

## **“An Ethical Humanist”**

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My 18-year-old cat is sick. According to the vet she has both thyroid and kidney disease. But thanks to some pretty cheap pills and some not so cheap prescription cat food, she's doing pretty well. In fact, the vet said that while she is their oldest patients, she is also sprier than some of their 12-year-old cats. Nonetheless, I wonder, how much money do I spend to prolong her life? Especially when there many other ways I might spend the hundreds of dollars of specialty food—such as donating the money to help feed people or to providing clean water to a rural village.

How do we know we are doing the right thing ethically when it comes to our money and our altruism?

The idea of exploring the ethics of how and where we donate our money comes from this year's auction winner, Chauncey. More specifically, he suggested I explore the topic of [“Effective Altruism”](#)—a project that aims to find the most effective ways to help others with our money and our time. Drawing on research to identify the world's most pressing problems as well as possible solutions, the Effective Altruism community seeks to do good in effective, impactful ways. A laudable goal.

For example, the website [effectivealtruism.org](http://effectivealtruism.org) points to the problem of pandemics as a global problem that is woefully underfunded. They cite statistics that compare the number of people who have died from Covid-19 (more than 21 million) to those who have died from terrorism attacks (500,000 from 1970-2020). And yet, over the last 10 years, more than \$280 billion has been spent on preventing terrorism attacks compared to only \$8 billion dollars a year spent on preventing pandemics. If the goal is to do good in the world, perhaps investing more in preventing pandemics and less on preventing terrorism might be more effective!?

Effective Altruism, or EA as some call it, asks us to bring a bit of rational analysis to our charitable giving. In the book *Doing Good Better*, EA leader William MacAskill lays out key questions in the movement:

1. How many people benefit and by how much?
2. Is this the most effective thing you can do?
3. Is this area neglected?

4. What would have happened otherwise?
5. What are the chances of success and how good would success be?

In putting forth these questions, MacAskill and other EA proponents promote an approach to charitable giving that weighs effective outcomes more heavily than personal sentimentality or proximity to the problem.

According to a [New Yorker article](#), the development of what became Effective Altruism started when MacAskill read ethicist Peter Singer's 1972 article, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality" in college. In short, Singer argues that the proximity of a child in need should not make a moral difference. If we are willing to help a drowning child in a shallow pond that we pass by, then we should help the starving child in Bangladesh if we have financial resources to do so. As journalist Gideon Lewis-Kraus summarizes the argument, "devoting resources to superfluous goods is tantamount to allowing a child to drown for the sake of a dry cleaner's bill."

MacAskill took this idea to heart and began to live a very frugal life in order to divert his income to charitable donations. But, not just any donations—donations that would do the most good possible. For example, early EA is known for helping to prevent malaria by providing insecticide-treated bed nets. MacAskill and the EA community has motivated such kinds of massive giving since its inception. Turning to address the dynamic of time and money, MacAskill began suggesting to young leaders that they could do more good in the world by earning lots of money that they could then give away. One such convert was [Sam Bankman-Fried](#), the now-disgraced founder of the crypto-currency exchange FTX. For a time, Bankman-Fried worked for the [Centre for Effective Altruism](#) where he brought not only wealth and connections to other very wealthy individuals, but also participated in a turn towards research in preventing future catastrophic events that would (theoretically) have enormous impact on future generations. This focus on future theoretical problems has led critics to wonder how one weights the value of future lives relative to those currently suffering. How impartial must we become to promote the most effective impact?

Now I want to pause to say that I knew none of this when accepting the idea of tackling effective altruism as a sermon topic. A quick glance at effective altruism seemed reasonable enough. Why not take into account how effective an organization is before donating money to them? Why not consider which problems might have a greater reduction in suffering or be important yet woefully neglected? Certainly, such questions seem like an expansion of commonsense due diligence, right? Adapting effective altruism as *one* tool to screen philanthropic choices continues to seem reasonable to me. However, the more I dug into the world of effective altruism, the more morally queasy I became. It may be *a* helpful tool

in considering donations, but if pursued as a robust system for morality, I believe it fails to fully account for how to live an ethical life.

How *do* we decide what it means to be ethical? For many, how to answer this question emerges from religious guidance. As a widely trusted source for what is true and good, religious texts, teachers, and norms determine for billions of people what it means to be ethical. Of course, within many religious traditions, there is also ongoing debate about how to apply religious convictions to contemporary moral issues. One only has to look to the ongoing divisions around same-sex marriage or abortion within religious groups to see this!

But does one even need religion to be ethical? “Can we be good without God?” Humanist leader Greg Epstein rejects this question outright, even calling it offensive and discriminatory. He asks,

“Would you feel comfortable working for an employer who implied that all gays and lesbian were immoral? Or all Democrats? Or all Republicans? ...This is the sort of all-or-nothing condemnation of a huge population one is making if one suggests that goodness and morality require belief in a deity.” (ix)

From a Humanist perspective, belief in God or in eternal consequences are not necessary for motivation to live ethically here and now. Being ethical means paying attention to the question of human flourishing rather than to adherence to a divine moral code. As the [Humanist Manifesto](#) describes,

*“Humanists ground values in human welfare shaped by human circumstances, interests, and concerns, and extended to the global ecosystem and beyond. We are committed to treating each person as having inherent worth and dignity, and to making informed choices in a context of freedom consonant with responsibility.”* [my emphasis]

To answer where this “inherent worth and dignity” is coming from, Epstein turns to philosopher Thomas Nagel’s ideas. He basically suggests that the answer isn’t very complicated: we all have felt a sense of harm and moral outrage; we know we’re not alone on this planet; and so, unless we want to be totally selfish, we logically begin to universalize the idea that harm and suffering is a bad thing for each and all of us. Or, to put it in the simple maxim of the golden rule: do to others what you would want done to you.

Throughout his book, Epstein builds the case that *dignity* is the core of a humanist ethic. For him, the central challenge of ethics is balancing one's own dignity with the dignity of others. He summarizes this by writing:

All of us know what it feels like to realize "I am a person." But it takes a little more awareness to realize "You are also a person." And it takes even greater awareness still to recognize that I am more of a person when I am trying to help you to be more of a person. (93)

At its best EA is trying to help more people live with dignity—for example, you could say that EA tries to help others be more of a person by reducing their suffering or deaths from malaria. Staying alive seems with a decent quality of life seems to be a pretty good baseline for being a person.

However, I fear that EA can become unmoored from inherent worth and dignity when it emphasizes quantitative impact as the core analytic tool. If by "effective" one simply means helping the largest number of people, then it seems that people slip into becoming numbers rather than an end in themselves. In this way, EA shares something with the emphasis of [utilitarian ethics](#) on the quantitative impact on the greatest number of people. The *inherent* worth and dignity of human lives becomes lost in such ethical approaches.

So I ask again, is it ethical to care for my elderly cat with medication and expensive food? To be clear, this is my son's cat and I don't feel strong personal sentimentality for her. But I do feel a sense of duty to provide reasonable and humane care for another living being for which I have taken responsibility. Thanks to the food and medication I am able to provide to her she retains a good quality of life. Should I ignore the suffering of this living being if it was in my power to alleviate it? Would I do more good by euthanizing my cat and donating the money saved to an EA organization? To help people? Some might say so. Some might say that it is not at all reasonable to prioritize health care of a cat over other more pressing needs in the world—especially those of persons.

We can argue these questions and that after all is the point. There are multiple values and assumptions that enter into our moral questions. What determines whether an outcome is "*effective*"? When might a problem be "neglected" because in fact it *is* less "important" than other issues? Or, as Effective Altruism suggests, when might we benefit from some helpful objectivity about whether or not a particular issue or organization does indeed enable outcomes that we feel good about?

While we cannot solve all question of ethics or even of ethical giving in a single sermon, exploring such questions is a good topic as we wrap up our own season of fundraising at First Parish. Why do we give to *this* institution? I suspect we give for a variety of reasons—some which may indeed include sentimental connections to the people or place. But I also suspect that many of us give because we believe that the institution matters—that it has mattered at some point in our own lives or, as we have heard in testimonials this past month, in the lives of others as well. Last September, my first sermon this year was entitled, [“Why Bother with Religion?”](#) In short, I answered that I believe that congregations like ours meet a need for purpose and belonging that we all have in us. This remains true of congregations like First Parish no matter who is the minister or who attends on a given Sunday or if you happened to like the music that day. We give to sustain something good in the corner of the world we inhabit—something that has mattered for centuries, continues to matter today, and *will* continue to matter to those here today as well as those yet to come.

Yes, we should be mindful of the values that inform our giving. We can be cautious in considering the ways our personal biases may lead us to neglect certain pressing issues. We can be curious about ways to have a bigger impact on reducing suffering. And we can keep wrestling with how to ethically give in ways that support the kind of good we believe in. Perhaps sometimes such questions can feel complicated. And perhaps sometimes it’s simple: do to others as you would have them do to you.

So may it be.  
Amen.