

Peter Singer's effective altruism



By Stephen Howes

Earlier this year, **Peter Singer** was in Melbourne to address the 2016 Australian Effective Altruism Conference. I was also there to speak at the same conference, to find out more about this new and growing movement, and to talk to Peter Singer, its founder.

Our story starts in 1970.

The essay



A refugee mother and child from East Bengal during the Bangladesh war, in 1971. Photo: Sunil Janah

In 1970, what was then East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) was hit by a cyclone that killed half a million people. In 1971, war broke out between East and West Pakistan, leading to Bangladesh's independence, and displacing nearly ten million refugees. The West was shocked and moved. George Harrison and Ravi Shankar organised The Concert for Bangladesh, the first of the big benefit concerts. Peter Singer, then a young philosophy lecturer at Oxford University, wrote an essay "Famine, Affluence and Morality", which was published in 1972 in the academic journal *Philosophy and Public Affairs*.

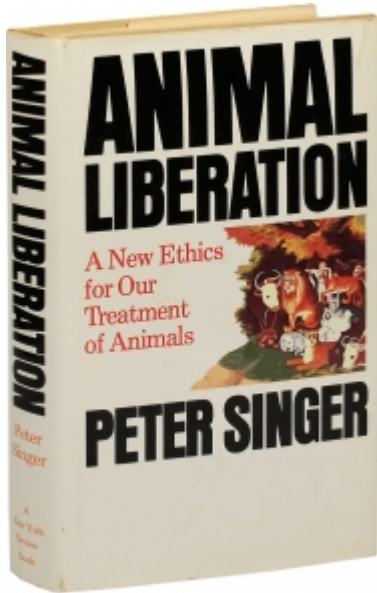
Singer's argument consisted of two basic propositions.

The first is the duty to prevent suffering. Singer expressed the more moderate version of this as a requirement to "prevent bad occurrences unless, to do so, we have to sacrifice something morally significant."

The second is the moral irrelevance of distance. "It makes no difference whether the person I can help is a neighbour's child ten yards away from me or a Bengali whose name I shall never know, ten thousand miles away."

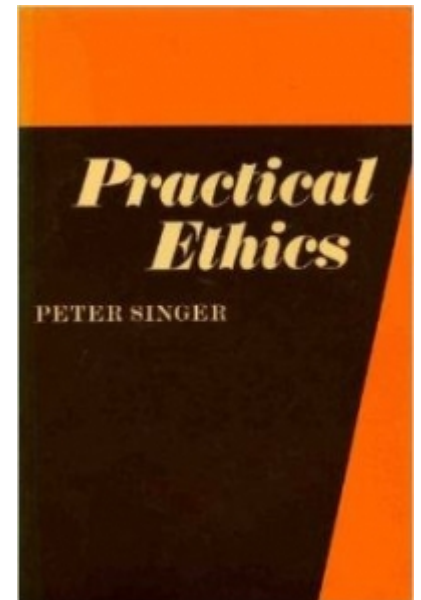
It was a compelling one-two. To drive his point home, Singer used the parable of a child drowning in a shallow pool. If we saw her, we would certainly pull her out, and hang the inconvenience of getting our clothes muddy. Equally obviously, we who can afford it should donate some of our income to help the refugees of Bangladesh, and hang the inconvenience of the monetary loss involved.

The career



“Famine, Affluence and Morality” was Peter Singer’s first foray into the field he was to make his own: practical ethics; the application of ethics—in his case utilitarian ethics—to public policy problems. However, it was a stepping stone rather than a launching pad. Singer soon became famous in relation to quite a different issue. In 1975, he wrote *Animal Liberation*, which sold half a million copies, and provided the philosophical foundations for the animal liberation movement. Never one to preach and not to practice, Singer, who by this time had returned to Melbourne, the city of his upbringing, in 1980 co-founded Animals Australia, the highly influential lobbying group.

His work on the rights of animals made Singer influential. What made him famous, and infamous in some circles, was his work on euthanasia, and his justification of infanticide under certain circumstances. In 1977, he published *Practical Ethics*, which set out his views on these contentious issues. They were to remain an enduring interest. In 1980, Singer established the Centre for Human Bioethics at Monash University. There over the next twenty years he laid the foundations for the academic field of bioethics, examining questions of life and death, from genetic engineering to *in vitro* fertilisation. Singer stayed at Monash until his appointment as the Ira W. DeCamp Professor of Bioethics at Princeton in 1999.

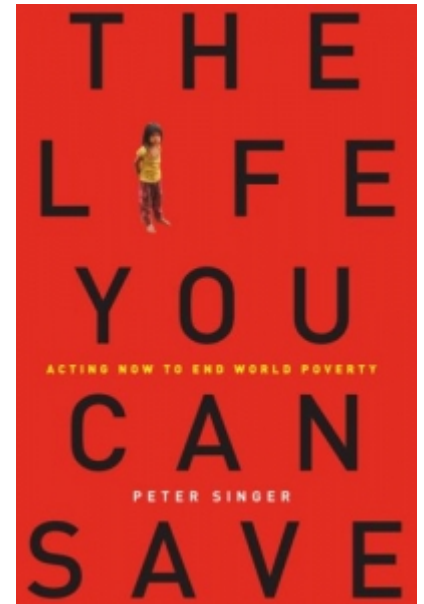


By then, Singer was a philosopher with rockstar status, often referred to as the world’s most famous. In 2005, he was named by *Time* magazine as one of the world’s 100 most influential people. The citation noted his work on animal rights and bioethics; nothing on global poverty, but Singer used the platform his status gave him to prosecute his case.

His Princeton appointment was particularly controversial—on account of his views around infanticide—and gave rise to an invitation from *The New York Times* to contribute an op-ed. Singer wrote an article that repeated the arguments of his

1972 article. The newspaper called it the “Singer solution to global poverty”.

A decade later, in 2009, Singer wrote his first book on the subject, *The Life You Can Save*. It followed the 1972 arguments, but with two important enhancements. First, it advocated for giving not only as a moral requirement, but as an aid to happiness. Singer found evidence in the psychological literature for the biblical precept that in giving we receive. Or, as he put it (on p.184), “taking part in a collective effort to help the world’s poorest people would give your life greater meaning and fulfilment.”



Second, keen to promote broader engagement, Singer put forward some more detailed guidelines for giving: a sliding scale, starting at 1% of income, reaching 5% at \$US 105,000, and continuing to rise. Individuals could and should do more, Singer argued, but he wanted to influence social expectations about what we should give, and for that he needed more moderate benchmarks. Also to encourage action, the book included a seven-point personal action plan, and reference to a website at which readers could pledge to give the amount Singer’s scale recommended.

In hindsight, that was the start of the effective altruism movement. Singer went on found The Life You Can Save as a fund-raising and educational organisation. To date, 19,000 people have taken the Singer pledge. And more change was afoot.

Peter Singer's 2013 TED Talk on effective altruism

The movement

Oxford is a centre of the effective altruism movement, with a number of related groups now linked through the Centre for Effective Altruism. The organisation Giving What We Can was established there in 2009. Members pledge to give 10% of their income to development NGOs they judge to be particularly effective. It has 2,000 members who have donated \$16 million.

80,000 Hours is another Oxford group. It gives career advice to aspiring altruists. An antidote to the usual advice bestowed upon Millennials to follow their dreams and passions, 80,000 Hours calls on young people to also think about how much they can earn, and therefore give, during their expected working career.

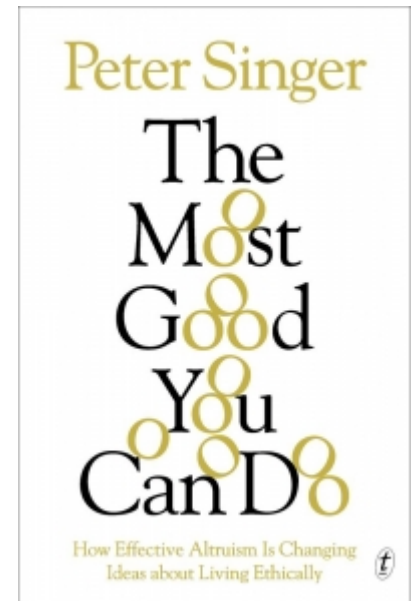
There are similar groups, mainly of young people, across continental Europe, as well as in Australia, the US and Canada, and emerging in Singapore and Hong Kong. Most, though not all, are focused on global poverty; animal rights and global risks also get a look in.

The motto of the effective altruism movement is perhaps best summed up by Giving What We Can's slogan: "Give more; give more effectively." Singer's influence in relation to the first of these two imperatives is obvious: it is the constant theme of his writing on the subject ever since 1972.

Peter Singer participates in a panel at the 2016 Effective Altruism Conference. Singer's role in relation to the imperative to "give more effectively" is less obvious. The effective altruism movement tends to recommend small NGOs with proven methodologies – a focus that some see as a weakness. The Against Malaria Foundation, which distributes anti-malarial bednets, is a perennial effective altruism favourite. The big NGOs don't figure: their effectiveness is judged too uncertain.

Except by Singer, who, although he insists that the charitable dollar gets a much higher return overseas, takes a more catholic view of development effectiveness. He is a life-long supporter of Oxfam, and serves on the Leadership Council of Oxfam US. Even though its impact is difficult to measure, Singer values Oxfam's advocacy and its support for civil society in developing countries.

While the line of sight from Singer to the movement he has spawned is not always direct, he is clearly the movement's mentor and patron. It is a role he embraces. Singer's 2013 TED talk (embedded above) is a ready reference, as is his most recent book, *The Most Good You Can Do*, published in 2015. There's even a Singer effective altruism MOOC.

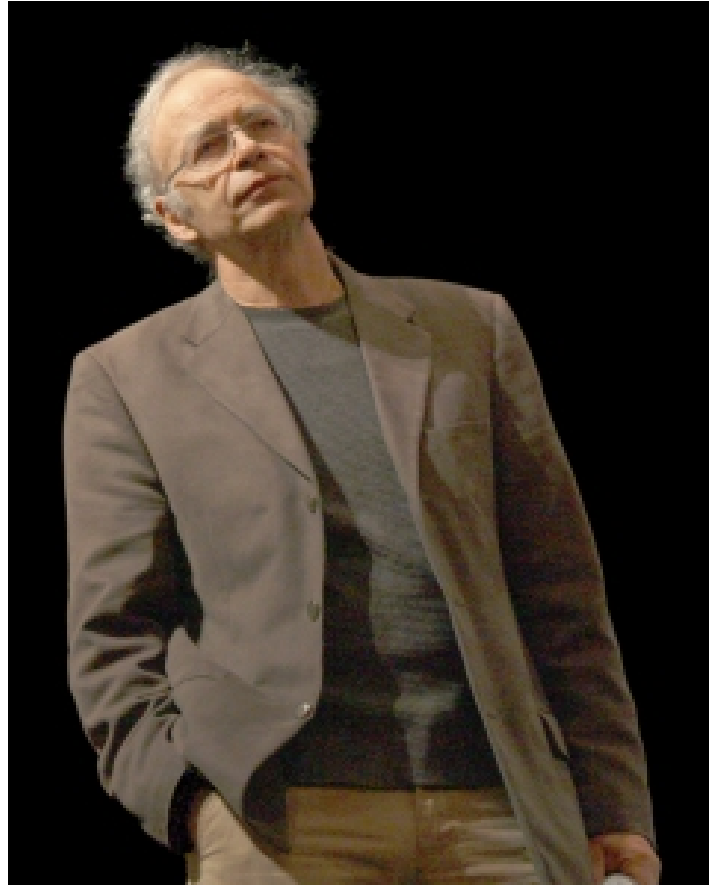


The effective altruism movement responds not only to Singer's advocacy for international giving, but also to his broader call to reinstate, as he put it in 1995, "the idea of living an ethical life as a realistic and viable alternative to the present dominance of materialist self-interest." The conflict between ethics and self-interest needs to be overcome, Singer wrote, "not by abstract reasoning alone" but by "showing that it works."

Peter Singer's address to the 2013 Tasmanian Writers Festival: our greatest moral challenges

http://mpegmedia.abc.net.au/rn/podcast/2014/01/bof_20140116.mp3

The man



When Singer wrote his Bangladesh article, he was 26. When I got to interview him in July 2016, he was 70. There are very few people who can claim to be the intellectual father of one movement, let alone two or three. But why had it taken so long - almost 40 years - for there to be a public response to his original essay?

Singer says he is not completely sure of the answer, but that there are various factors at play.

“I think the internet has played quite a role, because people might have been quite isolated. They might have thought ‘We ought to spend a large part of our lives doing the most good we can or helping people who are in extreme poverty.’ But they might have been the only person they knew who thought like that. They might have just concluded ‘Well, I’m a bit odd.’ But the internet enables people like that to connect.”

He also cites the growing culture of philanthropy among entrepreneurs.

“The fact that there are a number of people who made very large amounts of

money at a very early age in life and decided to use that money to do a lot of good is helping to catalyse interest in the issue. Bill Gates is the obvious example, but there are now a lot of others.”

Was he optimistic, because of the movement now afoot, or pessimistic that society is ever more consumerist? Globally, private giving for development seems stagnant, but Singer is upbeat.

“I’m encouraged. Because this movement is a relatively new one, maybe its influence is not yet reflected in the total amounts being given. But it does seem to be growing, and I see a lot of encouraging signs.

*“On a recent trip to Europe, I spoke at something called **Founders Pledge**, which is a group for founders of start-ups. It’s encouraging them to pledge to give a minimum of 2% of the money they get if they cash out their start-up. Within a year or so, founders have pledged \$120 million to charities. Already, five or six million dollars have been given. That’s a great group of people who are very entrepreneurial, and mostly fairly young. I’m hoping that they’re trendsetters for the way other people will react.”*

What about government aid, which dwarves its non-government cousin, Bill Gates and the like notwithstanding? Singer supports more government aid, but admits that his evidence base for it is not “overwhelmingly strong”. He is more comfortable supporting—and asking others to support—specific organisations he is confident deliver effective aid.

And what about the man himself? Was he persuaded to give by his philosophy or by other influences?

“Certainly not by religious beliefs,” Singer says.

“I didn’t have religious beliefs. By parental influences, to some extent. My father was a small businessman here in Melbourne. He certainly had ethical standards for how he would conduct his business, and that influenced me.”

“I would also attribute a lot to the influences that I had from being a student in the 1960s and being active against the Vietnam War and against conscription. That had an influence, but then I saw these other issues that were

comparatively neglected compared to the amount of attention given to the Vietnam War. They seemed important as well.”

Thinking through the demands of morality has been Singer’s life work. Interestingly, his practical and now life-long commitments to vegetarianism and to personal giving both started at around the same time.

“When I started thinking about animals and ethics, I was a graduate student at Oxford. I was challenged to think: if I’m continuing to eat meat, am I living ethically? I decided no, I wasn’t. But then also, I thought back then—and this was a thought I had before I ever started thinking about animals—if I’m not doing anything to help people in extreme poverty, when I’ve got more than enough, I’m not living ethically. So, I went along to Oxfam’s offices, in Oxford. I got some information from them and ... from then on I started giving to Oxfam.”

The rest, one might say, is history.



Peter Singer, philosopher and ethicist, speaking at TED2013 in California.

The impact

Singer's 1971 article might not have had much impact at the time it was published, but it certainly has in the decades since. There is now a significant literature on the moral implications of global poverty. Some remain sceptical, especially of the demanding nature of Singer's arguments. Bernard Williams offers a famous critique of utilitarianism along these lines, though whether their appearance of being too demanding is a critique of Singer's arguments or of ourselves remains unclear. If it is the former, then, as Singer has repeatedly noted, even a less demanding moral framework—giving our distant obligations at least some weight—would lead to the same conclusion in support of giving to international aid agencies.

Singer often refers to the “morally decent life”. No one has done more to broaden our definition of moral decency: to make it “unacceptable to be comfortably off and do nothing for the world's poor”, and to overcome our “indifference to the indefinite continuation of dire poverty and avoidable poverty-related deaths.” And now there are thousands of young people mobilised to live out the principles of giving more and giving more effectively, which makes these ideas seem less far-fetched and more attractive.

Peter Singer's contribution to the struggle against global poverty has already been significant. And it looks set to grow.

Notes: The 1995 quote (in the last paragraph in the section headed 'The movement') is on p. 235 of How are we to live? published in that year by Prometheus Books. The two quotes in the penultimate paragraph are, respectively, from this 2009 Guardian interview and from p. 212 of Singer's One world: the ethics of globalization, Yale University Press, 2004.