

Effective Altruism: A Global Movement of Expanding Moral Horizons

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Abstract: *This paper argues about Effective Altruism, a contemporary philosophical movement. Peter Singer, an Australian Practical Ethicist is the founder of this new emerging social movement. Many other philosophers are contributing to this philosophy at present. They have come up with a new idea of minimizing the atrocities of the world. This philosophy believes that inequality of this world is not an accident but it is designed by mega rich people and societies. To change the worst conditions of our planet is the grand theme of this philosophy. The current research debates, how altruism can be effective for a better living planet for living beings. It is greatly significant to the present scenario of Pakistan, as it is one of the latest philosophical works of the developed world and no work has been done here in Pakistan on the issue yet. The focus of this paper will be highlighting the worst kind of sufferings of the developing nations that are imposed on them both nationally and internationally and how we can get rid of these sufferings. Through this research, the most influential philosophers of the present time are put in context to address those issues too. Study's implications are not only limited to philosophical borders but it's quite wider in understanding societal problems.*

Key Words: Moral Horizons, Effective Altruism, Poverty Action Lab, Broken-Down Altruism, Metacharities, Empathy, Warm Glow Givers, Moral Conceptual Scheme, Misguided Grounds

Introduction

Effective Altruism is an exciting new emerging global movement. Peter Singer, an eminent Australian Philosopher of 21st century, is the founder of this social movement. He argues that usual rules of morality like not stealing or lying are not fortunate enough to be followed in the “present time hugely troubled world.” The moral principles that we are to follow in order to meet the present circumstances are, sparing our resources to make the world a better planet. According to this moral standard, a full ethical life is the one that is lived according to the principle of “the most good we can do.” In the development of this new Philosophy, Practical Ethics has played a vital role. There are number of examples of those who changed their lives dramatically after studying it. Effective Altruists are not saints of any religion; they are common people living a full ethical life.

Effective Altruism emerged with this specific name in late 2000s, however similar ideas are reflected in the writings of many Practical Ethicists. The same argument is found in Peter Singer’s paper *Famine, Affluence, and Morality* (1972). He thinks that it is our moral obligation to prevent bad from happening and we ought to help those whoever in the whole world is in turmoil.¹This concept is widely discussed by the Philosophers’ community on different forums throughout the world.

Working on the movement of Effective Altruism is enormously significant in many ways. In order to deal with the present time calamities of our country, we are gravely in need to focus on the teachings of world’s leading moral Philosophers like Peter Singer. Many contemporaries applied ethicists have approved this philosophy as one of the best solution to treat the global sufferings. A deep and sharp over view of the world tells us that unfortunately our planet is divided into two unimaginable extremes of inequality. Movement like Effective Altruism is substantial enough to awaken the lucky ones among these extremes, out of their dogmatic slumber and they can contribute to change the world with their enormous power. Such ideas are required to be introduced in Pakistan with which the developed world is benefitting. This research paper is going to be a great help to deal with the biggest problem of our time. The readers will be greatly benefited to know the

¹ Peter Singer, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1, no.1 (1972):1-10. <http://www.fringier.org/wp-content/writings/famine.pdf>.

most effective ways to help the global atrocities. Introduction of the latest Philosophical Movement by the contemporary Philosophers is the foremost objective of this research. Knowing the latest solution of the global turmoil will be highly beneficial for the developing world. I want people to get aware of the new ethical norms, presented by Effective Altruism, as new world demands newly revised moral scheme. We cannot remain stuck anymore with merely knowing about what we should do and what not to do. To deal with the present scenario, we are gravely required to know what we can prevent from happening. Further we will realize that restoration of sanctity of life will be possible through the prevention of misdistribution of wealth alone. My purpose is to point out that we cannot escape our moral responsibility for the prevailed sufferings. We cannot justify ourselves merely by thinking that we are not the cause of bringing them. We need to know that by indulging in luxury; definitely we are killing our fellow creatures indirectly. To address the issue of global poverty more effectively, such practical philosophies need to be included in the academic courses. Our coming generations should be very well aware of the silent heroes of the distant world who are purely scarifying much of their precious time, capital and energy to improve the planet.

Altruism is directly opposite to egoism, which tends to concern with one's own self. What unites all the effective altruists under its banner is the overriding concern of "the best one can do." The standard definition of Effective Altruism according to Peter Singer is: "a philosophy and a social movement which applies evidence and reason to working out the most effective ways to improve the world."²

These are the main features of the Movement. (1) Effective Altruism is a notable philosophy that tends to make a difference to the world from several perspectives. Living modestly to donate is the first and most important feature of the movement. They suggest that the superfluous riches of wealthy nations must be placed at the service of needy of the poor world. It does not require self-sacrifice or something contrary to one's own interest but it means you are also flourishing. In case of self-sacrifice, it will be called "broken-down altruism" which is of no use. The most good they can, fills their hearts with great sense of personal happiness and fulfillment. (2) Effective Altruists are strongly

² Peter Singer, *The Most Good You Can Do: How Effective Altruism Changing Ideas about Living Ethically* (New Haven and London: Yale university Press, 2015), 4-5.

convinced that they will not feel the pull of helping only identifiable people, from their own ethnic group, region or nation. They know that saving one life is desirable than “making a wish come true” and saving many lives is better than saving few lives. It requires broader form of altruism and expanding moral horizons is needed. Those who embrace effective altruism are really motivated by altruistic concerns and are optimistic about future. (3) Psychologists observed two kinds of giving behavior, one who prefer to give significant amounts to one or two charities and others are those who donate small amounts to many charities. The first category keeps on seeking evidence about the charity’s performance and what amount of positive impact it created. The other group has no such interest and is called “warm glow givers” by the psychologists.³ (4) Earn to give is another wonderful idea introduced by effective altruism. Although it is possible to donate enough to do good with an average income but by earning more, one can donate more. There are several examples of those who were living an affluent life but still needed some large purpose in life to make them happy. Sometimes avoiding greater harm is valuable than doing the most good one can. (5) Effective Altruism outlines many ethical careers that can be the better possibilities and worth considering to maximize the amount of good. The possible options of ethical careers might be the Advocate, the Bureaucrat, the researcher or the Organizers and Campaigners. Peter Singer views that adopting a career to do the most good is a wide-open choice and it depends upon one’s talent, character or interest. The important factor to be in consideration should be the expected value of one’s choice of career.⁴ (6) Altruistic organ donation is another example of effective altruism. You could aid others by giving part of yourself. Stem cell, bone marrow or blood donation is simpler forms of donation than donating a kidney or an eye. (7) Which motive works behind effective altruism, is an important point discussed in this regard. Different schools of thought answer it differently in the history of philosophy. Hume and Darwin disapproved love of mankind as the motivation of helping strangers. They believe in passion of love with kins alone. Another opinion is that morality evolves within the groups for resolving conflicts, sharing or cooperation. Empathy can also motivate to an effective altruist. Some recognize reason behind this. Giving for your passions or for your loved ones is called “misguided

³ Singer, *The Most Good You Can Do*, 5.

⁴ Singer, 65.

ground” to Singer.⁵ One should not be dazzled by the love of one’s own children. Giving enhances self-esteem among the donors and it should be based on reasonable values. (8) Metacharities impartially check the cost effectiveness of charity organizations by evidence and regular interventions. According to their data, cost of saving one life is more in developed countries. Poverty in those countries is by historical standards whereas in developing countries, it is by absolute standards. In order to save more lives, domestic causes are better to be neglected. To estimate which cause is better than others is substantial in effective altruism though it is very difficult. For example, building a new art gallery is related to enhancing aesthetic experience and is less in worth than curing blindness. (9) This movement is not limited to the well-being of the human beings of the distant world alone, it includes animal well-being, environmental issues and prevention of human extinction as well. They focus on reducing animal sufferings at farms, protecting nature and working on possible steps they could take to reduce future risks of mass human destruction.

Going through all the readings I found on the movement up till now, the finest strategy to reduce the turmoil of the planet is presented by Peter Singer. In order to get immediate benefits, he argues, educating and empowering women might be the right step, as they tend to be less aggressive than men. If they are given say to deal with national and international affairs, they will reduce the chances of nuclear wars. Furthermore educated women will have fewer and healthier children which will help us to stabilize the world population (especially developing world) at a sustainable level.⁶ This is called the courage to admit and we find this very rare in the men of our society. Living in a deprived land, we can very well understand this problem. Massively growing population is the root cause of every problem in the world. Contemporary academic philosophers should realize the present world requirements and should work on such strategies that can help to solve the problems.

Effective altruism is a set of new moral scheme. They are making people realize, how they are killing their fellow beings living in the distant world by indulging in luxury. This realization is brilliant and we all should spread this thought in our community too. Our filthy rich class

⁵ Singer, 86.

⁶ Singer, 178.

needs to know how ignorant they are and what is the mindset of those, they like to follow (the developed world).

Effective altruism is definitely doing great to eradicate the world poverty but to achieve the highest goals; its platform may be switched from “moral obligation” to “religious obligation.” It is true because people are more emotional about performing their religious obligations in comparison to moral obligations.

Ignorance can kill any nation quite easily. We can apply it to our own people when they bring such leaders who deprive them of their own rights in their own smartest ways. Majority of our nation is self-sufficient in ignorance and becomes fool every time. Effective altruists should focus on this problem too. They should visit developing countries to aware people of their rights and teach them the actual meaning of prosperity. Educating and empowering both men and women can make them able to go for the right choice. Unfortunately, many among our educated community don not know the real sense of development.

A higher form of reason and sensitivity works behind effective altruism. Undoubtedly it is very good to think for the betterment of the globe but I have few questions in this concern. Are we strong enough to break the barriers of “region” and “religion?” Can our political boundaries allow us to make our efforts in the right direction? Aren’t we tied by our own governments? I think no, in the presence of the clutches of the world establishment and the thirst of power and domination, there are countless decisions we are unable to make. Of course the idea of effective altruism is brilliant but in the presence of the limitations mentioned above, we will have to revisit this thought. Otherwise we will be like Medieval Doctors who fought the illness by applying leaches.

Peter Singer suggests developing countries to donate developed countries at the time of disaster to show compassion.⁷The idea seems very ethical but it’s not practical and pragmatic at all. The reason behind is very simple that the people of third world countries are facing such disasters daily and they deserve more attention of philanthropic organizations. Moreover, developed countries can easily handle their problems on their own for having strong economies. Preferring to deal the lesser damage before bigger and permanent one will be unwise.

⁷ Singer, 62.

According to Peter Singer, giving out of passion or to our loved ones are “misguided grounds”⁸ of charity giving. In my opinion it is not true because many charities in the world are in the memory of their loved ones and they are working very successfully. Human nature cannot be avoided. Loss of one’s own loved ones is always irreparable and unforgettable. No other damage can take its place. It can be felt only when it comes to you. Therefore, giving out of love of your kin is a very solid ground of giving. Yes, it is true that we should not be dazzled by the love of our own children.

Finally, I would sum up my discussion by saying that effective altruists do not regard themselves to be saints but only ordinary people. Thinking about sparing your resources for the unidentifiable individuals, adopting good career to earn more to give, and donating part of your body, having great concern for the nonhuman species or environment and taking measures to reduce human extinction in future is the whole agenda of effective altruism. I don’t think they are doing less than saints in anyway. In my opinion, sainthood is a school of thought and attaching it to any specific religion would be lacking the knowledge of that spirit. Serving mankind is the tradition of Prophets and Saints and effective altruists are very well following that tradition.

Conclusion

I have critically evaluated the new concept of expanding moral horizons. I have tried to the best of my abilities to make this research as comprehensive as I could. As I have mentioned above that there is not much material available here on Effective Altruism movement. So on regular basis I am in contact with these Living Legends and Metacharities on Instagram, Twitter and Facebook. I am also downloading the fresh research done on the issue and sometimes I ask somebody to bring the books or research articles that are not available online. This paper will be a great help for the students of philosophy. Other international human rights stake holders can benefit too by applying this approach for the betterment of human beings.

I opted to write on the issue to resolve the problems of my own country-men. This will be equally beneficial for both who do nothing and for those who share nothing because both communities share ignorance in common. This is the time we are gravely in need of such fine solutions to bridge the gap between two extremes of inequality. Prevention of misdistribution of resources is also a very good suggestion

⁸ Singer, 86.

presented by them to restore the sanctity of life. I hope this paper will serve as a great motivational force for everyone.

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