



The Life You Can Save: Acting Now to End World Poverty

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Using ethical arguments, provocative thought experiments, illuminating examples, and case studies of charitable giving, philosopher Peter Singer shows that our current response to world poverty is not only insufficient but ethically indefensible.

Singer contends that we need to change our views of what is involved in living an ethical life. To help us play our part in bringing about that change, he offers a seven-point plan that mixes personal philanthropy (figuring how much to give and how best to give it), local activism (spreading the word in your community), and political awareness (contacting your representatives to ensure that your nation's foreign aid is really directed to the world's poorest people).

In *The Life You Can Save*, Singer makes the irrefutable argument that giving will make a huge difference in the lives of others without diminishing the quality of our own. This book is an urgent call to action and a hopeful primer on the power of compassion, when mixed with rigorous investigation and careful reasoning, to lift others out of despair.

The Life You Can Save: Acting Now to End World Poverty Details

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Sarah says

This was the book I needed to read after my trip to Ecuador. Raises difficult ethical questions and prompts one to pay attention of the effectiveness of their donations. "I recommend that instead of worrying about how much you would have to do in order to live a fully ethical life, you do something that is significantly more than you have been doing so far. Then see how that feels. You may find it more rewarding than you imagined possible."

Amanda says

I chose to read Singer's book because I've often wanted to do more for the world's poor, but I want to do so in an informed way and see to it that my money is going to be used in a meaningful way that does not have politically or religiously motivated strings attached. I've tried to research charities before, but quickly became frustrated with the the lack of solid evidence as to their efficacy that even the most well-known charities couldn't (or wouldn't) provide. So I was already sold on the idea of giving to those in Third World countries, but didn't really know how to do so. I hoped Singer's book would offer me some practical advice as to which organizations to give to and some information regarding the difference these organizations are making.

The first part of the book is dedicated to making the philosophical case for our responsibility as a wealthy, industrialized nation to give to help end worldwide poverty. This part of the book I would give more of a 3 star rating, namely because this was a part of the book that I didn't really need. I was already convinced; I just wanted to know how. However, there are some interesting tidbits that explain our psychological and social aversion to giving, which helps explain why so many of us can turn a blind eye to the world's poor. For example, if we're on our way to work and a small child is drowning in a nearby lake, almost all of us would rush out to save the child. We wouldn't worry about being late to work or about risking our own life; we would simply act because we know a child's life is in danger. And yet 1 in 5 children living in Third World countries die before the age of 5. We know that, but statistics don't move us to act in the same way witnessing one particular child whose face we can see and whose voice we can hear can.

An argument that I found compelling in this part of the book is his case against the "give close to home" idea. While Singer is not advocating that we do nothing for those in our community (indeed, he does argue that we need to be more involved in our communities and give more of our time and resources to volunteering), he does argue that there is a difference between what poor in America looks like and what poor in Ethiopia, Nepal, or the Congo looks like. Whereas 1 in 5 children die before the age of 5 in impoverished countries, 1 in 100 children die of poverty in the U.S. (and, yes, that is definitely too much, but it does show where our money can do the most good). The American poor still have access to education, health care, and social services. 3/4 of their households have a car, air conditioning, and a VCR or DVD player. 97% of them own a color TV. American poverty has its own set of challenges and setbacks, but, as Singer points out, it's not necessarily the kind of poverty that kills as viciously and indiscriminately as it does in the Third World.

The last part of the book is the part that I found most effective for my purposes and, for those of you who are like me and just want some practical advice on how and to whom to give, you might want to skip ahead to this part of the book or you may just want to visit GiveWell.org, a website that reviews the effectiveness of

various charities and advises as to which ones are efficiently making a true, quantifiable difference in the lives of the poor. I've already chosen two charities that I'll be giving to: The Fistula Foundation and The Small Enterprise Foundation.

What I found interesting about many of the negative reviews is that the number one reason cited for disliking the book was "it made me feel guilty about not doing more." Well, no shit, Sherlock. And, frankly, you should. I should. We all should. 1.4 billion people live on less than \$1.25 a day--the Starbucks coffee I drank while reading this is approximately someone's salary for 4 days of work. If I have to skip the occasional Caramel Macchiato or bottled water or pair of shoes to help save a life, it's hardly a sacrifice on my part considering what's at stake.

Cross posted at This Insignificant Cinder

Dave Golombek says

This is perhaps Singer's simplest book, in that he addresses a much narrower subject than he frequently tackles, but in doing so, he creates his most persuasive work (amongst those I've read), and the one with the broadest appeal. This book covers the moral and ethical imperative to donate to charity, in particular those charities helping the poorest in the world.

The book starts with a few simple examples, such as finding a child drowning in a pond or stuck on railroad tracks and briefly discusses why there is no question (in his or almost anyone else's mind) why saving the child is the right thing to do, and why people actually do so in practice. The rest of the book covers the extrapolation of this simple case to children and adults who live far away (primarily Africa and Asia). He presents his arguments for doing so, refutes those arguments against doing so, and talks about the practical reasons why many people fail to act on those things that feel to be ethical.

The end of the book puts together a simple formula covering a proposal for how much should donate. This is clearly a touchy subject for many people, and yet the suggestions he makes are quite modest (a tiered system, with 1% of income for those making < 105K, 5% for those making 105K to ~150K, then going up as you make more money). He discusses extensively the gap between what you might argue should be donated on purely moral grounds and what people will practically donate, given the lives that we're accustomed to living and obligations we have assumed in our lives. Visit <http://www.thelifeyoucansave.com/> to see those who have already pledged and hopefully to join us!

This book is superbly written, covers an amazingly important subject, makes your mind work, and is a joy to read -- I can't give it the 6 stars it deserves, but I'll definitely be recommending it to everyone I know.

Nick Klagge says

A very quick read and a compelling argument. Singer argues that middle-to-upper-class people in developed countries (and upper class people in developing countries) have a moral obligation to give significantly more than we do to help the poorest people in the developing world. Although it is easy (and fair) to argue over exactly how much should be required of us, Singer pretty convincingly argues that, using any reasonable standard, the number should be much higher than it currently is. Singer's "reasonable standard" is essentially that, at minimum, we should be giving as long as it doesn't make a significant difference to our quality of life. Although many Americans do give a reasonable amount to charity, very little of it is directed to the

poorest people in the world (with most going to our own religious, educational, and cultural institutions). The reason for focusing on the global poor is not merely that they have a worse quality of life than the poor in our own countries (although that is true), but also that interventions can be made much more cheaply for them, so that any given amount can go much farther in alleviating human suffering.

Singer's discussion of the relevant considerations is both straightforward and fascinating. One of the biggest takeaways for me is that, really within the last 20 years or so, it has become much more feasible for us to verify that money given is truly (a) getting where it's meant to go, and (b) having a meaningful positive impact on people's lives. This is due to the enhanced level of analysis and transparency championed most prominently by GiveWell, as well as by the proliferation of randomized controlled trials championed by organizations such as Innovations for Poverty Action. Our current cultural ideas about giving are inherited from (say) the 18th through 20th centuries, when this type of verification was not possible. The reasonable result of this information shortage was a focus on giving "close to home" and "in the community," where it was easier to verify impact. A less obvious corollary is that this local focus effectively lowers the equilibrium expected level of giving, because the gap in life circumstances between the rich and the poor in a single community, along with the associated effectiveness multiplier, is by and large going to be much smaller than the gap between the global rich and global poor. (Singer allows that it may be reasonable for us to value our own well-being more highly than that of others, but not by very large multiples.) In addition, issues of desert (whatever one may think of them overall) are much less plausibly raised in a global context than in a local context--one can hardly argue that someone in a developing country who lacks access to clean drinking water just isn't working hard enough.

Indeed, Singer's focus in this book is less on changing individual minds (though that is important), and more on shaping the cultural mores around giving so that a higher level is expected of the well-off. I think he takes an admirably pragmatic view on this matter. One problem with the moral issue he raises is that the obligation can feel practically unlimited, and therefore overwhelming--I could give away virtually all of the money I make and still be very much better off than the people it would be going to help. Singer recognizes that ultimately the "right" level is something that each of us will have to decide individually. Instead, he proposes a societal standard that is significantly higher than the status quo, yet low enough that it is difficult to argue credibly that it's too high. (In other words, it's difficult to argue that the amounts he proposes would meaningfully lower the givers' well-being--in fact, given what we know about the psychology of giving, it's quite plausible to argue that they would raise it.) It's roughly as follows (using marginal brackets as with taxes, such that an increase in gross income across a bracket boundary never results in a decrease in take-home income):

- 0% of income if you're below the poverty line, then
- a sliding scale of 1% to 5% of your income between the poverty line and about \$100k, then
- 5% up to \$150k, then
- 10% up to about \$400k
- and several higher brackets above that

Note that all the way up to \$400k, which covers the vast majority of people I know (maybe everyone??), this standard is less stringent than the traditional "tithe" standard--the key distinction being that it is much more specifically targeted toward effectively alleviating the maximum amount of human suffering. Singer based his standard brackets on a rough back-of-the-envelope calculation of the total amount needed to end extreme poverty (as articulated in the UN development goals), spread across the wealthy population of the planet, with some judgment to set the brackets at levels that seemed reasonable.

While it's easy to pick at any one premise of Singer's argument, I find it pretty difficult to argue with his general conclusion. For myself, I plan to at least meet Singer's standard for my own income for this year, as well as to try and "backfill" some of what I would have given if I had been meeting it since starting to work. I'll see what that feels like, and think about whether I should set a higher personal standard.

I encourage others reading this to do the same, especially if your income is in the 6-figure range (or more!). If my paraphrase isn't totally compelling, pick up Singer's book and read it in a weekend. You can check out his website (thelifeyoucansave.org) to find a list of 10-20 organizations that meet his standards of (a) working on behalf of the poorest people in the world, and (b) having produced strong evidence of their effectiveness. Some of them really do save lives; others do non-life-saving things that can nonetheless have a profound impact on quality of life, such as surgery for blindness or for obstetric fistulas. At the beginning of reading about this general topic, I was really focused on just how much it costs to actually save a life. It's obviously very difficult to estimate this precisely, but the order of magnitude for the most cost effective interventions (e.g. against malaria) is somewhere north of \$1k and south of \$10k. But the more I read about it, the less I focused on that specific outcome. Some of the quality-of-life interventions are hugely important and much more easy to price out--for example, something like \$350 pays for a cataract surgery. If you gave \$3500 (about what Singer recommends for a gross income of \$90k), you could know with pretty high certainty that your gift restored sight to 10 people. To me that is even more compelling than a statistical one-ish life saved (although that is also pretty cool too!).

Rory says

I'm not sure what I expected out of this book. Probably an articulate, super-strong inspiration to give money to charity...and instruction on how and where to give it so that my meager offerings would do the most "good." But instead I just felt guilty and shamed after reading the first few chapters, and frustrated after skimming the rest.

That's actually how Singer *wants* you to feel, believes everyone *should* feel--that it's a basic measure of humanity to give a significant portion of your disposable income (and he calls the reader out on how much actually IS disposable) to some of the very needy people in the world. But...well, but nothing, I guess. It just wasn't the kick in the butt for me that maybe it was for others.

Larry Bassett says

The World Bank defines extreme poverty as not having enough income to meet the most basic human needs for adequate food, water, shelter, clothing, sanitation, health care, and education. Many people are familiar with the statistic that 1 billion people are living on less than one dollar per day. That was the World Bank's poverty line until 2008, when better data on international price comparisons enabled it to make a more accurate calculation of the amount people need to meet their basic needs. On the basis of this calculation, the World Bank set the poverty line at \$1.25 per day. The number of people whose income puts them under this line is ... 1.4 billion.

Author Peter Singer thinks and writes about "acting now to end world poverty" from philosophical, ethical and practical points of view. Singer is the challenging author of *Practical Ethics* and *Animal Liberation*; both books have their own histories of stirring up controversy.

Here are some of the questions and issues that *The Life You Can Save* addresses:

Is it wrong not to help?

Common objections to giving.

Why don't we give more?

Creating a culture of giving.

How much does it cost to save a life, and how can you tell which charities do it best?

From his other books, I saw Peter Singer as a person who is committed to certain ideas and who does not pull any punches. I trusted that he would “tell it like it is” and that I could find his message persuasive. I wanted to be convinced to donate more of my income and assets to make the world a better place.

I have the example of my father and mother who were very generous with their financial resources. My father still is. For example, when someone who helped my father do chores and repairs around his house found his income reduced, the value of his house “under water” with high mortgage payments, Dad offered \$1000 monthly to help with the mortgage until the man’s wife became eligible for social security.

Since I have retired, I have increased my charitable giving to the point where it is 10% of my gross income. Instead of buying a new car or doing some home improvements, I would like to increase my charitable giving. I support local organizations like the Greater Lynchburg Meals on Wheels and the Free Clinic of Central Virginia. I support state organizations like Virginians for Alternatives to the Death Penalty and the Virginia Legal Aid Society. I support national organizations like the Human Rights Campaign and the Natural Resources Defense Council. I would like to increase my giving to UNICEF and Doctors without Borders and have more of an impact internationally since I know the most severe poverty is outside the U.S.

So I wanted Peter Singer to give me a pep talk! And it worked! I now have a goal of becoming a philanthropist! Can I do that on a gross annual income of \$50,000? I have decided based on examples in the book that I can! All things can be done with sufficient exclamation points!

Singer is a controversial philosopher. He supports a utilitarian world view: you determine what is best by determining what creates the most good for the most people. I always thought that was an over simplification, but it does sound good on the face of it, doesn’t it? But I have a hard time reconciling Singer’s view that the sanctity of life is highly overrated with this book. In his book *Practical Ethics* he more or less supports euthanasia for defective infants. He has taken a lot of shit for that. He has been controversial in other ways as well. I usually like to evaluate the “whole person” to make decisions about how much credence and credibility to give to a person. I have some trouble with Singer since I think he has some weak links to go with his brilliance.

But there are real and serious dilemmas for the conscientious person who wants to help.

The real dilemma for most of us, is whether it is wrong and unnatural to reject our children’s pleas for the latest expensive computer games, to spurn designer-labeled kids’ clothing, and to send them to the local (entirely adequate but not outstanding) public schools. The savings you gain by taking the less-expensive option in each case will allow you will allow you to donate sums toward saving the lives of strangers. But do your obligations to your own children override your obligations to strangers, no matter how great their need or suffering?

Peter Singer introduces us to people who have made decisions that many, if not most, of us would consider impossible.

Sometimes in Haiti, Farmer will hike for hours to see patients far from any roads. He insists on doing this because to say that it takes too much time and effort to visit these patients is, in his view, to say that their lives matter less than the lives of others. Flying from the peasant huts and their malnourished babies in Haiti to Miami, just 700 miles away, with its well-dressed people talking about their efforts to lose weight, Farmer gets angry over the contrast between developing countries and the developed world. What troubles him most is what troubled him

all those years ago about the American doctor who was about the leave Haiti: “How people can not care, erase, not remember.”

Now you might want to say, “If you are going to quote the entire book, why don’t you just tell me to read the book myself?” Well, I certainly urge you to do that but here is just one more thought:

...the conflict that Farmer and Kravinsky feel so acutely, between being an ideal parent and acting on the idea that all human life is of equal value, is real and irresolvable. The two will always be in tension. No principle of obligation is going to be widely accepted unless it recognizes that parents will and should love their own children more than the children of strangers, and, for that reason, will meet the basic needs of their children before they meet the needs of strangers. But this doesn’t mean that parents are justified in providing luxuries for their children ahead of basic needs of others.

I think that this is the kind of book where you are probably going to be receptive to the message if you decide to read it. I could quote more but I am going to resist. I strongly urge you to read this book if you have a goal of making the world a better place. Peter Singer does not mince words and you may not like or agree with all of them, but they give me pause and make me want to do more for the stranger.

I think this book is going to make a difference in my life. That makes it a five star book for me.

Lisa says

This is a wonderful book that can change your life and make you feel at last that you can do something about the tragedies we see on TV all the time.

In a nutshell, Singer asks us why if we would not hesitate to jump into a pond to save the life of a drowning child, we do not have the same impulse to save the lives of children who are dying of preventable disease and malnutrition in developing countries. He says that if we are choosing to spend money on bottled water, for example, when tap water is clean and safe, that we are spending money on luxuries that we could easily do without. By giving just a small percentage of our incomes over the course of our working lives we can make a significant difference to a significant number of people, and if a whole heap of us did it, the UN could achieve the Millenium Goals sooner than 2015. Sight can be restored for \$60 AUD; a woman in Africa can have an obstetric fistula repaired for \$450.00 AUD. \$35 AUD can provide anti-retroviral treatment for someone living with HIV/AIDS in a developing country. These are life changing events for the individuals concerned but they also make these people economically productive and independent, which has a ripple effect. The effect is even more powerful when whole village projects enable economic independence through, for example, education, health care or clean water projects or improvements in agricultural methods.

To see my review please visit
<http://anzlitlovers.wordpress.com/201...>

bethany says

A summary: "You spent money to read this book and you probably drink soda or water occasionally, so you're murdering children. Now I'm going to throw a million statistics in your face to show you that I'm right and you're living your life wrong. Here's how much you need to donate. Do it or you're a bad person (did I mention you murder children?).The end."

Really don't understand why this got so many positive reviews when the entire book was literally demanding people donate more money. I think everyone knows that it's good to donate, I didn't enjoy being yelled at by this narrative.

Casey says

Although this book provides a heart-felt argument on why you should donate 5-10% of your total income to the world's poorest people, it is sensationalized writing at best and lacks the depth of analysis on:

1. Why the global poor are poor
2. What organizations are currently doing
3. What organizations lack the capability to do
4. What goes wrong with in NGOs
5. Where your money will go if you do donate...

As a student of international development I will be the first to tell you that if you are donating money to an international organization your odds of helping the worlds poorest of the poor are small. There is good being done and there is good to be done, but the reliability of donations is remarkably questionable.

I agree with the basic premise of this book that the world needs to do more for the poorest of the poor and that the richest of the rich could do more, but if it were that easy we would have done it by now. If you are calling for blanket donations, you have to do your homework first. In no part of this book is there a clear suggestion of how your money can be most useful when donated (i.e. what types of organizations to donate).

Overall nice sentimental value, but worthless if you want to critically think about how to help the world's poor.

howl of minerva says

You are walking past a shallow pond and you see a small child has fallen in. No-one else is around. The child is in obvious distress and will drown without your immediate help. You are however, wearing a gorgeous set of clothes you have lusted over for months and have just managed to purchase. You are also running late for work. Do you wade in to help the child, ruining your clothes and being late for work, or do you walk on by?

This is the thought-experiment with which Peter Singer, a Professor of Bioethics at Princeton, opens his discussion on the ethics of charity. Given this story, the vast majority of people will of course say that they would save the child and would consider it reprehensible to do otherwise or to consider their clothes or lateness for work as serious obstacles. The underlying premise being that if we can lessen the suffering of an innocent other at minimal cost to ourselves, it is wrong not to do so. The situation can also be thought of in terms of the golden rule, stated in various forms by all the major world religions.

Singer states a simple argument :

First premise : Suffering and death from lack of basic necessities such as food, shelter and medical treatment are bad things.

Second : If you can prevent something bad without sacrificing anything nearly as important, it is wrong not to do so.

Third : By donating to aid agencies you can prevent some bad things.

Conclusion : Not donating to aid agencies is wrong.

If we accept this argument, we are led to some radical conclusions. It is morally wrong to spend money on anything unless it is to prevent something bad happening – or for something nearly as important. From this argument, Singer goes on, buying a bottle of mineral water or a can of soda, when one can get perfectly potable water from a tap is morally unjustifiable as the outcome is not nearly as important as saving a child's life. 18,000 children **every day** die of malnutrition or preventable/treatable conditions. That's about one every 5 seconds. (http://www.childmortality.org/files_v...)

Several objections to this line of argument are discussed. Some brief highlights:

Objection : There is no binding universal moral code. People have a right to their own beliefs and practices.

Response : Agreed. But as a society we try to stop rape and murder and would not accept that someone has the right to torture animals or children because they believe it is fun. This suggests we are not complete moral relativists.

Objection : People work hard and have the right to decide what they spend their money on.

Response : Agreed. This is simply one argument for what people should do with their money. People have the right to do whatever they wish with it, but if they chose to flush it down the toilet or bury it rather than to save human lives, we would likely consider it wrong.

Objection : If we did not cause the suffering of others, we have no general moral obligation to alleviate it.

Response : There are many ways in which we can indirectly contribute to the suffering of others, for example in our pollution of the atmosphere, commercial fishing which devastates local communities, or our extraction of oil and minerals from countries whose people do not benefit from them. Nonetheless, even in cases where we have demonstrably done nothing wrong, our moral obligation is not lessened. Thinking back to the child drowning in the pond, the fact that we did not push them in does not lessen our feeling of obligation to help them.

Objection : Philanthropy breeds dependency, undermines real economic and political change and sustains the immoral status-quo.

Response : There are situations such as disaster-relief in which immediate donations are required to save lives. In the longer term, we must be extremely careful in how we give charity. Many charitable organisations these days do not simply give hand-outs but aim to engineer sustainable change in communities. Revolutionary change in global socio-economic and political structures may be desirable, and if one believes that, it would be right to devote serious resources of time, money and energy towards achieving it. Our concerns are practical and pressing. We know that doing nothing will not help. In the

absence of revolutionary change, or while such change is being brought about (by your Che Guevara T-shirt) – if we can do something to help, we should.

Objection : It is natural and ingrained by evolution to treat yourself and those close to you, as more important than people very far away, with whom we have no ties.

Response : Agreed. But it does not necessarily follow that it is right to spend extravagantly to purchase luxuries for ourselves, our friends and our families when the money could help relieve serious suffering.

Objection (freebie, not in the book): Doctors/nurses/paramedics/etc. save lives every day. Surely they're already doing their bit?

Response: In the developed world, jobs in healthcare are generally prestigious and well-paid. For every position there are tens, sometimes hundreds of applicants. If any one person were to choose to do something else, there would be several people eagerly ready to take their place. In the drowning child scenario (and in many catastrophic situations around the world), there is little or no help available and our personal choices will have a more significant difference on the outcome.

The book goes on to discuss some of the economics of charity in more detail, particularly in terms of governmental donation and ways to measure the efficacy of aid. The organisation GiveWell is plugged as an independent monitor of aid organisations' bang for buck. Of Singer's several striking examples of charitable work, one is the Fred Hollows foundation which provides sight-restoring cataract operations in the third world. Between 1993 and 2003, the foundation restored sight to a million people, at a cost of around \$50 a pop.

Another example is the Worldwide Fistula Fund. Childbirth without adequate medical attention (particularly in young or malnourished women who have small pelvises) can be very prolonged. This can cause tears called fistulae between the vagina and the rectum or bladder. Women suffering from such fistulae have a continuous flow of urine or faeces through the vagina and are outcast from their families and communities. The Worldwide Fistula fund provides fistula repair operations for these women and girls. Speaking of Lewis Wall, president of the fund, Singer tells us: « In Liberia the previous summer, he had operated on a sixty-seven year old who had developed a fistula when she was thirty-two and had been living soaked in urine for thirty-five years. It took twenty minutes to repair it in surgery. » Ongoing long-term approaches focus on education and prevention, particularly to reduce pregnancy in young girls but in the interim, asks Dr. Wall « What is it worth to give a fourteen-year-old girl back her future and her life ? » Although we cannot answer the question of what it is worth, we can answer the question of how much it costs : about \$350.

The last section of the book discusses the bottom line: how much are we willing to give? What is our fair share? A variant of the drowning-child story illustrates the problems with the fair-share question. Imagine that you come across a shallow pond with ten drowning children in it. There are nine other adults around. You leap in and pull out a child, expecting the other adults to do the same. But looking around you see that the other nine have ignored the children and walked on. Having done your fair share, do you now leave – or do you try to save another child?

If rigorously applied, Singer's moral argument would make it impossible for us to spend our money on anything that is not of equal value (or nearly) to saving a child's life. Excepting a few saintly ascetics, this is clearly untenable for the most of us. Fortunately, Singer also recognises it as such. After (qualified) praise of the Bill Gates foundation and scathing denunciation of the uncharitable super-rich – the Larry Ellisons and Paul Allens of the world with their \$200m super-yachts, he turns to the likes of me and you. After all, as we have seen, the can of soda and the Patek Philippe watch sit morally in the same super-yacht.

Singer's solution is a scale of regular charitable donation starting at 1% of personal income below US\$100,000 per year, 5% between \$100-150k and increasing thereafter to a maximum of 33% of income over ~\$10m per year. A little arithmetic shows that even a fairly limited subscription to this modest standard would meet the funding requirements of the UN Millennium Development Goals several times over.

As a point of departure it seems reasonable. This is a rare book that is not only thought-provoking, but action-provoking. I've been swayed by Singer's arguments and have signed his online pledge (thelifyoucansave.com). The tap-water in Canada is amongst the cleanest in the world.

Ugh says

I am not part of the target audience for this book, and neither, I suspect, are you. I'll come to why later...

I do like the way Singer approaches his books - he starts out by telling you where you're going to end up, and then proceeds to take you to your destination in a clear and concise manner, dealing with likely objections before they arise as he goes - but reading this I thought for a while that we were heading squarely for a two-star rating, partly because of that target audience problem I mentioned at the start. Let me explain...

Singer starts out by stating the case for why it's morally wrong not to give, and give substantially, to those much less fortunate. But frankly, if any of what he says here hasn't already occurred to you, and subsequently seemed obvious and irrefutable, then what have you been thinking about all your life? He then goes on to tackle common objections to this view, which is a good approach, but few of the objections make you think "ooh, I wonder how Singer's going to refute THIS one!" when you read them - most of them are blatantly excuses right from the off. There are some interesting stats about foreign aid thrown in here, but mostly they're aimed at an American audience, which isn't what I'm referring to when I say you're probably not his target reader, I mention it just in case (like me) you aren't American...

Things pick up a bit in part 2, which is probably where I started to shift my opinion into three-star territory. Here Singer relates some of the psychology of giving, some of which may be familiar to you already but overall it's still quite interesting.

Part three, however, is definitely interesting, as Singer sums up attempts to determine how much it costs to save a life. Frankly, I was surprised. Not by how little it costs, but actually the complete opposite. Somehow I'd picked up the idea that donating twenty or thirty pounds or so to Oxfam was there or thereabouts enough to save a life, when in fact you'll see that that's not the case. Donate that much every month for a year or so and that's more like it...

It was when I got to part 4 that I realised just how far I was from being the target of Singer's arguments (although the extent to which he states the bleeding obvious in part 1 is a substantial clue). Here he sets out his guidelines for how much you should be giving based on your income. He considers the superrich, the rich, and the comfortable. How does he define comfortable? Anyone earning more than \$105,000 per year. Ooooookay. Anything less than that he doesn't really bother with - there's a sentence or two about giving around one percent of your income, and he keeps banging on about water bottles for us mere mortals, as if he doesn't realise that people refill them with tap water dozens of times before buying a new one, but that's about it.

So there I was at around the halfway point, all ready to recommend that you instead buy something else with many more pages than this and then donate the money you would therefore save overall (by not spending thick-book money on something thin) to charity, when it turned out that Singer was thinking more in terms

of yachts and supercars than paperback books and a dollar or two here or there.

And that is what I mean when I say that you're probably not his target audience. Yes, for a successful businessman or lawyer or doctor etc this book is a clear, concise, well reasoned, practical little handbook that ought to convince and may well set off a few light bulbs and therefore deserve four or five stars. For my imagined average user of GoodReads - already well read, thoughtful, probably not that well off (otherwise you'd be too busy drinking champagne and out of crystal goblets to bother reading this stuff) - it's a mildly interesting but largely redundant confirmation of things that you already figured out for yourself a long time ago...

Still, you can't fault his intentions.

Vegantrav says

This book underscores why Peter Singer is the most influential philosopher living today. He takes his utilitarianism very seriously, and the implications of this philosophy, if followed, would radically change our world for the better. In this book, Singer lays out the case for why those of us in affluent nations should be giving to charity to help the poor worldwide. What is actually most surprising to me is the final section in which he lays out the numbers: if the richest 10% of those in the US (and the equally wealthy worldwide) would give at higher levels than they do now but at levels that do not adversely affect their lifestyles, we could effectively end world poverty. Still, the burden should not fall on the richest 10% alone: most of us not in the top 10% of America's wealthiest (those of us earning less than \$102,000 annually) could still easily give far more than we do by simply giving up some of our more frivolous spending. This book provides an excellent case for being more generous and eschewing the oft touted American individualism (what I would actually call selfishness: for a literary example of this selfishness-as-a-virtue, see Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*); rather than looking out only for ourselves, we should be looking to help those less fortunate than us, and Singer's arguments here provide the basic moral and practical reasons for such altruism.

Worthless Bum says

This most recent work by my favorite philosopher is something of an expanded and up to date version of the ideas expressed in his seminal 1972 essay "Famine, Affluence, and Morality". The idea being, people in wealthy countries give pitifully small amounts of money to those in abject poverty in the third world - people who are so poor that their lives are in jeopardy - and thus they should give much more generously. Singer employs the familiar "Pond" thought experiment in adducing his argument, as well as the "Bugatti" thought experiment used in Peter Unger's "Living High and Letting Die", which was itself inspired by Singer's aforementioned essay.

I was already familiar with Singer's views concerning the ethics of world hunger through his previous books and essays, so I was already well aware of his argument and the objections to them, which he clearly lays out in the first section of the book.

Singer then goes into some detail describing the psychological difficulties posed by having very altruistic expectations for charitable donations. He then addresses the epistemic difficulty of determining which charities are the most efficient, and thus, which are most worthy of our donations. The different types of aid are

looked at and compared. This is, of course, an empirical matter requiring close attention and scrutiny.

Singer finishes up the book by asking how much people should really give, and comes up with a standard by which people of different income brackets donate different percentages based on how much they earn.

Hadrian says

A very utilitarian view of charity. If you can do something to help out others and save lives, you must. Those who live in the first world can, efficient charities can do good, therefore one must donate. He even suggests percentile values based on your income. Those with more can afford to give away more.

Some statistical analysis is necessary to make sure that the methods you donate to and the charity itself are worth your money.

Singer may be controversial for other reasons, but this book makes a whole lot of sense. Time to sign up for volunteer work.

Brenda Pike says

I feel bad giving this only three stars, because Peter Singer is my idol. And when I read the article it's based on in the NY Times, I was deeply affected by it. It prompted Jason and I to decide to increase our donations from 1% to 5% of our income once we pay off our student loans this year. But I don't think the book adds that much to the article, except length. Certainly not clarity. I was looking forward to a discussion of the most effective ways to improve the lives of the world's poor, and instead I got case studies of people who were moved to start their own charities. I don't think that the book was organized well (it meandered a lot), and I don't think he synthesized the ideas into concise points.

That said, I did come away with some good ideas. When we increase our donations, we're going to focus much more heavily on foreign aid rather than domestic, and look for charities that help people become self-sufficient by building infrastructure (wells, toilets, schools, hospitals) and giving microloans. And we're going to look at places like GiveWell, that analyze charities' effectiveness, rather than Charity Navigator, which looks more at the percentage of administrative costs. I also found some encouraging facts. I didn't realize that the number of people living in extreme poverty (less than \$1.25 per day) has dropped from 1.9 billion in 1981 to 1.4 billion today. And, since 1960, the number of children who die each year before the age of five has been reduced from 20 million to below 10 million. And that's with huge population growth in that time, too. It's nice to feel like we're not just throwing our money into a black hole--we can help.
