

Institution: University of Oxford		
Unit of Assessment: 30 - Philosophy		
Title of case study: Changing how and what people give to effective altruistic causes		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2015-2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
William MacAskill Toby Ord	Associate Professor Senior Research Fellow	1 August 2015 – present 1 October 2009 – present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 1 August 2015 – 30 November 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)		
<p>MacAskill's research on effective altruism led to millions of pounds in donations to charity. It motivated billionaire Ben DeLo to pledge over USD500,000,000 to effective charities over his lifetime. The research also had a large influence on setting up the Long-term Future Effective Altruism Fund, which has paid out more than USD4,000,000 to charitable purposes to this day. MacAskill has also reached a large public audience through several high-profile podcasts and a TED talk, drawing dozens of people into the effective altruism movement with a commitment to improve human and animal wellbeing.</p>		
2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)		
<p>Between 2015 and 2020, MacAskill and Ord have been carrying out desk research in moral philosophy to answer the most important questions regarding institutional, philanthropic and individual action to maximise impartial welfare. This came in two categories: the foundations of effective altruism, and decision-making under moral uncertainty.</p>		
Foundations of effective altruism		
<p>Effective altruism uses evidence and reason to figure out how to benefit others by as much as possible and taking action on that basis. For example: if you want to donate to charity, which charity will do the most good (impartially considered), with your donation? Or if you want to pursue a career that has a positive impact on the world, which career paths will have the biggest impact?</p>		
<p>Research carried out by MacAskill between 2015 and 2019, including <i>The Definition of Effective Altruism</i> [1], <i>Effective Altruism: Introduction</i> [2], and <i>Understanding Effective Altruism and its Challenges</i> [3] further developed and defined the concept of 'effective altruism'. This research enabled improved understanding of what implications these ideas have on contemporary debates in shaping altruistic actions to maximise impartial welfare. His research has helped distinguish effective altruism from related concepts, like utilitarianism, show how morally ecumenical effective altruism is, and respond to common misconceptions about effective altruism, such as that it is unable to account for 'systemic change.'</p>		
Decision-making under moral uncertainty		
<p>Second, decision-making under moral uncertainty. Very often we are uncertain about what we ought, morally, to do. So how should we make decisions in the face of such uncertainty? This is a crucial theoretical issue for someone who is engaged in the project of effective altruism because it impacts so heavily on the question of <i>cause-prioritisation</i>: if you want to do the most good, should you try to improve the health of the world's poorest people, try to reduce the risk of civilizational catastrophe from climate change, or do something else? One's answer to this question will depend on fundamental moral issues, like how to value the interests of future generations against the present generation. We don't, currently, know the answers to those questions. But we still need to act, despite our uncertainty. The theory of decision-making under</p>		

moral uncertainty allows us to make more rational and reasoned decisions, despite that uncertainty.

Between 2015 and 2020, MacAskill and Ord generated a novel account of how correctly to make decisions under moral uncertainty, as outlined in the following works: *Moral Uncertainty* [4], *Statistical Normalization Methods in Interpersonal and Intertheoretic Comparisons* [5], and *Practical Ethics Given Moral Uncertainty* [6].

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

[1] [Chapter in Book] MacAskill, W. (2019) 'The Definition of Effective Altruism' in *Effective Altruism: Philosophical Issues*, Hilary Greaves and Theron Pummer eds. Oxford University Press. DOI: [10.1093/oso/9780198841364.003.0001](https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198841364.003.0001)

[2] [Journal Article] MacAskill, W. Effective Altruism: Introduction, *Essays in Philosophy*, vol. 18, no.1 (January 2017), pp. 1-5. DOI: [10.7710/1526-0569.1580](https://doi.org/10.7710/1526-0569.1580)

[3] [Chapter in Book] MacAskill, W. (2018) 'Understanding Effective Altruism and Its Challenges' in *The Palgrave Handbook of Philosophy and Public Policy*, David Boonin ed. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. DOI: [10.1007/978-3-319-93907-0_34](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-93907-0_34)

[4] [Authored Book, listed in REF2] MacAskill, W., Bykvist, K., Ord, T. (2020) *Moral Uncertainty* Oxford University Press. DOI: [10.1093/oso/9780198722274.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198722274.001.0001)

[5] [Journal Article] Cotton-Barratt, O., MacAskill, W., Ord, T. Statistical Normalization Methods in Interpersonal and Intertheoretic Comparisons. *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 117, issue 2 (February 2020), pp. 61-95. DOI: [10.5840/jphil202011725](https://doi.org/10.5840/jphil202011725)

[6] [Journal Article] MacAskill, W. Practical Ethics Given Moral Uncertainty, *Utilitas*, vol. 31, issue 3 (April 2019), pp. 231-245. DOI: [10.1017/S0953820819000013](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0953820819000013)

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

The impact of this research falls into two main areas: (1) public policy, law and services; (2) understanding, learning and participation.

Diverting institutional philanthropic resources towards more effective causes

MacAskill's research on effective altruism between 2015 and 2019 has influenced the work of NGOs and other organisations by directing philanthropic resources towards more effective causes. Key examples of these are listed below:

- MacAskill's research on effective altruism (especially research item 1) led several philanthropists, including billionaire Ben Delo, to direct their donations towards charities working in the field of effective altruism. [A] Ben Delo has, as a result of MacAskill's research, joined the Giving Pledge in 2019 and committed to donate the majority of his wealth to long-term oriented effective altruistic causes. [B] Effective Giving UK, who advise Ben Delo, state: "Based on Prof. MacAskill's research, our advisee and the UK's youngest self-made billionaire, Ben Delo, pledged to donate the majority of his wealth (over USD500,000,000) to work to safeguard future generations and protect the long-term prospects of humanity. In Mr. Delo's Giving Letter, he explicitly cites Prof. MacAskill's work on effective altruism [...] as influential to his giving strategy." Ben Delo learned about MacAskill's unpublished work through having personal conversations with him. On the Giving Pledge website, Delo states, "My approach is inspired by philosopher William MacAskill and the effective altruism movement, which promotes the use of reason and evidence when deciding how best to help others [...]. In short, I believe that all lives are valuable, including those of future generations." [A]

- After MacAskill's research on effective altruism was featured on the Making Sense Podcast with Sam Harris, [C] Harris decided to pledge 10% of his personal earnings as well as USD3,500 of the organisation's income to effective charities, by signing the Giving What We Can Pledge. [D, page 348] The podcast has approximately 1,000,000 downloads per episode.
- Based on his research, MacAskill advised the Centre for Effective Altruism in establishing a fund for individual donors, directed to the long-term future. The Centre for Effective Altruism is an Oxford-based charity working in support of the effective altruism community in bringing about positive changes in how we improve the world. MacAskill co-founded the organisation in 2011. The Executive Director of the Centre for Effective Altruism said: "MacAskill's research was [sic] vital input in establishing the Long-Term Future Fund." [E] The Long-Term Future Fund has raised more than USD4,800,000, of which over USD4,100,000 was paid out between March 2017 and November 2020 for charitable purposes. [F]

Diverting lay public resources towards more effective causes

MacAskill and Ord's research has contributed to enhancing understanding of issues in effective charity and decision-making on the benefits of giving to evidence-based charities. He has stimulated public interest and engagement in altruistic decision-making, increased awareness of these areas and challenged norms in the area of effective ways to improve welfare. Below are some of the key examples of how this has been achieved.

- In April 2018, MacAskill argued the moral importance of the long-term future in a TED talk on the concept of effective altruism [A, B, C], released on the TED website. [G] The talk has been watched almost 2,000,000 times and has been picked up by popular news and public intellectuals, including Max Tegmark, famous author, physicist, cosmologist and machine learning researcher on Twitter. Tegmark writes, "This was one of my favorite 2018 TED talks: let's not only do good but pick our battles wisely!" [G]
- MacAskill presented his research on moral uncertainty [research items 4, 5, 6] on popular podcasts over the period 2015-2019, including the 80,000 Hours podcast (circa 26,000 downloads), The Tim Ferriss Show, Very Bad Wizards, and the AI Alignment Podcast. [H] Some of these appearances popularised MacAskill's research, and led to changes in the audience's donation behaviours and careers - such as a survey respondent starting an MPhil in a related field after listening to a podcast of MacAskill's on Moral Uncertainty. [L]
- MacAskill encouraged people to join the effective altruism movement, and to dedicate more of their time and money towards effective charity. In a survey by the Effective Altruism Forum of their members in 2019, respondents were asked how they had first heard of effective altruism, 72 people (63% of 115 open comments) cite MacAskill's podcast appearances, and 4 people (5% of 76 open comments) cite MacAskill's TED talk [I]. The mean donation to effective charities per survey respondent was USD6,407 (calculation: USD16,100,000 total donations [J] among 2513 respondents [K].) One of the survey respondents who was influenced by reading MacAskill's work said "I now donate 10% of my income" to charities and causes "such as the Against Malaria Foundation and efforts to reduce existential risk." [L]

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

[A] Effective Giving, Letter on Ben Delo Giving (2020); Ben Delo, *Giving Pledge Letter* (2019).

[B] Web archive of the Giving Pledge Website listing Ben Delo's message and commitment. Available at: <https://givingpledge.org/Pledger.aspx?id=383>

[C] Report by Impact Evaluator of reach and influence of podcasts with Sam Harris. Podcasts are available at: <https://dynamic.wakingup.com/course/658>

And at: <https://samharris.org/podcasts/being-good-and-doing-good/>

[D] Web archive of the Giving What We Can Website listing Sam Harris' commitment. Member 5028. Available at: <https://www.givingwhatwecan.org/about-us/members/>

[E] Corroborating letter from the Executive Director of the Centre for Effective Altruism regarding MacAskill's contribution to the creation of the Centre and in establishing the Long-Term Future fund (10 December 2020).

[F] Website record of payout reports of the Long-Term Future fund confirming that over USD4,100,000 was paid to effective charities between March 2017 and November 2020. Available at: <https://app.effectivealtruism.org/funds/far-future>

[G] Report by Impact Evaluator on reach and influence of TED talk. TED talk available at: https://www.ted.com/talks/will_macaskill_what_are_the_most_important_moral_problems_of_our_time

- a. Jessica Stillman, *These are the best 10 TED talks of 2018* (Inc., 2018). Available at: <https://www.inc.com/jessica-stillman/the-10-best-ted-talks-of-2018-according-to-guy-who-runs-ted.html>
- b. Comment from Max Tegmark (2018) stating "This was one of my favorite 2018 TED talks". Comment available at: <https://twitter.com/tegmark/status/1041571883940896769>

[H] Report by Impact Evaluator on 80,000 Hours and other podcasts.

- a. 80,000 hours podcast available at: <https://80000hours.org/podcast/episodes/will-macaskill-moral-philosophy/>
- b. Julia Galef, *William MacAskill on "Moral Uncertainty"* (Rationally Speaking Podcast, 2017). Available at: <http://rationallyspeakingpodcast.org/show/rs-181-william-macaskill-on-moral-uncertainty.html>
- c. AI Alignment podcast, *Moral Uncertainty and the Path to AI Alignment with William MacAskill* (2017). Available at: <https://futureoflife.org/2018/09/17/moral-uncertainty-and-the-path-to-ai-alignment-with-william-macaskill/>
- d. Tim Ferris Show, *Will MacAskill on Effective Altruism, Y Combinator, and Artificial Intelligence* (2015). Available at: <https://tim.blog/2015/11/22/will-macaskill/>
- e. Very Bad Wizards, *Episode 147: Effective altruism and moral uncertainty (with the one true scotsman, Will MacAskill)*. (Very Bad Wizards Podcast, 2018). Available at: <https://verybadwizards.fireside.fm/guests/willmacaskill>

[I] Web archive of EA Survey 2019: How EAs Get Involved in EA (2020). Summary of survey showing how respondents joined the effective altruism movement. Available at: <https://forum.effectivealtruism.org/posts/ZuGTc3awtG6nrziiq/ea-survey-2019-series-how-eas-get-involved-in-ea>

[J] Survey 2019 Series: Donation Data (2020). Summary of how much survey respondents are now donating to effective charities. Available at: <https://forum.effectivealtruism.org/posts/29xPsh2MKkYGCuJhS/ea-survey-2019-series-donation-data>

[K] EA Survey 2019 Series: Community Demographics & Characteristics (2019). Summary of demographics. Available at: <https://forum.effectivealtruism.org/posts/wtQ3XCL35uxjXpwjE/ea-survey-2019-series-community-demographics-and>

[L] Quotes from members of effective altruism community showing effects of MacAskill's research on their views, careers and donations. Corroborators 1 (MPhil student) and 2 (Effective Giving UK) can also be contacted to confirm quotes.