

What Is Effective Altruism?

I met Matt Wage in 2009 when he took my Practical Ethics class at Princeton University. In the readings relating to global poverty and what we ought to be doing about it, he found an estimate of how much it costs to save the life of one of the millions of children who die each year from diseases that we can prevent or cure. This led Matt to calculate how many lives he could save, over his lifetime, assuming that he earned an average income and donated 10 percent of it to a highly effective organization, for example, one providing families with bednets to prevent malaria, a major killer of children. He discovered that he could, with that level of donation, save about one hundred lives. He thought to himself, "Suppose you see a burning building, and you run through the flames and kick a door open, and let one hundred people out. That would be the greatest moment in your life. And I could do as much good as that!"

Two years later Matt graduated. His senior thesis received the Philosophy Department's prize for the best thesis of the year. He was accepted by the University of Oxford for postgraduate study. Many students who major in philosophy dream of an opportunity like that—I know I did—but by then Matt had done a lot of thinking about and discussing with others what career would do the most good. This led him to a very different choice: he took a job on Wall Street, working for an arbitrage trading firm. On a higher income, he

would be able to give much more, both as a percentage and in dollars, than 10 percent of a professor's income. One year after graduating, Matt was donating a six-figure sum—roughly half his annual earnings—to highly effective charities. He was on the way to saving a hundred lives, not over his entire career but within the first year or two of his working life and every year thereafter.

Matt is an effective altruist. His choice of career is one of several possible ways of being an effective altruist. 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 tithе—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 the 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.

In the following chapters, we will meet people who have done these things.

What unites all these acts under the banner of effective altruism? The definition now becoming standard is “a philosophy and social movement which applies evidence and reason to working out the

most effective ways to improve the world.”² That definition says nothing about motives or about any sacrifice or cost to the effective altruist. Given that the movement has altruism as part of its name, these omissions may seem odd. Altruism is contrasted with egoism, which is concern only for oneself, but we should not think of effective altruism as requiring self-sacrifice, in the sense of something necessarily contrary to one's own interests. If doing the most you can for others means that you are also flourishing, then that is the best possible outcome for everyone. As we shall see in chapter 9, many effective altruists deny that what they are doing is a sacrifice. Nevertheless they are altruists because their overriding concern is to do the most good they can. The fact that they find fulfillment and personal happiness in doing that does not detract from their altruism.

Psychologists who study giving behavior have noticed that some people give substantial amounts to one or two charities, while others give small amounts to many charities. Those who donate to one or two charities seek evidence about what the charity is doing and whether it is really having a positive impact. If the evidence indicates that the charity is really helping others, they make a substantial donation. Those who give small amounts to many charities are not so interested in whether what they are doing helps others—psychologists call them warm glow givers. Knowing that they are giving makes them feel good, regardless of the impact of their donation. In many cases the donation is so small—\$10 or less—that if they stopped to think, they would realize that the cost of processing the donation is likely to exceed any benefit it brings to the charity.³

In 2013, as the Christmas giving season approached, twenty thousand people gathered in San Francisco to watch a five-year-old boy dressed as Barkid ride around the city in a Barnmobile with an actor dressed as Batman by his side. The pair rescued a damsel in

distress and captured the Riddler, for which they received the keys of “Gotham City” from the mayor—not an actor, he really was the mayor of San Francisco—for their role in fighting crime. The boy, Miles Scott, had been through three years of chemotherapy for leukemia, and when asked for his greatest wish, he replied, “To be Bar-kid.” The Make-A-Wish Foundation had made his wish come true.

Does that give you a warm glow? It gives me one, even though I know there is another side to this feel-good story. Make-A-Wish would not say how much it cost to fulfill Miles’s wish, but it did say that the average cost of making a child’s wish come true is \$7,500.⁴ Effective altruists would, like anyone else, feel emotionally drawn toward making the wishes of sick children come true, but they would also know that \$7,500 could, by protecting families from malaria, save the lives of at least three children and maybe many more. Saving a child’s life has to be better than fulfilling a child’s wish to be Bar-kid. If Miles’s parents had been offered that choice—Bar-kid for a day or a complete cure for their son’s leukemia—they surely would have chosen the cure. When more than one child’s life can be saved, the choice is even clearer. Why then do so many people give to Make-A-Wish, when they could do more good by donating to the Against Malaria Foundation, which is a highly effective provider of bednets to families in malaria-prone regions? The answer lies in part in the emotional pull of knowing that you are helping *this* child, one whose face you can see on television, rather than the unknown and unknowable children who would have died from malaria if your donation had not provided the nets under which they sleep. It also lies in part in the fact that Make-A-Wish appeals to Americans, and Miles is an American child.

Effective altruists will feel the pull of helping an identifiable child from their own nation, region, or ethnic group but will then ask themselves if that is the best thing to do. They know that saving a life

is better than making a wish come true and that saving three lives is better than saving one. So they don’t give to whatever cause tugs most strongly at their heartstrings. They give to the cause that will do the most good, given the abilities, time, and money they have available.

Doing the most good is a vague idea that raises many questions. Here are a few of the more obvious ones, and some preliminary answers:

What counts as “the most good”?

Effective altruists will not all give the same answer to this question, but they do share some values. They would all agree that a world with less suffering and more happiness in it is, other things being equal, better than one with more suffering and less happiness. Most would say that a world in which people live longer is, other things being equal, better than one in which people live shorter lives. These values explain why helping people in extreme poverty is a popular cause among effective altruists. As we shall see in more detail in chapter 10, a given sum of money does much more to reduce suffering and save lives if we use it to assist people living in extreme poverty in developing countries than it would do if we gave it to most other charitable causes.

Does everyone’s suffering count equally?

Effective altruists do not discount suffering because it occurs far away or in another country or afflicts people of a different race or religion. They agree that the suffering of animals counts too and generally agree that we should not give less consideration to suffering just because the victim is not a member of our species. They may differ, however, on how to weigh the type of suffering animals can experience against the type of suffering humans can experience.⁵

Does "the most good you can do" mean that it is wrong to give priority to one's own children? Surely it can't be wrong to put the interests of members of the family and close friends ahead of the interests of strangers?

Effective altruists can accept that one's own children are a special responsibility, ahead of the children of strangers. There are various possible grounds for this. Most parents love their children, and it would be unrealistic to require parents to be impartial between their own children and other children. Nor would we want to discourage such bias because children thrive in close, loving families, and it is not possible to love people without having greater concern for their well-being than one has for others. In any case, while doing the most good is an important part of the life of every effective altruist, effective altruists are real people, not saints, and they don't seek to maximize the good in every single thing they do, 24/7. As we shall see, typical effective altruists leave themselves time and resources to relax and do what they want. For most of us, being close to our children and other family members or friends is central to how we want to spend our time. Nonetheless, effective altruists recognize that there are limits to how much they should do for their children, given the greater needs of others. Effective altruists do not think their children need all the latest toys or lavish birthday parties, and they reject the widespread assumption that parents should, on their death, leave virtually everything they own to their children rather than give a substantial part of their wealth to those who can benefit much more from it.

What about other values, like justice, freedom, equality, and knowledge?

Most effective altruists think that other values are good because they are essential for the building of communities in which people can live better lives, lives free of oppression, and have greater

self-respect and freedom to do what they want as well as experience less suffering and premature death.⁶ No doubt some effective altruists hold that these values are also good for their own sake, independently of these consequences, but others do not.

Can promoting the arts be part of "the most good you can do"?

In a world that had overcome extreme poverty and other major problems that face us now, promoting the arts would be a worthy goal. In the world in which we live, however, for reasons that will be explored in chapter 11, donating to opera houses and museums isn't likely to be doing the most good you can.

How many effective altruists could there be? Can everyone practice effective altruism?

It's possible for everyone who has some spare time or money to practice effective altruism. Unfortunately, most people—even, as we shall see in chapter 11, professional philanthropy advisors—don't believe in thinking too much about the choice of causes to support. So it isn't likely everyone will become an effective altruist anytime soon. The more interesting question is whether effective altruists can become numerous enough to influence the giving culture of affluent nations. There are some promising signs that that may be starting to happen.

What if one's act reduces suffering, but to do so one must lie or harm an innocent person?

In general, effective altruists recognize that breaking moral rules against killing or seriously harming an innocent person will almost always have worse consequences than following these rules. Even thoroughgoing utilitarians, who judge actions to be right or wrong entirely on the basis of their consequences, are wary of speculative

reasoning that suggests we should violate basic human rights today for the sake of some distant future good. They know that under Lenin, Stalin, Mao, and Pol Pot, a vision of a utopian future society was used to justify unspeakable atrocities, and even today some terrorists justify their crimes by imagining they will bring about a better future. No effective altruist wants to repeat those tragedies.

Suppose I set up a factory in a developing country, paying wages that are better than local workers would otherwise earn and enough to lift them out of extreme poverty. Does that make me an effective altruist, even if I make a profit from the factory?

What are you going to do with your profits? If you decided to manufacture in the developing country in order to make it possible for people to escape extreme poverty, you will reinvest a substantial part of your profits in ways that help more people escape extreme poverty. Then you are an effective altruist. If, on the other hand, you use your profits to live as luxuriously as you can, the fact that you have benefited some of the poor is not sufficient to make you an effective altruist. There are all kinds of intermediate positions between these two extremes. Reinvesting some of your profits to help more people earn a decent income, while retaining enough to live at a much better level than your employees, puts you somewhere on the spectrum of effective altruism—you are living at least a minimally decent ethical life, even if not a perfect one.

What about giving to your college or university? You teach at Princeton University, and this book is based on lectures you gave at Yale University, thanks to the generous gift of a Yale alumnus. Do you deny that giving to such institutions counts as effective altruism?

I count myself fortunate to be teaching at one of the finest educational institutions in the world. This gives me the opportunity to teach very bright, hardworking students like Matt Wage, who are likely to have a disproportionately large influence on the world. For the same reason, I was pleased to accept the invitation to give the Castle Lectures at Yale. But Princeton has an endowment, at the time of writing, of \$21 billion, and Yale's is \$23.9 billion. At the moment there are enough alumni donating to these universities to ensure that they will continue to be outstanding educational institutions, and the money you donate to one of them could probably do more good elsewhere. If effective altruism ever becomes so popular that these educational institutions are no longer able to do important research at a high level, it will be time to consider whether donating to them might once again be an effective form of altruism.⁷