

## Effective-Altruism. Why and How we Need to Help.



The picture presented above may not seem familiar to you all. It relates to a not-so-old news story from 2011, a story that's deeply unsettled millions in China: footage of a two-year-old girl hit by a van and left bleeding in the street by passersby, footage too graphic to be shown, hence the still image. The entire accident is caught on camera. The driver pauses after hitting the child, his back wheels seen resting on her.. Within two minutes, three additional people pass two-year-old Wang Yue by. The first walks around the badly injured girl completely. Others look at her, and move on.

There were other people who walked past Wang Yue, and a second van ran over her legs before a homeless lady called for help. Wang Yue was rushed to the nearest hospital, but it was too late. She died. I wonder how many of you, reading this now, said to yourselves just now, "I would not have done that. I would have stopped to help." Virtually raise your hands if that thought occurred to you.

(\*UNICEF Report,\*)

[https://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/usa\\_65829.html](https://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/usa_65829.html)

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As I'm hoping, you raised your hand. And I believe you if you did. I'm sure you're right. But before you give yourself too much credit, I present you with a UNICEF report. In 2011, 6.9 million children under five died from preventable, poverty-related diseases. UNICEF thinks that that's good news because the figure has been steadily coming down from 12 million in 1990. That is good. But still, 6.9 million is 19,000 children dying every day. Does it really matter that we're not walking past them in the street? Does it really matter that they're far away? I don't think it does make a morally relevant difference. The fact that they're not right in front of us, that they might need a 5 USD donation to survive, none of that seems morally relevant to me. What is really important is, can we reduce that death toll? Can we save some of those 19,000 children dying every day?

(\*Against Malaria Foundation.\*)

<https://www.againstmalaria.com/WhyMalaria.aspx>



(Malaria Prevention Net<sup>^</sup>)

The answer is, yes we can. Each of us spends money on things that we do not really need. You can think what your own habit is, whether it's a vacation or just something like buying bottled water when the water that comes out of the tap is perfectly safe to drink.... satisfying your caffeine 'addiction', buying way too expensive clothes. You could take the money you're spending on those unnecessary things and give it to this organization, the Against Malaria Foundation, which would take the money you had given and use it to buy nets like this one to protect children like this one, and we know reliably that if we provide nets, they're used, and they reduce the number of children dying from malaria. What is stopping you from doing that I wonder. These children that can be saved, but aren't.

Fortunately, more and more people are understanding this idea of needed help, and the result is a growing movement: Effective-Altruism. It's important because it combines both the heart and the head. The heart, of course, you felt. You felt the empathy for that child Wang Yue. But it's really important to use the head as well to make sure that what you do is effective and well-directed. In addition the head helps us understand that any suffering, under-privileged people are like us, that they can suffer as we can, that the parents grieve for the deaths of their children, as we do, and that just as our lives and our well-being matter to us, it matters just as much to all of these people. Reasoning is not just some neutral tool to help you get whatever you want. It does help us to put perspective on our situation. I think that's why many of the most significant people in Effective-Altruism have been people who have had backgrounds in philosophy or economics or math. We'll look at a few in a minute. And that might seem surprising, because a lot of people think, "Philosophy is remote from the real world; economics, we're told, just makes us more selfish, and we know that math is for nerds." But in fact it does make a difference, and in fact there's one particular nerd who has been a particularly effective Altruist because he's got the Against Malaria Foundation.

(\*How many lives has Bill and Melinda Gates saved? Estimate.\*)

<https://thenextweb.com/microsoft/2012/01/14/bill-gates-philanthropic-efforts-have-helped-save-over-5-8-million-lives/>

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This is the website of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (linked above, pg1), and if you look at the words on the top right-hand side, it says, "All lives have equal value." That's the understanding, the rational understanding of our situation in the world that has led to these people being the most Effective-Altruists in history, Bill and Melinda Gates and Warren Buffett. No one, not Andrew Carnegie, not John D. Rockefeller, has ever given as much to charity as each one of these three, and they have used their intelligence to make sure that it is highly effective. According to one

estimate (linked above), the Gates Foundation has already saved 5.8 million lives and many millions more, people, getting diseases that would have made them very sick, even if eventually they survived. Over the coming years, undoubtedly the Gates Foundation is going to give a lot more funds, and is going to save a lot more lives. Well, you might say, that's fine if you're a billionaire, you can have that kind of impact. But if I'm not, what can I do? So I'm going to look at four off putting thoughts that the average person dwells on, that undoubtedly stand in the way of them giving.



(Toby Ord^) (\*Giving What We Can\*)

<https://www.givingwhatwecan.org/pledge/why-pledge/>

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They worry how much of a difference they can make. But you don't have to be a billionaire. This is Toby Ord. He's a research fellow in philosophy at the University of Oxford. He became an Effective-Altruist when he calculated that with the money that he was likely to earn throughout his career, and academic career, he could give enough funds to cure 80,000 people of blindness in developing countries and still have enough left for a perfectly adequate standard of living. So Toby founded an organization called Giving What We Can (linked above) to spread this information, to unite people who want to share some of their income, and to ask people to pledge to give 10 percent of what they earn over their lifetime to fighting global poverty. Toby himself does better than that. He's pledged to live on 18,000 pounds a year -- that's less than 30,000 US dollars -- and to give the rest to those organizations. And yes, Toby is married and he does have a mortgage.



(Will Crouch^) (\*How to do the most good in your Career\*)

<https://80000hours.org/about/>

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Now, mentioning time might lead you to think, "Well, should I abandon my career and put all of my time into saving some of these 19,000 lives that are lost every day?" One person who's thought quite a bit about this issue of how you can have a career that will have the biggest impact for good in the world is Will Crouch. He's a graduate student in philosophy, and he's set up a website called 80,000 Hours (linked above), the number of hours he estimates most people spend on their career. The website is designed to advise people on how to have the best, most effective career. But you might be surprised to know that one of the careers that he encourages people to consider, if they have the right abilities and character, is to go into banking or finance. Why? Because if you earn a lot of money, you can give away a lot of money, and if you're successful in that career, you could give enough to an aid organization so that it could employ, let's say, five aid workers in developing countries, and each one of them would probably do about as much good as you would have done. So you can quintuple the impact by leading that kind of career.

(\*Give Well. Where to donate.\*)

<https://www.givewell.org/charities/top-charities>

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Many people will think, though, that charities aren't really all that effective. So let's talk about effectiveness. Toby Ord is very concerned about this, and he's calculated that some charities are hundreds or even thousands of times more effective than others, so it's very important to find the effective ones. Take, for example, providing a guide dog for a blind person. That's a good thing to do, right? Well, right, it is a good thing to do, but bluntly speaking you have to think what else you could do with the resources. It costs about 40,000 US dollars to train a guide dog and train the recipient so that the guide dog can be an effective help to a blind person. It costs somewhere between 20 and 50 US dollars to cure a blind person in a developing country if they have trachoma. So you do the sums, and you get something like this. You could provide one guide dog for one blind American, or you could cure between 400 and 2,000 people of blindness. I think it's clear what's the better thing to do. But if you want to look for effective charities, this is a good website to go to. GiveWell (linked above) exists to really assess the impact of charities, not just whether they're well-run, and it's screened hundreds of charities and currently is recommending only three, of which the Against Malaria Foundation is number one. So it's very tough to find effective charities (sarcasma hahaha).

If you unfortunately want to look for other recommendations, <https://www.thelifeyoucan-save.org/> and <https://www.givingwhatwecan.org/> both have a somewhat broader list, but you can find effective organizations, and not just in the area of saving lives from the poor. I'm pleased to say that there is now also a website looking at effective animal organizations. That's another cause that I've been concerned about all my life, the immense amount of suffering that humans inflict on literally tens of billions of animals every year. So if you want to look for effective organizations to reduce that suffering, you can go to <https://animalcharityevaluators.org/donation-advice/recommended-charities/>. Some Effective-Altruists think it's very important to make sure that our species survives at all. So they're looking at ways to reduce the risk of the widespread extinction that happens daily. If you're still concerned about effectiveness, start your own charity. We might ask, "What is the most pressing and immediate issue of today?" There's many possible answers, which means there are lots of reasons to give to a lot of different organizations. You as a human have power to help any

one, or even all of the many good causes there are or yet to be invited, but are you giving? Are you giving enough?

My final topic I'd like to spend time on is, some people will think it's a burden to give. I don't really believe it is. I've enjoyed giving all of my life since I 'graduated' middle school. I think one of the reasons for this is that being an Effective-Altruist helps to overcome what we all know of, the Sisyphus problem. Here's Sisyphus as portrayed by Titian, condemned by the gods to push a huge boulder up to the top of the hill. Just as he gets there, the effort becomes too much, the boulder escapes, rolls all the way down the hill, he has to trudge back down to push it up again, and the same thing happens again and again for all eternity. Does that remind you of a consumer lifestyle, where you work hard to get money, you spend that money on consumer goods which you hope you'll enjoy using? But then the money's gone, you have to work hard to get more, spend more, and to maintain the same level of happiness, it's kind of a hedonic treadmill. You never get off, and you never feel satisfied. Becoming an Effective-Altruist gives you that meaning and fulfillment. It enables you to have a solid basis for self-esteem on which you can feel your life was really worth living by means of continuing to give for as long as you are alive. Save a life day.

If money is still an issue, if you can't spare 10% of your earnings (this category includes me currently), there are several body parts or bodily fluids one can donate. Examples of possible donations include blood, which you can donate regularly, assuming you are of the right height and weight; plasma and bone marrow as well. Something as trivial as a kidney can be given up without shortening your lifespan at all. There's about 100 people each year in the U.S. and more in other countries who do that. While writing this, I have to admit, I'm also somewhat embarrassed (as you should be) by that, because I still have two kidneys, and plenty of blood, plasma, and bone marrow to give. Calculations show that the number of life-years that one kidney could have added to a person, the extension of life, was about the same that you could achieve if you gave 5,000 US dollars to the Against Malaria Foundation. The cost of keeping your kidney means to me, a future donation of just as much money or more. So if you're feeling bad because you still have two kidneys as well, there's a way for you to get off the hook. A donation of money or a donation of the body.

I'll leave you with this final thought. With all the facts in front you, as well as resources, more plainly laid out than it may ever be again, do you now find yourself questioning your life decisions up to this point? I sure am, and I feel sorry for anyone who isn't. Need I remind you, 19,000 children under 5 years of age are dying from something you or I could have prevented. All life is created equal, and we need to look out for each other. Effective-Altruism is the only way we can make the most out of what resources we have left on this planet. Effective-Altruism is a strategy some are using now to fight global poverty, and immediate suffering. A time will come in the future, or maybe even now in the present, where we will have to use Effective-Altruism to combat the large and dawning issue of Climate Change. With evidence like what I've presented, it doesn't take a major in philosophy to figure out what needs to be done. Lucky for myself I have a minor in that field. but all that aside, you can't just wait, watch and hope things get better, because things aren't going to get better on their own. It's no one's responsibility to save the world on their own. It's our individual responsibility to save the world as best we can. Don't waste a second and start saving lives now.

Written by Moses Taylor.

Thank you for your time. Continue the conversation if you feel you are not obligated to dedicate yourself to the better of all humanity. I'd be happy to change your mind. Email [motayher@gmail.com](mailto:motayher@gmail.com)