Book Review

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Writing for a popular audience, philosopher Peter Singer of Princeton University and the University of Melbourne provides an explanation of effective altruism, an approach to living a more ethical life. Effective altruism is defined as “a philosophy and social movement which applies evidence and reason to working out the most effective ways to improve the world” (p. 4). As social movement, effective altruism is miniscule, largely practiced by a few millennials, yet Singer considers himself a part of this movement and perhaps even the instigator of it. Effective altruism rejects a “do no harm” morality in favor of a “do the most good you can” morality (p. 51). This book was written to convince more people to embrace effective altruism and to encourage those who have by telling them that they are not alone.

The 15 short chapters are grouped into four sections that, in turn, define effective altruism; describe approaches to doing the most good; analyze the motivations and justifications for those who have embraced effective altruism; and apply effective altruism to the choice of which causes and organizations to support. Effective altruists generally agree that less suffering and more happiness are desirable, but “effective altruists are real people, not saints, and they don’t seek to maximize the good in every single thing they do” (p. 8). Effective altruism is not a radical asceticism calling for extensive sacrifice, but rather an approach to utilizing spare time and money in a more effective manner to reduce suffering, extend lives, and improve the quality of living.

Examples of effective altruists, in the second section, include living more modestly in order to contribute more to others (but without bitterness), choosing high income occupations in order to have more to share (or making the best out of capitalism), and literally giving of yourself by donating a kidney or bone marrow. On the surface, each of these may appear to be a bit extreme, but Singer includes a chapter on other ethical careers in which he extols the good that may be accomplished as an advocate, bureaucrat, researcher, organizer of a campaign, and founder of a new organization. Essentially, an effective altruist lives an intentional life, not drifting into a career, but actively making work and lifestyle choices in a manner that facilitates effective altruism.

In the third section, Singer argues that the primary motivation for effective altruists is reason rather than compassion or empathy. Tracing the roots to 19th century utilitarianism, Singer lays out the fundamental philosophical axioms of effective altruism: (a) the good of one individual is of no more importance than the good of another; (b) rational beings are bound to aim at good generally; and, therefore, (c) each of us is morally bound to regard the good of the other. Effective altruists reject gut feelings and snap judgments in favor of objective and abstract reasoning, but with full awareness of the ample emotional payoff that accrues to those who give to help others.

In the last section of the book, Singer addresses the difficult decisions facing effective altruists in
their attempt to do the most good. Although un-
mentioned, Frederic Reamer’s *The Philosophical
Foundations of Social Work* (Columbia University
Press, 1993) is good background for what follows.
Reamer admitted the popularity of utilitarianism
(the most good for the most people) among social
workers, but argued that it was deficient due to
the difficulty of assigning quantitative values to
consequences, the subjective challenges associ-
ated with comparison of alternative goods, and the
unconstrained call for selflessness in action. As we
have already seen, Singer does not believe that ef-
effective altruism calls for a radical asceticism, and
in the last section, he shows quite clearly how the
contemporary access to information can be utilized
to conduct the objective evaluations that precede
effectively altruistic actions.

Here an example may be helpful. Effective altrui-
lists argue for rational evaluation of alternatives
based on the foundational belief that every life
is of equal value. Accordingly, if I became con-
vinced that there was only one chance in 4,000 that
donating a kidney might reduce my lifetime by
five years, and another’s could be extended by 40
years, then effective altruism justifies a kidney do-
nation. To do otherwise is to value the likely half
day of my life (5 x 365 days/4,000) as of greater
value than 40 years for another. Compassion is not
the issue; doing the most good is.

Other examples abound in this final section. Char-
table contributions to domestic philanthropies
simply cannot be justified on a cost-benefit basis
in comparison to the good that can be done with
modest resources directed at the poorest in the
world. Effective altruists are encouraged to care
about what other people do not care about so that
their modest resources make a larger impact, and
to use strategies that other people resist. Singer’s
essential argument is that philanthropic causes can
be objectively evaluated and that effective altruists
will not only do the hard thinking it takes to objec-
tive evaluate alternatives, but that they will choose
to give to the objectively best cause.

The last two chapters are particularly useful as
Singer walks the reader step-by-step through a ra-
tional evaluation of direct aid programs, advocacy
efforts, and efforts to prepare for extinction-level
events. The World Health Organizations Disability
Adjusted Life-Year and the National Institute for
Health and Care Excellence’s Quality Adjusted
Life-Year are useful metrics in conducting these
objective evaluations. Metacharities like Give Well
and Animal Charity Evaluators have significantly
improved access to high quality information to aid
in the evaluation process with regard to direct aid
programs, and The Open Philanthropy Project is
making progress toward assessing the outcomes of
political advocacy. The most important contribu-
tion of this book, however, is the simplicity with
which Singer conducts his objective evaluations.

In my view, effective altruism is altogether consis-
tent with social work values and ethics, although I
imagine that some readers will find his arguments
equating animal suffering with human suffering
too much. I am, however, particularly intrigued by
the blending of objective evaluation with a “do the
most good” ethical standard. As a social work edu-
cator, I find social work students filled with com-
passion and desirous of doing good, but somewhat
resistant to the rational and objective analyses
integral to establishing an evidentiary foundation
for good works. Singer provides an accessible and
persuasive case for the exaltation of reason over
compassion and the embrace of intentional analy-
sis and comparison of alternatives. Social work
would gain greatly from a broader application of
the essential components of effective altruism be-
cause it contains the potential of an answer for our
most pressing question, “How do we know that
what we are doing is making a difference?” Singer
has shown us the way.

Reference

foundations of social work*. New York:
Columbia University Press.