

Greater Manchester Humanists

EFFECTIVE ALTRUISM

Notes for discussion group meeting on 17 September 2015

This topic is prompted by this article: <http://www.bostonreview.net/forum/peter-singer-logic-effective-altruism> Here are some extracts from the article:

At universities from Oxford to Harvard and the University of Washington, from Bayreuth in Germany to Brisbane in Australia, effective altruism organizations are forming. Effective altruists are engaging in lively discussions on social media and websites, and their ideas are being examined in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and even the *Wall Street Journal*. Philosophy, and more specifically practical ethics, has played an important role in effective altruism's development, and effective altruism shows that philosophy is returning to its Socratic role of challenging our ideas about what it is to live an ethical life. In doing so, philosophy has demonstrated its ability to transform, sometimes quite dramatically, the lives of those who study it. Moreover, it is a transformation that, I believe, should be welcomed because it makes the world a better place.

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 . . . 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?

Finally, the emergence of effective altruism and the evident enthusiasm and intelligence with which many millennials at the outset of their careers are embracing it offer grounds for optimism about our future.

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; giving part of their body—blood, bone marrow, or even a kidney—to a stranger.

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.”

See the same link for commentary on Singer’s article, and his response.

See also:

<http://blog.ted.com/20-resources-for-better-giving-and-living-a-more-altruistic-life/>
which itself provides many links including one to a TED talk by Singer.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Effective_altruism

John Coss
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