

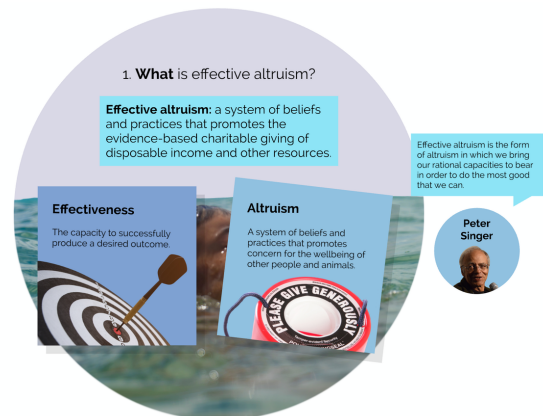
Introduction to Effective Altruism

Hi! This lesson introduces effective altruism, which, in many ways, can be described as a philosophical phenomenon. In brief, it's a system of beliefs and practices that encourages people to give away as much of their disposable income as possible, all to charities working to avoid preventable deaths and alleviate unnecessary suffering (mostly in less economically developed countries and sometimes with animals). On a personal level, it's also something that's significantly affected my own life, convincing me to be considerably more philanthropic and strategic in my charitable giving. In some ways, then, this lesson is more than a little self-indulgent because I'm very much convinced of the argument for effective altruism and hope my introduction to it encourages you to research it further and apply its principles to your own life. If you think it's a little dubious for a teacher to be preaching instead of teaching, then I hope you'll forgive me. Regardless, over the course of this lesson, we're going to be learning a little more about what effective altruism actually is, how it works, and, of course, why it's important.

• So, without further ado, what is effective altruism? Well, as we've already discussed, it's a powerfully persuasive philosophical view that encourages a lot more charitable giving to life-saving and pain-relieving causes. • I've defined it here as a system of beliefs and practices that promotes the evidence-based charitable giving of disposable income and other resources, which I think captures the main points. However, pondering the two words that make up its name for a moment or two may be helpful for us.

• 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. In this case, for altruism to be most effective, it must be concerned with the most important aspects of human and animal wellbeing, namely, the avoidance of preventable deaths and the alleviation of unnecessary suffering. It's this point that distinguishes effective altruism from garden variety charitable giving, which is often spontaneous and sometimes mindlessly irrational. If you're going to give away your disposable income, so the argument goes, don't give it to your local ballet company or scout group, despite the fact these may be charities; give it to an organisation that's actually going to save lives or demonstrably improve them. Get the most value for money that you possibly can. • Or, as Peter Singer would say, "bring [your] rational capacities to bear in order to do the most good that [you] can." This is the fundamental principle at the heart of effective altruism. Give, but give intentionally, so that you get the most bang for your buck, so that your donation has the greatest positive effect possible. For example, effective altruists point out that it costs about \$40,000 to train a guide dog and its recipient. However, it costs between \$20-50 to cure a blind person of trachoma in a less economically developed country. If you have \$40,000 to give away, even though a guide dog would alleviate the suffering of a single blind person, an effective altruist will encourage you to give the sum to Sightsavers, where it will save between 800 to 2,000 children from blindness. This latter choice represents the most good you can do to alleviate blindness-induced suffering with such a sum.

• So, effective altruism is all about giving as strategically as possible to reduce pain, suffering and preventable death in this world, but how does it work; how does the argument actually stack up? Although Peter Singer doesn't claim credit for the effective altruism movement, he is responsible for developing one of its most persuasive arguments, • which is built upon the drowning child thought experiment. First framed in 1972, in an incredibly famous paper titled *Famine, Affluence, and Morality*, Peter Singer invited his readers to imagine an adult walking past a shallow pond in which a child is drowning before asking, should the adult save the child from drowning even though his or her clothes may be ruined? He claimed most people would agree 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, we should, to the extent that we are able, stop bad things from happening in the world as long as we don't cause anything comparably bad to occur in doing so. At the very least, we'd certainly view someone who let a child drown in a pond to avoid buying a new pair of shoes as deeply suspicious. Even though it isn't a criminal act, we'd probably feel that this selfish, self-absorbed person had participated in the child's



death. It would probably raise a good deal of moral indignation; if we have any moral sense at all, we'd certainly think it was seriously wrong, if not outright evil. • But here's the kicker: proximity is not morally significant. We all know that people are suffering and dying from preventable causes around the world. The fact they're 10,000 miles away doesn't make a difference. If we choose to spend our disposable income on a new pair of shoes instead of fighting malaria, for instance, we're as morally bankrupt as someone who lets a small child drown before their eyes so they don't

have to get their shoes wet. Peter Singer sums all this up 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." This is, in the words of A. E. Harvey's famous book on the ethics of Jesus, a strenuous command, but it's one that some extraordinary people on this planet manage to follow. Peter Singer's recent books on the subject are studded with specific examples, • like Zell Krazinsky, who captures the spirit of effective altruism with the words, "The reasons for giving a little are the reasons for giving a lot, and the reasons for giving a lot are the reasons for giving more." He recently gave his entire \$45 million fortune to life-saving and pain-relieving charities and then donated one of his kidneys to a stranger to save her life; he's claimed in the past that anyone unwilling to make such a sacrifice is a murderer. But effective altruism is about more than philanthropy. • It's not mere charitable giving. The largest thousand charities in the United Kingdom include • the English National Opera, • Marlborough College (a leading private school for children of the wealthy), • and the Rugby Football Foundation. Giving to such charities may do some good, but not the sort of good envisaged by • effective altruism, which promotes charities like • the Against Malaria Foundation, • Evidence Action, • GiveDirectly, • New Incentives, and • Sightsavers; all organisations that can point to a demonstrable impact saving or significantly improving millions of lives.

•• This leaves us with only one thing left to consider (that is, why effective altruism is important as a system of beliefs and practices). Three things are at the forefront of my mind, although there are certainly others we may be able to think of. • First, effective altruism is enlivening, by which I mean it increases the sense of purpose and wellbeing among donors. It gives people a sense of mission and makes them feel better about themselves; it alleviates depression and purposelessness. Perhaps counter-intuitively, it makes its adherents much happier people.

• Second, it's environmental; by redirecting spending to good causes, it undermines the market for luxury goods and services which are, often, especially bad for the environment. Typically, effective altruists live incredibly modest lives: they don't have multiple vehicles or holidays homes or undertake frequent international trips because they spend their disposable income helping others. • And finally, it's ethical. Peter Singer claims it's impossible to live ethically without adopting effective altruism to some degree. Those who give away one per cent of their income to good causes live a minimally ethical life. From there, the sky's the limit, and, although Peter Singer avoids the term "secular saint", he points to people like Zell Krazinsky as examples of the good that we can all do in this world.

•• That brings us to the end of this introduction to effective altruism. Now you know what it is, how it works, and why it's important. With this one, I wouldn't be surprised at all if you disagree strenuously with both Peter Singer and me; after all, the drowning child thought experiment is routinely taught to undergraduates as an argument that must be deeply flawed, although successful cases against are yet to be convincingly made. The best counterargument that can be ranged against it is that it's unnatural to the point of nonsense to care about the wellbeing of total strangers, but that's also an argument against the nation-state, which only works because we all care more about millions of people that we've never met (enough to fight and die for them in some cases) than the rest of the world's population. So, please, go and find out more about effective altruism. It's one of the most exciting movements in ethics and a compelling call to action for anyone who thinks they're moral. And on that altruistic note, goodbye!

