

Sceptical Optimism? Dealing with the Problems of Our Time
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Effective Altruism to Help Others – and Yourself

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“For myself, I am an optimist - it does not seem to be much use to anything else” (Churchill 1954, 195). Winston Churchill's quote is a practical advice. And it makes sense. Optimists tend to live a healthier life, are more likely to reach their goals and are happier (Conversano et al. 2010). Yet, we are constantly bombarded with horrible news. Burning forests in Canada, Russian attack on Ukraine, high inflation, and a struggling economy in Europe - just to name a few. In a world of poly-crisis, it is hard to stay optimistic. I think two aspects are essential. *Action and visible progress.*

Foogy view ahead

Visible progress consists quite intuitively of two parts. First, our visibility is blurred. I don't want to get into a detailed analysis of the media's role, nor do I want to blame anyone for anything. Nevertheless, it is apparent that we are supplied with way more negative news than positive ones. This can have several reasons. One is that our attention is drawn more to negativity, so we tend to consume more negative news. Shows, articles or social media posts get more views, reads, or likes when they satisfy our bias. Now a vicious cycle starts, where we overlook positive reports. This is the negativity instinct. More instincts cloud our understanding of data and statistics. There is a single-perspective instinct, a gap instinct, a generalisation instinct, and more (Rosling 2018). It is beyond the scope of this essay to name and explain all. For now, it is only important that they exist and that they make it harder for us to understand trends. I will show the magnitude in the next paragraph. Those are the insights from the Swedish public health professor and statistician Hans Rosling, who became famous for his effort to educate the public about our flawed understanding of data and trends in development issues.

Start looking for someone playing the guitar

The second part of *visible progress* leads to the question: Is there even progress? Hans Rosling shows strikingly that the world is getting better, while still being very far from ideal. Over the years he polled the opinion of people from diverse backgrounds and a stunning majority (~80%) is convinced that the world is getting worse. He asked the participators questions about¹ the status quo of our world. What is the life expectancy of the world today? How many of the world's 1-year-old children today have been vaccinated against at least some disease? How many girls (in %) finish primary school in low-income countries? And more. All of these questions have the same design. Three answer options; one pessimistic, one neutral/ stagnation, and one more optimistic. E.g.: According to the United Nations in the last 20 years, the proportion of the world population living in extreme poverty has

A: almost doubled;

B: remained more or less the same;

C: almost halved.

¹ All the examples and data in the subsequent paragraph are borrowed from Hans Rosling's book 'Factfulness' (2018). He himself is meticulous in selecting reliable sources to prove his point. They include UN, WHO, World Bank, CDC, Our World in Data, ...

In all cases, the best answer is the correct one. Yet, the lion's share of people chooses the worst outcome - in every question. We are not only wrong about the world, which then could simply be explained by ignorance, but we are significantly drawn to the worst answer. Then the conclusion has to be that we are misinformed about the world. It doesn't matter if the people in the survey were rich or poor, high formal education or not, young or old. All groups, all around the world scored similarly bad. How to measure if the world is getting better is a daring endeavour. Poverty line, GDP, life expectancy, etc., all have a tail of critique on their own. On a quite simplistic view: It is not about a bigger pile of cash or more time in our life, but the ultimate goal of development rather is to have the ability to do what you want. Hans Rosling shows numerous examples of positive progress from a variety of fields. Someone practising the guitar is experiencing that happiness and freedom of the ability to do what he or she wants to do. So guitars per capita can be one good proxy. In 1962 there were 200 guitars per 1 million people, in 2014 the number rose to 11.000. Another example is that the price of solar panels is today 1/100th of the 1976's price. It is now cheaper than the wildest estimates have ever been. The share of people having access to a secure water source climbed to 88%, coming from 58% in 1980. Starting in 1970 the share of undernourished people was cut in half, while at the same time, the absolute world population more than doubled. We have more national parks, more new movies per year, the highest literacy among adults, and more cancer survivalists than ever before in history (Factfulness 2018). Yet, it is important to make clear again, that things can get better, while still being bad or at least not good enough. Horrible and unacceptable things happen around the world all the time. But a desperate worldview that everything is getting worse all the time is not only counterproductive but also simply wrong. The point I am trying to make here is, there is much more positive progress than we are aware of in our daily lives.

Active and passive action

Now to the second aspect to stay or become more optimistic. *Action* is necessary against the helplessness we probably all feel. After all, I am just one person, how am I supposed to put out the fire in a Canadian forest, stop a war, and revive the economy? A first step is to accept you won't. At least not on your own. And not immediately. Some time ago I had the chance to join a project aiming at UN's 2nd sustainability goal 'Zero Hunger' in Morocco. Our work included preparing and distributing food and drinks among refugees and the homeless. Although my impact was minimal and my knowledge about how to handle these matters foolish, people were grateful. I learned that they started a few years ago with little resources and supporters but grew and were able to offer their assistance now in several places in Rabat. To see directly that projects like that expand makes you believe in positive change.

One form of action that may also make improvements visible for us and hence combines visible progress and action, is *effective altruism* (EA). In his seminal paper 'Famine, Affluence, and Morality' Peter Singer makes the point of moral obligation towards those in need. In short, his notorious child in the pond analogy goes like this: If I see a child drowning in a pond, I ought to save it. Even if it will ruin my new shoes. The material value of the shoes is not even close regarding moral relevance compared to a child's life saved. It does not make any difference if

that pond is in my neighbourhood, an alien city, or on the other side of the globe. Also, it would not change anything about my moral obligation to act, if there are already several people around the pond, who are capable of saving the child but do not respond. Distance and the behaviour of others do not make a morally significant difference (Singer 1972). What matters is the following: Can we prevent suffering without having to sacrifice something of comparable moral significance? In 2019 an estimated 5 million children died from mostly preventable and treatable causes (Again, a horrible number, but steadily declining). That's more than 13,000 children a day (UNICEF 2020). Many of those are preventable because they are related to absolute poverty which is "a condition of life so characterised by malnutrition, illiteracy, disease, squalid surroundings, high infant mortality and low life expectancy as to be beneath any reasonable definition of human decency" (Singer 2016, 219). Poverty and global income inequality are complex problems to solve. But there are examples where aid and charities have a tremendous impact. The easiest example is immunisation. Each year more than 200 million people become infected with Malaria, which ends for around 600,000 deadly (Malaria Consortium 2022). Children are particularly vulnerable and account for the majority of deaths (Singer 2019). To provide seasonal preventive medicine costs around \$7 per child and is an effective measure to prevent deaths and alleviate damage in non-fatal cases. As of 2017 15.7 million children were protected in 12 different sub-Saharan countries through SMC programs. Potentially 14-16 million more children in that area could be reached if more funding is secured.²

Singer is convinced many more people could give money to charities instead of unnecessary consumption. Related to the term absolute poverty, there is also absolute affluence, to have income way above a level that fulfils basic needs. How often do we buy things we don't really need and don't even give us substantial pleasure? Originally, Singer argued that we ought to give away all excess money we spend on luxuries instead of only for more basic needs. His example that the purpose of clothing is only to keep you warm instead of also looking well-dressed shows how demanding the principle is. Singer recognises that by now and meanwhile also promotes a recommendation to give away 10% of your income to charitable causes. Ideally, the donated money should be used in a way where it does the best and some charities, organisations, or causes are more effective than others. This makes the *effective* part of *effective altruism*. The previously mentioned SMC program is one great example of many. Even small amounts of money can have a formidable impact.

Objections

Now I would also like to briefly address some objections. *EA is said to be élitist*. Only individuals with a lot of money can donate. Yes, exactly that is the point. People who can give, ought to give, others don't. An alternative to donating money may be to donate your time and help at a charity. Also, like I said before the originally very demanding principle can be softened (not all

² Seasonal malaria chemoprevention (SMC) medicine is given four times during each Malaria season and reduces ~75% of all malaria episodes and ~75% of severe cases. The SMC tablets easily dissolve in water. Children who are protected by SMC will help the whole community by reducing the transmission pool. (Malaria Consortium 2022, GiveWell, no date)

your excess resources, but some). True, then the principle is less sound, but at least it is “a way [...] in which theory and practice, if not yet in harmony, are at least coming together” (Singer 1972, 243).

EA is a way that perpetuates an ill system. I'd say, that helping others is the right thing to do in every system, and there is no guarantee for a system change or system fix (nevertheless worth working towards it and that can be done along EA). Of course, aid can be designed in a bad way, for instance, if second-hand clothing is donated to developing countries and consequently destroys the local textile industry and leads to more unemployment. It is crucial to make informed and rational decisions.

EA is undemocratic. I tend to agree. Affluent givers can decide on their own which causes they support and which they don't. But since foreign aid payments are not a priority for governments (in Germany 0.76% of GDP in 2017) (BMZ 2023) and it turns out to be difficult to advocate for more, an easier way is to start individually while campaigning for more conjointly decisions about how much to give and whom.

Charities are ineffective. This can be true; some NGOs are more effective than others and it requires some research to find the better ones. Additionally, charities probably won't fix a failed³ state, a broken system, or miraculously deliver economic prosperity. But at other objectives, they can be very effective. Disease prevention, disaster relief, and education are splendid examples. To slightly modify Kofi Annan's quote about the purpose of the UN: The objective of NGOs is not to take people to heaven but to prevent humanity from going to hell. EA asks us to sacrifice some of⁴ the benefits of a consumer society to support NGOs to help others. Which may help yourself to see more positive progress and to contribute to it. And now we could restart the old debate if altruism is even truly selfless...

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³ There are rankings for the effectiveness of charities, e.g.: [givewell.org](https://www.givewell.org)

⁴ He referred to the UN, I am referring to charities and NGOs in general; the original quote is: '[...] the United Nation's objective is not to take people to heaven, but to prevent humanity from going to hell'; <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/kofi-annan-on-40-years-trying-to-end-war-promote-peace> (12/09/2012).

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