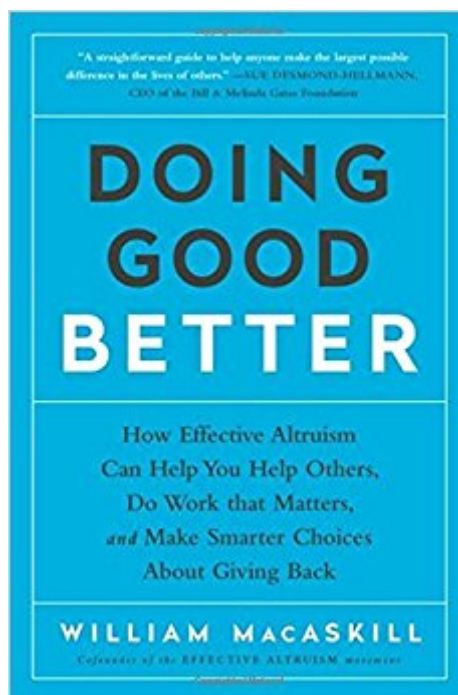




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# Doing Good Better: How Effective Altruism Can Help You Help Others, Do Work That Matters, And Make Smarter Choices About Giving Back



## Synopsis

An up-and-coming visionary in the world of philanthropy and a cofounder of the effective altruism movement explains why most of our ideas about how to make a difference are wrong and presents a counterintuitive way for each of us to do the most good possible. While a researcher at Oxford, William MacAskill decided to devote his study to a simple question: How can we do good better? MacAskill realized that, while most of us want to make a difference, we often decide how to do so based on assumptions and emotions rather than facts. As a result, our good intentions often lead to ineffective, sometimes downright harmful, outcomes.

As an antidote, MacAskill and his colleagues developed effective altruism—a practical, data-driven approach to doing good that allows us to make a tremendous difference regardless of our resources. Effective altruists operate by asking certain key questions that force them to think differently, set aside biases, and use evidence and careful reasoning rather than act on impulse. In *Doing Good Better*, MacAskill lays out these principles and shows that, when we use them correctly—when we apply the head and the heart to each of our altruistic endeavors—each of us has the power to do an astonishing amount of good.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

“Beautifully written and extremely smart. *Doing Good Better* should be required reading for anyone interested in making the world better.”—Steven D.

Levitt, #1 New York Times bestselling co-author of *Freakonomics* and *When to Rob a Bank*—“This is the most valuable guide to charitable giving ever published. Even readers who disagree with MacAskill’s conclusions about the value of particular charitable donations will make smarter decisions by learning from his analysis.”—Paul Brest, co-director, Stanford Center on Philanthropy and Civil Society and former president, William and Flora Hewlett Foundation “A straightforward guide to help anyone make the largest possible difference in the lives of others.”—Sue Desmond-Hellman, CEO of the Gates Foundation “We research hotels and headphones and sushi bars—but not charities. That is lunacy. And in this powerful and persuasive book, William MacAskill shows us how much we stand to gain from a little bit of thoughtfulness: The same donation could do hundreds of times more good if given to the most effective charities, rather than the least.”—Dan Heath, co-author of the New York Times bestsellers *Made to Stick*, *Switch*, and *Decisive*—“Effective altruism—efforts that actually help people rather than making you feel good or helping you show off—is one of the great new ideas of the twenty-first century. *Doing Good Better* is the definitive guide to this exciting new movement.”—Steven Pinker, Johnstone Family Professor of Psychology at Harvard University and author of *The Better Angels of Our Nature*—“*Doing Good Better* is a superb achievement. This must-read book will lead people to change their careers, their lives, and the world, for the better.”—Peter Singer, Ira W. DeCamp Professor of Bioethics at Princeton University, author of *Animal Liberation* and *The Most Good You Can Do*—“*Doing Good Better* is a must-read for anyone with both a heart and a brain. MacAskill demolishes the lazy myths of nothing-you-can-do-ism and demonstrates the power of asking the right questions. This is an important book. It’s also surprisingly fun. Figuring out what really helps people is a challenging scientific puzzle, and these pages are full of unexpected twists—enlightening and invigorating.”—Joshua Greene, director of Harvard’s Moral Cognition Lab, author of *Moral Tribes*—“Humanity currently spends more money on cigarette ads than on making sure that we—as a species—survive this century. We’ve got our priorities all wrong, and we need effective altruism to right them. If you want to make a real difference on the biggest issues of our time, you need to read *Doing Good Better*.”—Jaan Tallinn, cofounder, Skype and Kazaa—“*Doing Good Better* has rare combination of strikingly original ideas, effortless clarity of delivery, and a thoroughgoing practicality that leaves the reader inspired to get out of their chair and take on the

world. Humanity faces some big challenges in the 21st century; this is a much-needed manifesto for social change, and Will MacAskill is the ideal ambassador. •Eric Drexler, founder of nanotechnology and author of *Engines of Creation* “MacAskill tackles a monumental question: how can we make the biggest difference for the greatest number of people? His answer is a grand vision to make giving, volunteering, spending, and working more worthwhile. •Adam Grant, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Give and Take* “Are you interested in giving away money more effectively? This is the very best book on how to do that. •Tyler Cowen, *Holbert C. Harris* Professor of Economics at George Mason University and author of *Average is Over* “I wish I’d had this structure and insights twenty years ago! •Caroline Fiennes, Director, Giving Evidence

William MacAskill is an associate professor in philosophy at the University of Oxford and the cofounder of the nonprofit organizations Giving What We Can and 80,000 Hours. These nonprofits have raised more than \$400 million in lifetime-pledged donations to charity and have helped spark the effective altruism movement. MacAskill is a contributor to Quartz, the online business magazine of The Atlantic, and he and his organizations have been featured in The New York Times and The Wall Street Journal, and on NPR and in a TEDx Talk. He lives in Oxford, England.

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](http://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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