

Philanthropy: The Most Good You Can Do

Dr Sarah Flew (www.lse.ac.uk)

The ever provocative and influential philosopher Peter Singer has cast his eye over the subject of philanthropy and his new book *The Most Good You Can Do: How Effective Altruism Is Changing Ideas About Living Ethically* is going to be one of the most widely discussed books of 2015.

Peter Singer is essentially interested in discovering what makes an effective altruist. Effective altruism should be driven by a desire to do the maximum good and should be impact driven. He argues that the philanthropic act, therefore, should be underpinned by logic rather than sentiment.

The book is not yet out in the UK but has been receiving positive reviews in the USA. The *Yale University Press* marketing release says:

Peter Singer's books and ideas have been disturbing our complacency ever since the appearance of *Animal Liberation*. Now he directs our attention to a new movement in which his own ideas have played a crucial role: effective altruism. Effective altruism is built upon the simple but profound idea that living a fully ethical life involves doing the "most good you can do." Such a life requires an unsentimental view of charitable giving: to be a worthy recipient of our support, an organisation must be able to demonstrate that it will do more good with our money or our time than other options open to us. Singer introduces us to an array of remarkable people who are restructuring their lives in accordance with these ideas, and shows how living altruistically often leads to greater personal fulfillment than living for oneself. *The Most Good You Can Do* develops the challenges Singer has made, in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, to those who donate to the arts, and to charities focused on helping our fellow citizens, rather than those for whom we can do the most good. Effective altruists are extending our knowledge of the possibilities of living less selfishly, and of allowing reason, rather than emotion, to determine how we live. *The Most Good You Can Do* offers new hope for our ability to tackle the world's most pressing problems.

To accompany this, Peter Singer is running a 7 week online course which will help the participant think through how altruism/philanthropy can be made as effective as possible. Hence the title of his book *The Most Good You Can Do*. Details of the course can be found here: www.coursera.org/course/effectivealtruism?action=enroll&sessionId=975045

The relevance of Peter Singer's book is that despite the growth reported in mega gifts, the *Non Profit Quarterly* recent article (Spring 2015 edition, article titled 'Inequality's Tipping Point and the Pivotal Role of Nonprofits') pointed out that many of those gifts continue to be given within the narrow fields of culture, higher education and medical research. The article also highlighted that many mega gifts reflect only the personal interests of the benefactors and are too narrowly confined to a specific (often local) geographic area.

Peter Singer, The Most Good You Can Do: How Effective Altruism Is Changing Ideas About Living Ethically (Yale University Press) is out in the UK in May 2015. It has the potential to shake up attitudes and make philanthropists rethink their giving and what their legacy to the world will be.



Dr Sarah Flew

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