

The Logic of Effective Altruism
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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 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.

Most effective altruists are millennials—members of the first generation to have come of age in the new millennium. They are pragmatic realists, not saints, so very few claim to live a fully ethical life. Most of them are somewhere on the continuum between a minimally acceptable ethical life and a fully ethical life. That doesn't mean they go about feeling guilty because they are not morally perfect. Effective altruists don't see a lot of point in feeling guilty. They prefer to focus on the good they are doing. Some of them are content to know they are doing something significant to make the world a better place. Many of them like to challenge themselves to do a little better this year than last year.

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 \$200 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 \$200 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?

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.

What unites all these acts under the banner of effective altruism? The definition that appears in Wikipedia, which is now becoming standard, is “a philosophy and social movement which applies evidence and reason to determining the most effective ways to improve the world.” That definition says nothing about motives or about any sacrifice or cost to the effective altruist. Given that the movement has altruism as part of its name, these omissions may seem odd. Altruism is contrasted with egoism, which is concern only for oneself. But we should not think of effective altruism as requiring self-sacrifice, in the sense of something necessarily contrary to one’s own interests. If doing the most you can for others means that you are also flourishing, then that is the best possible outcome for everyone. Many effective altruists deny that what they are doing is a sacrifice. The fact that they find fulfillment and personal happiness in doing that does not detract from their altruism.

Psychologists who study giving behaviour 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.

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 don't give to whatever cause tugs strongest at their heartstrings. They give to the cause that will do the most good, given the abilities, time, and money they have.

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Here are a few questions surrounding the concept of doing the most good, 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 have 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 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.

What if one's act reduces suffering, but in order to act 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. 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.

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There has long been skepticism about whether people can really be motivated by an altruistic concern for others. Some have thought that our moral capacities are limited to helping our kin; those with whom we are, or could be, in mutually beneficial relationships; and members of our own tribal group or small-scale society. Effective altruism provides evidence that this is not the case. It shows that we can expand our moral horizons, reach decisions based on a broad form of altruism, and employ our reason to assess evidence about the likely consequences of our actions. In this way it allows us to hope that we will be able to meet the ethical responsibilities of a new era in which our problems will be global as well as local.

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