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To cite this article: Anthony Skelton (2016) Introduction to the symposium on The Most Good You Can Do, Journal of Global Ethics, 12:2, 127-131, DOI: [10.1080/17449626.2016.1193553](https://doi.org/10.1080/17449626.2016.1193553)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17449626.2016.1193553>



Published online: 07 Aug 2016.



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Introduction to the symposium on *The Most Good You Can Do*

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Invited contribution received 4 May 2016

Our world is awash in preventable and undeserved misery. The World Bank Group (Cruz et al. 2015) estimates that currently about 9.6% of the global population or 702 million people live in extreme poverty or on less than US \$1.90 per day. The extremely poor are unable to meet their most basic needs for nutrition, medical care, and shelter. As a result, they suffer and/or die from preventable illness and disease and malnutrition. Sub-Saharan Africa is particularly hard hit: it is estimated that about 35% of its population is extremely poor (Cruz et al. 2015). Unsurprisingly, this region has the highest under-five mortality rate on the planet.

The extremely poor are not the only ones living wretched lives. Each year vast numbers of non-human animals suffer and are killed in order to produce inexpensive, palatable foodstuffs. Billions of broiler chickens, for instance, are kept in cramped, polluted conditions, unable to engage in species-specific behavior, causing them to suffer from disease and to experience debilitating stress. The fact that they are bred to gain weight quickly only adds to their misery; their bone structure is often unable to support their bulk, leading to disability and deformity. At the end of their short lives, such chickens are deprived of food, captured, shipped in horrid conditions to slaughterhouses, and then killed (often painfully and brutally).

The misery produced by extreme poverty and by our treatment of non-human animals calls for some kind of practical response. Much of this suffering and premature death is, after all, preventable, often easily so. There are, however, deep divisions over how best to respond in practice.

One response to extreme poverty involves advocating for donations (or provisions of labor) to philanthropic organizations dedicated to preventing premature death and/or to preventing or alleviating suffering due to it. In the case of non-human animals, one response is to avoid consuming them and the products derived from them, especially those produced in factory farms, where conditions are inordinately despicable, and to donate (or labor for) charities aiming to improve the plight of non-human animals.

This raises a number of moral questions. Should one respond in this way? How much should one contribute to philanthropic organizations, if in fact one should do so? How should one give? Through which conduits should one direct one's contributions?

Peter Singer has devoted his career in part to dealing with these questions. His work (1972, 1993) on what the global wealthy ought to do in response to extreme poverty

has been devoted to establishing, first, that they ought to make significant sacrifices for the purpose of combating it and, second, that our common-sense attitudes about our obligations to the extremely poor do not survive philosophical scrutiny. His work (1975, 1993) on our treatment of non-human animals has been devoted to arguing, first, that non-human animals have moral standing, second, that we ought to refrain from (among other things) consuming them and their products, especially those produced in factory farms and, third, that our common-sense attitudes about the moral status of non-human animals are deeply flawed.

His groundbreaking work on these topics continues to thrive and inspire. Both his 1972 essay 'Famine, Affluence, and Morality', in which he first addressed the question of what the global wealthy ought to do for the global poor, and his highly influential and justly celebrated 1975 book *Animal Liberation*, in which he addressed the question of our obligations to non-human animals, have recently been reprinted (2015b, 2016).

The positions defended in these works are still among Singer's central preoccupations. In *The Life You Can Save* (2009), for instance, he again mounts and defends the philosophical case for the claim that the global wealthy should do a lot more for the global poor. Singer contends with the psychological mechanisms that interfere with individuals giving to philanthropic organizations and defends a standard of giving that is not too demanding and appeals to a wide variety of moral outlooks. But the book is not devoted only to philosophical argument. It is focused in addition on practical considerations relating to philanthropy and philanthropic interventions. Most relevant of all is his attempt to grapple with the claim that philanthropy (including official development assistance) has failed to combat extreme poverty. In this context, he is keen to argue that it can be effective in achieving this goal.

The effectiveness of philanthropy is a serious problem. Skepticism about effectiveness often stands in the way of philanthropy. It also makes a difference to the issue of how to respond in practice to various forms of suffering once one believes that it is obligatory to do so. It has historically been and still is quite difficult to assess the effectiveness of one's donations or one's work for a charity. Even where it is possible, it is difficult to determine the degree of effectiveness or relative effectiveness. This is due to the fact that information about these things is hard to come by, and very little reliable research is conducted on the effectiveness of charity and charitable interventions. To be sure that one's philanthropy is worth the effort one has to possess this information.

The effectiveness of philanthropy is the central focus of Singer's recent book *The Most Good You Can Do* (2015a), which is based on the Castle Lectures given at Yale University in 2013. His aim is to defend the main elements of a philanthropic movement called effective altruism. Its chief architects are, among others, William MacAskill and Toby Ord. (MacAskill's book *Doing Good Better* [2015] is the Bible of effective altruism.) Singer's arguments on our obligations to the global poor and to non-human animals are one of the driving intellectual forces behind this movement. Effective altruists hold that if one believes that one ought to work toward the alleviation and/or prevention of suffering and premature death of the sort due to extreme poverty and factory farming, one ought to maximize surplus benefit in so doing. To determine which charity or charitable intervention to choose, effective altruists advocate reliance on robust and reliable empirical evidence, especially randomized controlled trial field experiments. The evidence is supposed to tell us something about a charitable intervention's effectiveness. To figure out which

charities the evidence suggests are most effective, effective altruists recommend reliance on meta-charities, including GiveWell and Animal Charity Evaluators, the function of which is to determine, of the charities and philanthropic interventions available, which is, in light of the most robust evidence available, the most effective. The way to contribute, then, is to select, of the options available, the charity or charitable intervention that offers on the basis of the evidence available the most attractive cost–benefit ratio.

The hope is to convince people that charitable interventions are capable of being effective and to respond to the fact that though people are often willing, if prompted, to donate more to charity, they are less willing to change their behavior in terms of to whom they give. This leaves them making less impactful contributions. Effective altruists want to alter this behavior, and think it is a moral requirement to do so.

In *The Most Good You Can Do*, Singer defends effective altruism by arguing against various worries that might be raised about the idea that we ought to do the best when donating and by showcasing how the individuals that he dubs effective altruists live their lives. Singer wants to demonstrate that their lives are committed to commendable ethical principles and deeply meaningful to the individuals living them. He suggests that effective altruists are committed not only to maximizing the value of their philanthropy, but additionally to maximizing value generally. He presents as exemplars lives that are lived according to a particular moral doctrine. Effective altruists are, on Singer's reading, committed to the principles central to Sidgwick's ([1907] 1981) defense of utilitarianism, namely, that

the good of any one individual is of no more importance, from the point of view ... of the Universe, than the good of any other; unless, that is, there are special grounds for believing that more good is likely to be realized in the one case than in the other

and that 'as a rational being I am bound to aim at good generally, – so far as it is attainable by my efforts, – not merely at a particular part of it' (382). These are the principles, Singer contends, that undergird their life choices, and they are the principles that he thinks ought to do so. In this regard, Singer's position is more sectarian than the one defended in *The Life You Can Save*, in which he does not appeal to a comprehensive moral doctrine to defend his outlook. In addition, effective altruists, he argues, are motivated primarily (though not exclusively) by reason rather than by emotion. They have the capacity to overcome initial emotional reactions in thinking about charitable giving, among other things. For Singer, this is desirable, since emotion (often) stands in the way of effective giving (a theme that is also explored in *The Life You Can Save*).

In defending these positions, Singer (2014) relies on his more basic views in ethics. He uses his defense of effective altruism as an occasion to think about the nature of the most basic principles of ethics and about the nature of motivation to do what is morally required. In this way, he shows how moral philosophical views translate into practice to make a positive difference. All the while Singer is, in true Benthamite fashion, querying the reliability of prevailing views surrounding philanthropy. He is especially keen to challenge the idea that there is no fact of the matter about which charitable cause is best, and that there is no rational basis for selecting amongst the charities to support.

Effective altruism has unsurprisingly attracted the ire of critics (Clough 2015; Srinivasan 2015; for a reply, see McMahan, [forthcoming](#)). Most critics focus on effective altruism's approach to extreme poverty. (Few critics focus on effective altruism and our treatment

of non-human animals; this topic perhaps cuts too close to the bone.) Some of these critics raise the concern that in focusing on what individuals ought to do effective altruists ignore, to their discredit, the importance of dealing with features of the world that contribute to extreme poverty, including structural inequality, war, and political oppression (Srinivasan 2015). Others worry about the impact of philanthropic interventions on state sponsored attempts to deal with extreme poverty and its effects. The worry is that, if private charities sponsor interventions that compete with state sponsored ones (e.g. a vaccination campaign), such interventions can undermine the quality and effectiveness of state inventions and the mechanisms that work to make them more accountable. In doing so, this might exacerbate the conditions of the (especially) poorly off. Effective altruists are encouraged to be more mindful of the political implications of their interventions (Clough 2015).

Singer's defense of effective altruism and the moral principles that he thinks ought to guide them are no less controversial. He has already attracted some critical attention (see e.g. Gray 2015). Some of this criticism is familiar from the literature on utilitarianism and its alleged defects and is picked up on by the participants in this symposium, though often in a more sympathetic and nuanced fashion. In general the focus is on the impact that such principles have on the lives of the people who endorse them and the attractiveness of the picture of the moral life that they depict.

That Singer's views are contentious is obvious from the papers comprising the following symposium on *The Most Good You Can Do*, though, as he rightly points out in his reply to them, the disagreements expressed take place against a background of agreement. The question is not whether we ought to respond to suffering due to extreme poverty and factory farming, but how and how much.

The papers comprising this symposium were first read at the Rotman Institute of Philosophy in the Department of Philosophy at The University of Western Ontario on 18 September 2015. The participants were Anthony Skelton, Violetta Ionescu, Tracy Isaacs and Peter Singer. We are thankful to the audience for their helpful comments.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Anthony Skelton is Associate Professor in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Western Ontario and Associate Director of the Rotman Institute of Philosophy. He researches in the areas of normative ethics and the history of ethics. He has published articles in, among other journals, *Utilitas*, *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, *Journal of the History of Philosophy* and *Ethics*. He is the co-editor of *Bioethics in Canada* (OUP, 2013). He is currently working on a book entitled *Henry Sidgwick and the Conflicts of Ethics*. This is his first publication in the *Journal of Global Ethics*.

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