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Effective altruism

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August 13, 2013 (updated on: July 25, 2016) | by [Holden](#)

We're proud to be part of the nascent "effective altruist" movement. Effective altruism has been discussed elsewhere (see [Peter Singer's TED talk](#) and [Wikipedia](#)); this post gives our take on what it is and isn't.

What is effective altruism?

To us, "effective altruism" means **trying to do as much good as possible with each dollar and each hour that we have**. It's a way of thinking about morality that insists on *maximization* of good accomplished, and not just *satisficing* of rules and guidelines.

To us, this implies

- **Focusing on how one's actions are likely to affect the world, rather than on how they affect oneself and one's feelings.** Effective altruism is consistent with believing that giving benefits the giver, but it's not consistent with making this the driving goal of giving. Effective altruists

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often take pride in their willingness to give (either time or money) based on arguments that others might find too intellectual or abstract, and their refusal to give suboptimally even when a pitch is emotionally compelling. The primary/driving goal is to help others, not to feel good about oneself. (This doesn't mean that effective altruists aren't passionate about what they do or don't obtain emotional rewards; it means feeling this passion and obtaining these rewards comes from *focusing* on impact.)

- **Being open to working on any cause, rather than committing to a cause up-front based on pre-existing personal interests.** Strategic cause selection is based on the notion that one can do much more good working on some issues than on others.
- **Thinking of all beliefs as being open to change, and therefore potentially worthy of debate and analysis.** Effective altruists research and debate a broad range of topics, from estimates of how to improve lives as much as possible per dollar to how such estimates should be used to what counts as a life to whether it's better to give now or later (and many more). The consequences of a shift in views – including on relatively abstract topics – can be large, so one should not take any questions “off the table” by declaring that only one answer is acceptable.
- **Being open to unconventional approaches to doing good.** For example, effective altruists often choose to devote themselves to for-profit activities, perhaps because they're earning to give and perhaps because they believe these activities are themselves promising ways to improve the world. Doing lucrative for-profit work isn't usually – or stereotypically – identified with being “humanitarian” or “altruistic,” but for effective altruists it can be a serious option.

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- **Using one's investigative resources efficiently.** We'll never have all the information we need to make knowably optimal decisions. Effective altruism means focusing one's debates, analysis and research on questions that will bear tangible fruit in terms of informing our decisions about how to accomplish good. Different groups in the movement have different views of what this means. Some believe it is important to focus on **philosophical questions** (such as "should we value enabling a birth similarly to averting a death?") that seem in some sense "fundamental" and highly consequential in determining what outcomes we should aim for. We take a different view: we believe that questions like these, important though they may be, often aren't amenable to tangible progress through further investigation. We prefer to focus our resources on questions that combine "importance" with "tractability to further investigation."

Effective altruism is unusual and controversial

To many readers of this blog, the above qualities might sound like self-evidently good ones. But we don't believe that's how most people see them.

As GiveWell and Good Ventures have **explored what causes to get involved in**, the single most common advice we've gotten has been to "choose what you're passionate about." When we've described our desire to do "strategic cause selection" – choosing causes based on how we can accomplish the most good – we've seen a good deal of pushback and skepticism. It's common for people to emphasize the importance of "starting from the heart," and to fear that our commitment to a cause won't be genuine (and won't be robust) if it comes from a strategic, analysis-based choice.

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This concern is reminiscent of [David Brooks's reaction to the idea of "earning to give"](#):

If you choose a profession that doesn't arouse your everyday passion for the sake of serving instead some abstract faraway good, you might end up as a person who values the far over the near. You might become one of those people who loves humanity in general but not the particular humans immediately around ... Instead of seeing yourself as one person deeply embedded in a particular community, you may end up coolly looking across humanity as a detached god.

...when most people pick a vocation, they don't only want one that will be externally useful. They want one that they will enjoy, and that will make them a better person. They want to find that place, as the novelist Frederick Buechner put it, "where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."

I believe that these concerns misunderstand effective altruism. Effective altruism isn't an alternative to having personal interests and passions; it *is* a personal interest and passion. Our next post will elaborate.

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