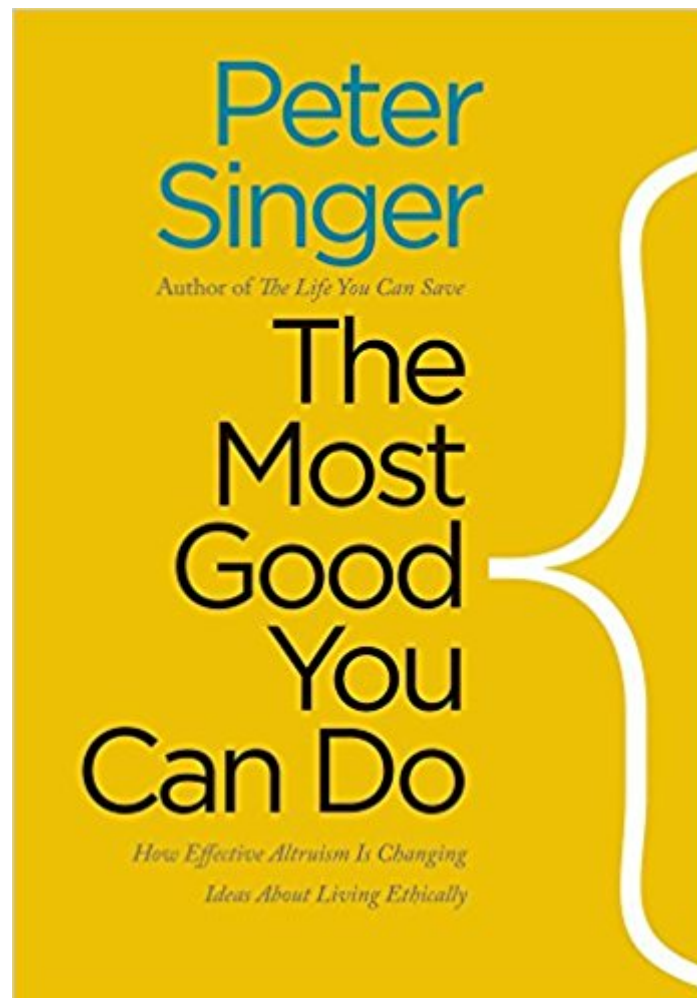




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# The Most Good You Can Do: How Effective Altruism Is Changing Ideas About Living Ethically



## Synopsis

From the ethicist the New Yorker calls “the most influential living philosopher,” a new way of thinking about living ethically Peter Singer’s books and ideas have been disturbing our complacency ever since the appearance of *Animal Liberation*. Now he directs our attention to a new movement in which his own ideas have played a crucial role: effective altruism. Effective altruism is built upon the simple but profound idea that living a fully ethical life involves doing the “most good you can do.” Such a life requires an unsentimental view of charitable giving: to be a worthy recipient of our support, an organization must be able to demonstrate that it will do more good with our money or our time than other options open to us. Singer introduces us to an array of remarkable people who are restructuring their lives in accordance with these ideas, and shows how living altruistically often leads to greater personal fulfillment than living for oneself. *The Most Good You Can Do* develops the challenges Singer has made, in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, to those who donate to the arts, and to charities focused on helping our fellow citizens, rather than those for whom we can do the most good. Effective altruists are extending our knowledge of the possibilities of living less selfishly, and of allowing reason, rather than emotion, to determine how we live. *The Most Good You Can Do* offers new hope for our ability to tackle the world’s most pressing problems.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Singer’s argument is powerful, provocative and, I think, basically right. The world would be a better place if we were as tough-minded in how we donate money as in how we make

it." – Nicholas Kristof, New York Times "We need thinkers such as Singer to test our intuitions. . . . The encouraging message is that we do have the resources to be better. . . . This requires foremost that we believe in the goodness of others. So reading these powerful new books on the existence of altruism could be the first step to making the world a nicer place." – Stephen Cave, Financial Times "Singer's book is bold, fresh, inspired, reasoned, optimistic. Read it and grow your brain." – Walter M. Bortz II, MD, Huffington Post Blog "In The Most Good You Can Do, Singer lays out a rationale for effective altruism - and a provocative defense of a movement he hopes will spread . . . Singer opens up worthwhile conversations (and practical applications) related to ethical ideals." – Glenn C. Altschuler, Philadelphia Inquirer "In a world getting ever wealthier and more unequal, a book about effective altruism is overdue. What can you be doing realistically, practically, today to make the world a better place? No one has thought harder about this question than Peter Singer, and he answers it with his characteristic clarity and persuasiveness." – Elie Hassenfeld and Holden Kamofsky Co-Founders and Co-Executive Directors of the Open Philanthropy Project "Peter Singer is one of the most important thinkers of our time, and this is his most important book. Through the stories of those in the nascent effective altruism movement, he provides clear guidance on what it means to live an ethical life in the face of the world's many problems. From charity to career choice to consumerism, this book will revolutionize how you think about doing good." – Will MacAskill, author of Doing Good Better: Effective Altruism and How You Can Make a Difference "Provocative and important. . . . The Most Good You Can Do is a delight to read." – Singer is a deep thinker and a wonderfully clear writer, moving smoothly from careful philosophical analyses to vivid stories of extraordinary lives. And even if you are not persuaded that effective altruism is the way to become a better and happier person, you will find yourself deeply unsettled by Singer's provocative claims about poverty, climate change, animals, art, rationality, and much else." – Paul Bloom, author of Just Babies "From the time of his 1972 paper "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," Peter Singer has argued that we should be giving more to alleviate global suffering than we usually do. In this new book, Singer introduces us to people who are giving much more and are having fun doing it, and shows us just how easy it is to make a positive difference in the world." – Lori Gruen, author of Ethics and Animals: An Introduction "Singer's inspiring book challenges us all to take it up a notch in thinking about our giving. Reading this book can change your life; acting on this book can improve the lives of others." – Dean Karlan, author of More Than Good Intentions and President of Innovations for Poverty Action

Peter Singer is Ira W. DeCamp Professor of Bioethics, Princeton University, and Laureate Professor, School of Historical and Philosophical Studies, University of Melbourne. He is the author of more than twenty books including *Animal Liberation*, *Practical Ethics*, and *The Life You Can Save*. He divides his time between New York City and Melbourne, Australia.

Disclosure: I give about 15% of my income to some of the charities discussed in this book, and I plan to give that much or more for the foreseeable future. I read *The Most Good You Can Do* as a committed effective altruist. Even if I hadn't, though, I think I'd have found this book compelling. The first ten or so chapters are uniformly excellent: My favorite pages were those telling the stories of dozens of people (from tech CEOs to low-income graduate students) who live extraordinarily generous lives. Singer also gives a more fluid introduction to the concepts behind effective altruism than you'd find by just reading blog posts or newspaper articles written by a variety of authors. He uses very little technical philosophy and a lot of plain language -- I finished the book in a couple of hours, and enjoyed every minute. Why only four stars? Near the end of the book, Singer begins to explore some of the in-depth causes that certain effective altruists support. These chapters were interesting to me, but they're also filled with numbers and speculative calculation and feel "colder" than the rest of the book -- they won't appeal to everyone. Still, this is an excellent book overall, and I'd recommend it to effective altruists and non-EAs alike. (If you've never heard of effective altruism, you may want to watch Peter Singer's TED talk on the subject before buying this book. The TED talk is free, it takes fifteen minutes to watch, and it's changed the lives of many people I know.)

Whether you're completely new to Peter Singer or are very familiar with his work, *The Most Good You Can Do* is highly informative and thought-provoking. The book builds on his previous work, but offers many profiles of people living out the values of effective altruism and explores practical and psychological issues around how we can do the most good in the world, in addition to the philosophical issues, making this book easily readable. Importantly, he shows that doing good things for the world altruistically is perfectly compatible with making yourself happy -- in fact, it's complementary. Some takeaways you can expect to get from this book are:- explanation of what effective altruism is, and the growth of the movement- real examples of ordinary people who have used the principles of effective altruism to accomplish extraordinary good- how to balance your own interests and needs against the moral duty to relieve suffering in the world- altruistic strategy on finding a career that maximizes social impact- altruistic strategy on choosing causes and charities to support- balancing between causes with concrete, predictable outcomes (e.g. preventing malaria)

and those with highly uncertain but potentially very high benefits (such as political advocacy) If you want to be challenged to think deeply about how you can best use your skills, time, or money to improve the world, this book will help you do that.

I think Peter Singer is a great guy, based on his philosophies, and I also think the message in this book is a good one. I believe that we should all be trying to reduce the suffering in the world by being vegan and donating to charities. That being said, I don't believe a book was the best medium for this. It is really short for the price you pay, and it seems to repeat itself over and over again. Basically, "Hey, you should donate to charity. Look at these 234982304 people who donate to charity. This is how they donate to charity." Then at the end of the book there are a few more essays that are tangentially related. Ultimately, the book, to me, comes off as disorganized and far too simply written for the ~18\$ price tag. The basic message, which I said above in quotes, could have been eloquently written into a journal/newspaper article or a speech (which I believe he already did via TED). There just isn't enough content, especially non-fluff content (e.g. a million unnecessary mini biographies of people who donate money), to warrant a book, let alone an 18\$ book. I like Peter Singer, but I would save your money and not purchase this. It seems as if Singer just wants to milk this (good, but small) message for as much as he can. I would have returned it but I wrote on one of the pages, so I ended up tossing it after I finished. At least Singer donates a good amount of the money I wasted on this book to charity, if what he says in his book is true!

This was a great introduction to effective altruism (EA). It starts off by introducing the topic of altruism, and gives case examples of "effective altruists" who are working to make the world a better place in the most effective way possible. It goes through both the "how" and the "why" of EA, and interviews effective altruists who have done incredibly amazing things, including changing World Health Organization policies and donating organs to strangers. People familiar with Singer's work will recognize many of the themes of this book, although the content is almost entirely new. The book is very much intended for the general public and not philosophers, so anyone looking for deeper engagement with the subject will need to look elsewhere. The only real flaw of this book was that, since it's written for the general public and gives such a brief introduction to such a complex topic, it can over simplify some complex issues, particularly in the later chapters where it discusses cause selection. For example, the risks from artificial intelligence are dismissed with just a few short sentences. That's an extremely minor quibble though, because a deep overview of those subjects was not really the intention of this book. Its goal was to introduce and inspire the reader to effective

altruism - a goal which it thoroughly accomplishes!

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