by some as "a philosophical apologia for an egalitarian brand of welfare-state capitalism" (Wolff, 1977: 195). Others argue that the degree of equalization of property entailed by Rawls's framework moves society considerably beyond existing examples of welfare-state capitalism and is flawed (Krouse & McPherson, 1988). Nonetheless, whatever the ultimate merits of his ambitious set of policy-rich proposals, Rawls's provocative statement has clearly served to rivet much needed attention on the concept of distributive justice and its implications for effective altruism.

The Concept of Capabilities and Effective Altruism

Another critically important philosophical perspective on distributive justice, particularly in relation to poverty, was introduced by Amartya Sen (2005, 2009). As with Rawls, Sen's views have direct conceptual links with effective altruism initiatives.

According to Sen, being poor does not mean living below an imaginary poverty line. Rather, it means having an income that does not enable an individual to meet basic needs, taking into account the circumstances and social requirements of the environment. Sen argues that our view of poverty should not be based on an income level per se, but, rather, on our assessment of how much a person can achieve with that income, recognizing that such achievements will vary from one individual to another and from one geographical location to another.

Poverty analysis, Sen states, should focus on a person's potential to function rather than on the results achieved. This perspective has important implications for social workers' definition of desirable outcomes under effective altruism. Sen introduced the concept of "capabilities," which are the "real freedoms" that people have to achieve what they wish to

achieve. Real freedom assumes that a person has all the required means necessary to pursue their aims and interests; this assumption ties into the goals of effective altruism. That is, it is not merely the formal or hypothetical freedom to do or be something, but the substantial opportunity to achieve it. This notion of capacity, especially enhancing people's capacity, is consistent with core social work values.

The philosopher Martha Nussbaum (2011) has also added much to discussions of the concept of capabilities, which, presumably, proponents of effective altruism wish to maximize. The core capabilities Nussbaum argues should be supported by all democracies are:

1. *Life*. Being able to live to the end of a human life of normal length; not dying prematurely, or before one's life is so reduced as to be not worth living.
2. *Bodily Health*. Being able to have good health, including reproductive health; to be adequately nourished; to have adequate shelter.
3. *Bodily Integrity*. Being able to move freely from place to place; to be secure against violent assault, including sexual assault and domestic violence; having opportunities for sexual satisfaction and for choice in matters of reproduction.
4. *Senses, Imagination, and Thought*. Being able to use the senses, to imagine, think, and reason—and to do these things in a "truly human" way, a way informed and cultivated by an adequate education, including, but by no means limited to, literacy and basic mathematical and scientific training. Being able to use imagination and thought in connection with experiencing and producing works and events of one's own choice, religious, literary, musical, and so forth. Being able to use one's mind in ways protected by guarantees of freedom of expression with respect to both political and artistic speech, and freedom of religious exercise. Being able to have pleasurable experiences and to avoid non-beneficial pain.
5. *Emotions*. Being able to have attachments to things and people outside ourselves; to love those who love and care for us, to grieve at their absence; in general, to love, to grieve, to experience

- longing, gratitude, and justified anger. Not having one's emotional development blighted by fear and anxiety.
6. *Practical Reason*. Being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one's life.
 7. *Affiliation*. Being able to live with and toward others, to recognize and show concern for other humans, to engage in various forms of social interaction; to be able to imagine the situation of another. Having the social bases of self-respect and non-humiliation; being able to be treated as a dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others. This entails provisions of non-discrimination on the basis of race, sex, sexual orientation, ethnicity, caste, religion, national origin and species.
 8. *Other Species*. Being able to live with concern for and in relation to animals, plants, and the world of nature.
 9. *Play*. Being able to laugh, to play, to enjoy recreational activities.
 10. *Control over one's Environment*, in two respects:
 - Political*. Being able to participate effectively in political choices that govern one's life; having the right of political participation, protections of free speech and association.
 - Material*. Being able to hold property (both land and movable goods), and having property rights on an equal basis with others; having the right to seek employment on an equal basis with others; having the freedom from unwarranted search and seizure. In work, being able to work as a human, exercising practical reason and entering into meaningful relationships of mutual recognition with other workers.

Nussbaum classifies capabilities into several types. Basic capabilities are the innate resources individuals have in order to develop more advanced capabilities. Internal capabilities build on pre-existing basic capabilities by use of resources such as exercise, education, and training.

Combined capabilities, according to Nussbaum, are defined as internal capabilities supplemented by the external conditions that make the

exercise of a function a realistic option. The aim of public policy and, we can argue, effective altruism is the promotion of combined capabilities that social workers are often in a position to facilitate. This requires two kinds of efforts: (1) the promotion of internal capabilities (for example, by education or training) and (2) the making available of the external institutional and material conditions. For Nussbaum, the capabilities of human beings should not be permitted to fall below a certain floor. These, too, are concepts that seem embedded in social workers' core beliefs about the importance of public policies that enhance vulnerable people's ability to live meaningful lives.

The Role of Social Work Empiricism

In addition to effective altruism's intense focus on distributive justice is its principal concern with evidence-based decision making and philanthropy. Effective altruism assumes that altruistic efforts can be evaluated, and that data are available to make judgments about effective giving. According to its website, GiveWell, a non-profit organization that implements the effective altruism model, is devoted to "finding outstanding giving opportunities and publishing the full details of our analysis to help donors decide where to give." GiveWell bases its assessments on staffers' review of research evidence and outcome data. According to the organization's mission statement, "We look at independent studies of charity programs, such as randomized controlled trials, to understand their effectiveness."

In this respect, social workers who embrace the ideals of effective altruism and its emphasis on empiricism and outcome studies must acknowledge the longstanding challenges social workers have faced documenting the effectiveness of their efforts. Although social work generally exhibits considerable support for a "scientific" approach to professional practice and measuring outcomes, at least in principle, there is considerable debate about the extent to which social work has fulfilled these aims and has the ability to do so moving forward. Limitations in social work's

research-based track record may limit the profession's ability to truly implement effective altruism.

Historically, social workers who have advocated for strong, ambitious research agendas to measure outcomes and effectiveness have embraced the epistemological school of thought known as logical positivism, the philosophical school of thought that emerged in Vienna in the 1920s (Richardson & Uebel, 2007). According to logical empiricism, researchers should seek “objective” scientific methodology to measure phenomena, emphasizing observable properties of material things that can be subjected to experimental methods.

Logical positivism is based on several key assumptions. In principle, a single, tangible reality can be reduced to its component parts, which can then be studied independently. The researcher (or observer) can be separated from that which is observed, and what is true at one time may, under appropriate circumstances, also be true at another time and place. Further, logical empiricism assumes linear causality, that is, independent (or causal) variables are correlated in a linear fashion with dependent (or outcome) variables. Finally, this paradigm assumes that the results of sound research are independent of investigators' values and biases. These assumptions are highly relevant to effective altruists' commitment to empirical evaluation of their efforts to promote good and useful outcomes.

The Challenges of Empiricism

For decades social workers have made enthusiastic attempts to apply the scientific method and its principles to investigation of social phenomena related to enduring social work concerns, such as poverty, mental health, health care, aging, disability, trauma, child welfare, criminal justice, and community organizing. Empirical studies abound in the form of case studies, controlled trials, single-case (N=1) designs, needs assessments, program evaluations, and social surveys.

By the early 1980s, however, a small group of critics began to question the merits of what is known as the hypothetico-deductive model for social

work. Beginning especially with Heineman's (1981) controversial critique, a number of social work scholars and practitioners began to question the positivist foundation that had emerged in social work (Epstein, 1986; Gordon, 1983; Rodwell, 1987).

For Heineman and other critics, logical positivism is a problematic model for social work because, in part, our empirical observations are fallible, and data gatherers may influence that which they observe and the interpretation of these phenomena. Empirically-oriented social workers also find it difficult to operationalize some abstract concepts commonly encountered in the profession (such as self-esteem, ego strength, dysfunction, conflict, trauma) and frequently have trouble documenting causal relationships among variables. For decades, for example, social workers have tried to identify factors that influence "successful" and "effective" intervention and treatment. Despite these ambitious and partially fruitful efforts, however, researchers continue to struggle to identify those factors that can be documented clearly. When we deal with phenomena as complex as human behavior and relationships, we have considerable difficulty identifying in the first place the specific concepts that may warrant empirical investigation. Many social workers believe that hard-to-identify traits affect what occurs in the relationship between social worker and client; despite endless speculation, there is no consensus among practitioners or researchers on which attributes matter most.

Also, true experimentation, including random assignment to experimental and control groups, along with pretests and posttests, is relatively rare in social work, either because a sufficient number of research participants are not available or because withholding an intervention from clients in a control group would be patently unethical. For example, social workers are likely to be uncomfortable randomly assigning children who have been severely abused to treatment and no-treatment groups to evaluate the causal effects of an intervention; deliberately withholding services for traumatized children may seem unconscionable. In short, social work contexts and circumstances often are such that research principles and designs

would need to be compromised in order to carry out any inquiry whatsoever.

A considerable portion of empirical social work research is devoted to analysis of cause-effect relationships, particularly related to assessment of treatment outcomes required by effective altruism. These explanatory studies, however, often are compromised because of basic design limitations. These limitations usually pertain to problems of internal and external validity (Rubin & Babbie, 2017).

Internal validity ordinarily is defined as the extent to which changes in a dependent (or outcome) variable are attributable to changes in one or more independent (or causal) variables. Key to explanatory studies is the ability to control for extraneous factors that might account for change in the dependent variable apart from the intervention or treatment. Ideally, these extraneous factors—which may include the effects of client maturation, contemporaneous events in clients' lives, historical events in clients' lives, and measurement itself (for example, “demand characteristics” and response bias)—are best controlled for by using a classic experimental design (Larson, 2019; Reamer, 1998). Such designs—the gold standard in research in every discipline and profession—ideally include random assignment of eligible clients to experimental (treatment) and control groups, followed by the collection of baseline or pretest data, the introduction of the intervention to clients in the experimental (treatment) group, and follow-up or post-test data collection.

There is widespread consensus that, in principle, this strategy is the most effective way to control for extraneous factors that might influence outcomes. Under this arrangement, differences in outcomes between the experimental (treatment) groups are attributable only to the intervention. Without a control group, it is difficult to know what would have happened to clients without any intervention. Further, without random assignment to an experimental and control group—that is, if intact groups are used for the experimental and control groups—differences in outcomes may be due to initial differences between the groups. While the classic experimental design may work well in laboratory settings and pharmacological research,

social work researchers often encounter difficulty implementing it. These design constraints typically mean that a social work researcher has difficulty ruling out a variety of plausible alternative explanations for a study's results. As a consequence, social work studies that set out to identify causal relationships among variables—a key element of effective altruism—often need to settle for the mere identification of various correlations among variables. Given that the variables involved in social work practice phenomena typically do not emerge in a clean linear fashion, the research designs we often end up using seem unable to fully capture the complex interactions and relationships that occur.

External validity, on the other hand, refers to the extent to which results of a study can be generalized to other contexts, circumstances, and settings. Generalizing the results of impactful efforts is essential to full implementation of effective altruism. Here, too, social work researchers often encounter limitations. For practical reasons, research samples may be small or nonrepresentative, limiting the results' generalizability. Although it is ideal to design studies based on probability samples (for example, simple random or stratified random samples), social workers often must settle for nonprobability samples (for example, accidental, quota, purposive, snowball samples). Master lists of clients or potential research participants often are not available, thereby precluding the use of probability sampling protocols.

Bounded Rationality in Social Work

The regrettable result of these various limitations is that a significant portion of empirically-based social work research is flawed, and this reality may limit full implementation of effective altruism. Unfortunately, however, consumers of empirical research, and often the researchers themselves, fail to acknowledge adequately that these limitations exist. This limitation seriously compromises efforts to evaluate the impact of interventions and services linked with effective altruism.

Like all scientists, social work researchers suffer from what Herbert Simon (1957) referred to as “bounded rationality.” That is, human beings are not as omniscient, rational, and consistently logical as we might like to be. Inevitably, our decisions and ability to grasp the world around us are affected by a variety of nonrational and nonlogical factors. Social workers have a limited ability to identify and understand the implications of the many variables that are related to practice. As a result, often the value of our research is limited.

One common problem concerns social workers’ ability to measure precisely, whether gathering quantitative or qualitative data. We may know that in any given project it is important to measure the impact of efforts to address such phenomena as trust, poverty, hope, self-esteem, addiction, or aggression, for example. It can be extremely difficult, however, to produce sensitive and valid operational definitions and empirical indicators of these concepts (often known in research as the challenge of face and content validity). Although we may be able to construct reasonably reliable self-report or other data collection instruments for recording feelings, attitudes, and behaviors related to these phenomena, much of what social workers measure still must be considered “soft” and elusive.

Social workers also sometimes dwell on results that are statistically significant (the likelihood of rejecting the null hypothesis when it is really true is 5 percent or less) but that lack substantive significance. This has become especially problematic as the use of complex multivariate statistical procedures that are little understood by many practicing social workers has proliferated among advanced researchers. As part of an ambitious effective altruism agenda, lengthy and complex discussions of empirical findings may emphasize statistically significant results based on what are actually very small correlations and coefficients that have little practical meaning and application. Practitioners who are able to follow the technical statistical analyses may struggle to understand what relevance such trivial statistically significant results might have.

Conclusion

Effective altruism is a powerfully important movement that has close links to social work's core aims and values. In principle, effective altruism provides social workers with a compelling conceptual and practical framework to enhance the profession's contributions.

Effective altruism seeks to promote the greatest amount of good possible, given available resources. In this respect, full implementation of effective altruism requires thoughtful reflections about distributive justice—the fair and just allocation of the limited resources available to assist people—and the ability to evaluate the effectiveness of social work's programs and interventions.

Distributive justice is a complex phenomenon. The reality is that there is no consensus among social workers regarding the fairest way to allocate limited social service and social welfare resources. Some practitioners favor some form of equality, while others give priority to allocation mechanisms based on individuals' level of need, affirmative action, or some other factor. To be effective altruists, social workers must continually strive to determine the fairest and most just distributive mechanism consistent with social work values.

And, to fully implement effective altruists, social workers must do what they can to evaluate the impact of their interventions and programs in a way that passes rigorous research muster. This entails designing evaluations that have strong internal and external validity, such that outcome data can truly be attributed to the interventions being evaluated. This is a tall order, especially given the very real limitations social workers face controlling for diverse extraneous factors that may account for client and programmatic outcomes independent of the interventions themselves. In this respect, social workers must be realists and acknowledge honestly when their research designs limit their ability to link outcomes to services and interventions.

The good news is that effective altruism holds great promise for social work. The challenging news is that effective altruism, in its purest form, can

be difficult to implement with fidelity. Social workers are accustomed to this sort of challenge. Real-life obstacles that affect clients, practitioners, and programs are ever-present in the profession. That said, social workers are up to the task. As Jane Addams (1902) observed, “For action is indeed the sole medium of expression for ethics” (p. 119).

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