

## I. THE ETHICS OF GIVING AND EFFECTIVE ALTRUISM

The ethics of giving has traditionally focused on *whether*, and *how much*, to give to charities helping people in extreme poverty.<sup>1</sup> In more recent years, the discussion has increasingly focused on *where* to give, spurred by an appreciation of the substantial differences in cost-effectiveness between charities. According to a commonly cited example, \$40,000 can be used either to help one blind person by training a seeing-eye dog in the United States or to help two thousand blind

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1. Peter Singer, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 1 (1972): 229–43; Liam Murphy, “The Demands of Beneficence,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 22 (1993): 267–92; Peter Unger, *Living High and Letting Die: Our Illusion of Innocence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); and Garrett Cullity, *The Moral Demands of Affluence* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004).

people by providing surgeries reversing the effects of trachoma in Africa.<sup>2</sup> *Effective altruists* recommend that we give large sums to charity, but by far their most central recommendation is that we give *effectively*, that is, to whatever charities would do the most good per dollar donated.<sup>3</sup> In this article, I will assume that it is not wrong not to give *bigger*, but will explore to what extent it may well nonetheless be wrong not to give *better*.

The main claim I will argue for here is that *in many cases* it would be wrong of you to give a sum of money to charities that do less good than others you could have given to instead, even if it would not have been wrong of you not to give the money to any charity at all. I will assume that all the charities under discussion here do positive good overall, do not cause harm, do not infringe upon rights, and so on.<sup>4</sup>

What makes my main claim particularly interesting is that it is inconsistent with what appears to be a fairly common assumption in the ethics of giving, according to which *if* it is not wrong of you to keep some sum of money for yourself, *then* it is likewise not wrong of you to donate it to any particular charity you choose.<sup>5</sup> Roughly: if it is up to you *whether* to donate the money, it is also up to you *where* to donate the money. I will challenge this common assumption.

2. Toby Ord, "The Moral Imperative towards Cost-Effectiveness in Global Health," *Centre for Global Development*, 2013: [www.cgdev.org/content/publications/detail/1427016](http://www.cgdev.org/content/publications/detail/1427016).

3. Peter Singer, *The Most Good You Can Do: How Effective Altruism Is Changing Ideas about Living Ethically* (London: Yale University Press, 2015); William MacAskill, *Doing Good Better: Effective Altruism and a Radical New Way to Make a Difference* (London: Faber & Faber, 2015); Iason Gabriel, "Effective Altruism and Its Critics," *Journal of Applied Philosophy* (2016), doi:10.1111/japp.12176; and Jeff McMahan, "Philosophical Critiques of Effective Altruism," *The Philosophers' Magazine*, forthcoming.

4. For discussions about the risks of doing harm in giving to overseas aid agencies, see Leif Wenar, "Poverty Is No Pond: Challenges for the Affluent," in *Giving Well: The Ethics of Philanthropy*, ed. Patricia Illingworth, Thomas Pogge, and Leif Wenar (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 104–32; Christian Barry and Gerhard Øverland, *Responding to Global Poverty: Harm, Responsibility, and Agency* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); and my "Risky Giving," *The Philosophers' Magazine*, forthcoming.

5. I would estimate that about half the people I have raised this with have found the common assumption to be plausible (I have raised this with at least three hundred people, including philosophers and nonphilosophers).

## II. MORAL OPTIONS

I will here conceive of “good” and “bad” from an *impartial*, or agent-neutral, perspective. Suppose that in one outcome, you consume an ice cream cone, and, for some unrelated reason and unbeknownst to you, five distant people suffer intense pain and die. In a second outcome, none of these things occurs. While the first outcome may be better *for you* than the second, the first outcome seems worse than the second from an impartial perspective.<sup>6</sup> Or, as I will more simply say, the first outcome seems *worse*. I will occasionally refer to *acts* as better or worse; this is merely an economical way of referring to acts that promote better or worse outcomes. (Also, throughout the article, “good” can be replaced with “expected good,” and “outcomes” can be replaced with “prospects,” and so on, without any loss to the main argument.)

According to *consequentialism*, an act is wrong if and only if and because it promotes a worse outcome than another available act would have done. My argument against the common assumption will be *non-consequentialist* in nature. That is, while I will suppose that promoting the good is a morally relevant factor, I will suppose that it is not the only morally relevant factor. In particular, I will suppose that there are *moral options*, according to which it is at least sometimes not wrong for you to act in a way that would result in less good than if you had performed some other act instead.<sup>7</sup> It may well be best, for example, for you to give away nearly all of your income to a cost-effective charity while working tirelessly to earn still more to give. If so, then both consequentialism and “consequentialism-plus-constraints”<sup>8</sup> would imply that it would be wrong of you not to do so. But, with intuition and commonsense morality, I will suppose that it is not wrong of you not to

6. Not everyone believes there is such a thing as “better than, *period*”: see Judith Jarvis Thomson, *Normativity* (Chicago: Open Court, 2008); and Richard Arneson, “Good, Period,” *Analysis* 70(2010): 731–44 for a reply. While I believe there is, it seems to me that the main task the notion of “better than, period” is put to in this article could be performed just as well by some other notion (for example, what is preferred from the standpoint of impartial benevolence).

7. See Samuel Scheffler, *The Rejection of Consequentialism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982); and Shelly Kagan, *The Limits of Morality* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

8. According to this view, it is wrong not to promote the most good, as long as promoting the most good does not involve the violation of any deontological constraint (such as the constraint against causing harm).

make such substantial sacrifices of your own well-being; that is, you possess the moral option not to do so.

Merely to keep my discussion relatively tidy, I will be assuming that the primary agent-neutral reasons for donating to charity are rooted in promoting the good, or *benevolence*, rather than in *justice*, for example, respecting human rights or discharging duties of compensation or rectification.<sup>9</sup>

### III. OPTIONALITY ABOUT WHETHER TO HELP

So there are moral options. But what is the *basis* of the moral option not to help others, for example, by giving to charity, when doing so would be best? A very natural and plausible answer is that the basis of such a moral option is the *cost to you*, the agent. If in order to rescue a drowning child you had to sacrifice both your legs, then intuitively you would have the moral option not to help. But if the only cost to you of saving the drowning child were muddied shoes, you would lack the moral option not to help. In both scenarios, we can assume that it would be best to help. What makes it not wrong not to do what's best in the first scenario is the substantial cost to you; since the cost to you in the second scenario is very small, no such moral option is triggered, and so here it is wrong not to do what's best.

The basis of the moral option not to do what is best is plausibly somewhat more complex—a function both of the amount of good you would do if you did what is best, as well as the cost to you of doing so. Nonetheless, for convenience I will in the first instance focus just on the cost to you.

Moreover, and importantly, I will here construe “cost” very broadly to include any loss to you in terms of your well-being, desires, projects, personal concerns, special relationships, and so on.<sup>10</sup> Arguably, these

9. On justice, see Thomas Pogge, *World Poverty and Human Rights: Cosmopolitan Responsibilities and Reforms* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002); and Elizabeth Ashford, “Severe Poverty as an Unjust Emergency,” in *Philanthropy and Philosophy: Putting Theory into Practice*, ed. Paul Woodruff (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

10. If “cost” is construed broadly enough to include losses in terms of your desires, one might worry that you doing anything other than what you actually do would involve some cost to you. After all, perhaps necessarily whenever you voluntarily do A rather than B, you desire A rather than B. There are two responses to this worry. First, we could construe “desires” in a narrow enough way that leaves room for the possibility of voluntarily doing A rather than B while not desiring A rather than B. Second, we could allow that you

various sorts of cost are distinct and can come apart; for example, arguably, you can sacrifice your well-being in order to promote your projects. For present purposes, I will remain agnostic about whether this is correct. The reason I construe “cost” so broadly is to be inclusive about what the basis of the moral option not to do what is best might be. At least, everything I argue here is consistent with taking losses to you in terms of your well-being, projects, personal concerns, and so on as the basis of such a moral option. It is also consistent with the view that it is the cost to you over the course of your whole life, rather than merely the cost to you now, that serves as the basis of the moral option. The cost to you on some particular occasion might be small, but it may not be wrong of you to refuse to incur it if in the past you’ve incurred substantial costs for the sake of promoting the good. But again, this article is not about *how much* one must give to charity to avoid acting wrongly. I will not be defending any answer to the question of how big the cost to you needs to be for it to be the case that it would not be wrong for you not to give, even when giving would be best.<sup>11</sup>

There are many cases in which you can either do nothing or instead perform one of a number of helpful acts, where each of the helpful acts would do more good than doing nothing, but the cost to you of doing any of the helpful acts is high enough that it would not be wrong of you to do nothing (as with charities, I will assume that none of the helpful acts in question cause harm, infringe upon rights, and so on). In such cases, I will say that there is *optionality* about *whether* to help. In this section, I have claimed that the basis of such optionality is the cost to you.

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doing anything other than what you actually do would involve some cost to you, but deny that such costs could generate any significant moral options (also see the discussion of “bare moral freedom” below).

The notion of “cost” might be broadened further still, for example, to incorporate *difficulty* (see Brian McElwee, “What Is Demandingness?” in *The Limits of Moral Obligation*, ed. Marcel van Ackeren and Michael Kühler [New York: Routledge, forthcoming]), or to incorporate various *brute* agent-relative considerations (one might argue that the fact that my friend was killed by a drunk driver itself gives me a reason to campaign against drunk driving, independently of whether such campaigning would further my desires, personal concerns, or special relationships).

11. See note 1. In “Giving Isn’t Demanding,” in Woodruff, *Philanthropy and Philosophy*, Andreas Mogensen, William MacAskill, and Toby Ord argue that giving money to charity does not typically involve a sacrifice of as much well-being as we tend to assume it does.

## IV. OPTIONALITY ABOUT WHERE TO HELP

What about optionality about *where* to help, that is, having the moral option to perform some helpful acts over others, even when they would do less good? The *same* basis of the moral option not to help at all sometimes also serves as the basis of the moral option to perform some helpful acts over others. Suppose there are two charities: giving your \$1,000 to one would do slightly less good than giving it to the other, but the first charity represents a cause much closer to your heart, for example, fighting blindness. Arguably, it would not be wrong of you to give your \$1,000 to the first charity, even though this is not best. This is because the *cost to you* of giving to the other charity instead of this one is substantial. Thus, we should not unqualifiedly claim that while it is permissible not to give a large portion of your income to charity, it would be wrong not to allocate whatever portion you do give in whatever way would do the most good. The basis of the moral option not to give will sometimes also serve as the basis of the moral option where to give.<sup>12</sup>

Nonetheless, my main claim here is that *in many cases* it would be wrong of you to give a sum of money to charities that do less good than other charities you could give to instead, even if it would not have been wrong of you not to give the money to any charity at all. This claim is inconsistent with the common assumption noted above that if it is not wrong of you to keep some sum of money for yourself, then it is likewise not wrong of you to donate it to any particular charity you choose. Unless there is something morally special about *money*, this particular common assumption goes hand in hand with the more general

*Common Assumption:* Optionality about whether to help at all entails optionality about which particular helpful act to perform.

Therefore, arguing against Common Assumption constitutes an important initial phase of my defense of my main claim.

12. Thus, I agree with Hilary Greaves ("Cancer Care and Saving Parrots," keynote lecture given at *The Philosophical Foundations of Effective Altruism* conference at the University of St. Andrews, March 30, 2016) that it would be a mistake for effective altruists to claim that there is a sharp asymmetry between *how much* and *where* to give, according to which while one is not required to give whatever amount would be best, one is required to give to the best charities only (if one does give).

## V. OPTIONALITY WHETHER TO HELP WITHOUT OPTIONALITY WHERE TO HELP

In arguing against Common Assumption, I will appeal to a case involving some speedy runaway trains.

*Arm Donor:* There is one innocent stranger stuck on track A, and a runaway train headed straight toward her. There are one hundred innocent strangers stuck on track B, and another runaway train headed straight toward them. If you do nothing, all one hundred and one people will soon die. However, you can use your arm as a train-stopper; those tied to the tracks are far enough away that putting your arm on either track would cause the relevant train to slow down and come to a complete stop before reaching anyone in its path. That is, if you place your arm on track A, you will stop the train on that track in time and save the one, and, if you place your arm on track B, you'll stop the train on that track in time and save the hundred. You have no other means of saving any of these people. Since the two tracks are twenty feet apart, you will not be able to sacrifice more than one arm in time to save all one hundred and one. Assume that losing your arm is a large enough cost to you to make it not wrong not to incur this cost, whether that is in order to save one life or one hundred. All other things are equal.

While not wrong to do nothing, and not wrong to place your arm on track B, saving the hundred, it seems it *would* be wrong for you to place your arm on track A, saving the one.<sup>13</sup> In general, it seems wrong to fail

13. Derek Parfit ("Future Generations: Further Problems," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 11 [1982]: 113–72, at p. 131; and *On What Matters*, vol. 2 [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011], p. 225) and Shelly Kagan (*The Limits of Morality*, p. 16) make similar claims about similar cases. However, neither has addressed the range of issues and objections such claims give rise to, and neither has applied the lessons learned to the context of charitable giving (both of which I hope this article will at least *begin* to do). Moreover, their cases do not always match the structure of the case of giving to charity. For example, in Kagan's case, at an earlier time you have the choice of *whether* to incur a large cost (by running into a burning building), and if you do, then at a later time you have the choice of *where* to help (to rescue a child or a parrot, where there is no further cost to you of rescuing one over the other). But in the case of giving to charity, you have the choice of whether to incur a large cost and the choice of where to help available at the same time, that is, at a given time, you can donate nothing, or donate to charity A, or donate to charity B, or donate to charity C, or . . . and so on. Even if you take a public pledge to give 10 percent of your income to *wherever* you believe it will do the most good (as do members of the

to save more lives when this is no costlier to you, other things equal. If these intuitions are correct, then, contrary to Common Assumption, we have optionality about whether to help without optionality about where to help.

If you think it makes for a clearer or otherwise better example, you can restate the case so that the cost to you of stopping either train is substantial pain or some other kind of serious well-being setback, rather than the loss of a limb. Moreover, if you are skeptical that it is wrong not to save the greater number (even when other things are equal),<sup>14</sup> you can substitute different specific details such that stopping the train on track A promotes one unit of good whereas stopping the train on track B promotes one hundred units of good. The point I am arguing for here is not wedded to any terribly specific account of what the good consists in, or to the claim that the number of lives saved matters, and so on. But for the sake of concreteness, it often helps to work in terms of different numbers of lives saved. General-level intuition here appears to support the following principle:

*Avoid Gratuitous Worseness* (weak): It is wrong to perform an act that is *much worse* than another, if it is *no* costlier to you to perform the better act, and if all other things are equal.

Two remarks about this principle: First, it is somewhat stronger than the intuitive claims made about Arm Donor. Though controversial, let us suppose for the sake of illustration that it would be much better to bring into existence many people who would have lives well worth living than to refrain from doing so. Even if so, we might think it would not be *wrong* of you to refrain from doing this, even if it were no

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organization Giving What We Can), you have not yet irrevocably given this money to charity, whereas in Kagan's case, once you run inside the building you have already paid the relevant cost. Unless you bind your future self in some more reliable way, after taking the pledge you will still have the choice of whether to give at all as well as where to give.

14. For example, see John Taurek, "Should the Numbers Count?" *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 6 (1977): 293–316; Derek Parfit, "Innumerate Ethics," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 7 (1978): 285–301; Frances Kamm, *Morality, Mortality*, vol. 1, *Death and Whom to Save from It* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Jens Timmermann, "The Individualist Lottery: How People Count, But Not Their Numbers" *Analysis* 64 (2004): 106–12; S. Matthew Liao, "Who Is Afraid of Numbers?" *Utilitas* 20 (2008): 447–61; and Kieran Setiya, "Love and the Value of a Life," *Philosophical Review* 123 (2014): 251–80.



costlier to you to do so than not.<sup>15</sup> While we might thereby deny Avoid Gratuitous Worseness (weak), it seems the principle could be weakened to accommodate such thoughts. For instance, we could instead restrict the principle to acts that are much worse than others in virtue of failing to significantly benefit existing people who are not very well off, or in virtue of failing to spare such people from significant harm. Since adopting this restricted version of Avoid Gratuitous Worseness (weak) would create no special obstacles for my argument for my main claim here, I will, for ease of presentation, refer to the original, unrestricted version. Readers should feel free to interpret “worseness” here along the lines of failure to significantly benefit existing people and so on.

Second, Avoid Gratuitous Worseness (weak) is compatible with the view that, in many cases, there is no *best* act. Instead, there may be only an “upper set” of acts, such that any act in this upper set is better than any act outside it, and such that those acts within the upper set are roughly equally good, on a par, or incommensurable<sup>16</sup>—or perhaps it is indeterminate how acts in the upper set rank in comparison to one another, or we are utterly clueless as to how they do. Arguably, such cases are especially likely to arise in the context of giving to charity, as many charitable causes are difficult to compare. Thus, there may be no best charity, but only an upper set of charities.<sup>17</sup>

Recall that in Arm Donor, you have three acts available to you at a single time:

- i. Do nothing
- ii. Do a helpful act
- iii. Do a much more helpful act

where (i) involves no cost to you; (ii) would promote more good than (i); (iii) would promote much more good than (ii); the cost to you of

15. For example, see Michael Tooley, “Value, Obligation and the Asymmetry Question,” *Bioethics* 12 (1998): 111–24.

16. For a useful introduction to these and related notions, see Ruth Chang, “The Possibility of Parity,” *Ethics* 112 (2002): 659–88; and Ruth Chang, “Value Incomparability and Incommensurability,” in *Oxford Handbook of Value Theory*, ed. Iwao Hirose and Jonas Olson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

17. Here one might consult [www.givewell.org](http://www.givewell.org) and [www.givingwhatwecan.org](http://www.givingwhatwecan.org).

doing either (ii) or (iii) is substantial; and the cost to you of doing either (ii) or (iii) is the same.

In the context of Arm Donor, I claimed that (i) and (iii) are not wrong, but that (ii) is wrong. This seems a plausible particular-level claim. But it is also supported by the plausible general principle, Avoid Gratuitous Worseness (weak). This principle implies that (ii) is wrong. The existence of moral options implies that (i) is not wrong. And (iii) is clearly not wrong. So we have particular-level and general-level intuitive support for this moral ranking of (i), (ii), and (iii). Since Common Assumption implies that (ii) is wrong only if (i) is too, we have intuitive support in favor of its denial.<sup>18</sup>

One might skeptically respond: “How can it be *not* wrong to stand by and do nothing but *wrong* to rather kindly incur a cost and do something *better* than doing nothing?” This question is intended to provoke the intuition that the moral ranking of (i), (ii), and (iii) I have offered is an implausible one, in virtue of assigning (i) a higher moral status than (ii).<sup>19</sup> The intuition here is that (ii) is wrong only if (i) is wrong too. One might then continue: the implausibility of this moral ranking not only shows that Avoid Gratuitous Worseness (weak) has implausible implications, but that, on reflection, it is not an intuitively plausible principle after all.

I do not agree. True, if (i) and (ii) were the only available acts, it would be permissible to perform (ii). But it is a familiar feature in

18. We can usefully put the point in terms of *conditional obligations*. You are not under any *unconditional* obligation to do (ii) or (iii); that is, it is not wrong to do (i). However, you *are* under an obligation to do (iii), *conditional* on it being the case that you in fact do either (ii) or (iii). For work on conditional obligations, which further reinforces the particular picture I am defending here, see Ulla Wessels, “Beyond the Call of Duty: The Structure of a Moral Region,” *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 77 (2015): 87–104; and Tina Rulli, “Conditional Obligations” (unpublished). The three of us (Wessels, Rulli, and I) have converged on similar accounts independently of one another.

It is also worth noting that while Scheffler’s *agent-centered prerogative* (in *The Rejection of Consequentialism*) is consistent with the above moral ranking of (i), (ii), and (iii), it is far more demanding than Avoid Gratuitous Worseness (weak); Scheffler’s view implies that no matter how costly it is for you to perform an act, you would be morally required to perform it if doing so would promote enough good.

19. Jeff McMahan raises this sort of concern in “Doing Good and Doing the Best,” in Woodruff, *Philanthropy and Philosophy*; on p. 5 of his manuscript, he writes, “can we really believe that the only one who has done wrong is the only one who has done any good at all—and in conditions in which it was permissible for her not to do any?”

nonconsequentialist ethics that the moral status of an act can depend on which alternative acts are available. In this case, the presence of (iii) alters the moral status of (ii), thereby altering the way that (ii) and (i) compare morally. I believe the intuition that (ii) is wrong only if (i) is wrong too has force only when considering these acts in isolation from the full choice situation. But with the full choice situation in view, it is clear that there *is* something to be said against (ii) that cannot be said against (i) or (iii): the performance of (ii) constitutes a deliberate refusal to do something *much better* at *no extra cost*. This is a serious moral failing.

So there are some cases in which there is optionality about whether to help without optionality about where to help. Unless there is something particularly morally relevant about helping by giving away limbs to stop trains as opposed to helping by giving away money to fund charities, we should also accept that there are some cases in which there is optionality about whether to give money without optionality about where to give it.

Here one might respond that there *is* something morally special about money; in particular, one might argue that *moral property rights* can generate optionality about whether and where to give. But it seems dubious that moral property rights generate either sort of optionality when you can do a lot of good at no cost to yourself, or a lot more good at no extra cost to yourself. Suppose you have the moral property right to the \$1,000 in your legal possession, but that (perhaps because you enjoy helping others) it would not be costly to you all things considered to give away this \$1,000 to save a life. Intuitively, it would be wrong not to give away the money to save the life. Next, we can suppose instead that it would be very costly to you to give away the \$1,000, such that it would not be wrong not to give it away to save lives. Now, faced with the choice of using your \$1,000 to save one stranger or to save one hundred, and supposing it is *equally costly* to you to do either act, it seems implausible that it would be permissible to save the one merely on the basis of moral property rights. Appeals to moral property rights cannot plausibly support the general claim that if it is up to you whether to donate a sum of money, then it is also up to you where to donate the money.<sup>20</sup>

20. It is controversial to what extent affluent people actually *do* possess moral property rights to the wealth legally in their possession. There are competing theories of just

Finally, one might argue that you simply enjoy some degree of *bare moral freedom* that, independently of cost (in my broad sense) and independently of moral property rights, gives you the moral option to do less good than you could have done. There are good reasons to be skeptical of such bare moral freedom as an independent source of moral options.<sup>21</sup> Even bracketing this skepticism, bare moral freedom seems insufficient to generate optionality about whether to give when you can do a lot of good at no cost to yourself, and insufficient to generate optionality about where to give when you can do a lot more good at no extra cost to yourself. This is for reasons parallel to those cited above in connection with moral property rights; for example, even if it is permissible for you not to give away your \$1,000 to save lives, if faced with the choice of using your \$1,000 to save one stranger or to save one hundred, it seems implausible that it would be permissible to save the one merely on the basis of bare moral freedom (assuming it is equally costly to you to do either act).

#### VI. CAN WE CHEAPLY AVOID GRATUITOUS WORSENESS?

Consider once again the choice between

- i. Do nothing (keep \$1,000 for yourself)
- ii. Do a helpful act (give \$1,000 to charity A)
- iii. Do a much more helpful act (give \$1,000 to charity B)

Again: (i) involves no cost to you; (ii) would promote more good than (i); (iii) would promote much more good than (ii); the cost to you

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acquisitions and transfers of property, and on some of them it is dubious that the most affluent people in the world have moral property rights to *all* of the wealth legally in their possession. Arguably, one is morally required to use whatever property one legally possesses but lacks moral property rights to in the impartially best way (or, at least, one's moral options concerning the use of such property are far less extensive than they would otherwise be). These remarks are inspired by Jeff McMahan (personal communication), by Elizabeth Ashford ("Severe Poverty as an Unjust Emergency"), and by Derek Parfit's address to the Oxford Union in 2015: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=xTURwOg-B\\_I](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xTURwOg-B_I).

21. See Shelly Kagan (*The Limits of Morality*, pp. 223–41); and Richard Arneson, "Moral Limits on the Demands of Beneficence?" in *The Ethics of Assistance: Morality, Affluence, and the Distant Needy*, ed. Deen K. Chatterjee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 33–58.

of doing either (ii) or (iii) is substantial; and the cost to you of doing either (ii) or (iii) is the same.

Suppose that, on the basis of the substantial cost to you, it is not wrong not to give the \$1,000 to charity. Given the particulars of the case, I have argued that (i) and (iii) are not wrong, whereas (ii) is wrong.

One might object: "Acceptance of your view will *motivate* readers to *switch* from less cost-effective giving (ii) to not giving at all (i). They will prefer to avoid wrongdoing the cheap way."<sup>22</sup>

The first thing to note in response is that even if accepting my view would have undesirable effects, this is no objection to its truth. The second is that it is doubtful readers will in fact react to reading my article by not giving at all, though this is an empirical claim I cannot defend here. A further point an effective altruist would urge us to consider: even if many readers did switch from (ii) to (i), as long as just a small proportion switched from (ii) to (iii) this would remain a net change for the better, given that the (iii)-type charities in the "upper set" arguably do so much more good per dollar donated than those (ii)-type charities outside it.

One might next object: "Your view *permits* a switch from less cost-effective giving (ii) to not giving at all (i), as after all, on your view (i) is permissible. That is implausible."

There are two responses available here. Obviously I could *resist*, arguing that it *is* permissible to switch from (ii) to (i). On the other hand, I could *revise* my view so that it avoids implying that it is permissible to switch from (ii) to (i). The objection cannot be to the permissibility of (i) *when not switching from (ii)*—this would be too broad, and at odds with the assumption that there is a moral option that permits the agent to do (i). Thus, those pressing the objection must recognize some condition on the permissibility of (i) such that while (i) is wrong in all or at least some cases of switching from (ii), it is not wrong when not switching from (ii). I had been assuming up to this point in the article that agents who would choose (i) were not switching from (ii). In

22. In a similar vein, Bernard Williams wrote of Singer's view (as first presented in "Famine, Affluence, and Morality") that "As moral persuasion, this kind of tactic is likely to be counterproductive and to lead to a defensive and resentful contraction of concern." Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Fontana, 1985), p. 212, n. 7.

these familiar nonswitching cases, the condition on the permissibility of (i) is satisfied, yielding the familiar moral ranking: (i) and (iii) are permissible, whereas (ii) is wrong. But in all or at least some switching cases, the condition on the permissibility of (i) is not satisfied, and so only (iii) is permissible.

I will not attempt here to determine whether the “resist” response or the “revise” response is more plausible. Those who find the former implausible should find the latter plausible, and those who find the latter implausible should find the former plausible. This is sufficient for my present purposes. But, for the sake of concreteness, let us very briefly consider a particular way in which one might develop the “revise” response:

It is permissible to switch from (ii) to (i) only if the agent chooses (i) for an appropriate kind of reason, for example, in order to avoid the cost of giving.<sup>23</sup> Choosing (i) merely in order to avoid wrongfully doing (ii), when one could have at no extra cost avoided this wrongdoing by doing (iii) instead, is intuitively an inappropriate kind of reason. So, we get different moral rankings of (i), (ii), and (iii) depending on the agent’s reason for choosing (i). It need not be that all cases of switching from (ii) to (i) involve choosing (i) for an inappropriate kind of reason, but some do, and in these cases it is wrong to choose (i).

Alternatively, one can offer a more nuanced version of the “resist” response, distinguishing between act assessments and agent assessments. For instance, one might argue that, while switching from (ii) to (i) for an inappropriate reason is permissible, the person who acts this way is to some extent morally deficient for having done so for an inappropriate reason.<sup>24</sup>

Again, I need not here settle on whether to resist or revise in response to the above objection. The availability of one response if not the other is good enough for now; future work might take this further,

23. Rulli (“Conditional Obligations”) has independently developed a similar move in response to what she calls the “easy exemption objection” in her work on conditional obligations.

24. Somewhat similarly, if a runaway train is headed for five people and the only way to stop it from killing them is by diverting it onto a sidetrack on which someone you dislike is trapped, it may remain permissible to divert the train even if you do so merely in order to kill this person. See Frances Kamm, *Intricate Ethics: Rights, Responsibilities, and Permissible Harm* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 132; and for a reply, see S. Matthew Liao, “Intentions and Moral Permissibility: The Case of Acting Permissibly with Bad Intentions,” *Law and Philosophy* 31 (2012): 703–24.

determining which response is most plausible, and more broadly working out what exactly to say about switching from less helpful helping to not helping at all.

#### VII. INCURRING COSTS BY GIVING TO SOME CHARITIES OVER OTHERS

Against Common Assumption, I have argued that there are at least *some* cases in which there is optionality about whether to give (help) without optionality about where to give (help). But recall that my main claim is stronger than this, that is, that there are *many* cases in which there is optionality about whether to give without optionality about where to give.

Nonetheless, once we have the weaker claim, it seems a relatively easy task, philosophically speaking, to defend the stronger claim. The task now consists in determining the prevalence of cases in which the various conditions present allow for optionality about whether to give without optionality about where to give. This is of course largely an empirical matter, but there remain a few philosophically interesting issues about strengthening Avoid Gratuitous Worseness (weak).

First, given the existence of significant moral options, there are many realistic scenarios in which it is plausible that it is permissible not to give a sum of money to charity, even if giving would be much better than not giving. It is easy to imagine such scenarios by simply imagining that the sum of money in question is large, or that the potential donor is not well off financially.

Next, it is likely that there are subsets of charities within the full set of charities you could give to, such that for each subset (a) it would be equally costly for you to give to each of the charities in the subset (again, working with my broad sense of “cost”), for example, because all these charities are equally near to your heart because they are all for the same cause (for example, fighting blindness); and (b) the charities in the subset vary substantially in the amount of good per dollar you would do by giving to them. The fact that very many charities within and across charitable cause types differ dramatically in the amount of good they do per dollar donated is well documented, especially in the context of priority setting in global health.<sup>25</sup> Though debatable, I here

25. For some relevant facts, see the World Health Organization's *Disease Control Priority Project* report: <http://dcp-3.org/dcp2>. The effective altruism movement (see earlier citations) is largely driven by such facts about dramatic differences in cost-effectiveness.

assume that these dramatic differences in the amount of good done per dollar between charities generally translate into dramatic differences in the amount of good per dollar *you* would do by giving to the most cost-effective charities over others.<sup>26</sup>

Within the subset of charities of which (a) holds (for example, charities fighting blindness), it is wrong to give to those that do much less good per dollar, even when it is not wrong not to give to any charity at all. It seems to me this is already enough to conclude that there are many cases in which there is optionality about whether to give without optionality about where to give.

But for all I have said so far, as long as you care *a little bit* more about giving to a blindness-fighting charity than a cancer-fighting charity, it would not be wrong to do the former, even if the cancer-fighting charity did much more good per dollar. This is because Avoid Gratuitous Worseness (weak) is *so* weak; it very meekly says it is wrong to perform a much worse act when the better act would be *no* costlier to you to perform. But if you cared just a little bit more about one charity than another, that would generate *some* cost, and so Avoid Gratuitous Worseness (weak) would fail to apply. Discussing a philanthropist who was fonder of dogs than people, McMahan writes, “If the cost to her of giving her wealth away made it supererogatory to give it to any charity, the additional cost to her of giving it to charities that would help people rather than ones that would help dogs seems to exempt her from any duty to give it to the former.”<sup>27</sup>

This argument would fail to support the view that, in Arm Donor, it is permissible to save the one over the one hundred. This is because in Arm Donor there is no additional cost to you to saving the one hundred rather than the one. But we are now considering cases in which there is

26. Strictly speaking, the assumed link here is between the *average* amount of good done by charities per dollar donated to them and the *expected* amount of good per dollar your donations would do. For some work that bears on the plausibility of this link, see Garrett Cullity, “Pooled Beneficence,” in *Imperceptible Harms and Benefits*, ed. Michael Almeida (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2000), pp. 1–23; Shelly Kagan, “Do I Make a Difference?” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 39 (2011): 105–41; Julia Nefsky, “Consequentialism and the Problem of Collective Harm: A Reply to Kagan,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 39 (2011): 364–95; and Mark Budolfson and Dean Spears, “Effective Altruism, Marginal Impact, and Fundraising: Weak Links in Effective Altruism’s Chain” (unpublished).

27. “Doing Good and Doing the Best,” manuscript p. 6.



*some* additional cost to you in giving to some charities over others. It is in these cases that McMahan's argument applies.

In response, we could imagine a variant of Arm Donor in which to save the one you would have to sacrifice your arm, whereas to save the one hundred you would have to sacrifice your arm *and* suffer a mild sore throat. It still seems wrong to save the one. While you would not be deliberately refusing to do something much better at *no* extra cost, you would be deliberately refusing to do something much better at only *slightly* extra cost. That seems nearly as objectionable, and still wrong. We might make an exception for those who are very badly off, or who have in aggregate incurred very large costs for the sake of promoting the good. *Perhaps* such people are not required to incur *any* further costs for the sake of promoting the good, no matter how small the costs and no matter how much good they would promote if they did incur them. The vast majority of affluent people are not in this exceptional category. Thus, if the dog enthusiast were not in this category, and if it were only slightly costlier to her to give her large sum of money to a much better charity than to give it to the charity for dogs (that does very little good), it would be wrong of her to give in this less good way even though it would not be wrong of her not to give the sum to charity at all.

As I have noted, Avoid Gratuitous Worseness (weak) fails to apply to cases in which there is some extra cost to you in giving to some charities over others. We can thus consider strengthening the principle to various degrees:

*Avoid Gratuitous Worseness* (still pretty weak): It is wrong to perform an act that is *much worse* than another, if it is *slightly* costlier to you to perform the better act, and if all other things are equal.

*Avoid Gratuitous Worseness* (moderate): It is wrong to perform an act that is *much worse* than another, if it is *moderately* costlier to you to perform the better act, and if all other things are equal.

*Avoid Gratuitous Worseness* (strong): It is wrong to perform an act that is *much worse* than another, even if it is *much* costlier to you to perform the better act, and if all other things are equal.

As the Avoid Gratuitous Worseness principle grows in strength, it becomes progressively less intuitively plausible (though like the "weak" variant, the "still pretty weak" variant is still intuitively plausible, *full*

*stop*). Stronger and stronger variants of the principle will imply there are more and more cases in which it is wrong to give some sum of money to some charities over others, even though it is not wrong not to donate this sum of money at all.

Moreover, we might distinguish between variants of the principle on the basis of the particular *type of cost* in question, for example:

*Avoid Gratuitous Worseness* (moderate/well-being cost): It is wrong to perform an act that is *much worse* than another, if it is *moderately* costlier to you *in terms of your well-being* to perform the better act, and if all other things are equal.

*Avoid Gratuitous Worseness* (moderate/projects cost): It is wrong to perform an act that is *much worse* than another, if it is *moderately* costlier to you *in terms of your projects* to perform the better act, and if all other things are equal.

The Avoid Gratuitous Worseness principle will likely vary in plausibility depending on the kind of cost in question; for example, I suspect that Avoid Gratuitous Worseness (moderate/projects cost) is plausible, if the cost is in terms of one's projects only rather than one's well-being, whereas as I suspect Avoid Gratuitous Worseness (moderate/well-being cost) is a bit more controversial. One might object that one cannot suffer a loss in terms of one's projects without thereby suffering a loss in terms of one's well-being; the two sorts of loss are inextricably linked. Even if that is correct, we can distinguish between losses to one's well-being that strictly involve losses in terms of one's projects, and losses to one's well-being due to other factors (for example, incurring pain or losing a limb). And we can accordingly distinguish between different variants of Avoid Gratuitous Worseness. Again, which of these variants of the principle is true will affect the number of cases in which there is optionality about whether to give without optionality about where to give.

We can further alter the strength and applicability of Avoid Gratuitous Worseness by tinkering with its "much worse" variable. For instance, it may still seem wrong to perform an act that is only *some-what* worse than another, if it is no costlier to you to perform the better act, and if all other things are equal.

Finally, it is worth noting that in the case of charitable giving (unlike Arm Donor), you are usually able to *split* your donations among different charities. Considerations of cost to you may permit you to give some portion *but not all* of your “donation money” to charities closer to your heart over those that do much more good per dollar donated. The remaining portion then cannot permissibly be spent on these less good charities.

Assuming there are moral options, it seems a pretty common occurrence for a potential donor to lack optionality with respect to where to give while nonetheless possessing optionality about whether to give.

#### VIII. SUMMING UP

It is an interesting and important question what those attracted to moral options, and to nonconsequentialist thinking more broadly, should say about which charities to give to. I have argued that one thing they should say is that there are *many* cases in which it would be wrong of you to give a sum of money to charities that do less good than other charities you could give to instead, even when it would not be wrong of you not to give the money to charity at all. This claim is consistent with the effective altruist philosophy noted at the outset, and I believe it is a claim nonconsequentialist effective altruists should accept.

Working out with greater precision when one lacks optionality about whether and where to give will require careful assessment of the plausibility of different variants of Avoid Gratuitous Worseness, alongside sober sensitivity to the various morally relevant empirical considerations. I hope such philosophical and empirical investigations will be taken further, to improve the ethics of giving both in theory and in practice.