Peter Singer. *The Most Good You Can Do: How Effective Altruism is Changing Ideas about Living Ethically*. Yale University Press 2016. 232 pp. $25.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780300180275); $16.00 USD (Paperback ISBN 9780300219869).

Living up to his moral philosophical tradition of Utilitarianism, US-Australian philosopher Peter Singer's latest instalment is *The Most Good You Can Do*, enhancing Utilitarianism's 'greater good' principle. The book—endorsed by software monopolist and corporate philanthropists Bill and Melinda Gates—is based on Singer's Castle Lecture delivered at Yale University in 2013. The book approaches 'the most good' idea in four parts: effective altruism; how to do the most good; motivation and justification; and choosing causes and organizations, finishing with an afterword addressed to 'readers in Australia and New Zealand.' Peter Singer, according to the book's cover, 'may be the most controversial philosopher alive; he is certainly among the most influential' (*New Yorker*).

Singer's argument follows a threefold logic: capitalism remains with us for the time being; it creates social, economic, and moral pathologies such as extreme poverty; and as a consequence, we have a moral duty to alleviate the worst impact of capitalism (a word that hardly ever appears in this book) by doing—individually—the most good we can do. For Utilitarians, there is a moral duty demanding that we live up to our moral obligations by donating whatever we can to charities that work for the poor. But Singer also discusses what makes a good charity, e.g., Oxfam. In this sense, his book is quite often political rather than moral in its philosophical character.

Given the recent problems of 'phony generosity' of the super-rich, Singer's book provides a timely examination of the 'charity industry.' But before discussing charities—a '$200 billion industry' in the USA alone—and without highlighting the evolutionary and moral origins of altruism, Singer dives into his concept of 'effective altruism.' He defines it as follows: 'we should do the most good we can.' Perhaps dating back to his seminal 1972 article on 'Famine and Affluence', Singer acknowledges—and this seems to be despite the good intentions of neoliberalism—that today, still 'millions of children die each year from diseases that we can prevent or cure.' But the democratic majority—carefully guided by corporate mass media—is choosing not to prevent this.

Singer does not shy away from directing the critical torch on his own institutions: Princeton University, where he is a professor, and Yale University, which invited him for the lecture. Singer writes: 'Princeton has an endowment, at the time of writing, of US$21 billion and Yale of US$23.9 billion … the money you donate to one of them could probably do more good elsewhere.' Perhaps the term 'could probably' is actually more like 'will most definitely' do more good elsewhere than donating money to super-rich elite universities reserved predominantly for the US and global elite .

Many, if not nearly all, of the examples in Singer's book are from the global elite. For example, he discusses the case of an Oxford University student 'living on a £14,000 a year scholarship [which places him into] the richest 4 percent of the world's people.' But Singer also discusses questions like whether it is 'okay for us to be going to the movies and drinking chai lattes while 1.4 billion people are living in extreme poverty.' Singer stays away from big numbers. He keeps his discussion rather individualistic noting that 'strong social ties to family and to friends are a basic source of happiness.''. So best not to think about the money wasted on militarism, wars, and, for example, senseless advertising making us 'buy things we don't need with money we don't have to impress people we don't like.'

Throughout the book one gets the impression that Singer accepts that 'capitalism in its current global form is worsening inequalities.' He is also convinced that 'those who think the entire modern capitalist economy should be overthrown have consciously failed to demonstrate that there are ways of structuring an economy that have better outcomes.' Another problem is raised by Alexander Berger. On Berger's problem, Singer writes that 'on average fourteen people on the waiting list die each day' in the USA before receiving a kidney transplant. That this has something to do with capitalism, privatized, insufficient, and non-existing healthcare, the hegemonic ideology of individualism, etc., escapes Singer. After discussing additional charity cases from Yale University, Princeton, and MIT, Singer reaches the conclusion that 'we can speculate that people with a high level of abstract reasoning ability are more likely to take the kind of approach to helping others that is characteristic of effective altruism.'

Unfortunately, unlike almost all examples in his book, and Singer himself (Oxford), most people are not graduates of elite universities. Perhaps even after 'Band-Aid' and decades of charity it may just not be enough that 'effective altruism is what we are passionate about.' What utilitarian philosophy is passionate about is happiness and on this Singer notes:

> studies of the relationship between income and happiness or well-being indicate that for people at low levels of income, an increase in income does lead to greater happiness, but once income is sufficient to provide for one's needs and a degree of financial security, further increases have either much less impact on happiness or no impact at all.

For Singer, however, all this does not lead to, for example, a push for higher minimum wages, progressive taxation, taxing multinational corporations, or more drastic political measures. It does not even lead to a critique of rampant consumerism and capitalism other than to say, 'perhaps we imagine that money is important to our well-being because we need money to buy consumer goods, and buying things has become an obsession that beckons us away from what really advances our well-being.'

At no point is all this linked to capitalism. The idea that it is related to consumer capitalism supported by a global marketing behemoth and a neoliberal ideology that converts every eventuality of life into a marketable good escapes Singer. Global capitalism's rampant overconsumption also creates 'more than a billion people [who] are living in extreme poverty.' While I (the reviewer), like Singer (the author), am 'donating to Oxfam,' we have yet to see an end to extreme poverty.

Meanwhile Singer laments 'a new museum wing [that] will cost $50 million.' What remains unnoticed is the fact that the USA alone will spend '$57.52 million on defence per hour during 2016' (nationalpriorities.org). But despite these staggering numbers, Singer continues using the wrong cases. He continues that the 'renovation of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, completed in 2004, cost $858 million.' The US military will spend more money than this museum renovation before Mr Singer has lunch—every day.

The avoidance of facts like these even leads Singer to false hypothetical questions such as 'if $100,000 can prevent blindness in 1,000 people, is that better than using $100,000 to feed the starving?' $100,000 is really small change for Eisenhower's 'Military-Industrial Complex.' Is all this too complex for a philosopher? The US military alone spends about one million dollar per minute while the morally worthless global advertising ogre is spending—or better wasting—half a billion dollars

per year globally. Singer's hypotheticals are nice for philosophical articles in Utilitarian journals but they camouflage the realities of the causes of global poverty, the wastefulness of society, and the lavishness of military spending.

But Singer is correct when noting that 'most gifts to charities are emotionally based. Two-thirds of donors do not research at all before giving.' Starving babies on TV around Christmas—some say Capitalismas—work well for charities. However, while this increases donations, it does not seem to alleviate global poverty. But emotional advertising also works well for marketing as most buying is done without much thinking. It makes people buying and donating even to charities like 'the Children's Charity Fund, Inc., a small Florida-based organisation that spends 84 percent of its revenue on fund-raising activities and nearly 10 percent on administration expenses, leaving just 6.1 percent for its programmes.' No wonder there are millions of charities.

Towards the end of his book Singer seeks to pre-empt some of the critique outlined above by emphasizing that 'political advocacy is an attractive option because it responds to critics who say that aid treats just the symptoms of global poverty.' Perhaps this is what charities, donations, and philanthropy do—they make the super-rich feel good, give IT monopolists a positive media image while they simultaneously, as Wittgenstein once said, 'leave everything as it is' with capitalism. In his afterword, Singer almost admits as much when saying, 'as I complete this book, the most recent UNICEF estimate is that 6.3 million' children will die while the number of children dying from preventable diseases has dropped from 27,000 to 17,000.' Undeniably, this makes a difference not just to plain statistical numbers but also to children who do not die as well as those who still die (www.poverty.com) because we—collectively—chose to stand by.

If Stephen Hawking's most recent and most dire prediction about capitalism is correct, perhaps not even Singer's capitalism accepting notion of 'the most good we can do' will be able to compensate for what is ahead of us. In the end Peter Singer's book reminds one of Brazilian Roman Catholic Archbishop Hélder Câmara, who once said: 'when I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why they are poor, they call me a communist.' Many regard Peter Singer as a saint because he will give food to the poor while never asking 'why are they poor'?

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