


Section A		
Institution: University of St Andrews		
Unit of Assessment: UoA 30: Philosophy		
Title of case study: Expanding Ethical Circles		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2015 - 2019		
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:
Theron Pummer	Senior Lecturer	01 September 2015 - present
Ben Sachs	Senior Lecturer	01 September 2012 - present
Elizabeth Ashford	Senior Lecturer	01 March 2001 - present
Tim Mulgan	Professor	01 June 2005 – present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2016 - 31 December 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No		
Section B		
1. Summary of the impact		
<p>We have impacted beliefs and behaviours beyond academia on matters concerning the <i>scope of ethics</i> through research-driven writing, public events, and online materials. Our research supports the claim that ethical considerations extend beyond the traditional moral circles of the 'nearby' and apply more widely to distant people, future people, and non-human individuals, whether terrestrial or not.</p> <p>Our research and corresponding engagement activities have been used for community-building purposes by the NGOs <i>The Life You Can Save</i> and the <i>Centre for Effective Altruism</i>. Additionally, a variety of analytics show that 10s of 1000s of people from around the globe have engaged with our public philosophy through events and media including <i>The Conversation</i>, <i>The Guardian</i>, <i>The Times</i>, <i>Fox News</i>, <i>Vox</i>, <i>The Express</i>, and <i>Newsweek</i>; notably in one of our events, feedback showed 13% of 12,000 people (respondents) changed their viewpoint.</p>		
2. Underpinning research		
<p>Our underpinning research deals with the <i>scope of ethics</i>. This requires us to examine challenging questions, such as: Which things in this vast universe <i>matter</i>? Which things have interests? Which have rights that give rise to moral obligations? Many believe that all humans matter, regardless of their distance from us. What are the implications for our obligations to distant persons living in extreme poverty, e.g., through charitable giving? What are our duties to nonhuman animals? Or to extra-terrestrials? Or future generations? Questions such as these demonstrate that our 'moral circle' is potentially broad enough to encompass all individuals; this requires a reassessment of both our moral priorities as well as our 'place' within the moral universe.</p> <p>We argue that global social structures, which fail to uphold human rights to subsistence are unjust, and that morality demands we contribute to reforming these structures (R1). In a world where many agents are failing to contribute, and where reform takes considerable time, affluent individuals are under a duty to aid distant needy individuals by giving to NGOs. We further argue that it is not only our duty to give <i>more</i> (a standard focus in the literature), but to give <i>better</i>, that is, more cost-effectively – the same monetary gift to one life-saving charity can prevent ten times as many deaths as when given to another (R2). Duties to give more and duties to give effectively can come apart; in many cases, it may be morally acceptable not to give large sums of money to charity, but nonetheless be wrong to give ineffectively with what money one does choose to</p>		

donate. These findings support engagement with the ‘effective altruism’ movement, which provides recommendations to those looking for the most cost-effective ways of making a positive difference with their time, talents, and money (**R3**).

Looking beyond human persons, we have argued that nonhuman individuals, such as terrestrial animals, also fall within the scope of ethics. In particular, we have argued that an act’s harmfulness can be sufficient to make it wrong, regardless of whether the individual harmed is a human being. Since nonhuman animals are capable of suffering harm at our hands, they fall within our moral circle (**R4**). Therefore, there are moral constraints on using animals for food and for medical experimentation. This same harm-based argument for taking account of nonhuman animals applies to extra-terrestrials, insofar as we can potentially cause harm to extra-terrestrials. This, in turn, places important constraints on space exploration, which comes with non-negligible risks to potential extra-terrestrial civilizations. Nor do we believe that the scope of ethics ends with those (human or otherwise) who exist *presently*. Just as we can be called upon to answer for our behaviours to those who exist presently, so too we can be called upon to answer to future generations, especially considering they will have to contend with a largely broken global ecosystem for which earlier generations bear responsibility (**R5**). Finally, we have argued that if the scope of ethics is as wide as suggested above, humanity occupies a less central place in the moral universe than has been traditionally assumed (**R6**).

3. References to the research

All the research listed is peer-reviewed and published by highly regarded academic publishers.

R1. Chapter in edited volume. Ashford, Elizabeth (2018). ‘Severe Poverty as an Unjust Emergency’, in Paul Woodruff (ed.), *The Ethics of Giving* (Oxford University Press): 103-148. DOI: [10.1093/oso/9780190648879.003.0005](https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190648879.003.0005)

R2. Journal article. Pummer, Theron (2016). ‘Whether and Where to Give’, *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 44(1): 77-95. DOI: [10.1111/papa.12065](https://doi.org/10.1111/papa.12065)

R3. Edited volume. Greaves, Hilary and Pummer, Theron, eds. (2019). *Effective Altruism: Philosophical Issues*, Oxford University Press. Print ISBN-13: 9780198841364. DOI: [10.1093/oso/9780198841364.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198841364.001.0001)

R4. Monograph. Sachs, Ben (2018). *Explaining Right and Wrong: A New Moral Pluralism and its Implications*, Routledge. eBook ISBN9781315142302. DOI: [10.4324/9781315142302](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315142302)

R5. Journal article. Mulgan, Tim (2018). ‘Answering to Future People: Responsibility for Climate Change in a Breaking World’, *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 35(3): 532-548. DOI: [10.1111/japp.12222](https://doi.org/10.1111/japp.12222)

R6. Monograph. Mulgan, Tim (2015). *Purpose in the Universe: The moral and metaphysical case for Ananthropocentric Purposivism*, Oxford University Press. Print ISBN-13: 9780199646142. DOI: [10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199646142.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199646142.001.0001)

4. Details of the impact

Our activities have expanded people’s circles in two ways: First, they have induced changes in public opinion; second, they have influenced the research and outreach strategies of two effective altruist NGOs.

Contributing to the Awareness of the Moral Importance of Non-Humans

The activities of Sachs and Mulgan have led to increased scepticism about the human-centred message embodied in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and increased awareness of the fact that the universe is not made for, nor is the dominion of, humankind.

Sachs has engaged in activities enabling the spreading of a central message from his recent book (**R4**), namely that causing harm to other sentient beings is no less wrong-making than is causing harm to humans. First, Sachs produced an article for *The Conversation* titled “Eight ethical questions about exploring outer space that need answers” in 2018—an article that challenged its readers to expand their ethical circle by thinking about how humanity’s exploration

of space could affect non-human life forms and environments. This piece was republished in *Quartz*, *The Wire* (India), *The Independent*, and the *World Economic Forum*, and in the print edition of *The Scotsman*, among others, and was widely read on all 6 inhabited continents (see map below). As of 16 December 2020, it has garnered over 73,000 reads (**S1**), putting it in the 90th percentile for readership among all articles in *The Conversation* in 2017-18 (“for politics/society/business/arts pieces, the average number of reads is between 10,000 and 20,000”) (**S2**)—a remarkable figure given that the typical readership for an article in the humanities is many times smaller than that for a typical article in the sciences. Those who read this article were challenged to broaden their ethical outlook.



Global readership of The Conversation article (2018) entitled, “Eight ethical questions about exploring outer space that need answers”

In addition, between 1 July 2019 and 7 July 2019, Sachs co-presented a physics/philosophy cross-disciplinary exhibit at The Royal Society Summer Science Exhibition (RSSSE) called “A Message from Afar”. The exhibit showcased the SETI (Search for Extra-terrestrial Intelligence) research of the project lead, Prof. Martin Dominik (University of St Andrews, School of Physics and Astronomy) and various other researchers, alongside Sachs’s philosophical research. Through the exhibit, we engaged the public in dialogue about, and surveyed them on, how wide our ethical circle ought to be, including whether our efforts to make contact with alien civilizations should be brought to a halt *for the sake of the aliens themselves*. (This question implicitly draws upon **R4-R6**.) The 2019 RSSSE was attended by 12,653 people, an overall increase of 8% from 2018 (1,500 students (**S3**), and “A Message from Afar” was covered extensively over a period of many months, e.g. by *The Guardian*, *The Times*, *Fox News*, *Vox*, *The Express*, and *Newsweek* (with combined total readership/viewers in hundreds of millions worldwide) (**S4**), with *Fox News* commenting that the survey constitutes “at long last” an attempt to understand how the public feels about these questions (<https://www.foxnews.com/science/what-would-you-do-if-we-found-aliens-survey-asks>). The survey, completable both online (<https://www.fromafar.world/opinion>) and using iPads at the RSSSE, has received 14,111 responses as of 10 December 2020 and still receives about 80 responses per month, according to Prof. Martin Dominik, who is administering the survey (**S5**). The exhibit and survey were so well received that the team were invited to, and did, exhibit again at the Dundee Science Centre. The Head of Development at the Centre reported that hosting “A Message from Afar” helped the Centre “to provide an engagement programme that accurately reflects cutting-edge science and showcases the diversity within STEM careers” (**S6**).

Finally, Sachs and Mulgan have both participated in public events seeking to spread the message about humanity not sitting at the centre of the moral universe. Mulgan, for his part, participated in a public debate in 2016 in London, with several hundred people in attendance, on whether the universe has a purpose. He argued there, based on his book (**R6**), that the universe *does* have a purpose, but humanity is not central to it, thus showing that humanity does not sit at the centre of the ethical circle. The podcast of the debate (<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/theforum/does-the-universe-have-a-purpose/>) was downloaded over 4,000 times, though this is an under

estimate – more tellingly, 48% of the audience never studied philosophy (**S7**). Sachs, for his part, organized an event at the Edinburgh Science Festival titled ‘Get Your Hands Off Me You Damned Dirty Alien!’ on 5 April 2018. The audience of 70 people (members of the public) were given, as background information, a quote from the first sentence of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

(https://www.ica.org/sites/default/files/the_universal_declaration_of_human_rights_an_archival_commentary.pdf), proclaiming the “*inherent dignity and equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family*”. They were asked the following question before and after a panel discussion on human-alien encounters (featuring an astrobiologist, a theologian, a political theorist, a philosopher): *Could the existence of a superior form of life elsewhere in the universe make this proclamation untrue?* Only 16% answered ‘yes’ before the discussion, and 29% answered ‘yes’ afterwards (<https://academic.oup.com/astrogeo/article/59/3/3.41/4995443>). In other words, attending this discussion caused a near *doubling* of scepticism about the moral outlook that forms the basis of the most famous and influential human-centred rights proclamation in history.

Influencing the Research and Outreach Strategies of two Effective Altruist NGOs

Drawing upon his research (**R1-R3**) on effective altruism, which argues that privileged people ought to de-centre their ethical circle by prioritising impacts on others in their deliberation about where they direct their charitable giving, Pummer’s outreach efforts have influenced the research and outreach strategies of two NGOs focusing on ‘effective altruism’ (as seen with, for example, cost-effective charitable giving).

First, drawing upon (**R1-R3**), Pummer organized a series of public events and workshops between 2015 and 2017, which forged connections with the *Centre for Effective Altruism* (<https://www.centreforeffectivealtruism.org/>) and influenced their focus and research priorities in building an international network of PhD and postdoctoral researchers (**S8**). This NGO is the flagship organisation of the effective altruism movement. It serves to educate people about the most cost-effective ways of improving the world in a number of areas, including world poverty, animal welfare, and reducing risks of existential catastrophes. They do this through conferences, online resources, donor coordination strategies, and grant-making focused on research and outreach. Their impact as an NGO includes moving approximately USD1,000,000,000 to effective charities (<https://www.effectivealtruism.org/impact/>).

Second, with two PG Research Assistants and an IT Officer, Pummer produced an easily searchable online database to facilitate outreach and lesson planning on effective charitable giving (released October 2019). The NGO *The Life You Can Save* (<https://www.thelifeyoucansave.org/>) helped to construct the database and are now helping to promote it (**S8**). This NGO encourages making charitable giving a regular part of one’s life and it provides publicly available rankings of the cost-effectiveness of charities, including an ‘impact calculator’ showing how far a given donation can go (<https://www.thelifeyoucansave.org/impact-calculator/>).

His article “Effective giving: how the world’s wealthy could help millions more people for free” published on 8 June 2017 in *The Conversation* (directly inspired by (**R2**)) was read by people in the USA, Australia, Canada, India, South Africa and Europe and was republished in *EconoTimes* (they reach over 500,000 people (unique visitors) per month) and in *Alliance* (they reach 20,000 people (unique visitors) per month and their newsletter has 13,000 people (registered contacts)) (**S9**) and elicited a response from the Director of *Giving Evidence*, a donor consultancy organisation, who agreed with Pummer that people need moral principles to guide their charitable giving. Also drawing upon **R1-R3**, Pummer released a video interview and followed it up with a long-form article on his research, titled “What’s bad about being good?” This article outperformed all previous long-forms at St Andrews in terms of early views, with clear evidence that the majority of people stayed on to read the page (**S10**).

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

S1. Analytics that *The Conversation* produced for the article.

S2. Email from the Membership Director at *The Conversation*.

- S3.** Individual Exhibit Feedback provided by the Royal Society about the Summer Science Exhibition.
- S4.** Articles in *The Guardian*, *The Times*, and *Newsweek*.
- S5.** Email from survey administrator.
- S6.** Email from Head of Development at the Dundee Science Centre.
- S7.** Email from the Director of the Forum for Philosophy.
- S8.** Statements from NGOs: the previous Executive Director of *Giving What We Can* (and employee of the *Centre for Effective Altruism*) and the COO at *The Life You Can Save*.
- S9.** Analytics that *The Conversation* produced for the article.
- S10.** Statistics for the long-form article on Pummer's research and its impact.