# Acting on Utilitarianism

> *"Create all the happiness you are able to create; remove all the misery you are able to remove. Every day will allow you, will invite you to add something to the pleasure of others, or to diminish something of their pains."*
>
> – Jeremy Bentham [1]

## Table of Contents


1. Introduction
2. Opportunities to Help Others
3. Effective Altruism
4. Cause Prioritization
   - Global Health and Development
   - Farm Animal Welfare
   - Existential Risk Reduction
5. Paths to Impact
   - Charitable Giving
   - Career Choice
   - Outreach
6. Conclusion
7. Resources and Further Reading


## Introduction

So far we've looked at utilitarianism from a theoretical viewpoint. But what does utilitarianism actually mean in practice? What concrete actions does it say we should take? This article explains what it means to live an ethical life from the perspective of utilitarianism.

There are many problems in the world today, some of which are extremely large in scale. According to utilitarianism, each person ought to work on these problems and to try to improve the world by as much as possible, giving equal weight to the well-being of everyone. Unfortunately, our resources are scarce, so as individuals and even as a global society we cannot solve all the world's problems at once. This means we must make decisions about how to prioritize the resources we

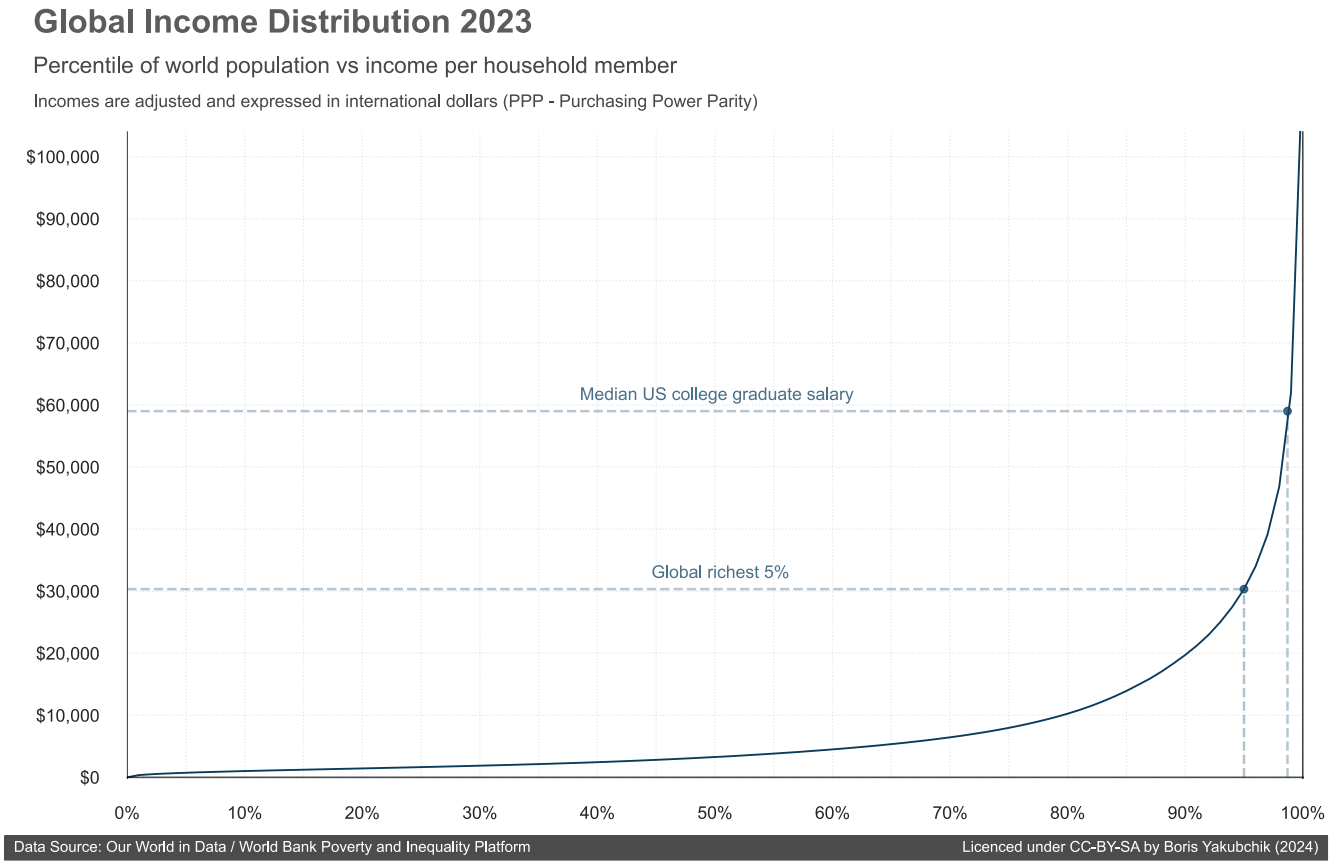
have. Since not all ways of helping others are equally effective, utilitarianism implies that we should carefully choose which problems to work on and by what means.

To do the most good they can, in practice, many utilitarians donate a significant portion of their income to address the world's most pressing problems, devote their careers to doing good, and aspire to high degrees of cooperativeness, personal integrity, and honesty.

Throughout this article, we use expressions like "doing good" and "having an impact" as shorthand for increasing the well-being of others, in particular by promoting their happiness and preventing their suffering.

## Opportunities to Help Others

Wealth and income are distributed extremely unequally across the globe. Middle-class members of rich countries like the US and UK earn fifty times as much as the poorest 750 million people in the world; this puts them in the richest 5% of the world's population.[2] This disparity in wealth means that well-off citizens of affluent nations are presented with outstanding opportunities to benefit others.




> *Earning above $30,000 per year puts you in the richest 5% of the world population.* Cf. *Giving What We Can* (2024). How Rich Am I?.

Wealth and income exhibit what economists call *diminishing marginal utility.*[3] The idea is simple: How much an individual's well-being is increased by receiving a higher income depends on their

current income. While richer people report being more satisfied with their lives overall, the richer you become, the less well-being you get from additional money. An additional dollar benefits a poor farmer in Kenya much more than it benefits a middle-class member of a rich country.

The diminishing marginal utility of money implies that we can generally increase overall well-being by redistributing from the rich to the poor. The well-being affluent citizens forego by donating $100 is small compared to the benefit to someone living in extreme poverty. Instead of buying new sneakers, your donation could give someone the equivalent of a year or more of healthy life. [4]

Given the diminishing marginal utility of money, the scourge of extreme global inequality implies that we can do an astonishing amount of good by donating to the global poor or other disadvantaged groups. For just a few dollars—the price of a coffee—we could pay for an insecticide-treated bednet that would protect two children in a developing country from malaria for two years. [5] And this money may go even further when spent on effective programs within other cause areas.

Utilitarianism implies that we should make helping others a central part of our lives. Further, utilitarianism urges us to use our resources not just to do some good but to do the most good we can. If we fail to produce the best outcome we can, more people will die than needed to die, or more people will suffer harms larger than they needed to suffer. If we think that the grave harms that others in this world suffer are urgent enough that we have a duty to use some of our resources to fight those harms, that same duty requires us to use those resources in ways that help as much as possible.

How much should we sacrifice for the benefit of others? For well-off citizens of affluent countries, utilitarianism will say they should give a substantial portion of their resources to help others. However, utilitarians recognize that in deciding how much to give, it's important that we not let the best be the enemy of the good. It would be a mistake for us to give so much in the short run that we make ourselves miserable and burn out later on. In practice, most utilitarians try to figure out a level of sacrifice that is sustainable for them in the long run; for utilitarians focused on donations, this is typically between 10% and 50% of their income.

## Effective Altruism

Many utilitarians undertake very significant personal sacrifices because of their belief in utilitarianism. But recently some have argued that *what* one tries to do is even more important than *how much* sacrifice one undertakes. This is a key insight of the philosophy and social movement of *effective altruism*, which is endorsed by many utilitarians, such as Peter Singer. [6]

Those in the effective altruism movement try to figure out, of all the different uses of our resources, which ones will do the most good, impartially considered, and act on that basis. So

defined, effective altruism is both a research project—to figure out how to do the most good—and a practical project to implement the best guesses we have about how to do the most good.[7]

While utilitarianism and effective altruism share certain similarities,[8] they are distinct and differ in important ways.[9] Unlike utilitarianism, effective altruism does not require that we sacrifice our own interests whenever doing so brings about a greater benefit to others. Unlike utilitarianism, effective altruism does not claim that we should always seek to maximize well-being, whatever the means. Finally, unlike utilitarianism effective altruism does not equate the good with the total sum of well-being.[10] For these and other reasons, many members of the effective altruism community are not utilitarians; instead, they often give some weight to a range of different ethical theories.

Despite these differences, utilitarians are usually enthusiastic about effective altruism. The main reason is that, out of all communities, the effective altruism movement comes closest to applying core utilitarian ideas and values to the real world.

In addition, joining a community of people with shared aims like effective altruism can be one of the best ways for its members to increase their impact. Such a community allows a group of people to mutually support each other, and to coordinate more effectively, thus achieving more than they could as individuals.

Members of the effective altruism movement often decompose the problem of how to do the most good into two parts: First, which problem ("cause") should I focus on? Second, what means should I take to address those problems? We will discuss these two questions in the remainder of this article.

## Cause Prioritization

To figure out the most effective actions, we first need to know which causes to focus on. Utilitarians are *cause impartial*, meaning they aim to contribute to the causes where they expect to do the most good. Which causes would most effectively promote well-being if they were further addressed? Finding the answer to that question is called *cause prioritization*.

Since some moral problems may be far more important than others, choosing what cause to focus on may be the greatest factor in how much good an individual will do. However, the world is complex, and we face high uncertainty about how best to improve the world. This uncertainty leads to reasonable disagreement about what causes to prioritize. But the effective altruism community has made some progress outlining three social causes that appear particularly pressing: (i) global health and development, (ii) farm animal welfare, and (iii) existential risk reduction.

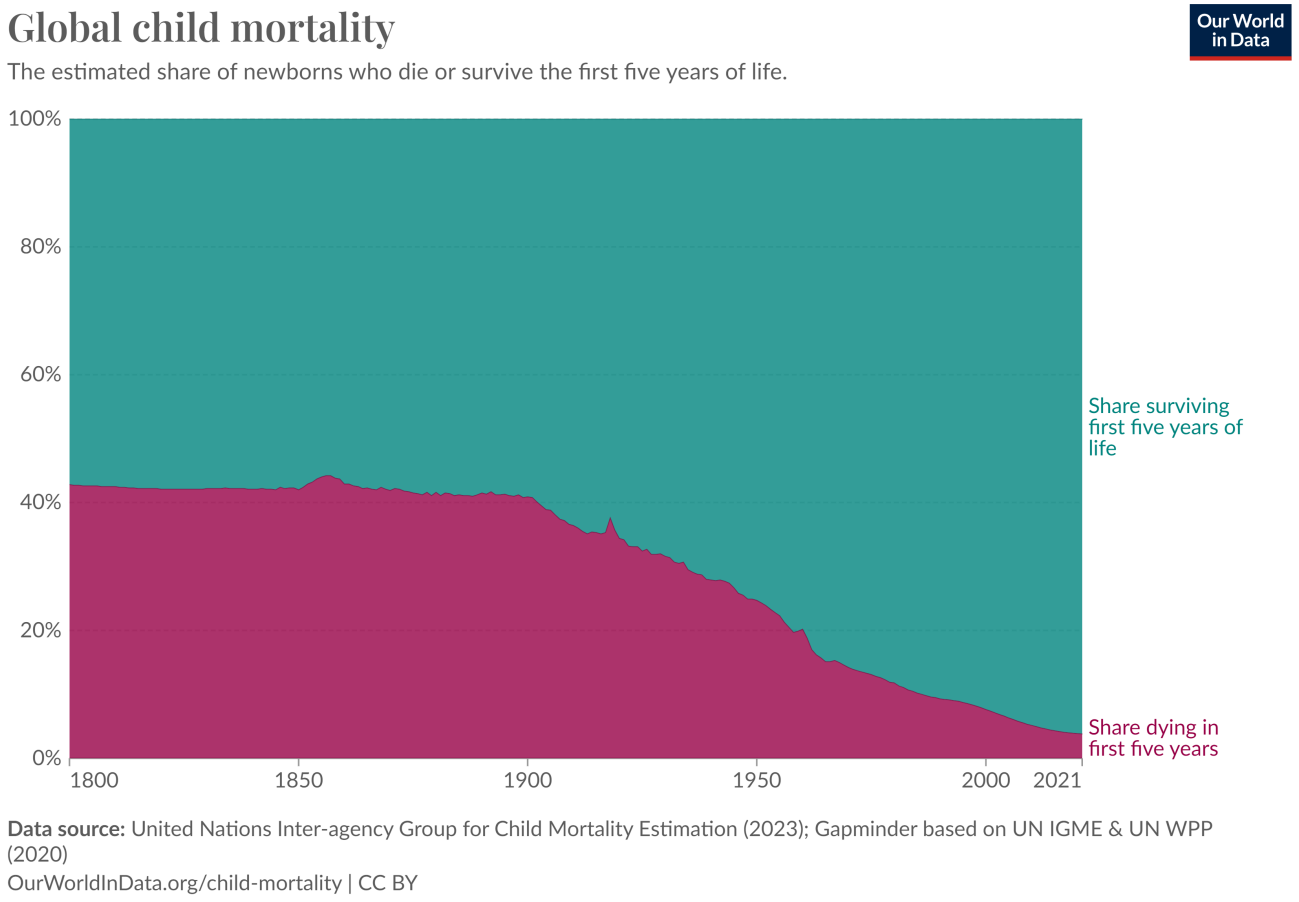
### Global Health and Development

> *"One thing that greatly matters is the failure of we rich people to prevent, as we so easily could, much of the suffering and many of the early deaths of the poorest people in the world."*

> – Derek Parfit[11]

As explained in Chapter 6: Utilitarianism and Practical Ethics, utilitarians endorse cosmopolitanism, according to which the geographical distance between an actor and someone they can help is not morally relevant in itself. Cosmopolitanism implies that we should look for effective interventions to help others, regardless of their nationality, where they live, or where they come from.

On this basis, global health and development may be considered a particularly high priority cause for utilitarians.[12] Efforts in this area have a great track record of improving lives, making this cause appear especially tractable. For most of human history, it was the norm that around two out of every five children died before their fifth birthday, largely due to preventable causes. With improved sanitation and access to medical care, we've since made tremendous progress against child mortality, with global rates dropping as low as 4% by 2020.[13]




However, this progress is no reason to rest on our laurels, since we still have much further to go: around 16,000 children under 15 still die worldwide every day.[14] Fortunately, we can help decrease this number even further. The best interventions in global health and development are incredibly cost-effective: GiveWell, a leading organization that conducts in-depth charity evaluations, estimates that top-rated charities can prevent the death of a child from malaria for under $5,000 by providing preventive drugs.[15]

Other evidence-backed and cost-effective ways to help the very poor include distributing anti-malarial nets, offering vitamin A fortification, and simply transferring money.[16] All of these interventions present amazing opportunities to improve the well-being of others at very low cost to ourselves.

## Farm Animal Welfare

> *"The question is not, Can they reason? nor, Can they talk? but, Can they suffer? Why should the law refuse its protection to any sensitive being? … The time will come when humanity will extend its mantle over everything which breathes."*
>
> – Jeremy Bentham[17]

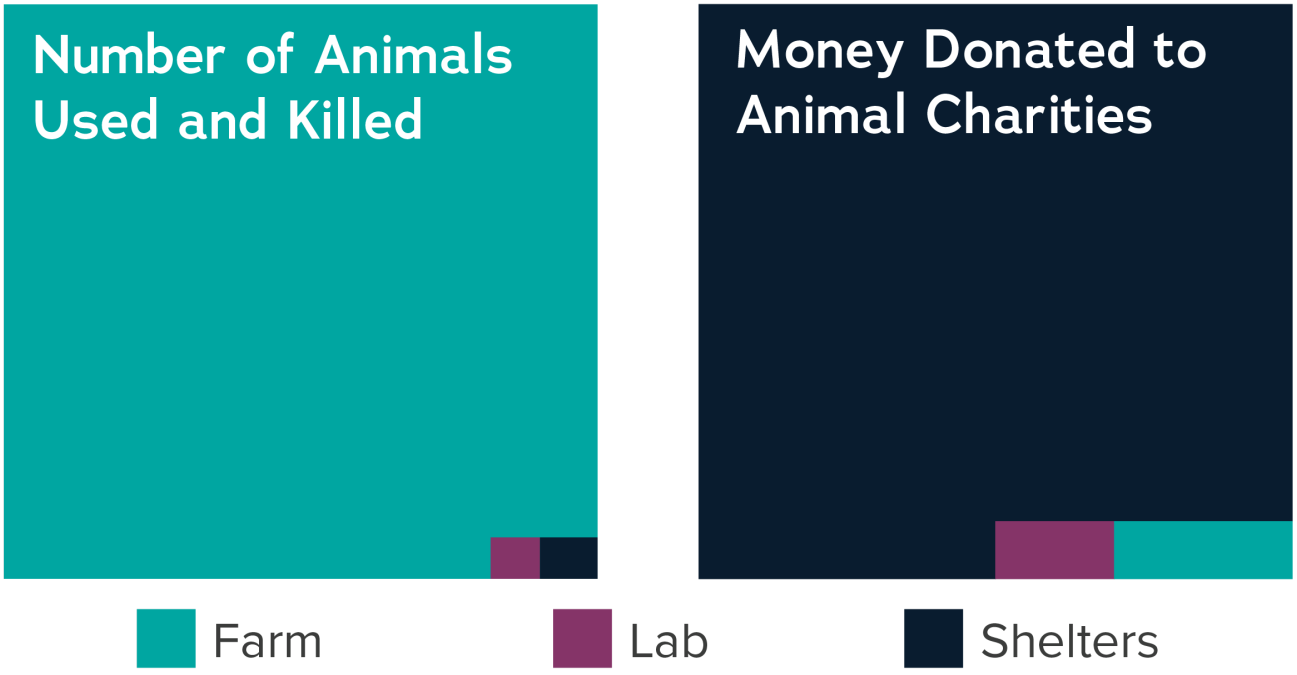
Improving the welfare of farmed animals should be a high moral priority for utilitarians. The argument for this conclusion is simple: First, animals matter morally; second, humans cause a huge amount of unnecessary suffering to animals in factory farms; third, there are easy ways to reduce the number of farmed animals and the severity of their suffering. We will go over these premises one by one.

First, as explained in Chapter 6: Utilitarianism and Practical Ethics, utilitarians reject speciesism: discrimination against those who do not belong to a certain species. By the lights of utilitarianism, we should give equal moral consideration to the well-being of all individuals, regardless of what species they belong to.[18]

Second, we find ourselves in a historically unprecedented situation, where every year humans kill around 70 billion land animals for food.[19] The vast majority of these spend their lives in factory farms in horrendous conditions,[20] crammed together with little space, without natural light or stimuli, and at constant risk of developing ailments such as weakened or broken bones, infections and organ failure. Most have their lives ended prematurely when they are slaughtered for food. These suffering animals are probably among the worst-off creatures on this planet.

Third, we can significantly improve the lives of farmed animals for just pennies per animal. In recent years activists have campaigned for numerous large retailers and fast food chains to cut caged eggs from their supply chains. Research suggests these corporate animal welfare campaigns have significantly improved the lives of somewhere between 9 and 120 hens per dollar spent by sparing them a year of cage confinement.[21]

Because of the sheer numbers of sentient beings involved, making progress on improving farm animal welfare could avert a huge amount of suffering. Yet despite the size of the problem, farm animal welfare is highly neglected.




(Image credit: Animal Charity Evaluators.)

In the US, only a few tens of millions of philanthropic dollars are donated yearly to organizations that focus on improving the lives of farmed animals. The amount spent is tiny compared to other animal causes. According to research nonprofit Animal Charity Evaluators: "Of domesticated and captive animals killed by humans in the U.S., about 99.987% are farmed animals, 0.007% are euthanized in companion animal shelters, and 0.006% are animals used in laboratories. However, about 95% of donations to animal charities in the U.S. go to companion animal organizations, 2% go to laboratory animal organizations, and 3% go specifically to farmed animal organizations."[22]

### Existential Risk Reduction

> *"Classical Utilitarians... would claim, as Sidgwick did, that the destruction of mankind would be by far the greatest of all conceivable crimes. The badness of this crime would lie in the vast reduction of the possible sum of happiness."*
>
> — Derek Parfit[23]

Chapter 6: Utilitarianism and Practical Ethics introduced *strong longtermism*, according to which the most important determinant of the value of our actions today is how those actions affect the very long-run future. Strong longtermism follows from utilitarianism—and a wide range of other moral viewpoints—if we assume that some of our actions can meaningfully affect the long-run future and that we can estimate which effects are positive and which negative.[24]

By the lights of longtermism, the most important moral problems are the ones where we have the greatest leverage to positively affect future generations. In particular, we should be highly

concerned with *existential risks*—such as all-out nuclear war, or extreme climate change, or an engineered global pandemic—which are defined as follows:

> **An existential risk is a risk that threatens the destruction of humanity's long-term potential.**[25]

Besides the deaths of all 8 billion people on this planet, an existential catastrophe would also entail the loss of all of humanity's future potential. In short, if an existential catastrophe occurred, the loss of value would be astronomical.[26]

If we avoid existential catastrophe, human civilization could survive for around a billion years before the Earth is no longer habitable. And if someday we settled other planets, civilization could continue for billions or trillions more.[27] We may also expect the quality of life to continue to improve. We've seen dramatic improvements in human welfare over the past few centuries, driven by technological development and moral progress. These trends have allowed more of us to lead longer, more fulfilling lives.[28] Fortunately, we should expect that further scientific and medical breakthroughs will continue to improve lives in the future.

Therefore, the extinction of humankind would irreversibly deprive humanity of a potentially grand future and preclude trillions of lives to come. The realization of an existential risk would be uniquely bad; much worse than non-existential catastrophes. Since the stakes involved with existential risks are so large, their mitigation may be one of the most important moral issues we face.[29]

Work to ensure that humanity's long-run future goes well is not only very important but also very neglected. Future individuals do not get to influence the decisions we make today in our economic and political systems; they do not participate in markets today, and they do not have a vote. In essence, future individuals are voiceless. Against this background, it's unsurprising that our generation systematically neglects the interests and well-being of the many individuals that will exist in the future.

For a detailed discussion of existential risks and the moral importance of the long-run future of humanity, we recommend *The Precipice: Existential Risk and the Future of Humanity*.

## Paths to Impact

How can we best address the most important causes? In general, there are three courses of actions that are most impactful. First, we can donate money to charity. Second, we can work in a career that helps others. Last but not least, we can encourage other people to also engage in these actions.

As pointed out in Chapter 6: Utilitarianism and Practical Ethics, while utilitarians accept an obligation to try to do the most good they can, in practice they should almost always avoid violating commonsense moral prohibitions such as those against lying or killing. A good utilitarian would therefore generally do better by acting in accordance with commonsense moral virtues like

integrity, trustworthiness, law-abidingness, and fairness and not trying to assess each action on utilitarian terms case by case.

## Charitable Giving

In slogan form, the utilitarian recommendation for using your money to help others is to "give more and give better". Giving more is self-explanatory. Giving better means finding and donating to the organizations that make the best use of your donation.

We've already seen that citizens of affluent countries are in the richest few percent of the world's population. By making small sacrifices, those in the affluent world have the power to dramatically improve the lives of others. Due to the extreme inequalities in wealth and income, one can do a lot more good by giving money to those most in need than by spending it on oneself.[30] Fortunately, an increasing number of affluent people recognize the unique position they are in, and they have decided to give more of their resources to benefit others. For instance, Giving What We Can is a growing community of people who have pledged to give at least 10% of their income for the rest of their lives to wherever they believe the money will do the most good.[31] Over 9,000 people have taken the pledge, collectively committing to donate billions of dollars over their lifetimes.

Just giving more achieves little good, however, if the money is not spent wisely. Some ways of making a difference do vastly more good than others. Most people think that the best charities differ from the average in their effectiveness by only about a factor of 1.5 or so.[32] However, counterintuitively, the most cost-effective charities are tens or even hundreds of times more effective than typical charities.[33] Because of these vast differences between charities, the decision of where to donate is of great consequence; doing the most good requires us to make this decision very carefully.

To give better, one can follow the recommendations from organizations such as GiveWell, which conducts exceptionally in-depth charity evaluations. GiveWell's best-guess estimate is that the most cost-effective charities working in global health can save a child's life for under $5,000.[34] By donating 10% of their income each year, an affluent person will save a child's life every year—dozens of lives over their lifetime. And if that person focused on more important causes, it's plausible that they could do far more good again.

Perhaps surprisingly, a significant personal commitment to helping others involves sacrificing far less than one might initially have thought. Studies suggest that although there is a positive correlation between income and happiness, it's not as strong as one might think. In the US, for example, a 10% reduction in income is associated with only a 1% drop on a scale measuring life satisfaction.[35] Moreover, it's not at all clear that we should think of donating 10% as equivalent to a 10% loss of income. There is some (conflicting) evidence to suggest that spending money on others

can often improve our well-being by as much as or more than spending it on ourselves.[36] So, it's not even clear that donating 10% of one's income would be a personal sacrifice at all.[37]

### Career Choice

A second way to help solve the world's most important problems is choosing the right career path: most of us will spend around 80,000 hours during our lives on our professional careers and some careers achieve much more good than others. Your choice of career is, therefore, one of the most important moral choices of your life. By using this time to address the most pressing problems, we can do an enormous amount of good. Yet, it's far from obvious which careers will allow you to do the most good from a utilitarian perspective.

Fortunately, there is research available to help us make more informed choices. The organization 80,000 Hours[38] aims to help people use their careers to solve the world's most pressing problems. To do this, they research how individuals can maximize the social impact of their careers, create online advice, and support readers who might be able to enter priority areas.

As with donations, choosing an impactful career need not involve much of a personal sacrifice: We can enjoy a much broader variety of jobs than we might think before we've tried them.[39] Also, you are unlikely to thrive in a job you do not enjoy. It would be unsustainable to pursue a career doing something that you hate. Relatedly, maintaining your physical health and emotional well-being are crucial to ensure you do not burn out and keep doing good over the long run. Therefore, choosing a career that maximizes your social impact does not involve giving up on a career that is satisfying, challenging, and enjoyable.[40]

### Outreach

Third, by utilitarian lights, an effective way of doing good is by inspiring others to try to do more good. Thus, the best option for many people may be to develop and promote the ideas and values associated with utilitarianism or effective altruism, and be a positive role-model in their behavior. By raising awareness of these ideas, it's plausible that you could inspire several people to follow the recommendations of these philosophies. In this way you will achieve a *multiplier effect* on your social impact—the people you inspire will do several times as much good as you would have achieved by working directly to solve the most important moral problems. Because utilitarianism and effective altruism are still little-known and little-understood, there may be a lot of value in promoting these ideas.

Some may also recommend political activism and volunteer work as ways to do good with one's time and efforts. Surprisingly little attention has been given to carefully assessing the marginal impact of different political activities. This paucity of information makes it especially hard to know which efforts in this sphere seem like good bets. But the high stakes suggest that the best-targeted

efforts here could do immense good (though, as always, a dedicated career in the area may have even greater potential).[41]

## Conclusion

Utilitarians are committed to making *helping others* a very significant part of their lives. Also, they believe that when helping others, they should use their resources to do the most good, impartially considered, that they can.

The areas currently among the top priorities for utilitarians predominantly benefit groups that cannot defend their own interests. This includes people in extreme poverty, non-human animals, and future individuals. We've looked at three corresponding causes: improving the conditions of those in extreme poverty, reducing the suffering of factory farmed animals, and protecting future generations by reducing existential risks.

To do the most good they can, utilitarians often donate money to effective charities, work on helping others with their career, and do outreach to encourage others to join in. We face many severe moral problems, which present opportunities to do an enormous amount of good. To benefit others as much as possible, utilitarians carefully prioritize among their options, focusing their efforts wherever they believe they can make the biggest positive contribution to overall well-being.

Donate to effective charities

Choose an impactful career

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## How to Cite This Page

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## Resources and Further Reading

### General

- Peter Singer (2011). *Practical Ethics*, 3rd edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek & Peter Singer (2017). Chapter 6: Utilitarianism in Action, *Utilitarianism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

### Effective Altruism

- William MacAskill (forthcoming). Effective Altruism. *The Norton Introduction to Ethics*, Elizabeth Harman & Alex Guerrero (eds.).[42]
- William MacAskill (2015). *Doing Good Better: Effective Altruism and How You Can Make a Difference*. New York: Penguin Random House.
- William MacAskill (2018). What Are the Most Important Moral Problems of Our Time? *TED*.
- Peter Singer (2013). The Why and How of Effective Altruism. *TED*.
- Richard Y. Chappell (2024). Why Not Effective Altruism?. *Public Affairs Quarterly* 38 (1): 3-21.
- Websites and organizations relevant to effective altruism:
  - Effectivealtruism.org: Website providing online resources about effective altruism.
  - Effective Altruism Forum: An online forum for discussing issues related to effective altruism.
  - GiveWell: Charity evaluator aiming to find outstanding giving opportunities.
  - 80,000 Hours: Research non-profit aiming to help talented individuals maximize the social impact of their careers.
  - Giving What We Can: Community of people having pledged to give 10% of their lifetime earnings to effective charities.
  - Charity Entrepreneurship: Charity incubator helping start multiple high-impact charities annually.
- Podcasts on effective altruism & utilitarianism:
  - Effective Altruism: An Introduction. *80,000 Hours Podcast*.
  - William MacAskill (2020). Doing Good. *Making Sense Podcast with Sam Harris*.
  - Peter Singer (2016). What is Moral Progress?. *Making Sense Podcast with Sam Harris*.
  - Peter Singer & Kasia de Lazari Radek (2024) Lives Well Lived

## Global Health and Development

- Peter Singer (2019). *The Life You Can Save: Acting Now to End World Poverty*, 2nd ed. The Life You Can Save, Bainbridge Island, WA and Sydney, available free at <www.thelifeyoucansave.org>.
- Toby Ord (2019).The Moral Imperative toward Cost-Effectiveness in Global Health, in Greaves, H. (ed.) *Effective Altruism: Philosophical Issues*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Peter Unger (1996). *Living High and Letting Die: Our Illusion of Innocence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

## Farm Animal Welfare

- Tyler John and Jeff Sebo (2020). Consequentialism and Nonhuman Animals. In *The Oxford Handbook of Consequentialism*, Douglas W. Portmore (ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lewis Bollard (2021). Lewis Bollard on big wins against factory farming and how they happened. *80,000 Hours Podcast with Rob Wiblin*.
- Jess Whittlestone (2017). Animal Welfare. *Effective Altruism*.


### Existential Risks


- Toby Ord (2020). *The Precipice: Existential Risk and the Future of Humanity*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Nick Bostrom (2013). Existential Risk Prevention as Global Priority. *Global Policy*. 4(1): 15–31.


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1. Bentham's advice to a young girl in 1830. Bentham, J., ed. by Goldworth, A. (1983). *Deontology together with A Table of the Springs of Action and Article on Utilitarianism*. Oxford: Clarendon, p.xix. ↩
2. The World Bank estimated that 735 million people lived in extreme poverty in 2015, meaning that they earned less than $1.90 per day (in 2011 prices). Thus, an annual income of $35,000 corresponds to 50 times the annual income of a person living just below the extreme poverty line. ↩
3. Cf. Drupp et al. (2018). Discounting Disentangled. *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy*, 10 (4): 109–34. ↩
4. GiveWell estimates that their top charities have saved children's lives at an average cost of between $3000 and $5500, suggesting at least a year gained per $100. See GiveWell (2024). How Much Does It Cost To Save a Life. ↩
5. GiveWell (2024). Mass Distribution of Insecticide-Treated Nets (ITNs). ↩
6. In 2013, Peter Singer gave a TED talk on effective altruism.

   For a more detailed and recent introduction to effective altruism, see MacAskill, W. (forthcoming). Effective Altruism. *The Norton Introduction to Ethics*, Elizabeth Harman & Alex Guerrero (eds.). For a response to criticisms, see Chappell (2024) Why Not Effective Altruism?. *Public Affairs Quarterly* 38 (1): 3-21. ↩
7. For a detailed philosophical discussion of effective altruism, see the 16 articles included in Greaves, H. & Pummer, T. (2019). *Effective Altruism: Philosophical Issues*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. ↩

8. "It is true that effective altruism has some similarities with utilitarianism: it is maximising, it is primarily focused on improving wellbeing, many members of the community make significant sacrifices in order to do more good, and many members of the community self-describe as utilitarians."

   MacAskill, W. (2019). The Definition of Effective Altruism. In Greaves, H. & Pummer, T (ed.). *Effective Altruism: Philosophical Issues*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. ↩

9. See MacAskill, W. (2019). The Definition of Effective Altruism. In Greaves, H. & Pummer, T (ed.). *Effective Altruism: Philosophical Issues*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. ↩

10. Effective altruism "is compatible with egalitarianism, prioritarianism, and, because it does not claim that wellbeing is the only thing of value, with views on which non-welfarist goods are of value."

    MacAskill, W. (2019). The Definition of Effective Altruism. In Greaves, H. & Pummer, T (ed.). *Effective Altruism: Philosophical Issues*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. ↩

11. Parfit, D. (2017). *On What Matters, Volume Three*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 436–437. ↩

12. For instance, Peter Singer's book The Life You Can Save makes the case for the ethical importance of improving global health and international development. Singer, P. (2019). *The Life You Can Save: Acting Now to End World Poverty*, 2nd ed. The Life You Can Save, Bainbridge Island, WA and Sydney, available free at <www.thelifeyoucansave.org>. ↩

13. Dattani, S.; Spooner, F.; Ritchie, H. & Roser, M. (2023). Child & Infant Mortality. *Our World In Data*. ↩

14. Dattani, S.; Spooner, F.; Ritchie, H. & Roser, M. (2023). Child & Infant Mortality. *Our World In Data*. ↩

15. GiveWell (2019). Your Dollar Goes Further Overseas. ↩

16. GiveWell (2024). Our Top Charities. See also GiveDirectly. ↩

17. Bentham, J. (1789). *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*. Bennett, J. (ed.), pp. 143–144. ↩

18. As explained in Chapter 6: Utilitarianism and Practical Ethics, giving equal moral consideration to all animals does not necessarily imply that we should treat them all the same. ↩

19. Sanders, B. (2018). Global Animal Slaughter Statistics And Charts. *Faunalytics*. ↩

20. Anthis, K. and Anthis, J. (2019). Global Farmed & Factory Farmed Animals Estimates. *Sentience Institute*. ↩

21. Šimčikas, S. (2019). Corporate campaigns affect 9 to 120 years of chicken life per dollar spent. *Effective Altruism Forum*. ↩

22. Cf. Animal Charity Evaluators (2024). Why Farmed Animals? ↩

23. Parfit, D. (1984). *Reasons and Persons*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 454.

    Note that this isn't technically accurate. Some conceivable dystopias (containing vast suffering) would be even worse than human extinction. ↩

24. For a discussion of longtermism and its underlying assumptions, see Greaves, H. & MacAskill, W. (2021). The case for strong longtermism. *Global Priorities Institute* Working Paper No. 5-2021. ↩

25. Ord, T. (2020). The Precipice: Existential Risk and the Future of Humanity. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, p. 37.

    We'll focus on extinction risk as the simplest example of this, but one can also imagine outcomes in which humanity survives, but with its long-term potential permanently hobbled. ↩

26. Cf. Bostrom, N (2003). Astronomical Waste: The Opportunity Cost of Delayed Technological Development. *Utilitas*. 15(3): 308–314. ↩

27. Cf. Nick Beckstead (2013). *On the Overwhelming Importance of Shaping the Far-Future*. PhD Dissertation, Rutgers University. Section 3: The Case for Shaping the Far Future. ↩

28. Roser, M. (2019). The short history of global living conditions and why it matters that we know it. *Our World In Data*. ↩

29. Cf. Bostrom, N. (2013). Existential Risks as a Global Priority. *Global Policy*. 4(1): 15–31. ↩

30. Cf. MacAskill, W. (2014). *Doing Good Better: Effective Altruism and How You Can Make a Difference*. New York: Random House. Chapter 1. ↩

31. Note that William MacAskill, coauthor of this website, is a cofounder of *Giving What We Can*. ↩

32. Caviola, L., Schubert, S., Teperman, E., Moss, D., Greenberg, S., & Faber, N. (2020). Donors vastly underestimate differences in charities' effectiveness. *Judgment and Decision Making*. 15(4): 509–516. ↩

33. GiveWell (2019). Your Dollar Goes Further When You Fund the Right Program.

Ord, T. (2011). The Moral Imperative toward Cost-Effectiveness in Global Health. *Center for Global Development.* ↩

34. GiveWell (2019). Your Dollar Goes Further Overseas. ↩

35. Stevenson & Wolfers (2013). Subjective Well-Being and Income: Is There Any Evidence of Satiation?. *American Economic Review, American Economic Association.* 103(3): 598–604. ↩

36. Dunn, E.; Gilbert, D. & Wilson, T. (2011). If money doesn't make you happy, then you probably aren't spending it right. *Journal of Consumer Psychology.* 21(2): 115–125. ↩

37. For more detail, see MacAskill, W.; Mogensen, A. & Ord, T. (2018). Giving Isn't Demanding. In Woodruff, P. (ed.) *The Ethics of Giving: Philosophers' Perspectives on Philanthropy.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 178–203. ↩

38. Note that William MacAskill, coauthor of this website, is a cofounder of 80,000 Hours. ↩

39. Cf. Todd, B. (2017). We reviewed over 60 studies about what makes for a dream job. Here's what we found. *80,000 Hours.* ↩

40. Though for an alternative perspective that puts much more weight on pursuing "excited curiosity", see Graham, P. (2023). How to Do Great Work. ↩

41. But note also the high risk of political efforts proving counterproductive. Consider, for example, environmental regulations that make it more difficult to build new solar, wind, and nuclear power plants to replace harmful coal power. ↩

42. Note that William MacAskill, coauthor of this website, is the author of several of the listed resources on effective altruism. Moreover, he is a cofounder of both 80,000 Hours and *Giving What We Can.* ↩