

A conversation with Effective Altruists of Berkeley, June 19, 2015

Participants

- Ajeya Cotra – Student, University of California at Berkeley, Member, Effective Altruists of Berkeley, and Summer Research Analyst, GiveWell
- Oliver Habryka – Student, University of California at Berkeley and Member, Effective Altruists of Berkeley
- Rohin Shah – Student, University of California at Berkeley and Member, Effective Altruists of Berkeley
- Davis Foote – Student, University of California at Berkeley and Member, Effective Altruists of Berkeley
- Helen Toner – Research Analyst, Open Philanthropy Project
- Catherine Hollander – Outreach Associate, Open Philanthropy Project

Note: These notes were compiled by the Open Philanthropy Project and give an overview of the major points made by the members of Effective Altruists of Berkeley.

Summary

The Open Philanthropy Project spoke with Ajeya Cotra, Oliver Habryka, Rohin Shah, and Davis Foote of Effective Altruists of Berkeley (EA Berkeley) as a follow-up to a \$10,000 Good Ventures grant to teach a class on effective altruism. Conversation topics included how the class was run, how funding was used, and plans for the future.

Effective altruism DeCal course

Ajeya Cotra and Oliver Habryka taught a course on effective altruism in the spring of 2015 as part of the University of California at Berkeley's (Berkeley) "DeCal" program of student-led courses. They plan to teach this course again next year, with or without funding from Good Ventures.

Giving games

Every week, students were given \$20 to donate to one of two charities selected by the facilitators of the class. On one occasion, they had to decide between the approximately 10 charities that the class had previously considered.

On some days, each student chose which charity to donate to. Giving games on these days would begin with 5 minutes of individual brainstorming, followed by 10 minutes to ask questions and discuss with other students, and another 5 minutes of individual brainstorming, at the end of which they would make a decision. Representatives of the charities being discussed were sometimes present in the class and available to answer questions.

On other days, students had to reach consensus within small groups, and on one occasion the whole class had to agree to donate to either the Methuselah Foundation or the Iodine Global Network. This led to an intense and fun debate that got students engaged. It was a difficult decision, and they spent over an hour discussing. Students seemed to become more invested when more money was at stake, and the need to persuade others may also have

increased engagement. In the future, Ms. Cotra and Mr. Habryka plan to have the students come to a consensus, at least in small groups.

Final project

For the final project, the class was broken up into small groups which competed to come up with a creative way to multiply their impact using the funding from Good Ventures, without necessarily having to donate money directly to charities. One group's project was chosen as the winner, and will be implemented in the fall.

Students began working on the final project in the second half of the semester. It was introduced later than originally planned, and it took several weeks for students to begin conceiving project ideas. Many students struggled with the broad scope of the assignment, and had trouble thinking of a better use for the money than donating it directly to the Against Malaria Foundation.

The winning project will use the grant money to organize events in which Berkeley students take the Giving What We Can pledge. This will include marketing and outreach efforts. This project was chosen because it offers a concrete and easy way for Berkeley students to make a difference, and because there is a high likelihood that the amount of money this would raise in donations would be greater than the amount invested.

Other groups' final projects proposed the following:

- Funding a massive open online course (MOOC) on happiness practices.
- Giving money directly to the Berkeley Free Clinic.
- Funding a collaborative research group between the computer science and math departments at Berkeley and institutions like MIRI.

Class dinners

Students from the class got together for dinners approximately every other week. On one occasion, Mr. Habryka hosted a dinner for members of the broader effective altruism community, as well as members of the class. These dinners were not a planned element of the class, but were successful in fostering closer relationships between the students who attended. In the future, Mr. Foote would like to get more students to attend. He said that he did not necessarily make friends at these dinners, but attended them to participate in discussions and hear perspectives that he is not exposed to elsewhere.

Funding for these dinners was provided by the Centre for Effective Altruism (CEA). During the course, Mr. Habryka was working with Tyler Alterman of CEA on creating a strong template for effective altruist dinner gatherings that could be easily replicated in other effective altruist groups. Mr. Habryka and Mr. Alterman were looking for opportunities to test the effectiveness of these dinner gatherings, and Mr. Habryka requested and was granted funding from CEA to work on this through the DeCal. He thinks that in the future it is possible that CEA may fund the DeCal itself as well.

Successes

Mr. Habryka thinks that the more formal nature of the class as opposed to a club encouraged students to be more active than they would have been in a club setting. He

thinks it was also important that from the beginning, the facilitators drew on the authority of various effective altruist organizations and spoke as representatives of a community, rather than as individuals. Ms. Cotra, however, believes that most of the success of the class was attributable to discussions and the strength of pre-existing social ties.

Mr. Shah thinks that giving games helped students to bond because they offered a lot of material for discussion, both inside and outside of class.

In the class of 18 students, the average attendance of 12-15 was high in comparison to similar student-run discussion classes at Berkeley. When attendance is not mandatory, Mr. Shah estimated that other classes average about 30% attendance for lectures and 50% for discussion sections. The higher attendance rate of the effective altruism DeCal may be for the following reasons:

- Attendance was ostensibly required
- The class was not required, so only interested students chose to take it
- Giving games incentivized students to come to class

Impact on students

Some students took the Giving What We Can pledge.

The course may have affected how students choose between nonprofits, and in the future they may consider donating to some of the specific nonprofits introduced in the class. It is likely that some students will use evidence-based giving practices and donate according to GiveWell's recommendations.

Many students had already chosen their majors and planned for careers that were to some extent altruistic, so the class likely did not have a strong impact on career choices.

Because the final project was designed to be carried out next semester as part of the club, the group of 6 students who designed the winning final project will join EA Berkeley, and 4-5 of them are expected to be pretty actively engaged in the club as they work on their project. It is unlikely that the rest of the class will stay engaged.

Mr. Habryka and Ms. Cotra planned to conduct surveys before and after the class in order to collect information on how students' perspectives had changed, but did not end up completing the "after" survey. The "before" survey showed that all students were enthusiastic about altruism, but many had significantly different empirical beliefs, and the group was fairly divided on some moral questions. The students were moderately aligned with the principles of effective altruism, but not as strongly as they could have been if there had been a stronger selection process to determine which students to admit to the class.

Ms. Cotra thinks that throughout the course, students changed their views on empirical matters regarding what kind of charitable work is effective. Ms. Cotra and Mr. Habryka did not speak very much about philosophy after the first week, so they do not know as much about how students' philosophical beliefs changed throughout the semester. Mr. Habryka thinks that prior to the class, many students did not have opinions on things like moral philosophy or whether charity should be evidence-based, and he believes that the class contributed significantly to the formation of beliefs on these topics.

Ms. Cotra does not plan to follow up extensively with students who choose not to be engaged with EA Berkeley, because it may be intrusive and would likely not yield very helpful responses, but she is considering sending an email to the class list.

Room for improvement

The experience of having run the class once will make it easier to run it more smoothly in the future. Ms. Cotra has developed a better sense for how much time to budget for different elements of the class, and she is willing to increase her time commitment, which she thinks will be necessary in order to run both the class and the club next semester.

Final project

Ms. Cotra and Mr. Habryka would like to approach the final project differently. A lot of time was lost because students were confused, so it may be helpful to add more structure, begin working on the projects earlier in the semester, and/or reduce the amount of money involved to lower the stakes.

It may be possible to leave the final project unchanged if the new group of students is particularly entrepreneurial, or if they already have some expertise that would help them with a project like this.

Selection of students

This semester, 18 students applied to be in the class, and all were accepted. In the future, Ms. Cotra and Mr. Habryka would like to do much more marketing of the class in order to attract a larger pool of applicants, which would allow them to be more selective about whom to accept. They hope to attract students who are able to act independently and who start with a higher level of ability, alignment with the principles of effective altruism, and knowledge on this topic. They will not be required to have knowledge about effective altruism specifically, but it will be preferable to choose students who have a strong quantitative background. Mr. Habryka thinks that the selection of students is the single most important factor in the success of the class.

Finances

Through the club's university account, they will be able to send checks directly to charities. They were not aware that this was a possibility when they started running the class, but will be doing this in the future.

Organization

Because there will be more people in the club next year, they plan to use tools like Asana to communicate well with all members.

They would like to find a more efficient way to track the votes in giving games. This semester, students voted on small slips of paper that were then manually entered, which was not the most efficient use of time.

Broader impact

EA Berkeley, as both an effective altruism chapter and as a course, is interested in finding ways to meaningfully contribute to things that are important to GiveWell. This may involve encouraging promising students to apply for internships with GiveWell and encouraging them to do the kind of research that prepare them to work at GiveWell or in other similar organizations.

Sources of funding

The group initially expected to need more funding for giving games, because they expected to have more students. They did not focus on additional fundraising after receiving the Good Ventures grant because the grant covered their financial needs. They have not yet spent all of the grant funding allotted for the final project, but they expect to have more funding than is needed.

They planned to hold a \$3000 matching fundraiser with The Life You Can Save, but this was no longer necessary after they received the Good Ventures grant. They decided not to run this fundraiser and did not receive matching funds.

They earned about \$250 through a minor fundraiser on CauseVox.

Use of funding

The initial plan was to spend half of the grant money on giving games, which would leave half for the final project. Funding for giving games was dependent on the number of students in the class, because each student was given a set amount of money (\$20) per week to donate to charity. Because the class was smaller than expected, only 30% of the funding was ultimately spent on giving games. This left 70% for the final project.

The grant was originally intended to be for re-granting (e.g. via giving games), but Mr. Habryka and Ms. Cotra asked Good Ventures whether it was appropriate to use some of the funding for something other than donating directly to a charity. Good Ventures approved this, but likely expected that a greater proportion of the money would be spent on giving games. Ms. Cotra had a similar expectation, but the level of spending on giving games was determined primarily by the size of the class. This spending was further reduced as attendance dropped from 18 to about 12-15 students per week. Most weeks the class was also attended by about 3 additional people who were not enrolled in the class, including friends, members of the effective altruism community, and students who had not signed up for the class but were interested in learning about effective altruism.

Budget plans for next year

The facilitators plan to continue playing giving games with about \$20 per student per class.

Ms. Cotra thinks that the final project could be completed with less funding than it had this year.

They think it would be potentially high-value to spend some of their budget on getting students more involved in the effective altruism community in the following ways:

- Pursuing job opportunities

- Attending events such as the GiveWell research seminar in May, which seemed like a good learning opportunity for students
- Engaging directly with the effective altruist organizations in the Bay Area, such as 80,000 Hours, instead of merely talking about them

There will likely be a slight increase in club expenses next year because of the increase in membership. This year, very little money was spent on the club because it held no events and few formal meetings. The club had only four members, who would talk informally when needed. Next year, more money will be spent on formal meetings and events.

*All GiveWell/Open Philanthropy Project conversations are available at
<http://www.givewell.org/conversations>*