'Peter Singer's 'Most Good' makes rational case for good life

"The Most Good You Can Do: How Effective Altruism is Changing Ideas About Living Ethically" by Peter Singer

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How Effective Altruism is Changing Ideas About Living Ethically

By Peter Singer
Yale University Press.

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After establishing trust funds for his wife and children, Zell Kravinsky is living on $60,000 a year so he can give most of his $45 million real-estate fortune to charity. He has also donated a kidney to a stranger. Studies show that the odds of dying from the procedure are about 1 in 4,000; Kravinsky claims he can't justify valuing his life at 4,000 times that of a stranger.

According to Peter Singer, professor of bioethics at Princeton University and of historical and philosophical studies at the University of Melbourne, Kravinsky is an "effective altruist." Drawing on ethical principles and hard evidence, effective altruists give substantial amounts of money to organizations successful in addressing the world's most pressing problems. In *The Most Good You Can Do*, Singer lays out a rationale for effective altruism - and a provocative defense of a movement he hopes will spread.

A leading animal-rights advocate, Singer stresses the well-being of all sentient beings. To prevent the largest amount of suffering, he argues, resources should go to farm animals (and the elimination of consumption of animal products) rather than pet care and sterilization.

Effective altruists, Singer says, should assist the world's poorest rather than individuals in affluent countries. The poverty threshold in the United States, he points out, is about $16 a person a day; "extreme poverty" in the less-developed world is $1.25 a day. It costs $40,000 to supply a guide dog to a blind person in the United States; preventing someone from going blind from trachoma, a tropical disease associated with loss of sight, costs less than $100. And because the needs of sentient beings are so urgent, Singer discourages donations to art museums and well-endowed universities.

There are uncertainties. Is it better to send $100,000 to an organization fighting climate change, or spend it on restoring sight to 1,000 people? A hard call. But Singer at times seems to favor initiatives whose impact can be quantified. And some of his numbers are suspect or speculative.

Still, Singer opens up worthwhile conversations (and practical applications) related to ethical ideals. At minimum, *The Most Good You Can Do* can stimulate donors to insist that charitable organizations provide persuasive proof of their effectiveness.

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