

## Book Review

Singer, P. (2015). *The most good you can do: How effective altruism is changing ideas about living ethically*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

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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 unmentioned, 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 associated with comparison of alternative goods, and the unconstrained call for selflessness in action. As we have already seen, Singer does not believe that 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 altruists argue for rational evaluation of alternatives based on the foundational belief that every life is of equal value. Accordingly, if I became convinced 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 donation. To do otherwise is to value the likely half day of my life ( $5 \times 365 \text{ days} / 4,000$ ) 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. Charitable 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 objectively 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 rational 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 contribution of this book, however, is the simplicity with which Singer conducts his objective evaluations.

In my view, effective altruism is altogether consistent 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 educator, I find social work students filled with compassion 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 analysis and comparison of alternatives. Social work would gain greatly from a broader application of the essential components of effective altruism because 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

Reamer, F. G. (1993). *The philosophical foundations of social work*. New York: Columbia University Press.