

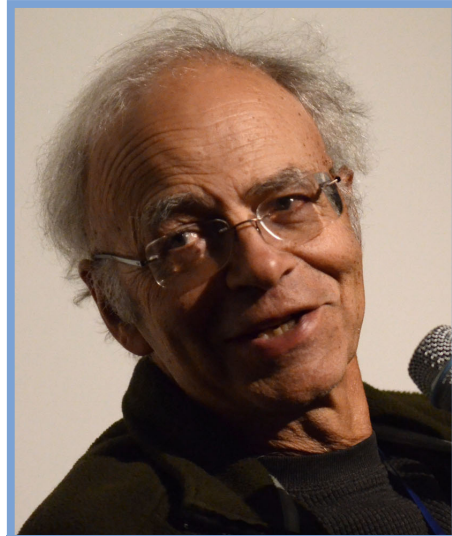
# Effective Altruism

## 1. What is effective altruism?

Effective altruism is a philosophical phenomenon. It promotes the evidence-based charitable giving of disposable income to avoid preventable deaths and alleviate unnecessary suffering. Unlike many other types of charitable giving, effective altruism is characterised by rational decision-making and the repression of emotional responses to misery and pain. Generally, effective altruists attempt to identify charities that save the greatest number of lives (human or animal) or add the greatest number of useful years to existing lives and then give their disposable income to these charities in the hope of doing the greatest amount of good possible.

### Effective Altruism

A system of beliefs and practices that promotes the evidence-based charitable giving of disposable income and other resources.



Peter Singer

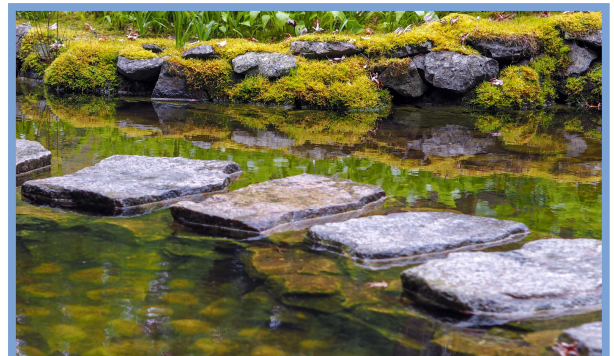
The term "effective altruism" derives its meaning from the words "effectiveness" and "altruism". Effectiveness is the capacity to successfully produce a desired outcome, and altruism is a system of beliefs and practices that promotes concern for the wellbeing of other people and animals. Effective altruists argue that altruism is most successful when it is concerned with the fundamental features of human and animal wellbeing (i.e. the avoidance of preventable deaths and the alleviation of unnecessary suffering); consequently, they donate to causes that materially improve wellbeing.

Peter Singer (b. 1946) claims, "Effective altruism is the form of altruism in which we bring our rational capacities to bear in order to do the most good that we can." In practice, this sometimes means making emotionally dispassionate choices. For example, if a person has a blind neighbour and \$40,000 to give away to charity, an effective altruist would not endorse giving it away to fund the training of a guide dog. Instead, for the same sum, up to 2,000 children in less economically developed countries could be saved from trachoma-induced blindness, even though the donor has no relationship with them.

## 2. How does effective altruism work?

Peter Singer is responsible for developing one of the most persuasive arguments for effective altruism, based on the drowning child thought experiment. First framed in 1972, in a paper titled *Famine, Affluence, and Morality*, he invited his readers to imagine an adult walking past a shallow pond in which a child is drowning before asking whether or not the adult should save the child even though his or her clothes will be ruined? He claimed most people would agree that the adult ought to save the child from drowning based on the principle that people should prevent bad things if the moral cost of prevention is incomparably lesser. In other words, people should stop bad things from happening to the extent that they can, as long as they don't cause anything comparably bad to occur by doing so.

Peter Singer uses the drowning child thought experiment to argue that proximity is not a morally significant factor in evaluating whether or not human beings are morally obliged to provide life-saving assistance to others. He argues that just as the adult in the thought experiment should save the drowning child even if it ruins his or her clothes, all human beings should give away their disposable income to organisations that stop people from suffering and dying from preventable causes worldwide. Peter Singer summarises this principle with the words, "If it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it." He claims that people should evaluate their charitable giving according to the degree of good it does.



A shallow pond: the setting for Peter Singer's drowning child thought experiment.

### 3. Why is effective altruism important?

Effective altruism is an important philosophical movement because it saves lives. Generally, charitable giving is emotional and spontaneous, which means considerable sums are given to charities that do not significantly improve human or animal wellbeing. The top one thousand United Kingdom-based charities include the English National Opera, the Marlborough College Trust (based at a leading private school for children of the extremely wealthy), and the Rugby Football Foundation. While all these organisations provide philanthropic support for some people, they do not demonstrably save lives or alleviate suffering to the degree that charities endorsed by ethical altruism do. Such organisations include the Against Malaria Foundation, Evidence Action, GiveDirectly, New Incentives, and Sightsavers; between them, these charities have saved or significantly improved the lives of millions of people around the world. Consequently, the primary reason why effective altruism is so important is that it has a major impact on the lives and livelihoods of many of the most impoverished people on Earth.

Beyond this, effective altruism enlivens donors by giving them a sense of purpose and improving their mental wellbeing. Generally, effective altruists report lower levels of depression and higher levels of life satisfaction. In brief, effective altruism appears to give many people a real reason for living or working well-paid jobs that are otherwise unfulfilling. Additionally, effective altruism positively impacts the environment because it reduces disposable income spent on high-carbon goods and services (e.g. cars, holiday homes, and international travel). Such luxuries are one reason why people in more economically developed countries contribute so disproportionately to greenhouse gas emissions and climate change. Finally, effective altruism is ethical. Peter Singer claims that it is impossible to live morally without adopting effective altruism to at least a limited degree; he argues the people who give away one per cent of their income live a minimally ethical life, but from there, the sky is the limit (there are some secular saints have given away all their wealth in the name of effective altruism).

#### George Thinks

I'm pretty much sold on effective altruism, and it's inspired me to radically rethink my life and what I should be doing with it. Of course, I'm by no means a secular saint, as Peter Singer puts it, but I'm much more thoughtful about how I spend my disposable income. Certainly, spending money saving the lives of others seems considerably more meaningful than accumulating material possessions, especially when they're luxuries rather than necessities. But we live in an avaricious and materialistic age, so I certainly won't be offended or surprised if you disagree with me. Nevertheless, the one thing I struggle to get around is this: if you agree with saving the drowning child in front of you but not the one dying from malaria in a far off country, why does proximity matter? The only persuasive defence appears to be that it's unnatural to show concern for strangers thousands of miles away, but that would make the nation-state an unnatural construction as well. If you think there's no need to help strangers, then there's no need to contribute to the welfare state or die for your country either.

