

*From Moral Neutrality to Effective Altruism:
The Changing Scope and Significance of
Moral Philosophy*

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PETER SINGER is often described as the world's most influential living philosopher. In 2005 *Time* magazine named him one of the one hundred most influential people in the world, and in 2014 he was third on the Gottlieb Duttweiler Institute's ranking of Global Thought Leaders. He is known especially for his work on the ethics of our treatment of animals, for his controversial critique of the sanctity of life ethics in bioethics, and for his writing on the obligations of the affluent to aid those living in extreme poverty. He first became well-known internationally after the publication of *Animal Liberation* in 1975. In 2011 *Time* included *Animal Liberation* on its "All-TIME" list of the one hundred best nonfiction books published in English since the magazine began, in 1923. Singer has written, coauthored, edited, or coedited more than forty books, including *Practical Ethics*, *The Expanding Circle*, *How Are We to Live?*, *Rethinking Life and Death*, *The Ethics of What We Eat* (with Jim Mason), *The Life You Can Save*, *The Point of View of the Universe* (with Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek), and, most recently, *The Most Good You Can Do*. His works have appeared in more than twenty-five languages.

Peter Singer was born in Melbourne, Australia, in 1946, and educated at the University of Melbourne and the University of Oxford. After teaching in England, the United States, and Australia, he has, since 1999, been Ira W. DeCamp Professor of Bioethics in the University Center for Human Values at Princeton University. Since 2005 he has combined that position with the position of Laureate Professor at the University of Melbourne, in the School of Historical and Philosophical Studies. He is married, with three daughters and four grandchildren. His recreations include hiking and surfing. In 2012 he was made a Companion of the Order of Australia, the nation's highest civic honor.

INTRODUCTION

My topic is the startling change in moral philosophy that has taken place since I came to Oxford as a graduate student in 1969. The story is one in which Oxford philosophy has played a particularly important role, so it seems an appropriate topic for a Tanner Lecture given in Oxford.

In 1972, when I was a Radcliffe Lecturer at University College, Oxford, I published a short article titled "Moral Experts," in which I challenged the view that, as C. D. Broad put it: "It is no part of the professional business of moral philosophers to tell people what they ought or ought not to do."¹ Why, for a time, did most of the leading moral philosophers think it a mistake to look to their discipline for guidance? Why do we see the subject so differently today?

AGAINST PRACTICAL ETHICS

In the article I quoted from C. D. Broad and also from A. J. Ayer, both of whom held what was then the dominant conception of the proper role of the moral philosopher. In this lecture I will add a third, Bertrand Russell. I begin with Ayer, because he is the clearest example of the view I had in mind.

A. J. Ayer

In 1949 A. J. Ayer published an essay called "On the Analysis of Moral judgments."² It was later reprinted in his widely read book *Philosophical Essays*. Ayer was, at the time, Grote Professor in Philosophy at University College, London. Earlier he had published *Language, Truth and Logic*, his manifesto for logical positivism, in 1936, when he was only twenty-six, and a lecturer in philosophy at Oxford, and he was to return to Oxford as Wykeham Professor of Logic in 1959.

In "On the Analysis of Moral Judgments," Ayer restates in a somewhat more sophisticated form the view of what it is to make a moral judgment that he first presented in *Language, Truth and Logic*—namely, that such judgments do not state propositions, but express our attitudes, and so cannot be true or false. In explaining the implications of this theory, he makes some firm statements about the scope of moral philosophy:

I am not saying that morals are trivial or unimportant, or that people ought not to bother with them. For this would itself be a judgement

of value, which I have not made and do not wish to make. And even if I did wish to make it it would have no logical connection with my theory. For the theory is entirely on the level of analysis; it is an attempt to show what people are doing when they make moral judgements; it is not a set of suggestions as to what moral judgements they are to make. And this is true of all moral philosophy, as I understand it. All moral theories, intuitionist, naturalistic, objectivist, emotive, and the rest, in so far as they are philosophical theories, are neutral as regards actual conduct. To speak technically, they belong to the field of meta-ethics, not ethics proper. That is why it is silly, as well as presumptuous, for any one type of philosopher to pose as the champion of virtue. And it is also one reason why many people find moral philosophy an unsatisfying subject. For they mistakenly look to the moral philosopher for guidance.

It is indeed to be expected that a moral philosopher, even in my sense of the term, will have his moral standards and that he will sometimes make moral judgements; but these moral judgements cannot be a logical consequence of his philosophy. To analyse moral judgements is not itself to moralize.³

In saying this, Ayer is dismissing a tradition of moral philosophy that goes back to Socrates who, at least as he is portrayed in Plato's dialogues, challenged Athenians to examine their lives. Presumably, by unsettling accepted views, Socrates would have been influencing his interlocutors' ideas about how they ought to live. Other moral philosophers who offered guidance about how to live and what to do included Aristotle, the Epicureans and Stoics, Christian scholastics like Thomas Aquinas, and later Western philosophers such as Hume and Kant, the utilitarians Bentham, Mill, and Sidgwick, and the intuitionist W. D. Ross. All of them thought that moral philosophy has practical implications. Ayer's rejection of this conception of the subject is, however, consistent with the radical view of philosophy that he had put forward in *Language, Truth and Logic*, which maintained that statements for which there is no possible form of verification are meaningless. This included statements about the existence of God, and moral judgments. Ayer was therefore quite deliberately turning his back on the history of philosophy, and setting out a new, and much more limited, program for what philosophers, including moral philosophers, should do.

C. D. Broad

Whatever we think of Ayer's position—and it will not surprise you to learn that I do not think much of it—it at least has the merit of being straightforward and consistent with his overall views. The other philosopher I quoted in “Moral Experts” is C. D. Broad, and his case is more puzzling.

This is the quote I originally used from Broad:

It is no part of the professional business of moral philosophers to tell people what they ought or ought not to do. . . . Moral philosophers, as such, have no special information not available to the general public, about what is right and what is wrong; nor have they any call to undertake those hortatory functions which are so adequately performed by clergymen, politicians, leader-writers.⁴

When I quoted this, in 1972, I took it at face value, including the reference to “hortatory functions which are so adequately performed by clergymen, politicians, leader-writers.” Now that I know more about Broad, it seems to me that he must have meant this ironically. He was a homosexual who in 1958 joined others in signing a letter to *The Times* supporting the repeal of the law that made homosexual acts illegal. Clergymen, at the time, were not generally supportive of such reforms. Although the article from which I quoted was written eighteen years earlier, it seems unlikely that Broad would have then thought that clergymen, along with politicians, were performing their hortatory functions “so adequately.”

A second puzzling aspect about the quote is that it is from an essay titled “Conscience and Conscientious Action,” which was first published in wartime, in 1940. The opening sentence, which immediately precedes the passage I quoted, indicates its topic: “At the present time tribunals, appointed under an Act of Parliament, are engaged all over England in dealing with claims to exemption from military service based on the ground of ‘conscientious objection’ to taking part directly or indirectly in warlike activities.” So this looks very much like a contribution to practical ethics! Broad's argument is that “for anyone to decide rationally as to whether another person's action is conscientious or not” is an “almost impossible” task, and that therefore the tribunals set up to consider claims to exemption based on conscientious objection “have been given a task which is, from the nature of the case, incapable of being satisfactorily

performed.” Nor does Broad hesitate to draw the conclusion that this is, “a strong ground against allowing exemption from military service on grounds of conscience and against setting up Tribunals at all,” although he does acknowledge that there could be other reasons that point in the opposite direction. Perhaps he has in mind public policy considerations such as reducing the opposition to compulsory military service, or the cost of imprisoning people who refuse to serve. But in any case, Broad clearly comes very close to doing what he says it is not the professional business of philosophers to do—namely, telling people (including those in government) what they ought or ought not to do.

A clue to resolving the seeming contradiction between the passage I quoted in my *Analysis* article (in which Broad says it is no part of the professional business of philosophers to tell people what to do), and the fact that the article in which it appears does tell people what to do, lies in the following sentences, which immediately follow the passage I quoted. Broad writes:

But it is the function of a moral philosopher to reflect on the moral concepts and beliefs which he or others have; to try to analyse them and draw distinctions and clear up confusions in connection with them; and to see how they are interrelated and whether they can be arranged in a coherent system. Now there can be no doubt that the popular notions of ‘conscience’ and ‘conscientious action’ are extremely vague and confused. So I think that, by devoting this paper to an attempt to elucidate them, I may succeed in being topical without being impertinent.

What Broad here describes is in fact the basis for a great deal of what goes on in practical ethics. The reference to clearing up confusions in our moral concepts and beliefs resembles at least part of what I claimed, in “Moral Experts,” was the advantage that moral philosophers would have over people in assessing what we ought to do. As I put it then, the moral philosopher’s

specific experience in moral philosophy gives him [or her] an understanding of moral concepts and of the logic of moral argument. The possibility of serious confusion arising if one engages in moral argument without a clear understanding of the concepts employed has been sufficiently emphasised in recent moral philosophy and does not

need to be demonstrated here. Clarity is not an end in itself, but it is an aid to sound argument, and the need for clarity is something which moral philosophers have recognised.⁵

Beyond that, however, Broad says something more far-reaching when he recognizes that it is the function of a moral philosopher to see how “moral concepts and beliefs . . . are interrelated and whether they can be arranged in a coherent system.” Broad could hardly deny that this is properly the function of a moral philosopher, because it is at least part of what Henry Sidgwick sets out to do in *The Methods of Ethics*, a book that Broad had earlier described as “the best treatise on moral theory that has ever been written.”⁶ This activity is not normatively neutral. In Sidgwick’s hands, in Book 3 of *The Methods*, it leads to the rejection of the form of intuitionism he refers to as “common sense morality” and the suggestion that it needs to be supplemented and underpinned by utilitarianism.

A good deal of my own work in practical ethics could be seen as arguing that our moral concepts and beliefs are *not* coherent, and therefore should be changed. To give some examples:

1. The traditional ethical doctrine of the sanctity of human life, as held by, for instance, the Roman Catholic Church, insists that all human life is of equal worth, irrespective of its quality. Yet it also permits the withdrawal of life support, such as a respirator, from patients who have irreversibly lost consciousness. Although various justifications are given for this permission, such as that the provision of life support in these circumstances is an “extraordinary” rather than an “ordinary” means of treatment, or that it imposes a “disproportionate” burden on the patient, these justifications themselves can be shown, when scrutinized, to rest on a quality of life judgment of the kind that the doctrine of the sanctity of life rejects.⁷
2. Most of us believe that it would be seriously wrong to fail to rescue a small child in danger of drowning in a shallow pond, even when rescuing the child would mean that one has to replace a very expensive pair of shoes. Yet most of us do not condemn a failure to aid children in developing countries, even though we can save their lives for a comparable cost.⁸ These beliefs at least appear to be at odds. In several works, I explore some ways of making them coherent, but argue that they do not succeed.⁹
3. We reject the view that, in our dealings with other human beings, we may give extra weight to the interests of those who are members of our own race

or sex, merely because they are of our race or sex. Yet we accept that we should give extra weight to the interests of those who are members of our own species. Although we sometimes disguise the nakedness of such speciesism by referring to characteristics, such as rationality, or self-awareness, or autonomy, that are typically manifested by members of our species and not, or not to the same degree, by members of other species, the fact that we continue to regard even members of our species who do not, and never will, have these characteristics as having a higher moral status than any nonhuman animal suggests that this is not the real basis of our views. There is, therefore, a lack of coherence in our opposition to racism and sexism, and our acceptance of speciesism.¹⁰

If one argues that an opposing position has this kind of incoherence, one is offering a person who holds the position a choice. In each of these examples, it would be possible for someone to avoid the conclusion for which I am arguing by dropping one of the premises: by saying, in the first example, “it is wrong to withdraw a respirator when one knows that will result in death, even if the patient has no prospect of recovering or again having an acceptable quality of life,” and in the second example, “it is not wrong to leave the child to drown in the shallow pond,” and in the third example, unpalatable as it may be, by saying that racism and sexism are not wrong.

Thus a more careful reading of Broad than I gave in “Moral Experts” suggests that his conception of the function of a moral philosopher allows considerable scope for practical ethics, and that he himself was engaged in practical ethics in the article from which I quoted. It therefore looks very much as if my younger self seriously misrepresented Broad; but in fact there is other evidence that, though quite unknown to me in 1972, supports the view that he thought moral philosophers have very little to contribute to practical issues. The first comes from *Five Types of Ethical Theory*, written a decade before the article from which I quoted, Broad wrote: “We can no more learn to act rightly by appealing to the ethical theory of right action than we can play golf well by appealing to the mathematical theory of the flight of the golf ball. The interest of ethics is thus almost wholly theoretical.”¹¹ The second piece of evidence arose after Eugene Freeman invited Broad to contribute to a festschrift for Paul Arthur Schilpp, the theme of which was “Philosophy and the Public Good.” The volume was to have a particular focus on the issue of nuclear weapons. Broad replied: “I find myself with nothing of the slightest interest or

importance to contribute” and expressed the view that this was not merely a result of his own inability, but that it was unlikely that philosophy has anything to contribute on the nuclear threat.¹²

It appears therefore that although Broad recognized that moral philosophers have the tools to contribute to some practical ethical questions, he believed that the occasions on which these contributions are likely to be useful are going to be extremely limited. There was, one might feel, considerable, and I would argue, excessive, modesty about venturing far beyond the academic world and one’s area of expertise. He seems to have felt that this would be, to use his word, “impertinent.”

In contrast to Broad, the next philosopher I will discuss was not at all modest about writing for a broad public, nor at all constrained about going beyond his professional expertise.

Bertrand Russell

Bertrand Russell was the best-known British philosopher of the twentieth century, and at the same time the author of a large number of books and essays on practical ethical issues, from social justice to sexual morality, and from happiness to nuclear disarmament. How then can he be included among philosophers who think that practical ethics is not philosophy? The answer is that when Russell was writing on what we might now think of as practical ethics, he did not regard what he was doing as philosophy.

Russell’s work in ethics is the subject of Charles Pigden’s fine contribution to *The Cambridge Companion to Bertrand Russell*, and in what follows I draw on this work.¹³ As Pigden points out, Russell himself contributed to a narrow view of what philosophy is, writing: “The only matter concerned with ethics that I can regard as properly belonging to philosophy is the argument that ethical propositions should be expressed in the optative mood, not the indicative.”¹⁴ The issue that Russell is referring to is one in what we now call metaethics, and refers to whether we should understand statements like “X is good” as making a statement about X that can be true or false, or as an expression of a wish or hope that makes it another way of saying something like “Would that everyone desire X!” So Russell’s view is similar to that of A. J. Ayer and the emotivist account of ethics later defended by C. L. Stevenson. From 1913 onward, Russell held that normative ethical judgments are not the kind of utterance that can be true or false, and since he thought of philosophy as an inquiry into truth, this, Pigden suggests, explains why he thought his

writings on issues in normative and applied ethics were not part of philosophy.

This view appears to have affected not only the way in which Russell regarded his own writings on ethical issues but also the way in which he went about that writing. Consider this passage: “Persuasion in ethical matters is necessarily different from persuasion in scientific matters. According to me, the person who judges that A is good is wishing other persons to feel certain desires. He will therefore . . . try to rouse those desires in other people. . . . This is the purpose of preaching and it was my purpose in the books in which I have expressed ethical opinions.”¹⁵

Elsewhere, in defending himself against a lack of precision in his writing, Russell refers to his *Principles of Social Reconstruction* and “to some extent my other popular books” as “not intended as a contribution to learning” but rather having “an entirely practical purpose.”¹⁶

Russell is therefore distinguishing “preaching” from philosophy, and putting practical ethics—indeed, all normative ethics—in the former category. There is one qualification to be made here: work that takes an end as given, and then shows that a particular practice does or does not conduce to that end, is scientific, and it is possible to formulate rational arguments about how best to achieve the given end. For example, if we take, as Bentham did, the maximization of utility as the sole end, we may write a scientific work inquiring whether capital punishment does or does not conduce to this end. But this work would then not be normative either, and would only guide those who accept that utility is the end. This is, therefore, not an exception to Russell’s rule that normative ethics is more akin to preaching than to philosophy—or at least, Russell did not think that it was.

We can, I believe, see the effects of this in some of Russell’s own writings, especially about nuclear disarmament. It is the plain duty of everyone, he says, to make known two key facts: that nuclear war is “not improbable” and that it would cause the death of all, or almost all, human beings. Given this, a philosopher or other person of “any academic capacity” must, after studying the probable effects of nuclear war, “devote himself, by whatever means are open to him, to persuading other people to agree with him as to these effects and to joining him in whatever protest shows the most chance of success.”¹⁷

What view of normative ethics or applied ethics is Russell displaying here? Note that again the philosopher is not distinguished from others, and the persuasion should be by whatever means are open to him. Here

Russell really is assimilating practical ethics to preaching and reserving the term “philosophy” for something that is clearly not preaching.

Broad and Russell *could* have said that when they were doing practical ethics, what they were doing was part of their professional work as philosophers. It is interesting that they nevertheless chose not to do so. As I have said, some kind of discomfort about venturing into the public eye seems to have been a factor for Broad, and for Russell, given his attitude to religion, perhaps avoiding any suspicion that philosophy is involved in “preaching” could have been a significant factor in denying that practical ethics is part of philosophy. But practical ethics is not the same as preaching, and it is not just a matter of arousing desires, or emotions, in readers. Practical ethics is about producing and assessing arguments for ethical views. It is subject to academic standards. When we grade student essays, we do not grade them on the basis of our agreement or disagreement with the conclusions the student reaches, but on the quite distinct criterion of the quality of the argument presented. Academics seek to publish in peer-reviewed journals, or in books published by respected academic presses that also use reviewers, or if they publish in more popular places, they seek to win the regard of their colleagues, who can tell an emotional appeal from a well-reasoned one. So it is not all that difficult to separate practical ethics from preaching, and it is surprising that Russell himself makes such a crude assimilation. He should have been aware of the work of his many philosophical predecessors who did practical ethics, and should have recognized that, whether he agreed with it or not, it was not the same as preaching. Indeed, Charles Pigden argues that Russell, in at least some of his work—for example, his Hobbesian argument for world government—makes philosophical arguments and therefore is doing philosophy. Pigden writes of Russell: “When he wrote on these topics he often wrote as a moral philosopher and not—as he sometimes pretended—an unphilosophical moralist.”¹⁸

WHAT CHANGED AND WHY?

The rise of student activism in the 1960s—focused initially, in the United States, on the civil rights movement in the South, but subsequently dramatically increased by opposition to the war in Vietnam, and then also by the emerging environmental and feminist movements—led to a demand that university courses should be relevant to the major issues of the day. For some disciplines this was easy. Historians of Southeast Asia had a prominent role to play in teach-ins about the Vietnam war, as did experts

on international relations. But what about the rights and wrongs of going to war? Or of disobeying the law requiring young men to register for the draft? Philosophy professors recalled the long tradition of just war theory, and the arguments of social contract theorists like Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau for a qualified obligation to obey the law. Encouraged by their students—and by departmental chairs seeking larger enrollments to justify maintaining or expanding their academic staff—teachers of philosophy became more willing to venture out beyond the limits of philosophy prescribed by Ayer, Broad, and Russell.

As an undergraduate and master of arts student at the University of Melbourne, I had been involved in the antiwar and anticonscription movement before I came to Oxford as a graduate student in 1969. In 1971, I attended a conference held in London that aimed toward founding an organization called Radical Philosophy. The idea was to change academic philosophy—which most of those attending saw as essentially conservative, elitist, and dominated by Oxford—into something more relevant to people outside academic life, and more in tune with the values of those who saw a need for social change. I shared these aims, and initially supported the organization. To my disappointment, however, the organization came to be dominated by those who thought that what is truly radical is Marxist philosophy, and not the analytical Marxist tradition developed by philosophers like Gerald Cohen, but the interpretations propounded by French writers like Louis Althusser.¹⁹ Whatever one thinks of Marx, to discuss Marxism in the style of Althusser is to ensure that one's work is completely incomprehensible to everyone except the few who enjoy struggling with obscure, jargon-ridden texts. What would really be radical, I thought, would be to use the tools of analytical philosophy in a way that would enhance discussions of important issues outside academia.

In seeking to do philosophical work about practical ethical issues, I was, notwithstanding the conservative reputation of Oxford philosophy, pushing on an open door. This was in part a generational change—younger philosophers like Derek Parfit and Jonathan Glover were already working on what we now consider to be practical ethics. Glover was doing preliminary work for *Causing Death and Saving Lives*, though this seminal book was to be published only in 1977, and Parfit was raising questions about whether it would be better to have a small population of extremely happy people, or a much larger population of people who were,

on average, less happy, but could nevertheless be seen as having, because of their numbers, a greater total amount of happiness—a surprisingly difficult issue to resolve that, despite its abstract nature, has important practical implications.²⁰

It was not, however, only members of the new generation of Oxford moral philosophers who were interested in practical ethics. R. M. Hare had long thought that the point of doing moral philosophy is to help us reach better decisions on practical issues. In his second book, *Freedom and Reason*, published in 1963, Hare gave examples of moral reasoning that showed that he believed that his analysis of the logic of our use of words like “ought” had practical implications.²¹ His 1966 lecture “Peace” was another early foray into practical ethics, although it was little-known until it was reprinted in one of the first anthologies in practical ethics, James Rachels’s *Moral Problems*.²² Later Hare wrote on abortion and other issues in bioethics, and in one article he explored what is wrong with slavery—a topic that was not remote for him because, as he used to say, he had actually been a slave.²³

Another important source of encouragement of practical ethics came from the founding of *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, which rapidly set the standard for the discipline, publishing, in its first two volumes influential articles such as Judith Jarvis Thomson’s “In Defense of Abortion,” my own “Famine, Affluence and Morality,” and Michael Tooley’s “Abortion and Infanticide.”²⁴ Each of these articles used reason and argument to make new points in a way that was distinct from previous discussions of these issues.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF PRACTICAL ETHICS

To illustrate the significance of this new development in philosophy, I will use two fields that I know well because I have contributed to their development.

The Ethics of Our Treatment of Animals

One way of gauging the extent to which the ethics of how we treat animals has become more prominent in philosophy is to look at Charles Magel’s comprehensive bibliography of writings on the moral status of animals. Magel found only 94 works on that subject in the first 1,970 years of the Christian era, but 240 works in the next 18 years, up to the date when he completed his work.²⁵ The tally must now be in the thousands.

Leading works on animals and ethics have been translated into, and discussed in, most of the world's major languages, including Japanese, Chinese, and Korean. For those who think, as Hegel did, that the Owl of Minerva takes wing at dusk and philosophy follows trends rather than instigating them, it is worth noting that, at least in this instance, the philosophical arguments came first and the animal movement followed. As James Jasper and Dorothy Nelkin observed in *The Animal Rights Crusade: The Growth of a Moral Protest*: "Philosophers served as midwives of the animal rights movement in the late 1970s."²⁶ Several leaders of the animal movement have attributed their initial awareness of the issue to reading my own book, *Animal Liberation*. These include Henry Spira, who was the first animal campaigner to succeed in stopping a series of experiments on animals, and was also responsible for causing major corporations like Revlon and Avon to cease testing their products on animals, and Ingrid Newkirk, the founder of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, the largest radical animal rights organization in the world.²⁷ Forty years after the publication of *Animal Liberation*, people are still coming up to me and saying that they became vegetarians or vegans after reading the book (in some cases, they tell me that they have been lifelong vegetarians or vegans because their parents read the book). It is, of course, more difficult to say how much the book has contributed to changing attitudes to animals, or to the significant, though regrettably far from sufficient, improvements in animal welfare that have occurred in many different jurisdictions since it was published. These include European Union regulations that have eliminated the most extreme forms of confinement for veal calves, pigs, and hens in factory farms and so have improved the living conditions of hundreds of millions of farm animals, and similar reforms in California.

We can find, I believe, some confirmation of the importance of clarity and rigor in argument in the fact that it is practical ethics in what we can still, for want of a better term, refer to as the analytic tradition that has influenced people in favor of radical changes in their attitudes to animals, and not the continental philosophical tradition, which in this area, at least, has failed to live up to its own standards of social critique. There is, as far as I am aware, no evidence that any of the impetus for changing our practices regarding animals came from writers in the philosophical traditions of twentieth-century continental Europe, that is, from thinkers such as Heidegger, Foucault, Levinas, Derrida, Badiou, or Deleuze, nor from those strongly influenced by these writers.

Obligations of the Affluent to the Poor

“Famine, Affluence and Morality,” which I published in 1972, did not have the immediate practical influence of *Animal Liberation*. It was published in an academic journal, not in a book by a trade publisher, and so it reached a larger audience only when it began to be reprinted in anthologies used in teaching ethics courses. Even then, though, it was often taught as if it raised an intellectual, rather than a moral, challenge. Joshua Greene, a professor of psychology at Harvard and the author of *Moral Tribes*, introduced a talk I gave at that university in 2015 by saying that when he was an undergraduate at Harvard, he had taken an ethics course in which students were told to read “Famine, Affluence and Morality,” but the professor teaching the course said, in effect, “Well clearly this can’t be right, but it’s interesting to figure out where he goes wrong.”²⁸ Until recently that was the prevailing response to my views about the obligations of the affluent to the poor; but in the past decade, things have changed. There is an emerging new movement, known as effective altruism, which is taking seriously the idea that we ought to be doing the most good we can, and that one plausible candidate for doing the most good is to give a lot more to help people in extreme poverty. This movement emphasizes the importance of using evidence and reason to determine the most effective ways to improve the world. Although some of this can be seen as science, rather than ethics—assessing the outcomes of specific anti-poverty programs is a scientific enterprise—the idea of “improving the world” or “doing the most good you can” implies that we know what is an improvement, and what is not, and are able to compare different possible improvements. The effective altruism movement has therefore spawned a good deal of philosophical discussion, much of it taking place online.²⁹

Oxford University has been at the center of the growth of effective altruism. When I wrote “Famine, Affluence and Morality,” I was a Radcliffe Lecturer there. More than thirty years later, Toby Ord was a graduate student in philosophy at Oxford when he decided to calculate how much good he could do if he were to become an academic and, for the rest of his career, live on something like his graduate studentship, donating whatever else he earned to a charity. He did the sums and calculated that the money he would be able to donate would, over his lifetime, be sufficient to prevent eighty thousand people in developing countries from becoming blind. He was astonished that one person could, without a particularly high income, do so much good. He thought that if other people knew this, they might be prepared to donate a portion of their

income to effective charities, so with assistance from Will MacAskill, another Oxford graduate student in philosophy, he founded Giving What We Can in 2009. MacAskill also set up another organization, 80,000 hours, which provides advice to those who are thinking about choosing an ethical career. The term “effective altruism” was coined when a group of effective altruists, many of them from Oxford, decided that the movement needed a name, and chose it from a list of possibilities. The Centre for Effective Altruism is also now based in Oxford. Many other past and present Oxford philosophers have links to effective altruism.³⁰

Effective altruism is a movement based on a set of values that tend to be consequentialist, but not strictly so. Effective altruists take a universalist and timeless perspective. They are concerned about improving the lives of people and other sentient beings, wherever they are, and whenever they exist. They discount the future only for uncertainty, not merely because future goods are yet to come. Many effective altruists think about principles like justice, fairness, and equality in a consequentialist way—that is, they regard them as having great instrumental value, because a society that is just, fair, and not too unequal is likely to have higher welfare than one that does not instantiate these principles; but they do not see such principles as having intrinsic or overriding value.

Effective altruists are concerned with outcomes, not with moral merit. They do not spend much time worrying about whether someone is acting in a purely altruistic way, rather than because he or she is interested in having a good reputation, or living a better life. In fact, effective altruists promote their way of life as one that is more rewarding—because more fulfilling and meaningful—than one that is less altruistic. That may seem paradoxical, but if the result is more help for those in need, that is what really matters.

Effective altruists are spread across a wide spectrum with regard to what they do for others. Some of them provide remarkable proof of the extent to which ethical argument can alter people’s lives. Ian Ross, for example, has been a management consultant and is now involved in a video game startup. In 2014 he earned \$400,000, and kept only \$20,000 for himself, donating 95 percent of his income. Some effective altruists deliberately choose a career that will enable them to give more. Matt Wage, a Princeton philosophy major who had thought of going on to an academic career, turned down Oxford University’s offer of a place in its graduate program, and instead went to Wall Street, where for the past three years, he has been earning enough to donate a six-figure sum to

effective charities. He believes that this enables him to do more good than he would have been likely to do as an academic.³¹

In January 2013, I learned of a particularly dramatic example of how philosophy can lead people to do something they would not otherwise have done. I received an e-mail that began as follows:

In *The Life You Can Save*, you remark that as far as you know no student of yours has ever actually donated a kidney. Last Tuesday, I bit the utilitarian bullet: I anonymously donated my right kidney to whoever could use it the most. By doing so, I started a “kidney chain” that allowed a total of four people to receive kidneys. The idea of donating a kidney popped into my head in an Ethics class.

The writer was Chris Croy, a student at St. Louis Community College, in Meramec, Missouri. He went on to tell me that although he had never taken a class with me, my writings on humans’ moral obligations to others had played a role in his decision to donate his kidney. After reading my article “Famine, Affluence and Morality,” Croy continued, the class had considered a counterargument by John Arthur that contained the following passage:

One obvious means by which you could aid others is with your body. Many of your extra organs (eye, kidney) could be given to another with the result that there is more good than if you kept both. You wouldn’t see as well or live as long, perhaps, but that is not of comparable significance to the benefit others would receive. Yet surely the fact that it is your eye and you need it is not insignificant. Perhaps there could be cases where one is obligated to sacrifice one’s health or sight, but what seems clear is that this is not true in every case where (slightly) more good would come of your doing so.

Another student in the class said that we need both of our kidneys to live, but Chris knew that that was wrong and replied that donating a kidney has little to no effect on one’s health and thus is actually an insignificant sacrifice. Then he spent the rest of the class thinking about what he had said. He read everything he could find about kidney donation. When his friend Chelsea told him that she was thinking of donating a kidney, the idea suddenly did not seem so crazy. He decided to do it, and after building up his courage called the hospital. Chelsea did the same, but a scan

showed that she had polycystic kidney disease, so her offer to donate was rejected. Chris went ahead on his own. More than a year after the donation, Chris was doing fine. One morning he got a call from an unfamiliar number, and a voice said, "Hello, it's your kidney calling." The kidney was now working for a forty-three-year-old schoolteacher at a school that mostly serves poor children. Chris felt good about that.³²

Effective altruism raises many interesting philosophical questions, and challenges some views that philosophers have defended. Bernard Williams argued, against Henry Sidgwick and utilitarians more broadly, that humans are not the kind of beings who can take a universal point of view: "There is simply no conceivable exercise that consists in stepping completely outside myself and from that point of view evaluating *in toto* the dispositions, projects and affections that constitute the substance of my own life."³³ Some effective altruists come very close to being living refutations of that claim. Williams also argued, in his famous example of George and the chemical weapons factory, that there is something wrong with taking a job that goes against your values, even if by doing so you will bring about better consequences than any alternative open to you. This is, Williams seems to have thought, to give up the projects that are central to all our lives, and making yourself a hostage to circumstances. I am not going to compare working on Wall Street with building chemical weapons, but the many people who have successfully chosen a career with higher financial returns in order to give more seems to refute this aspect of Williams's thought too. Doing the most good you can is itself a project that one can, and arguably should, adopt and take to be overriding of other projects.³⁴

PRACTICAL ETHICS AND THE VALUE OF PHILOSOPHY

In 2013 a report from Harvard University set alarm bells ringing because it reported that, for the United States as a whole from 1966 to 2010, the proportion of students completing bachelor's degrees in the humanities fell from 14 percent to 7 percent. Even elite universities like Harvard itself have experienced a similar decline. Moreover, the decline seems to have gotten steeper in recent years. There is talk of a crisis in the humanities.³⁵

Nicholas Kristof, in one of his *New York Times* columns, raised the question "What use could the humanities be in a digital age?" Skeptics about the value of the humanities, he wrote, "may see philosophy as the most irrelevant and self-indulgent of the humanities." He then responded

to these skeptics by referring to three philosophers who have shaped the way he understands the world: Isaiah Berlin, John Rawls, and myself. “These three philosophers,” Kristof wrote, “influence the way I think about politics, immigration, inequality; they even affect what I eat,” and he concluded that “To adapt to a changing world, we need new software for our cellphones; we also need new ideas.”³⁶ It hardly needs to be said that all three of the philosophers Kristof names wrote on substantive normative issues in ethics or political philosophy. Kristof is saying, in other words, that philosophy has been redeemed from irrelevance and self-indulgence by precisely the modes of thought that go beyond philosophy, as Ayer, Broad, and Russell sought to define it.

It is, of course, possible to defend the value of areas of philosophy that Kristof does not mention. Yet it is curious that philosophers, who should be the first to question the assumptions on which their discipline rests, rarely mount such defenses of what they are doing. Effective altruism therefore poses a challenging question to everyone thinking of pursuing a career in philosophy: will you, by making that career choice, be doing the most good you can? The prospects of giving this question an affirmative answer seem brighter if you are planning to work on normative questions, and in that way may help others to do more good (although even then, for some people there may be better options, as Matt Wage decided there were for him). If, however, you are not intending to work in an area of philosophy that will make a difference, either directly or indirectly, to how people live, the question as to whether you should choose a philosophical career becomes more acute. Why not choose a different career that will do more good? To answer that question—or a broader question about the value of pursuing other areas of the humanities or the arts—is, however, a much larger topic than I can address here.

NOTES

1. Peter Singer, “Moral Experts,” *Analysis* 32 (1972): 115–17. The quote is from C. D. Broad, “Conscience and Conscientious Action,” *Philosophy* 15 (1940): 115–30, here 115. Reprinted in C. D. Broad, *Ethics and the History of Philosophy* (New York: Humanities Press, 1952).
2. A. J. Ayer, “On the Analysis of Moral Judgments,” *Horizon* 20 (1949): 171–84, reprinted in A. J. Ayer, *Philosophical Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1954), 231–49.
3. Ayer *Philosophical Essays*, 244–46.
4. Broad, “Conscience and Conscientious Action,” 115.
5. Singer, “Moral Experts,” 117.

6. C. D. Broad, *Five Types of Ethical Theory* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench and Trubner, 1930), 143.
7. See Helga Kuhse and Peter Singer, *Should the Baby Live?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985); Peter Singer, *Rethinking Life and Death* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).
8. When I first made this claim, the available information on the cost of saving a life by donating to an aid organization indicated that it was comparable with the cost of an expensive pair of shoes. Subsequently, much more thorough investigation of the cost of saving a life by donating to an effective aid organization put the figure at around \$3,000. Although it is possible to find shoes priced at \$3,000, few of us would pay that much for a pair of shoes. On the other hand, Peter Unger's example of Bob and the Bugatti suggests that most people believe it would be wrong to fail to save a life even if the cost to oneself were *much* more than \$3,000. See Unger, *Living High and Letting Die* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 136–39.
9. See, for example, Peter Singer, "Famine, Affluence and Morality," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1 (1972): 229–43; *The Life You Can Save* (New York: Random House, 2009).
10. See especially Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper, 2009).
11. Broad, *Five Types of Ethical Theory*, 285. I owe this quote to Dale Jamieson, "Constructing Practical Ethics," in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Ethics*, edited by Roger Crisp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 845.
12. C. D. Broad to Eugene Freeman, March 13, 1964, quoted in Eugene Freeman, ed., *The Abdication of Philosophy* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1976), 2–3.
13. Charles Pigden, "Bertrand Russell: Moral Philosopher or Unphilosophical Moralism?" in *The Cambridge Companion to Bertrand Russell*, edited by Nicholas Griffin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 475–506; for a fuller account of Russell's work in moral philosophy, see Pigden's "Russell's Moral Philosophy," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta (Winter 2014 ed.), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2014/entries/russell-moral>.
14. Bertrand Russell, "Reply to Criticisms," in *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell*, vol. 11, edited by John Slater and Peter Köllner (London: Routledge, 1997) 47. I owe this quote to Pigden, "Bertrand Russell," 478.
15. Russell, "Reply to Criticisms," 11:47, quoted in Pigden, "Bertrand Russell," 480.
16. Russell, "Reply to Criticisms," 11:55–6, quoted by Pigden, "Bertrand Russell," 481.
17. Bertrand Russell, "The Duty of a Philosopher in This Age," in Freeman, *Abdication of Philosophy*, 17–18. Freeman indicates (on p. 22) that this paper was written in 1964, when Russell was ninety-two, though published only after his death.
18. Pigden, "Bertrand Russell," 493.
19. This trend can be seen by a perusal of the early issues of the organization's journal, *Radical Philosophy*, available at www.radicalphilosophy.com.

20. Jonathan Glover, *Causing Death and Saving Lives* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1977). A full presentation of Parfit's work did not appear until his *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).
21. R. M. Hare, *Freedom and Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963).
22. R. M. Hare, "Peace," a lecture given at the Australian National University, Canberra, 1966 and privately printed. Reprinted in James Rachels, ed., *Moral Problems* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), 323–41, and in R. M. Hare, *Applications of Moral Philosophy* (London: Macmillan, 1972), 71–89.
23. R. M. Hare, "What's Wrong with Slavery?" *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 8 (1979): 103–21. Hare had been a slave during World War II, when he was, as a prisoner of the Japanese, forced to work on building the notorious Burma Railway.
24. Judith Jarvis Thomson, "A Defense of Abortion," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1 (1971): 47–66; Peter Singer, "Famine, Affluence and Morality," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1 (1972): 229–43; Michael Tooley, "Abortion and Infanticide," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 2 (1972): 37–65.
25. Charles Magel, *Keyguide to Information Sources in Animal Rights* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1989).
26. James Jasper and Dorothy Nelkin, *The Animal Rights Crusade: The Growth of a Moral Protest* (New York: Free Press, 1992), 90.
27. On Spira, see Peter Singer, *Ethics into Action: Henry Spira and the Animal Rights Movement* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998). For Newkirk, see Ingrid Newkirk, "What is Animal Liberation? Philosopher Peter Singer's Ground-breaking Work Turns 40," <http://www.peta.org/about-peta/learn-about-peta/ingrid-newkirk/animal-liberation/>.
28. Joshua Greene, introducing my lecture, "The Most Good You Can Do: How Effective Altruism Is Changing Ideas About Living Ethically," Harvard University, April 12, 2015. Greene's remarks can be heard at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MAXTmLsIx7g>, around eighteen minutes after the beginning of the video.
29. See Peter Singer, *The Most Good You Can Do* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015); and Will MacAskill, *Doing Good Better* (New York: Gotham, 2015). Web sites include www.effectivealtruism.org; www.thelifeyoucansave.org; www.givingwhatwecan.org; and www.8000hours.org; and www.givewell.org.
30. An incomplete list includes, in alphabetical order, Nick Beckstead, Nick Bostrom, Iason Gabriel, Michelle Hutchinson, Jeff McMahan, Andreas Mogensen, Derek Parfit, Theron Pummer, Janet Radcliffe Richards, and myself.
31. E-mails from Ian Ross to me, 2013–14, and e-mails and conversations between Matt Wage and me, 2013–15.
32. E-mails from Chris Croy to me, 2013–14.
33. Bernard Williams, "The Point of View of the Universe: Sidgwick and the Ambitions of Ethics," *Cambridge Review*, May 7, 1982, 191; reprinted in Bernard Williams, *The Sense of the Past: Essays in the History of Philosophy*, edited by Myles Burnyeat (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

34. Passages in this section are based on my book *The Most Good You Can Do*.
35. *The Teaching of the Arts and Humanities at Harvard College: Mapping the Future*, a report of a Working Group chaired by James Simpson and Sean Kelly, Harvard University, 2013, <http://harvardmagazine.com/sites/default/files/Mapping%20the%20Future%20of%20the%20Humanities.pdf>. See also “Addressing a Decline in Humanities Enrollment,” *Harvard Magazine*, June 6, 2013, <http://harvardmagazine.com/2013/06/reinvigorating-the-humanities>; and Anthony Grafton and James Grossman, “The Humanities in Dubious Battle,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 1, 2013, <http://chronicle.com/article/The-Humanities-in-Dubious/140047/>.
36. Nicholas Kristof, “Don’t Dismiss the Humanities,” *New York Times*, August 13, 2014.