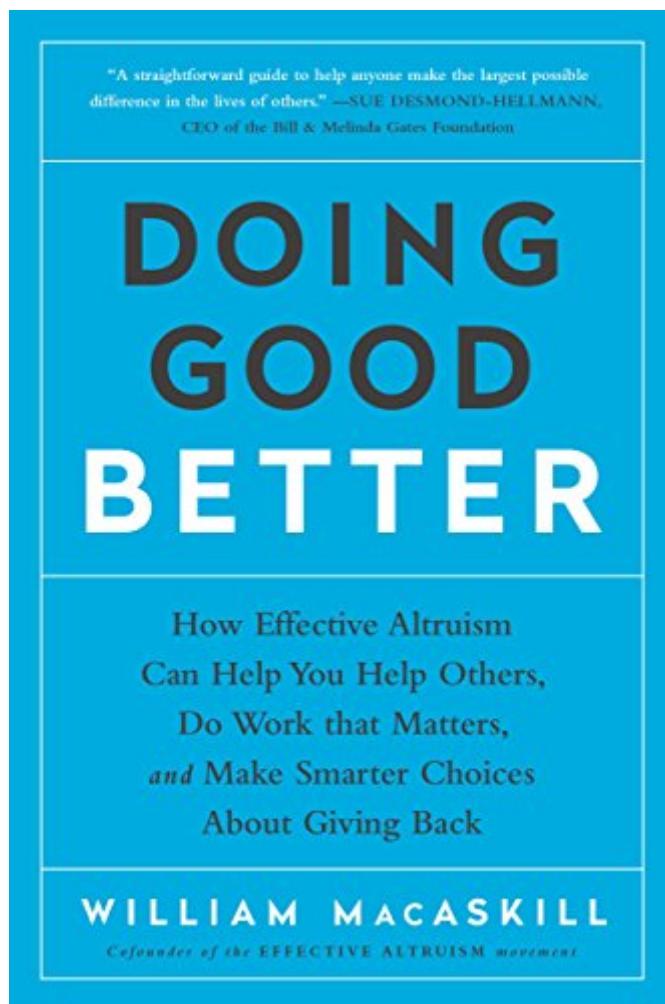


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Doing Good Better: How Effective Altruism Can Help You Make A Difference



Synopsis

Most of us want to make a difference. We donate our time and money to charities and causes we deem worthy, choose careers we consider meaningful, and patronize businesses and buy products we believe make the world a better place. Unfortunately, we often base these decisions on assumptions and emotions rather than facts. As a result, even our best intentions often lead to ineffective—and sometimes downright harmful—outcomes. How can we do better? While a researcher at Oxford, trying to figure out which career would allow him to have the greatest impact, William MacAskill confronted this problem head on. He discovered that much of the potential for change was being squandered by lack of information, bad data, and our own prejudice. As an antidote, he and his colleagues developed effective altruism, a practical, data-driven approach that allows each of us to make a tremendous difference regardless of our resources. Effective altruists believe that it's not enough to simply do good; we must do good better. At the core of this philosophy are five key questions that help guide our altruistic decisions: How many people benefit, and by how much? Is this the most effective thing I can do? Is this area neglected? What would have happened otherwise? What are the chances of success, and how good would success be? By applying these questions to real-life scenarios, MacAskill shows how many of our assumptions about doing good are misguided. For instance, he argues one can potentially save more lives by becoming a plastic surgeon rather than a heart surgeon; measuring overhead costs is an inaccurate gauge of a charity's effectiveness; and, it generally doesn't make sense for individuals to donate to disaster relief. MacAskill urges us to think differently, set aside biases, and use evidence and careful reasoning rather than act on impulse. When we do this—when we apply the head and the heart to each of our altruistic endeavors—we find that each of us has the power to do an astonishing amount of good. From the Hardcover edition.

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Customer Reviews

It will probably come as no surprise to many readers of this review that The Charities Aid Foundation lists the United States as the most charitable nation in the world. We are now and have been a generous people both with our time and treasure. My guess is that many people reading this review are charitable people who want to know if their hard earned money is well spent when they give it to their favorite charity. In his new book, William MacAskill, cofounder of the Effective Altruism Movement, gives us a thoughtful method for determining what charities will make best use of our contributions and make a genuine difference for good in the lives of desperate and destitute people. In Part One of his book he answers these questions: 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 order to accurately answer these questions, economists have developed a metric called the quality-adjusted life year (QALY). Time and again MacAskill will use this metric to highlight effective and ineffective organizations. Toward the end of his book he gives us a list of those charities that pass the QALY muster such as GiveDirectly, Deworm the World International, Against Malaria Foundation, etc. Part Two of MacAskill's book shows us Effective Altruism in Action. From beginning to end he tells us interesting stories about people who make a difference for good. He makes the point repeatedly that even small contributions that are well placed can significantly impact the quality of life of poor and sick people. He often challenges our assumptions about strongly held beliefs such as that we should avoid purchasing products made in sweatshops. We are not wrong about the dreadful conditions in many of these workplaces, but the true fact is that work in a sweatshop is much to be preferred over even worse alternatives. As we think about our own pattern of giving to charity, MacAskill encourages us to establish a regular habit of giving and to evaluate carefully whether our time spent serving in a charitable organization or working to earn money to

give the organization is more valuable. We need to plan carefully what we will do to incorporate altruism into our everyday lives. MacAskill suggests that we join the effective altruism community (effectivealtruism.org), put our name on their mailing list, and invite our neighbors to do the same. From beginning to end Doing Good Better is about enlightened behavior; that is, thinking less about self and more about connecting with networks that make a difference for good in the lives of the poor and unfortunate people of this world. People who read MacAskill's well written and thoughtful book have a game plan for action, not only in how to contribute meaningfully to worthy charities, but also to consider how to structure their lives to get the most from their talents and the best opportunities to use these talents to help others. I mentioned at the beginning of this review that Americans are a giving people. William MacAskill gives us a plan and a program to channel our best tendencies and motivations in directions that will do the greatest good for the greatest number of people. Highly recommended.

Now this book is the kind of thing that can change your thinking radically - yet its conclusions are so evident that you wonder why nobody thinks about the topic this way. Doing Good Better is well-written and well-researched. For people familiar with the subject matter there will be some repetition. However, I was positively surprised that compared to Peter Singer's 'The Most Good You Can Do', MacAskill's book is really full of new information and new ways of thinking about things. MacAskill breaks effective altruism down into five key questions and a few core topics. Each of them is illustrated with examples that are actually good to know. That's a key difference to 'The Most Good You Can Do'. For example, the chapter on ethical consumerism tells you which popular climate-saving measures are not really helping much (and which are) and the chapter on expected value helps you figure out which risks are worth taking, e.g. how bad it is to ride a motor bike compared to using ecstasy. The careers chapter contains some options I might actually try. All of this culminates into a pretty decent understanding of how to make a big difference. The book ultimately provides ways to get involved with the effective altruism movement. A read that's both entertaining and indispensable if you want to make a difference.

Doing Good Better is a great introduction to effective altruism and the sort of rational, evidence-based reasoning that is extremely helpful to making sure that what we do in our lives actually effectively fulfills our values. Without explicitly asking ourselves MacAskill's Second Key Question of Effective Altruism, "Is this the most effective thing you can do?" we may end up having a "merely very good" impact with our lives, which surprisingly is nowhere near as good as the best

impact we potentially could have. As MacAskill writes, "When it comes to doing good, fat-tailed distributions seem to be everywhere. It's not always true that exactly 80 percent of the value comes from the top 20 percent of activities—sometimes things are even more extreme than that, and sometimes less. But the general rule that most of the value generated comes from the very best activities is very common" (p. 50). If we don't consciously try to achieve the most good we can and pursue that challenge with careful reasoning, then it's likely we won't achieve anywhere near our potential. That's why effective altruism is important and why I was very happy to learn that there is a growing community of people who agree about the importance of this sort of thinking.

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