Research Prioritisation at the Global Priorities Institute

GPI is driven by a particular mission: namely, to conduct and facilitate world-class, foundational academic research to guide and assist the project of doing good as effectively as possible. We aim to select research projects strategically so as to best fulfil this mission. This document outlines key ideas that inform research prioritisation at GPI to help prospective ECCP applicants in deciding on their own research project and in writing their research proposal.

Two Routes to Impact

GPI deliberately operates with a multiplicity of hypotheses about how our work may lead to positive change. One important distinction concerns whether the impact of a given paper is direct, in the sense of reaching practical decision-makers independently of uptake by the rest of academia, or instead mediated by academia. This is important to bear in mind for the purposes of assessing actual or potential papers, because academic prestige and uptake by the rest of academia is critically important for the second route to impact, but in itself irrelevant for the first.

Accordingly, in considering the merits of a given research project, we consider the following two questions separately:

1. **Direct impact**: To what extent would this project contribute to rigorously writing up and/or advancing a line of thought on an issue that is of crucial importance to the enterprise of trying to do the most possible good?
2. **Effect on academia:** To what extent would this project contribute to inspiring other academics to work on an issue that is of crucial importance to the enterprise of trying to do the most possible good?

This is not to say that the two questions are unrelated. In particular, it might be difficult for a paper to score highly on the second question without also scoring highly on the first, though there are possible exceptions to this rule, e.g. survey articles, encyclopedia entries, or programmatic papers whose explicit aim is to inspire academics to take up some crucial question(s).

Prioritisation and Advocacy

Another important distinction is between
1) **Prioritisation**: Research that aims to inform the decision-making of agents who are already committed to the project of trying to do good as effectively as possible.
2) **Advocacy**: Research that aims to increase the number of agents who are engaged in that project.

Research speaking to (1) automatically also speaks to (2), by making the relevant body of thought sufficiently complete and rigorous to inspire confidence that this is a sensible and worthwhile enterprise. However, the converse does not hold.

GPI's primary focus is on (1). However, we do also value and conduct a limited amount of research that speaks to (2) without also speaking to (1).

Crucial issues

There exist large academic literatures addressing questions that are relevant to prioritisation and advocacy. For example, any paper on discounting, growth theory, forecasting, population ethics, moral uncertainty, interpersonal aggregation, or decision theory fits the description related to prioritisation, if interpreted sufficiently liberally.

GPI does not merely seek to contribute additional papers to these existing literatures, even where the contribution in question is academically excellent. A paper that does no more than this, while an impressive intellectual achievement, will not normally be especially high priority by GPI's lights. Rather, we seek to identify the most crucial issues from the point of view of each of the two enterprises noted in the previous section, and to conduct research that contributes especially strongly to addressing those crucial issues.