


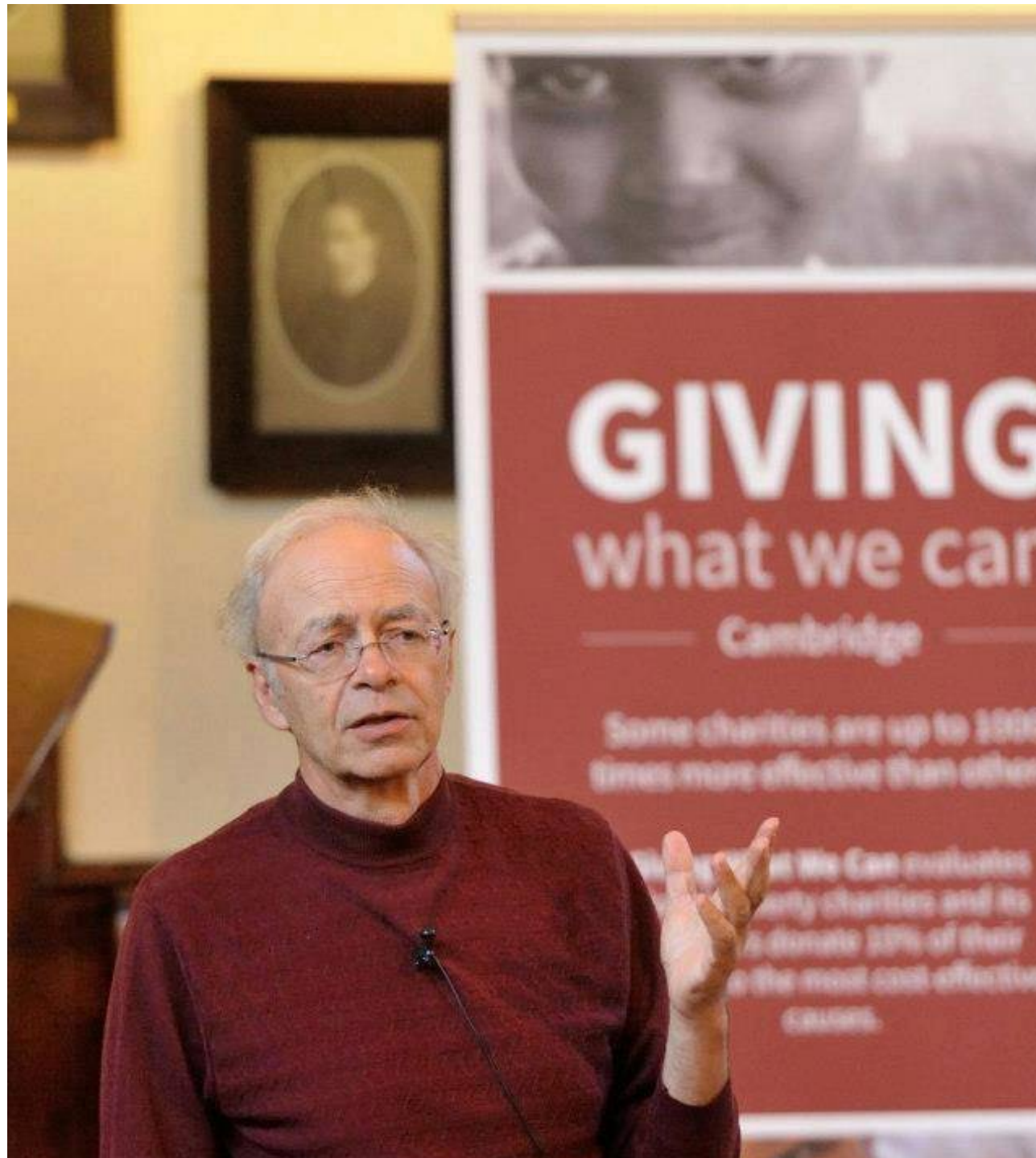


INTERVIEW WITH PETER SINGER-PART II

 By Giving What We Can Cambridge (/person/giving-what-we-can-cambridge)

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In early May, Peter Singer visited Cambridge to **give a talk on effective altruism and Giving What We Can at the Cambridge Union.** (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fEulhlGgskc&feature=youtu.be>) Before the talk, a team from **Giving What We Can Cambridge** (<http://givingwhatwecan.org/cambridge/>) took the opportunity to discuss effective altruism and effective careers with Professor Singer.

In the second part of the interview, published below, Singer answers questions on effective careers.

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Applying effective altruism to career choices – the idea behind “effective careers”

GWWC: How would you define an effective career?

Peter Singer: An effective career is one in which you seek to make the biggest possible beneficial impact on the world. That would be the most effective career but not many people will reach this. What you see instead is people striving for the most effective career and changing their career choices in order to have a bigger impact, if not the biggest. Overall this is adding another dimension to what effective altruism is all about.

GWWC: Is there a set of stable criteria that identifies a career as effective or good?

Or does it differ from person to person? Because ultimately it is very hard to anticipate what impact these big life choices will have. With all that in mind what advice would you give to university students and young people interested in making these decisions?

Peter Singer: The main advice is to think about your career as something you are going to spend a large amount of time and energy on – 80,000 hours – and therefore not just to fall into one career or the other but to make a conscious choice to end up in a career where you can make a significant difference, and expect to get some satisfaction and well-being from doing so. But that's very general advice, I can't give advice to students saying either you should become a doctor to go and help people abroad who need health-care, or you should become a scientist so that you can discover renewable energy that doesn't emit greenhouse gases, or you should go into finance so that you can earn a lot of money and donate to these organisations. That decision is going to depend on the individual's talent and character. Each individual has to think for himself or herself "what can I contribute and where can I have the greatest impact" and then commit to doing so.

GWWC: In your own academic career and your career as a public figure, you have spent a lot of time persuading other people to be more compassionate. Looking back on all the things you have worked on and the impact you have made, would you go into an academic career again? What are your thoughts about your own impact?

Peter Singer: I think I've been very fortunate to have made the choices that I did, without knowing exactly where it would lead. But certainly, I always had some sense that I wanted to affect opinions on what we ought to do and how we ought to live, that was why I became interested in ethics. I was lucky that when I started doing philosophy it was a period of transition as the rather sterile philosophy of linguistic analysis was giving way against the background of issues such as the Vietnam War, racism and sexism to which philosophy needed to be made relevant. That became a climate in which you could once again do applied ethics. Because it was a fairly new field it was possible for me to do more and to have a bigger influence with articles such as "Famine, Affluence and Morality".

GWWC: Do you think there is a way in which the idea of effective altruism as an investment banker is just fundamentally at odds with conventional ideas of morality, where it is about what I myself do and not necessarily about consequences for everyone else?

Peter Singer: Well, you're seen in some circles as an immoral person as a banker. Maybe this is the predominant view among students but I don't think that's the general view. And that may also be something where there is a difference between UK and the US, where there is generally a more positive view of capitalism and money, so that Americans see altruism and banking as less of a conflict. But I agree, it will take a real shift and in a way you have to grasp the argument that Will

Crouch has put forward: if you don't become an aid worker, someone almost as good as you will, and will have almost the same impact as you, whereas if you don't become an investment banker someone else will and will probably do pretty much the same bad – or lets just say morally dubious thing – as you, but they won't have given a significant portion of their income to charity, which you would have.

Concluding thoughts...

GWWC: What do you think are the questions that are still open in this field, in terms of moral responsibility, effective careers, effective giving and tying all these concepts together?

Peter Singer: So I think there are still a lot of open questions regarding what things we ought to be working on. We've been talking about effectiveness, and I guess we have some background assumptions that we're trying to reduce global poverty, but even within that area there are different things that we could do. There are things like getting bed nets out to kids so they don't get malaria, that's pretty straightforward. There's things like trying to change the global economic order, the World Trade Organization or the way in which the US and Europe subsidise their agricultural products which is disadvantageous for developing countries. So there's that more political route, and there's things like working with climate change in the long run. So I think those questions are still quite open. And then I think there are reasonable questions that should be raised as to whether global poverty is the issue that we should be focused on. Some people think that existential risk – a risk of something causing the extinction of our species – is an issue we are neglecting the opportunity to reduce the odds of. And even if we reduced them quite slightly, taking into account the long future of the species and all that might be achieved and realised if we survive for the next

couple of centuries some people think that's a more important issue to work on than global poverty. And some people, and indeed I, think, that animal suffering is a very important and relatively easily preventable form of suffering. So you can debate whether if you are interested in reducing suffering with a limited amount of resources those could be used more effectively in eliminating global poverty or trying to persuade more people to be vegetarian or vegan so that there's less animal suffering, and fewer greenhouse gas emission. So there are a number of different strategies within each cause and there are a number of different causes – this is a debate that needs to be pursued.

GWWC: To wrap up – what are your next steps?


Peter Singer: Currently I am working on transforming a series of lectures on effective altruism I gave at Yale into a book-length manuscript. Also I am working with **The Life You Can Save** (<http://www.thelifeyoucansave.org>), which is an organization in some respects parallel with Giving What We Can - we work closely together. The aim is to spread the idea that to live an ethical life you should give a significant portion of your income to alleviating poverty.

GWWC: Thank You!

You can read more about effective careers-and whether it's better to be a banker or an aid worker-on **80,000 Hours** (<http://80000hours.org/>), our fellow CEA stablemate's website.

This is a slightly compressed and edited version of the original interview.

Thanks to Jacob Trefethen, Sophie Hermanns and Luke Illott for leading the interview and Markus Anderljung for transcribing the interview!

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