Love by Sacrifice: Competing Perspectives on Moral Living

By Jeannine M. Pitas



St. Agnes and Female Saint by Anonymous (From The Met Archives)

What does it mean to be a good person? This question has been with humans since antiquity, and it has been with me since early childhood. While being raised in the Catholic tradition, I was offered a fairly simple recipe for goodness: thou shalt not kill, thou shalt not steal, honor thy father and mother. As I grew older, the Ten Commandments and Golden Rule were supplemented by a desire to develop the “fruits of the Holy Spirit”: love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, faithfulness, kindness, goodness and self-control.

But when I reached adulthood, it became clear that, while a good starting point, the foundation I'd received in childhood was insufficient to deal with the moral dilemmas of our world. What is the best response to racism, sexism, genocide, war, torture, environmental degradation, poverty, cruelty toward animals, and many other forms of personal and collective harm? Attending street protests, signing petitions, and volunteering with community organizations became regular parts of my life. But they never seemed quite enough.

In 2011 I encountered a new social movement, effective altruism, which turned my thoughts about goodness on their head. “If you really want to make a difference in the world, don't work as a teacher,” one adherent of the movement told me. “Instead, go get a job on Wall Street.” While this attitude did not sit well with me (spending ten to twelve hours each day crunching numbers for a large corporate entity is one vision I have of hell), I initially found it hard to argue against its logic.

If you recognize that someone else would be doing your job in your absence, it might be more effective to fund several other people's work – particularly in an economically impoverished country, where your money goes further - than to do the work yourself. Likewise, while I find it hard to believe that one could make a real difference while continuing to maintain our current capitalist structures, it might make sense to be an Oskar Schindler-like, justice-seeking individual within an unjust system such as Wall Street, knowing that if you aren't doing that work, the system would still be in existence, and the next person in your position probably would not share your moral concerns.

While I acknowledge the logic in effective altruism (EA), its inherent utilitarianism – focused on meeting the basic needs of as many people as possible – seemed too removed from the ethics that felt more intuitive to me (rule-based morality and virtue ethics). I was also skeptical of its focus on incremental change pursued by individuals over systemic change brought about by communities of people. A few years ago, I encountered another group that in many ways seems like the polar opposite of effective altruism: the Catholic Worker movement, a loose network of urban houses of hospitality and rural subsistence farms.

Initially, the two movements seem very different. While EA in its contemporary form is only six years old, Catholic Worker has existed since 1933. Although EA recently has begun to embrace political advocacy as an effective means of doing good, it is mostly focused on charity to distant organizations helping the world's most vulnerable, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. Catholic Worker, on the other hand, has always combined direct charity in local communities with advocacy for justice worldwide. EA is somewhat impersonal; it uses a scientific approach and cites donations of money to proven effective charities as the best way to maximize one's personal impact in a world of finite time and resources. It also, for the most part, does not vocally hold the current transnational capitalist system responsible for the sufferings it purports to alleviate. Meanwhile, Catholic Worker is built around “personalism,” the idea that impacts occur most effectively on a one-to-one basis, and holds a fair amount of skepticism toward large institutions – Worker houses are not even officially affiliated with the Roman Catholic Church, despite its social teachings having been Day’s original inspiration for founding houses of

hospitality. Centralized around a few elite academic institutions and well-funded organizations, EA often appears quite “top down” in its approach, with its members generally maintaining thousands of miles of distance from those it seeks to help. Catholic Worker, in contrast, is “bottom up,” decentralized and directly involved in the communities it serves.

However, as different as these two movements are, I observe some intriguing similarities. Both tend to attract people of relatively privileged backgrounds who are looking to make a meaningful difference in their own lives and the lives of others. Both draw inspiration from iconic leaders (cofounders Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin in the case of Catholic Worker, and renowned philosopher Peter Singer in the case of EA). Both offer a meaningful way of living that is radically different from mainstream, middle-class European or North American life. Both take a view of politics that appears to transcend the left/right divisions plaguing the United States of America and other countries at this time. Meeting people in both movements, I believe that each one can learn a lot from the other...and all of us who seek to do good can learn from both.

When Julia Wise first learned of effective altruism, she was doing social work with prisoners. Like me, she did not want to give up the job she'd trained for to become a high-earning investment banker or computer programmer. She also knew she wanted to have children, a decision that inevitably would take time and resources away from doing good father afield. However, she did not let that stop her. She and her spouse have pledged to donate at least 30% of their combined income to effective charities until they retire, and she now works as Community Liaison for the Centre for Effective Altruism.

“People sometimes ask how I know I am making a difference when I'm mostly focused on helping people far away,” Wise says. “To be honest, I really had no more idea of whether or not I was making a difference as a social worker. The positive feeling I got working with people was not enough to let me know I was actually having an impact on someone's life. I now approach charity in a more scientific way.” Wise asserts that malaria was eradicated in the United States through large, impersonal, top-down programs. Today, she and her spouse donate to Against Malaria Foundation, a proven effective charity which helps prevent malaria in sub-Saharan Africa. “Even though I will never meet the people in these communities, I trust that my contribution is at least making it less likely that their children will get sick and die.”

Eric Anglada and Brenna Cussen Anglada first became interested in the Catholic Worker movement as college students, and it ultimately led them to meet and marry one another. They were drawn to the idea of living in community and leading simple lives in solidarity with those most affected by poverty. Anglada said social justice advocacy and antiwar protest are fueled by the experience of living with the poor. “To be able to commit to broader policy changes, we can learn a lot from knowing people who've seen the downside of various policies, programs, and state solutions.” Today, the two of them live with another family at St. Isidore Catholic Worker Farm in Cuba City, Wisconsin; their mission involves stewardship of the earth and an attempt to support just systems rather than unjust ones.

“Dorothy Day said 'no,' to the unjust systems she saw around her in the Great Depression,” Cussen explains. “Meanwhile, Peter Maurin offered an alternative way of living. He criticized middle class Americans for failing to care for their own needs, for expecting the poor to grow food and make clothes for them. Today, we are farther removed from producing for ourselves. But we'd like a society where this is done locally rather than in a sweatshop in China. We'd rather grow our own lettuce rather than have migrant farm workers die because of it,” she says. Though wary of the “white savior complex” and hesitant to believe their work will save the world, she and Anglada see Catholic Worker as participating in a larger movement for good.

EA and Catholic Worker both tend to attract predominantly white, middle class, well-educated participants. “People living with more social disadvantages and direct oppression know about the needs of those in their communities. Those with more privilege, like me, are more likely to pick and choose their involvements. We would like to attract more people with lived experience of oppression and a better sense of how the world works, but the process is slow,” says Wise.

“Though some guests in houses of hospitality go on to become workers, most Catholic Workers are white, middle-class and highly educated,” says Cussen. “Catholic Worker certainly changes the lives of people involved in it, making us realize that the suburban, middle-class cultures we've left behind are largely a cause of social problems. Through this movement, we can view society critically. We probably will not lead the world to liberation – if anything that needs to come from oppressed people themselves, and we often do best by getting out of the way. For us, by living simply, growing our own food, and advocating for justice, we are in solidarity with those building a new society.”

Another intriguing similarity between both movements is that, though radically different in their approach, both exhibit unconventional views toward politics. “This is probably the most diverse aspect of effective altruism,” says Wise. “There's a lot of disagreement about the role that government should play in achieving our goals; our members range from libertarians, who'd like to see as little government as possible, to Democratic socialists. There aren't many social conservatives in EA, but we're beginning to see a few. In general, I believe we transcend some of the current divisions in US politics – if it's a tug-of-war, we're pulling sideways rather than against anyone. Progress can be made on issues that are not hot buttons, such as better public health in the developing world, reducing incarceration in the US (for reasons of cost as well as justice) and encouraging more people in general to donate to charity. We want to find areas that are not battlegrounds, spaces where we can make improvements without opposition.”

While Catholic Workers vary in their approaches to political involvement, they also do not fall smoothly along the traditional red-blue divide. The founding members were anarchists, and many follow that tradition. Since 2000, both Cussen Anglada and Anglada have not voted in a federal election, and they deliberately earn below the threshold required to pay federal income tax.. “Since all the land now called the United States of America was acquired through genocide, I don't want to participate in a system which was founded by killing people and then grew wealth by enslaving people. I don't see it as legitimate,” says Cussen.

“Voting is a form of coercion,” adds Anglada. “The winners dominate the losers. If we want to live in a decentralized society, then we should not use centralized means.”

Cussen adds that many Catholic Workers are attuned to national and international politics, but rooted in their local communities, seeing the direct charity they do each day as a kind of political action, “Volunteers might hold different views, but they can meet and talk in the kitchen while washing dishes.”

Noting the contrasts and points of similarity between EA and the Catholic Worker, I was drawn to consider what the two movements might learn from one another. For Evan Gaensbauer of Vancouver, BC, the two groups initially seem to have different goals. “Caring for those around you in a practical way strengthens society and offers a sense of community. Having the largest measurable personal impact on the world is a very different goal,” he says. However, he adds that EA, while in the past very individualistic, is embracing the need for community. “Some effective altruists, especially younger ones who live in big, expensive cities, share housing and meals to keep costs low and be able to give more. This is not as radical as inviting the homeless to live with you, but some of us have the idea that we need to support one another and make lifestyle changes to avoid having a negative impact.”

Wise adds that EA has changed by offering an increased emphasis on community. “At the beginning, our emphasis was on individual action, but we now see we can do more good by coordinating with one another,” she says. “In the past, we urged people to take higher earning jobs and donate more, but for me that would have been like trying to fit a round peg in a square hole. I now work for the Centre for Effective Altruism, which needed someone with social work skills. In general, we are trying to look at people's different abilities and strengths to help them find the roles that suit them.”

Meanwhile, some Catholic Workers are beginning to give greater consideration to the need for gauging their effectiveness. Samuel Kruse is currently working to establish a house of hospitality in Madison, Wisconsin. Last year, he and his friend Daniel Loiacono invited homeless people to stay in their apartment. “Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin founded the movement during the Great Depression. But the people we serve now has changed. Most of them have addictions or other mental health issues, and I've seen that many Catholic Workers just aren't prepared to deal with those conditions.” Seeing his limits has led him to question the traditional method that Day and Maurin started. “We once got someone to go through detox on a farm. Three days later she was back on the streets using again. I am concerned about effectiveness and whether or not we will actually achieve what we have set out to do.”

As Loiacono is currently visiting Catholic Worker communities around the US to learn from them, Kruse hopes that together they might create a new kind of community. “I see the Madison Catholic Worker as an incubator for community organizing. Serving the poor will always be at the heart of what we do, and having a community life between workers makes this process sustainable. I still want us to invite people into our homes, but not by replacing the systems that already do this work. Without sacrificing personalism, I'd like our work to acknowledge the need to collaborate with other institutions in Madison already doing the work – for example, how might we help to improve the shelter system that already exists? Forty women are turned away each night from one shelter. I can't invite all of them in personally, but I can try to change their conditions at a systemic level.”

Kruse also stresses the need for people of different ideologies to find common ground. “At the present moment, liberals and conservatives seem to lack a common teleology, a common definition of what the good is,” says Kruse. “As a Catholic raised with gospel values, I am wondering if we might find a common goal that can appeal to everyone – Christians, Buddhists, atheists, Sikhs. My personal motto lately has been “Live love, and love by sacrifice.” Most people would agree that this is a good idea – the debate is over how*.* But we need to find some common ground so that dialogue can happen.”

Peter Maurin once said that he saw Catholic Worker as creating a society where “it is easier for people to be good.” Nearly sixty-five years after its founding, through several new generations, the movement continues to work toward that goal. Meanwhile, drawing on the ideas of utilitarianism and positivism, the effective altruism movement seeks to reduce the pain of some of the world's most vulnerable – those living in poverty, those suffering from preventable disease, and also animals on factory farms. Both movements have flaws and much potential to be criticized. However, I believe that even without identifying with either of them, we can draw on the strengths of both when making decisions about how to do good in a highly complex world. Particularly at this time, when division is on the rise, we can learn from these contrasting movements to transcend our differences and connect through the values we still hold in common: honesty, community, love, and hope. These values, and many others that lurk behind our differences, are the ones that might answer the most urgent needs of our world.

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