Journal of Global Ethics

ISSN: 1744-9626 (Print) 1744-9634 (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rjge20

Precis: *The Most Good You Can Do*

Peter Singer

To cite this article: Peter Singer (2016) Precis: *The Most Good You Can Do*, Journal of Global Ethics, 12:2, 132-136, DOI: 10.1080/17449626.2016.1191522

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/17449626.2016.1191522

Published online: 07 Aug 2016.

JOURNAL OF GLOBAL ETHICS, 2016
VOL. 12, NO. 2, 132–136
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17449626.2016.1191522

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Precis: *The Most Good You Can Do*[†]

Peter Singer

University Center for Human Values, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ, USA

Invited contribution received 4 May 2016

Effective altruism is based on a very simple idea: we should do the most good we can. Obeying the usual rules about not stealing, cheating, hurting, and killing is not enough, or at least not enough for those of us who have the great good fortune to live in material comfort, who can feed, house, and clothe ourselves and our families and still have money or time to spare. Living a minimally acceptable ethical life involves using a substantial part of our spare resources to make the world a better place. Living a fully ethical life involves doing the most good we can.

Effective altruism is notable from several perspectives. First, and most important, it is making a difference to the world. Philanthropy is a very large industry. In the United States alone there are almost one million charities, receiving a total of approximately $250 billion a year, with an additional $100 billion going to religious congregations. A small number of these charities are outright frauds, but a much bigger problem is that very few of them are sufficiently transparent to allow donors to judge whether they are really doing good. Most of that $250 billion is given on the basis of emotional responses to images of the people, animals, or forests that the charity is helping. Effective altruism seeks to change that by providing incentives for charities to demonstrate their effectiveness. Already the movement is directing tens of millions of dollars to charities that are effectively reducing the suffering and death caused by extreme poverty.

Second, effective altruism is a way of giving meaning to our own lives and finding fulfillment in what we do. Many effective altruists say that in doing good, they feel good. Effective altruists directly benefit others, but indirectly they often benefit themselves.

Third, effective altruism sheds new light on an old philosophical and psychological question: Are we fundamentally driven by our innate needs and emotional responses, with our rational capacities doing little more than laying a justificatory veneer over actions that were already determined before we even started reasoning about what to do? Or can reason play a crucial role in determining how we live? What is it that drives some of us to look beyond our own interests and the interests of those we love to the interests of strangers, future generations, and animals?

Finally, the emergence of effective altruism and the evident enthusiasm and intelligence with which many millennials at the outset of their careers are embracing it offer grounds for optimism about our future.

[†]This precis draws on the opening chapter of *The Most Good You Can Do* (Yale University Press, New Haven, 2015).

Effective altruists do things like the following:

- Living modestly and donating a large part of their income–often much more than the traditional tenth, or tithe–to the most effective charities;
- Researching and discussing with others which charities are the most effective or drawing on research done by other independent evaluators;
- Choosing a career in which they can earn most, not in order to be able to live affluently but so that they can do more good;
- Talking to others, in person or online, about giving, so that the idea of effective altruism will spread;
- Giving part of their body – blood, bone marrow, or even a kidney – to a stranger.

Psychologists who study giving behavior have noticed that some people give substantial amounts to one or two charities, while others give small amounts to many charities. Those who donate to one or two charities seek evidence about what the charity is doing and whether it is really having a positive impact. If the evidence indicates that the charity is really helping others, they make a substantial donation. Those who give small amounts to many charities are not so interested in whether what they are doing helps others – psychologists call them warm glow givers. Knowing that they are giving makes them feel good, regardless of the impact of their donation. In many cases the donation is so small – $10 or less – that if they stopped to think, they would realize that the cost of processing the donation is likely to exceed any benefit it brings to the charity.

In 2013, as the Christmas giving season approached, twenty thousand people gathered in San Francisco to watch a five-year-old boy dressed as Batkid ride around the city in a Batmobile with an actor dressed as Batman by his side. The pair rescued a damsel in distress and captured the Riddler, for which they received the keys of 'Gotham City' from the mayor – not an actor, he really was the mayor of San Francisco – for his role in fighting crime. The boy, Miles Scott, had been through three years of chemotherapy for leukemia, and when asked for his greatest wish, he replied, 'To be Batkid.' The Make-A-Wish Foundation had made his wish come true.

Does that give you a warm glow? It gives me one, even though I know there is another side to this feel-good story. Make-A-Wish would not say how much it cost to fulfill Miles's wish, but it did say that the average cost of making a child's wish come true is $7500. Effective altruists would, like anyone else, feel emotionally drawn toward making the wishes of sick children come true, but they would also know that $7500 could, by protecting families from malaria, save the lives of at least three children and maybe many more. Saving a child's life has to be better than fulfilling a child's wish to be Batkid. If Miles's parents had been offered that choice – Batkid for a day or a complete cure for their son's leukemia – they surely would have chosen the cure. When more than one child's life can be saved, the choice is even clearer. Why then do so many people give to Make-A-Wish, when they could do more good by donating to the Against Malaria Foundation, which is a highly effective provider of bednets to families in malaria-prone regions? The answer lies in part in the emotional pull of knowing that you are helping this child, one whose face you can see on television, rather than the unknown and unknowable children who would have died from malaria if your donation had not provided the nets under which

they sleep. It also lies in part in the fact that Make-A-Wish appeals to Americans, and Miles is an American child.

Effective altruists will feel the pull of helping an identifiable child from their own nation, region, or ethnic group but will then ask themselves if that is the best thing to do. They know that saving a life is better than making a wish come true and that saving three lives is better than saving one. So they do not give to whatever cause tugs most strongly at their heartstrings. They give to the cause that will do the most good, given the abilities, time, and money they have available.

*

Doing the most good is a vague idea that raises many questions. Here are a few of the more obvious ones, and some preliminary answers:

What counts as 'the most good'?

Effective altruists will not all give the same answer to this question, but they do share some values. They would all agree that a world with less suffering and more happiness in it is, other things being equal, better than one with more suffering and less happiness. Most would say that a world in which people live longer is, other things being equal, better than one in which people live shorter lives. These values explain why helping people in extreme poverty is a popular cause among effective altruists. A given sum of money does much more to reduce suffering and save lives if we use it to assist people living in extreme poverty in developing countries than it would do if we gave it to most other charitable causes.

Does everyone's suffering count equally?

Effective altruists do not discount suffering because it occurs far away or in another country or afflicts people of a different race or religion. They agree that the suffering of animals counts too and generally agree that we should not give less consideration to suffering just because the victim is not a member of our species. They may differ, however, on how to weigh the type of suffering animals can experience against the type of suffering humans can experience.

Does the idea of doing the most good mean that it is wrong to give priority to one's own children? Surely it cannot be wrong to put the interests of members of the family and close friends ahead of the interests of strangers?

Effective altruists can accept that one's own children are a special responsibility, ahead of the children of strangers. There are various possible grounds for this. Most parents love their children, and it would be unrealistic to require parents to be impartial between their own children and other children. Nor would we want to discourage such bias because children thrive in close, loving families, and it is not possible to love people without having greater concern for their well-being than one has for others. In any case, while doing the most good is an important part of the life of every effective altruist, effective altruists are real people, not saints, and they do not seek to maximize the good in

every single thing they do, 24/7. Effective altruists typically leave themselves time and resources to relax and do what they want. For those of us with children, being close to our children and other family members or friends is central to how we want to spend our time. Nonetheless, effective altruists recognize that there are limits to how much they should do for their children, given the greater needs of others. Effective altruists do not think their children need all the latest toys or lavish birthday parties, and they reject the widespread assumption that parents should, on their death, leave virtually everything they own to their children rather than give a substantial part of their wealth to those who can benefit much more from it.

What about other values, like justice, freedom, equality and knowledge?

Most effective altruists think that these other values are good because they are essential for building communities in which people can live better lives, free of oppression, and have greater self-respect and freedom to do what they want as well as experience less suffering and premature death. No doubt some effective altruists hold that these values are also good for their own sake, independently of these consequences.

Does promoting the arts count as improving the world?

In a world that had overcome extreme poverty and other major problems that face us now, promoting the arts would be a worthy goal. In the world in which we live, however, donating to opera houses and museums is not likely to be doing the most good you can. When David Geffen, the entertainment mogul, gave $100 million for the renovation of the Avery Fisher Hall at New York's Lincoln Center (now to be renamed David Geffen Hall) he could have found better things to do with his money.

Is it really possible for everyone to practice effective altruism?

It is possible for everyone who has some spare time or money to practice effective altruism. Unfortunately, most people who give to charity do not compare the effectiveness of the various charities to which they might donate. Even professional philanthropy advisors are likely to tell their clients to 'follow their passion.' In an online leaflet called 'Finding Your Focus in Philanthropy,' Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors states flatly that there is 'obviously' no objective answer to the question of what is the most urgent cause. But we should not embrace relativism about the choice of charity. Even if deciding on the very best cause is extremely difficult, some causes are objectively better than others, and philanthropy advisors ought to be bold enough to say so. Nevertheless, it is not likely everyone will become an effective altruist anytime soon. The more interesting question is whether effective altruists can become numerous enough to influence the giving culture of affluent nations. There are some promising signs that that may be starting to happen.

What if one's act reduces suffering, but to do so one must lie or harm an innocent person?

In general, effective altruists recognize that breaking moral rules against killing or seriously harming an innocent person will almost always have worse consequences than following these rules. Not all effective altruists are utilitarians, and in any case, even thoroughgoing utilitarians who judge actions to be right or wrong entirely on the basis of their consequences, are wary of speculative reasoning that suggests we should violate basic human rights today for the sake of some distant future good. They know that under Lenin, Stalin, Mao, and Pol Pot, a vision of a utopian future society was used to justify unspeakable atrocities, and even today some terrorists justify their crimes by imagining they will bring about a better future. No effective altruist wants to repeat those tragedies.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Peter Singer is Ira W. DeCamp Professor of Bioethics in the University Center for Human Values at Princeton University, and Laureate Professor in the School of Historical and Philosophical Studies at the University of Melbourne. His books include *Animal Liberation*, *Practical Ethics*, *Pushing Time Away*, *The Life You Can Save*, and *The Most Good You Can Do*. His most recent book, *Famine, Affluence and Morality*, reprints one of his best-known essays, which helped to inspire the effective altruism movement.