

Altruism and Happiness

When people learn what effective altruists have done, they often wonder what would lead someone to make so great a sacrifice for a stranger. But many effective altruists don't see what they are doing as a sacrifice at all. Holden Karnofsky touches on that in a blog post on "Excited Altruism," saying that he and Elie don't consider themselves unusually selfless or feel that they made a sacrifice in starting GiveWell. "Compared to when we worked in finance," he writes, "we find our work more interesting, more exciting, more motivating, and better for meeting people that we have strong connections with, all of which easily makes up for pay cuts that haven't much affected our lifestyles."¹ The effective altruists we met earlier do not generally see what they are doing as a sacrifice either. Toby Ord initially thought that living on £18,000 a year would be a sacrifice worth making because of the good he could do with the income he was forgoing. Later he realized that it wasn't a sacrifice at all because his sense of engagement in making the world a better place means far more to him than new gadgets or a bigger house.² Julia Wise, as we saw, sees her ability to save hundreds of lives as an "amazing opportunity" but demands no more of herself than she can cheerfully give. Ian Ross is familiar with psychological research about the "hedonic treadmill" of consumer spending, which shows that when we consume more, we enjoy it for a short time but then adapt to that level

and need to consume still more to maintain our level of enjoyment. Hence, he says, while donating doesn't give him much of a rush, he also doesn't think he is missing out on much. Charlie Bresler, the unpaid executive director of The Life You Can Save, has told me, "I truly do not believe in 'altruism'—I believe the life I am saving is my own and that I should have started doing this kind of work much sooner!"

Too often we equate making a sacrifice with doing something that causes us to have less money. Money, however, is not an intrinsic good. Rather than saying that something is a sacrifice if it will cause you to have less money, it would be more reasonable to say that something is a sacrifice if it causes you to have a lower level of well-being or, in a word, be less happy. Therefore, to determine whether effective altruists are making a sacrifice, we need to look at the chief determinants of happiness or at least at those that might be affected by the kinds of choices that effective altruists make. Recent psychological research shows that in this respect Holden, Toby, Julia, and Ian are not unusual. 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. Other things, especially warm personal relationships, contribute much more. One study calculated that for single people earning their society's median income, finding a domestic partner would give as big a boost to happiness as a 767 percent increase in income.³

Two groups of researchers have asked samples of Americans to estimate the happiness of people on low incomes. In one study, respondents were asked to estimate how much time people living on

less than \$20,000 a year spent in a bad mood; the other study sought opinions on the happiness of people earning \$55,000 and below. Both studies had data that answered the questions they were asking their samples to estimate. The former study found the estimated prevalence of bad mood was "grossly exaggerated," and the latter found that people "vastly underestimated" how happy people at the specified relatively low incomes were likely to be.⁴

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. An in-depth study of thirty-two families in Los Angeles found that three-quarters of them could not park their cars in their garages because the garages were too full of stuff. The volume of possessions was so great that managing them elevated levels of stress hormones in mothers.⁵ Despite the fact that the growth in size of the typical American home means that Americans today have three times the amount of space, per person, that they had in 1950, they still pay a total of \$22 billion a year to rent extra storage space.⁶ Are they happier for having so much stuff? Graham Hill has known both sides of this question. After selling an Internet consulting company, he bought a four-story 3,600-square-foot house and filled it with all the latest consumer goods. His enjoyment was brief; he soon became numb to his possessions and found that his life had become much more complicated. He now lives in a 420-square-foot apartment with a minimum of possessions and likes his life far better than before.⁷

Although using our income to buy more stuff does not make us happier, it turns out that using it to help others does. Elizabeth Dunn, Lara Aknin, and Michael Norton gave a sum of money to participants in an experiment, instructing half of them to spend it on

themselves and the other half to buy a present for someone or donate it to charity. At the end of the day, those who spent the money on others were happier than those who spent it on themselves.⁸ This result is in line with Gallup survey data. People in 136 countries were asked, "Have you donated money to charity in the last month?" They were also asked to rate, on a ten-point scale, how happy they are. In 122 of the 136 countries there was a positive correlation between having donated to charity in the past month and being at a higher level of happiness. The difference in the level of reported happiness between those who answered yes to the question about donating to charity and those who answered no was equivalent to the difference made by a doubling of income.⁹

The survey shows a correlation, not causation, and it seems that the causation can run both ways because people who are happy are more likely to give to help others.¹⁰ This observation led Aknin, Dunn, and Norton to ask whether recalling an act of spending to help others leads to an increase in happiness and whether this increase in turn makes people more likely to spend on others in the near future. They were able to show that there is a reciprocal relation between the two, producing a positive feedback loop that leads to more spending on others and greater happiness. The authors write that their findings might "have implications for individuals seeking to escape the hedonic treadmill" and offer "a path to sustainable happiness."¹¹

Many people accept the notion that money can't buy happiness and therefore that for people living in affluent countries on average or above-average incomes, giving money can bring benefits that outweigh the loss of spending power. But what of donating a part of one's body? Having surgery, taking time off to recover, and accepting a degree of risk to one's long-term health and longevity, all for a

complete stranger—even if the risk is small, isn't that still a sacrifice? Again, the evidence says it is not. In one study, seven people who gave nondirected organ donations (six kidney donors and one who donated a liver segment) were interviewed three months after the donation. Three of them had met the recipients of their donations and found this a satisfying experience. The other four had chosen to remain anonymous, but all said they were pleased with what they had done. None experienced psychological problems. According to the authors of the study, "On a scale of 1–10, with 10 being best, an average score of 9.8 was given in rating the overall donation experience while an average score of 10 was given to willingness to do it over again."¹² Sue Rabbitt Roff, who was a lay member of the Unrelated Live Transplant Regulatory Authority in the United Kingdom, reports that "every study of live kidney donors from Turkey to Scotland has reported enhanced self-esteem among the donors."¹³ If many kidney donors had to deal with major health problems because of their donation, then the enhancement to their self-esteem might be outweighed by the worse health outcome, but such health issues are, fortunately, very rare.¹⁴

Self-esteem is an important component of happiness.¹⁵ The Canadian philosopher Richard Keshen has developed a concept of reasonable self-esteem that fits particularly well with the mindset of effective altruists, given that, as we have seen, many of them rely more on their reasoning capacities than on their emotions. Keshen begins with the concept of a reasonable person—that is, a person whose defining commitment is to have reasonable beliefs about the world, about what is in her interests, and about what she ought to do.¹⁶ A reasonable person seeks to hold beliefs that are in accord with the relevant evidence and values that are not open to reasonable criticism by others. Here Keshen anticipates Thomas Scanlon's idea of

sound ethical decisions as those that others cannot reasonably reject.¹⁷ Granted, all this leaves open what values are reasonable, but at a minimum reasonable values are values that are not influenced by biased thinking and hence can be defended to others. To be a reasonable person is to be part of a long line of thinkers, stretching back to Aristotle, who appealed to reason and argument rather than to authority or faith. To the reasonable person, self-esteem must be based on evidence and reasonable values.

At the core of the reasonable person's ethical life, according to Keshen, is a recognition that others are like us and therefore, in some sense, their lives and their well-being matter as much as our own. Therefore the reasonable person cannot have self-esteem while ignoring the interests of others whose well-being she recognizes as being equally significant. The most solid basis for self-esteem is to live an ethical life, that is, a life in which one contributes to the greatest possible extent to making the world a better place. Doing this is not, therefore, altruism in a sense that involves giving up what one would rather be doing, nor does it involve alienation or a loss of integrity, as Bernard Williams claimed. It is, on the contrary, the expression of the core of one's identity. When Henry Spira, the pioneering campaigner for animals whom we met in chapter 5, knew he did not have long to live, he said to me, "When I go, I want to look back and say: 'I made this world a better place for others.' But it's not a sense of duty; rather, this is what I want to do. I feel best when I'm doing it well."¹⁸

If, as I have just argued, effective altruists are not making a sacrifice, do they deserve to be considered altruists at all? The idea of altruism always has in it the idea of concern for others, but beyond that, understandings can differ. Some interpretations imply a complete denial of one's own interests in order to serve others. On this

view, if the rich man were to do as Jesus told him—to sell all he has and give the proceeds to the poor—he would still not be an altruist because he was asking Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. Similarly, on a Buddhist view, helping others and protecting life advances one's own well-being too. If one can, through virtuous living and meditation, achieve enlightenment, one transcends one's ego and knows the sufferings and joys of every sentient being. There is no sense of loss in this transcendence of the quest to satisfy desires that previously seemed so important or of the pleasures that came from their satisfaction, for enlightenment involves detachment from one's desires.¹⁹

We do not have to make self-sacrifice a necessary element of altruism. We can regard people as altruists because of the kind of interests they have rather than because they are sacrificing their interests. A story told about the seventeenth-century philosopher Thomas Hobbes illustrates this point. During his lifetime, Hobbes was notorious because his philosophy was based on egoism, the idea that people always do what is in their interests. One day while walking through London he gave alms to a beggar. A companion immediately accused him of refuting his own theory. Hobbes replied that it pleased him to see the beggar made happy, so his gift was consistent with egoism. But now imagine that Hobbes did this all day, every day; that he actively sought out people in need and offered them assistance; to a point at which he reduced his fortune and lived more simply so that he could give more. He continues to explain his actions by saying that his greatest joy comes from seeing people made happier.

Is this imaginary Hobbes an egoist? If so, the claim that we are all egoists has been weakened to the point that it no longer shocks. On this understanding of egoism, the apparent dichotomy between

egoism and altruism ceases to matter. What is really of import is the concern people have for the interests of others. If we want to encourage people to do the most good, we should not focus on whether what they are doing involves a sacrifice, in the sense that it makes them less happy. We should instead focus on whether what makes them happy involves increasing the well-being of others. If we wish, we can redefine the terms *egoism* and *altruism* in this way, so that they refer to whether people's interests include a strong concern for others—it if does, then let's call them altruists, whether or not acting on this concern for others involves a gain or loss for the "altruist."

PART FOUR
CHOOSING CAUSES AND
ORGANIZATIONS