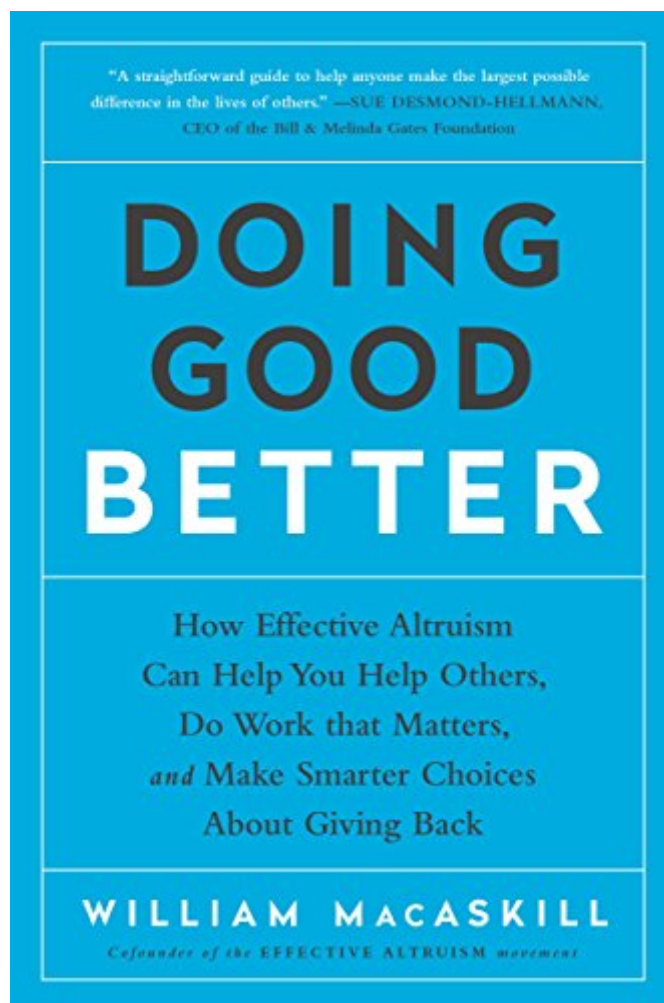


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Doing Good Better: How Effective Altruism Can Help You Make A Difference



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.

Book Information

File Size: 2276 KB

Print Length: 266 pages

Publisher: Avery; Reprint edition (July 28, 2015)

Publication Date: July 28, 2015

Sold by: Penguin Group (USA) LLC

Language: English

ASIN: B00OYXWL4W

Text-to-Speech: Enabled

X-Ray: Not Enabled

Word Wise: Enabled

Lending: Not Enabled

Enhanced Typesetting: Enabled

Best Sellers Rank: #140,698 Paid in Kindle Store (See Top 100 Paid in Kindle Store) #8 in Kindle Store > Kindle eBooks > Business & Money > Job Hunting & Careers > Volunteer Work #20 in Kindle Store > Kindle eBooks > Nonfiction > Politics & Social Sciences > Social Sciences > Philanthropy & Charity #39 in Books > Business & Money > Job Hunting & Careers > Volunteer Work

Customer Reviews

A chapter or two into this book, I was already thinking about people I could recommend it to. To begin with, he discusses an exciting idea for pumping water from the ground in developing countries – the PlayPump – a kind of roundabout that kids could play on and pump water at the same time. It didn't work out in the end and MacAskill uses it as an illustration for his central premise: that we need to evaluate ideas, conduct studies, and examine data before we donate huge amounts of money to any cause. In other words, that we need to be better at quantifying the benefit of money that we donate to charities (or any time or money that we use to do good). Then he introduces some stats on income – if you earn more than \$28,000, the typical income in the US, you're in the richest 5% of the world's population, and \$52,000 puts you in the 1% globally. Since 20% of the world's population earn less than \$550 per year (\$1.50 per day), a small portion of your income would make a much bigger impact in their lives than it would in your own. That only covers the intro and the first chapter, and I feel that the book was interesting for a while after that but then went steadily downhill. MacAskill is an associate professor of philosophy at Oxford University, but I was surprised that most of his book is based on economics, and it's strange that it lacks both the wider and deeper perspective that I would have expected based on his chosen field. But then, he got his PhD barely three years ago. In short, he attempts to reduce everything to a number – how much difference do you make by donating to one charity versus another. I'm a scientist – I believe in objective evaluation of data to reach a conclusion. But MacAskill's book has several problems. Maybe it's better if I go through them as a list.

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.

Doing Good Better easily earns 5 stars. It has the potential to do much good itself, in helping others choose effective charities and in making related choices, plus it is an interesting and enjoyable read. MacAskill takes us through the process of analyzing our altruistic based choices, from selecting which charities to support, to career choices, and more. First, he explains why the outlook he takes (that the good that a charity actually provides) is more important than the commonly used factor of "how much of the donated money does this charity use for purposes other than overhead and fund-raising". Though the proportion of money used for actual charity work may seem important, if that work actually ends up providing little or no actual benefit to someone, then it is money wasted.

CH 1 - You Are the 1 Percent: Just how much can you achieve? " This chapter offers an eye opening look at world income inequality. Some shocking facts, "if you earn more than \$52,000 per year, then, speaking globally, you are the 1 percent" | Even someone living below the US poverty line, earning just \$11,000 per year, is still richer than 85 percent of people in the world. " Because of this, donations to charities working on social issues in Third World areas have the potential to do much more good per dollar. MacAskill calls this effect the 100x Multiplier. Because of the disparity between what \$1 can buy in this country, and what it can buy in the Third World, that dollar can provide much more benefit overseas. Lest you think that the problem is so

great and your dollar is so small, that you need not bother, MacAskill points out, itâ™s not the size of the bucket that matters, itâ™s the size of the drop you are putting in the bucket. That drop actually matters to real people in need.

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