

Arguing for Effective Altruism

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Abstract

This article addresses a couple of conceptual problems, and they are: Why should one bother about the hungry that one has not seen? What is the overriding philosophical principle that makes one consider that Effective Altruism is not mere charity? Why should parents think of a starving child of their neighbour when they have their child? These are the few ethical problems arising in conceptual, moral queries that concern Effective Altruism critics. This article concentrates on Peter Singer's ethical arguments to support ethical altruism and rebut its critiques.

KEYWORDS: Moral Philosophy, Effective Altruism, Normativity, Political Philosophy

The Problem

This article addresses a couple of normative and conceptual problems, and they are: Why should one bother about the hungry that one has not seen? What is the overriding philosophical principle that makes me consider that effective altruism is not mere charity? Why should parents think of a starving child of their neighbour when they have their child? These are the few ethical problems arising in the form of conceptual, moral queries that bother the critics of Effective Altruism. This essay concentrates on Peter Singer's ethical arguments to support ethical altruism and rebut its critiques. Ethical Altruism advocates doing as much good one can help others utilising talent, wealth, money and time.

In Somalia, lots of people are suffering from starvation. Due to the impact of civil war, terrorism, poverty and famine. There is no food for them; no house to live in; no cloth to wear. The biting cold is taking away many precious lives. Lack of drinking water; instead, due to the dearth of water, people are dying. In the other part of the world, especially in the West, China, India and Australia, people have enough. If they become generous and sensitive to these people's needs, then their life can be spared. Like Somalia, we have a similar story to tell and hear in other parts of the world. No one can deny that they are unaware of such reality in some parts of the world. As the late Derek Parfit noted in a talk about effective altruism

I do not think the disagreement between utilitarianism, egalitarianism and prioritarianism makes much difference here because the stakes are so high, and the difference that you can make it so obvious that all those views are going to agree. (Parfit, 2015)

Death in any part of the world occurs due to lack of food, shelter, medical facility, poverty, etc., is always wrong. No one can disagree with this proposition. Therefore, if we can avoid or help avoid death due to these preventable reasons, then we should do it. Provided there is no more important job than this. If there is no more significant work to do, then we should do what we can to prevent these casualties. Say, for example, I am walking near a pond. I am well dressed up, in good cloth. I see that a

small child is getting drowned in the pond. If I am not going to help the child in the pond, then the child is sure to die. I want to save my beautiful cloth, therefore, I do not want to go into the pond then it is morally wrong for me to allow the child to die (Andrew Darnton & Martin Kirk, 2011).

Distance

The distance can be a factor that usually the critique of the effective altruism cite to avoid helping people in need. Can distance be an excuse to save the lives of people? When a person is physically near to us, we know the person's life and background. Furthermore, therefore we are in a better position to help the person who is near us. However, that is not the case with someone who is not near us (Kathleen Vohs, Nicole Mead & Miranda Goode, 2006). Say, for example, that some are living very far away from us, maybe in Africa. We will never know the name of that person. It does not make much sense to help that person who is very far from us.

Nevertheless, the response to this criticism and excuse is: In this globalised world, where transportation, communication, television, flight and postal systems have made our life more comfortable; and helps to know the condition of the distant people more comfortable and faster (Kirk, 2012). We can deliver goods very fast with efficiency. Therefore, any kind of discrimination on the ground of geographical reason is morally wrong.

Number

Another criticism is about the number. What if I am the only person among millions of people? Can I make a difference? If I m the only person, and without my intervention, if lots of people will lose a life, it is highly recommended to help. But what about the case that I am the only person I cannot make a substantial change around? The criticism based on the number, which states that I am not able to help because of less number, is a lame excuse. The reason is: let us once again take the example of the drowning child. It may be the case, also, there could be several persons around me, and they are too available. However, does that make my escape from the responsibility that I am the only person and others do not help me, and hence I must stay unaffected, which is morally wrong? Whether others help or no, I must go and save the child in need of my assistance. Transferring the blame on the other, and letting the child die, makes me morally guilty (Srinivasan, 2015).

Charity vs Duty

The critics say that Effective altruism is like charity. There is no difference between the two. Therefore, we are not morally obliged to do good. There is a difference between charity and effective altruism. Charity comes out of generosity. One is lauded for charity, but one is not condemned for failing to be charitable. Bill Gate is praised for helping lots of people.

Nevertheless, Ambani is not condemned for not giving to charity. Charity does not involve moral judgement. Nevertheless, effective altruism does. Effective altruism is a kind of duty. The duty that has to be performed (Singer, 238). Failing to perform may incur condemnation. Duty is not coming out of a generous act. Duty can bring praise or condemnation. Hence effective altruism demands that we help as much we can. For example, it is wrong for the wealthy nation to store money and wealth, which should have been to help the starving life. It is here appropriate to site the thought of Thomas Aquinas,

According to the natural order instituted by divine providence, material goods are provided for the satisfaction of human needs. Therefore the division and appropriation of property, which proceeds from human law, must not hinder the satisfaction of man's necessity from such goods. Equally, whatever a man has in superabundance is owed, of natural right, to the poor for their sustenance. (Singer, 239)

The money we withhold belongs to the poor; the cloth we throw belongs to the naked; the food we throw belongs to the hungry and starving. However, critique may say that it is, in fact, one's duty to condemn morally abhorrent acts like murder, rape or character assassination. However, It is a charity to wish the good or the betterment of the other society. For example, it would be a charity for my part to wish to see greenery throughout South America. This is never a duty for me. However, this objection's response is simple: One can conveniently make a difference between charity and duty. As we have global connectivity, the world as a global village, we must help people on the other side of the world. Therefore, in the era of quick transportation, distinguishing charity and duty is not a plausible argument. These augmenting sets seem to call us to work full time to work for the relief of the dying, suffering, starving, naked and oppressed people anywhere in the world (Matthews, 2015).

As Peter Singer puts it, "*we ought, morally, to be working full time to relieve the great suffering of the sort that occurs as a result of famine or other disasters.*" (Singer, 232). Is this a valid argument? This is not a philosophical criticism but a form of practical reasoning. Of course, if it is not obligatory or one is not under any compulsion to work full time to alleviate the suffering masses anywhere in the world. Nevertheless, effective altruism suggests that we choose a career that helps give as much as possible, generating a tremendous income. Some also critique effective altruism on the ground that it is for rich people. This emphasises on giving. This has nothing to do with poor people. Poor people cannot afford to give much.

Nevertheless, that is not the case. One can give talent, time, energy, money to alleviate problems and pain anywhere therefore; it is not the case that one has to support monetarily. Therefore the argument based on 'rich' is implausible.

Government responsibility vs People's Initiative

It is said that overseas assistance is the Government's business.

Overseas aid should be a government responsibility, and that therefore one ought not to give to privately run charities. Giving privately ... allows the Government and the noncontributing members of society to escape their responsibilities. (Singer, 239)

A government should take responsibility, and the Government should work for international assistance and connectivity to the world. Hence, this must be a government project to help others, especially starving people anywhere in the world. This also tells us that when people are encouraged to donate privately on their own. When people decide to help the dying, the hungry, the Government becomes lazy, and the Government shies away from doing its responsibility well. The response to this critique is when Government escapes from its responsibility when private individuals start helping the global poor in the world. That is not true. Instead, the opposite is

correct; the more people start helping others and getting themselves involved in this sort of international charitable works, the Government comes forward to help all the more. At times govt. makes it the national policy to help and engage in transnational charitable works. If a private individual does not help and remain calm and indifferent to the global crisis, then the national regime would assume that the democratic citizens are uninterested, and therefore Government will not do its responsibility anymore. Hence, the private initiative will encourage the Government to engage in this kind of charitable jobs. This also can bring disreputation to the Government that the Government is inactive and make them lose in the election (David Callahan, 2014).

The other prominent argument seems to be coming from the phenomena of population explosion. By helping the starving kids now is a temporary solution. In fact, by doing this, we allow a more significant problem to arise. We help now, and a massive number of population explosion might happen. That might give rise to a food crisis, scarcity of shelter and clothing. The answer to this critique is: there is evidence wit us that population growth is happening.

Moreover, we do not have enough resources to curve the population explosion. Nevertheless, we too are aware of the many numbers of organisations working for population control. Therefore, there is no need of getting worried about the single potential problem of population growth. This makes us think and critically engage in the calculation and the scientific analysis of various organisations working for various causes. Some work for population control, other work for poverty alleviation, still other work for employment. It is effective altruism helping us to understand and decide where I should invest my money. In the words of William,

As I and the Centre for Effective Altruism define it, effective altruism is the project of using evidence and reason to figure out how to benefit others as much as possible and taking action on that basis. (MacAskill, 1)

This is also a movement that helps us to think about doing good to others as much we can. When it comes to the dilemma of whether I should help my child or the child of someone else? I have my kids. I have every responsibility to look after my children as much as I can. That is the first and foremost job of parents, to give a good education, to give better clothing and better medicine to their children. This is a commonsensical understanding. However, that does not invalidate the call for helping the kids suffer from not having the minimum. Is it not a good thing to save money from buying extra clothing to one's kids and helping needy children? Little sacrifices can make a massive difference in the life of a distant, suffering child. Peter Singer states,

The savings you gain by taking the less-expensive option in each case will allow you to donate substantial sums toward saving the lives of strangers. But do your obligations to your children override your obligations to strangers, no matter how great their need or suffering?" (Singer, 2009:129)

This question calls us to introspect on our luxurious life. We have a moral obligation to save money to save others' lives and do as much good as we can.

Conclusion

This essay has understood that despite the many valid criticisms coming from various philosophers against Effective Altruism, the ethical reasoning underpinning the normativity of ethical altruism is far superior. The philosophical challenges behind the critiques of distance, number, duty vs charity, and Govt. vs Public Initiatives have been resolved. In the concluding remark, the arguments advanced by Peter Singer have helped better understand the moral force behind this ethical school that is growing both as a philosophical system and a social movement throughout the globe. This movement has drawn the attention of philosophers, lawyers, bankers, and ordinary people who wish to make a difference in other's life. This movement has helped the most vulnerable of society, especially those who do not attract the state's developmental works and intervention. By assigning ethical reasoning to this case, Peter Singer and other ethicist have made Effective Altruism a vehicle of change.

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