

The Rise of the Rational Do-Gooders
Zachary Pincus-Roth, Washington Post 9.23.20

Brian Ottens wished he could buy his 8-year-old daughter a better iPad. The first-generation one she'd inherited from her great-grandmother didn't support the game she wanted to play. But Ottens has different priorities. "We just explain it to her: iPads are expensive, and this several hundreds of dollars could go toward helping a lot of animals," he says. When her school went online during the covid-19 pandemic, Ottens was forced to give in and buy a low-end Chromebook. Still, he says, "if it never showed up, I think she would have continued feeling the same way. I understand why." Every year, Ottens and his wife donate a large amount to charities, mainly ones that advocate for animals. In 2018, they gave \$49,000, which was 27 percent of their combined salary. This year they plan to give \$60,000. They vary the amount to maximize their tax benefits, so that they can give more in the long run.

Ottens, 43, is an engineer at NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center in Greenbelt, Md., working on devices that look for signs of life on places like Mars and Saturn's moon Titan. It's a stressful job: He needs to keep his team on a strict timetable, and there's unexpected weekend work. But he seeks out the stress. The more stress he has, the more animals will live. "Once I discovered this access I had for reducing suffering, it motivated me to compete for the highest-stress job I could withstand," he says, "and it usually came along with higher pay, and that higher pay has meant I could donate a lot more." His wife is on board with his giving. The couple don't own a fancy car or take expensive vacations. When planning their finances for the year, nixing donations is just not on the table.

Ottens's choices are unimaginable for many, but they're typical of effective altruism, a movement devoted to improving the world in the most logical, evidence-based way possible. Oxford professor William MacAskill, who helped found the movement, estimates that if you're a one-person U.S. household earning more than \$58,000, you're in the top 1 percent in the world, even accounting for global cost differences. Since a dollar means far more to the less fortunate than to those living in such comfort, effective altruists donate a large percentage of their income. And to further harness that dollar, they seek out causes that most efficiently save lives. They land on ones that many of us haven't considered before, especially since those lives tend to be on the other side of the world, or nonhuman — or yet to be lived.

It's no coincidence that the effective altruism movement came about when evidence-based practices — using science and data to make decisions, rather than conventions and intuition — were on the rise in areas such as government and health care; however, EA hasn't yet gone mainstream.

One question about EA is whether the "E" is harder than the "A." One EA group ragged on New York Times columnist David Brooks, who in 2013 had written a critique of earning money at a hedge fund in order to donate it to far-away recipients. ("You might become one of those people who loves humanity in general but not the particular humans immediately around.")

Motivation is a hole in effective altruism's armor. Isn't it better if an art-loving rich person gives to a local museum rather than buying a yacht? But an EA might argue that society is paying for

that contribution, in the form of a tax deduction. And can't wealthy nonprofits find other means of making up the difference — like a museum selling a lesser-known work that it doesn't display anyway? The arguments can go on and on.

Jason Dykstra is a radiologist in Holland, Mich. His family of four lives on around \$48,000 annually and has given away about 75 percent of their take-home income for the past seven years. Dykstra often gets pushback from his peers. "To be able to convince them that someone halfway around the world is just as important as their kid or their grandkid or favorite church buddy, that's the challenge I've run into," he says. He thinks the pandemic could help EA, as it has awakened Americans to the horrors of infectious diseases and economic instability. "It's helped them to empathize better with problems that the rest of the world faces all the time," he says.

Think about the moral issues your friends and family have argued about over the past few years. Donald Trump. Race relations. The 2020 campaign. Immigration. Abortion. Trump. Trump. Trump. Effective altruists might personally care about these things, but they are not the causes the movement tends to focus on. "Anything that involves party politics ... EA tries to stay out of those things because it's so unlikely that we'd be able to make a difference," says Julia Wise, 35, community liaison at the Center for Effective Altruism. Issues in the news may be galvanizing. But, Wise says, "we've been looking for problems that are boring."

Dylan Matthews, a former Washington Post reporter, is the head writer of Future Perfect, a section of Vox that's funded by private donors and explores how to do the most good. Matthews identifies as an effective altruist himself; he once donated a kidney to a stranger. At Vox, he grapples with how to communicate the movement's ideas convincingly. One colleague joked that he should write an article saying that instead of sending toothbrushes to children detained at the Mexico border, people should be spending that money on malaria. But he wouldn't write something like that, he says, because he wouldn't want to dismiss anyone's pain. "EA is not an oppression Olympics," he says, "and if it becomes an oppression Olympics, a lot of good and smart people will be turned off."

But as EA has become more flexible, it still faces a daunting force: the human brain. Even for Geistwhite, 33, who hosted the D.C. gathering and works as a statistician for the U.S. Agency for International Development, it's been a long road to shifting his intuitions. He grew up in the town of Farmington, N.M., in a conservative family, inheriting a "Fox News perspective," as he puts it over dinner at NuVegan Cafe in Northwest Washington. He would volunteer for the Salvation Army, occasionally on programs that gave gifts to kids. But when they opened their gifts, he recalls, they just seemed confused. He heard about GiveWell while in college at Princeton and eventually started coming around to EA beliefs.

Geistwhite once worked for nine months at a health clinic in Sierra Leone and now keeps a photo of his co-workers there at his desk. One had difficulty concentrating in the afternoon because he would pass up the \$1.50 daily lunch to save money to support his family. The photo is a reminder of who needs help. "It's the suffering that's important," Geistwhite says. "It's not how I feel about it."