

Jakub Synowiec

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6357-6344>

## Temperance and prudence as virtues of an effective altruist

Temperance and prudence are virtues that boast a long and glorious tradition in the history of ethical deliberations. They used to be recommended by ethical authority figures, and as such might have born testimony to the nobleness of the person evincing them; nowadays, when the public life is dominated by consumerism, their realisation may be viewed rather as a proof of low social status. At the same time, over the recent years more and more well-

**Jakub Synowiec** – Ph. D., an Assistant Professor at the Department of Ethics, Faculty of Philosophy, the Pontifical University of John Paul II in Cracow. Scientific interests: ethical argumentation, personalism, Peter Singer’s philosophy, effective altruism. Selected publications: *Model argumentacji etycznej w etyce personalistycznej Karola Wojtyły i Tadeusza Stycznia*, Kraków 2014; *Ethics for Everyday Heroes – from Utilitarianism to Effective Altruism*, in: “Ethics & Bioethics” (in Central Europe) 6 (2016) issue 3–4, s. 147–156; *Jakie Peter Singer rzuca nam wyzwania*, in: *Etyka u schyłku drugiego tysiąclecia*, Warszawa 2013, pp. 215–228.

to-do people have decided to realise these virtues, consciously restricting their consumption, thereby causing public dismay. The present paper will address the issue of a contemporary philosophical and social movement that might rock the consumerist world to its foundations. Effective Altruism. The movement has its origins in practical ethics formulated in the spirit of utilitarianism. The aim of the paper is to reconstruct the meaning of temperance and prudence for the emergence and practice of life of effective altruists on the basis of publications by their most prominent representatives: Peter Singer and William MacAskill. Besides, an attempt will be made at corroborating the proposition whereby Effective Altruism can be an alternative to consumerism, and contribute to practising temperance and prudence in public life.

## Effective altruism

As late as the first decade of the 21st century the concept of effective altruism<sup>1</sup> did not have a clearly defined denotation. For the first time it took on its contemporary meaning in 2011, when the *Centre for Effective Altruism* was founded, but the concept was popularised only by Singer, who delivered a lecture on the subject during a TED conference in 2013.<sup>2</sup> The lecture can be viewed online in many languages, which makes for its great popularity.<sup>3</sup> Currently, Effective Altruism is above all about a growing community organised as followers of several websites and social media. This varied community is trying to put into practice the ideas of effective altruism, as well as engages in animated philosophical debates, thanks to which both the idea and the movement are dynamic phenomena with no definitive shape, and therefore defy any comprehensive approach or theoretical systematisation. Scientific studies describing effective altruism are thus far few and far between (even though effective altruists are very willing to refer to the research conducted in the field of various disciplines), and in the Polish language there is only one publication available, which is targeted at the general public rather than of a scientific character, the title being very revealing for that matter: *Podręcznik efektywnego altruizmu* [An Effective Altruism Handbook].<sup>4</sup> In the English language, which is the main language of the movement, two major publications have been produced: *Doing Good Better. A Radical New Way to Make a Difference*<sup>5</sup> by William MacAskill,

<sup>1</sup> When capitalised, Effective Altruism denotes a philosophico-social movement, and when spelt in lowercase characters – a philosophical idea.

<sup>2</sup> I quote the history of Effective Altruism after: *Podręcznik efektywnego altruizmu*, ed. R. Carey, joint translation, Warszawa 2015, p. 12. TED conferences (Technology, Environment, Design) are a popular series of short, several-minute-long speeches presenting in a lucid and accessible way current trends, new thoughts, ideas and inventions. The conferences are translated into many languages and are tremendously popular with Internet users.

<sup>3</sup> P. Singer, *Why and how of effective altruism*, [https://www.ted.com/talks/peter\\_singer\\_the\\_why\\_and\\_how\\_of\\_effective\\_altruism](https://www.ted.com/talks/peter_singer_the_why_and_how_of_effective_altruism) (accessed 17.09.2016).

<sup>4</sup> *Podręcznik efektywnego altruizmu*, op. cit.

<sup>5</sup> W. MacAskill, *Doing Good Better. A Radical New Way to Make a Difference*, London 2015.

and *The Most Good You Can Do. How Effective Altruism Is Changing Our Ideas About Living Ethically*<sup>6</sup> by Peter Singer. It is them that I chiefly refer to in this paper.

From the philosopher's perspective, the origin of Effective Altruism is edifying. Professional philosophers – given their pertinent diagnoses, opposition to thought and conduct patterns, development of ethical argumentation as well as a creative combination of research results from different fields – made a substantial contribution to the emergence of the movement. The role of the intellectual background to the movement and the “provider of the idea” is played by practical philosophy, constructed within the framework of utilitarian ethics, as well as Singer's philosophical reflection on help provided to the poor, which he has been working on for more than 40 years.<sup>7</sup> Besides, the emergence of effective altruism was enabled owing to the development of scientific research into methods of helping the poor and man's rationality.<sup>8</sup> Recent changes in the most affluent countries have also been of relevance: exponential growth in prosperity, increasing awareness of suffering afflicting other beings, as well as technological development allowing for quick transfers of means. The title of Singer's book might serve as the slogan that most succinctly encapsulates the idea of effective altruism – *The Most Good You Can Do*. According to this slogan, effective altruism is an attempt at changing the world into the best world possible. It is not only about improving the world, but improving it the best you can, that is directing one's altruistic efforts in a manner allowing for an optimal effect. The requirement concerned with the optimisation of the effect means that donors must abandon classical, impulsive manners of helping. Our good, emotional impulses to reach out to the needy must be subject to the control of

<sup>6</sup> P. Singer, *The Most Good You Can Do. How Effective Altruism Is Changing Our Ideas About Living Ethically*, New Haven–London 2015.

<sup>7</sup> The task of following the development of Singer's thought on providing aid to the poor, and studying its influence on the emergence and development of Effective Altruism is partially addressed in the paper: J. Synowiec, *Ethics for Everyday Heroes – from Utilitarianism to Effective Altruism*, “Ethics & Bioethics” (in Central Europe) 6 (2016) issue 3–4, pp. 147–156.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. *Podręcznik efektywnego altruizmu*, op. cit, p. 11.

reason. However, the control is not merely about theoretical reflection, but about application of scientific research with a view to choosing the most effective form of help. It is to be evaluated, in an evidence-based manner, which ones of our actions can bring about the most good. That, however, is not always precisely calculable, even if we employ such metrics as QALY.<sup>9</sup> The point is rather about certain estimates, which is usual in the case of utilitarian calculations, and one might arguably hold with Aristotle's view whereby the degree of exactitude proper to mathematical or physical calculations is not attainable or needed in ethics.<sup>10</sup>

### Charity controlled by reason

Theoreticians of Effective Altruism note that whenever we decide to benefit others, we more often than not act irrationally. This is diametrically opposed to our financial investments. William MacAskill suggests regarding help as an investment and provides an example of a company looking for an investor in the street and employing methods used by charities:

Imagine, for example, that you're walking down your local high street. An attractive and frighteningly enthusiastic young woman leaps in front of you, barring your way. She clasps a tablet and wears a T-shirt that says 'Dazzling Cosmetics.' You agree to speak to her and she explains that she represents a beauty products company that is looking for investment. She tells you how big the market for beauty products is, and how wonderful the products they sell are, and how, because the company spends over 90% of its money on making the products, and less than 10% on staff, distribution and marketing, the company is extremely efficient and therefore able to generate an impressive return on investment. Would you invest?

<sup>9</sup> *Quality-adjusted life year* – a unit of measurement enabling a comparison between medical interventions with regard to their effectiveness; it may also be used to compare charity programmes. Prolonging a healthy person's life by one year is equivalent to 1 QALY. The same effect can be achieved by improving the quality of life by 10% every year over the period of ten years. See W. MacAskill, *Doing Good Better...*, op. cit., pp. 39–44.

<sup>10</sup> See Arystoteles, *Etyka nikomachejska*, trans. D. Gromska, Warszawa 2008, p. 79, 1094b.

MacAskill is certain that no prudent person would invest their money on the basis of such campaigning. Investing money is always preceded by complicated analyses. Therefore, such methods of drumming up investment cannot be found in reality. Charity is different. Thousands of people support organisations they have never heard of just because they have been approached by some glib canvasser in the street, or because they have received an e-mail, a phone call, or seen a newspaper advertisement. Rarely do they reflect on what happens to the donated money, or what effects their help produces.<sup>11</sup> What is more, those who can expect support include crowds of anonymous beggars who rely on emotional impulses towards generosity. As we reach for the wallet, we do not consider how much good (if any at all) will be done to the supplicant by the donated money; we just want him out of our sight, because his presence is a reproach to us. We pay “a dime” to have a clean conscience.

Effective altruism focuses on various forms of aid and programmes, and on the basis of evidence chooses the best ones (and not only effective, but even efficient ones, i.e. producing the greatest good per one dollar). Helping local beggars in Poland is way down the list, because – irrespective of the programme effectiveness – it is hardly conceivable that such a manner of allocating our means is the way of using available resources that will benefit the world the most. Helping people in need in Poland, even if it is done by institutions that manage to effectively improve their lot, will certainly not be the best option for an effective altruist either. The needy in Poland are relatively poor in relation to the rest of the society, which cannot be downplayed, but if we compare them with the destitute living in countries in the poor south of the globe, then we can conclude that they should consider themselves lucky; after all it has been a long time since we last heard of someone starving to death in Poland. There are many institutions in Poland that help such people; it is easier for them

<sup>11</sup> Singer cites psychological research showing that individuals donating small sums are not interested in any effects; they do it to feel better. Sometimes they cannot even see that the costs of accepting their donation exceed its amount (in the case of supporting charity organisations with very small sums). However, individuals donating larger sums show interest in the effects of the aid they provide. See P. Singer, *The Most Good You Can Do...*, op. cit., p. 5.

to solicit support on account of our natural tendency to help people who are somehow close to us. Having weighed up the effects and costs, an effective altruist will conclude that the same amount of money will bring much more good in a less affluent country. However, mere helping the destitute living in a developing country is still too little to ensure that the help is effective. Charitable organisations and aid programmes differ substantially. Also in Africa there are charitable organisations that expend money ineffectively, and so research is conducted in order to assess the effectiveness of the programmes; for instance, it has been proved that the fashionable *playpumps* have decreased, instead of increasing, availability of potable water.<sup>12</sup> This type of research allows us to determine what is worth investing in, what actions will “squeeze” the most good out of every transferred dollar. Such research is not, however, free from controversy of both a substantive and ethical nature.<sup>13</sup>

Direct financial support is not the only possible form of aid. One characteristic feature of effective altruism is a quest for an optimal career path to be followed by individuals willing to make the world a better place. Special career counselling is developed as part of effective altruism. The website [8000hours.org](http://8000hours.org) (the name denoting an estimated and rounded-off number of hours that most people spend at work) is a portal that allows you to choose ethically motivated career. There are many ethically justified options, from among which you should choose one suited to your predispositions. One of the recommended choices is a highly-paid career. High pay allows you to donate large sums of money, which in turn means you can do a lot of good, provided that you support the most effective organisations. Peter Singer provides an example of a young man who concluded from utilitarian calculations that he could do more good by choosing a career in banking rather than academia.

<sup>12</sup> See W. Mac Askill, *Doing Good Better...*, op. cit., pp. 1–18. The idea of *playpumps*, “pumping roundabouts” driven by playing children’s muscle energy was so attractive to affluent societies that it raised considerable funds.

<sup>13</sup> There is no room in the present paper to elaborate on the issue, but it is partially addressed in the book: A. Leszczyński, *Eksperymenty na biednych. Polityczny, moralny i ekonomiczny spór o to, jak pomagać skutecznie*, Warszawa 2016, pp. 146–58.

Singer estimates that in the first one or two years he managed to donate an amount of money approximate to one that he could donate in his lifetime if he decided to give away 10% of his professorial salary.<sup>14</sup> Of course this means that the said effective altruist had it in him to take up the job. If you have the makings of a scientist, such a career might be better than any best-paid position. Developing a new vaccine or treatment, even if your contribution is limited, might produce far more good than earning a large sum of money. Also, one should not underestimate a career in research into the effectiveness of charity, the results of which will affect the allocation of donated resources.

Such traditional “ethical careers” as a charity or healthcare worker are not seen by effective altruists as obvious choices. Many people have the makings of a charity worker, so if we can choose a job thanks to which we can donate enough money to employ a few workers like this, then this reasoning suffices to show that such an option is better. Doctors in Europe earn a lot, so their donations can be generous, but the profession itself does not necessarily mean that they are going to save more lives than people following other professions. A lot depends on the specialisation, as well as the place in which one works – in the poorest countries every single doctor makes a huge difference. The origins of the movement show that considering a philosopher’s career is also worthwhile. Philosophers can effectively argue for effective altruism, encourage people to lead ethical lives, mould their attitudes, instruct them how to become champions of effective altruism.<sup>15</sup> As you consider different career paths, you must ponder which one will be best suited to your vocation so that it brings about the most good.

Effective altruists also think about what goals to pursue, or about tackling which problems might potentially produce the greatest good. Currently, the problems recommended for effective altruists

<sup>14</sup> See P. Singer, *The Most Good You Can Do...*, op. cit., pp. 3–4.

<sup>15</sup> In the paper *Ethics for Everyday Heroes – from Utilitarianism to Effective Altruism*, op. cit., pp. 147–156 I argue that the popularisation of ethical thinking may be the best strategy to be adopted by people earning their living in low- and middle-income countries, e.g. Poland.

include: global poverty, animal suffering caused by industrial livestock production, and protection of the existence of mankind;<sup>16</sup> however, the movement is open to other goals as long as there is argumentation whereby their realisation will bring the most good in relation to the costs incurred. The debate on the subject is very animated. There are essentially three criteria for choosing priority areas of action: *scale*, i.e. how many lives included in the moral calculation are affected by a given problem; *neglectedness*, i.e. how many resources are allocated to solve the problem; and *tractability*, i.e. whether the problem is solvable and the means allocated will make a difference. Effective altruists do not become involved with issues whose scale is small, e.g. supporting local communities or organisations devoted to saving homeless animals. As a rule, they avoid philanthropic activity that does not reduce suffering, e.g. supporting arts. Out of a number of really big problems selected are those that traditional charities address rarely or do not address at all (e.g. elimination of destitution, animal suffering at livestock production farms, or the issues concerned with existential threats to mankind). Not all large-scale problems suffer from a lack of interest, e.g. vaccinations or combatting global warming are problems that have gained a lot of traction, and programmes devoted to them attract substantial means, and so jumping on the bandwagon does not change much. There are also large-scale problems that attract meagre means, because in the light of state-of-the-art knowledge no amount of money or time could possibly help in solving them. The example that MacAskill provides is ageing, which accounts for about two thirds of deaths globally, and only a few researchers are grappling with the problem, because the research results obtained thus far indicate that there is no hope for solving it.<sup>17</sup>

By applying these criteria, Swedish philosopher Nick Bostrom was able to convincingly argue that global financial resources allocated to charitable goals should be channelled into the research aimed at saving mankind from a possible disaster. The future human population will be

<sup>16</sup> Cf. *Podręcznik efektywnego altruizmu*, op. cit., p. 25.

<sup>17</sup> See W. MacAskill, *Doing Good Better...*, op. cit., p. 226.



so sizeable that in the philosopher's opinion their salvation (effected by stopping the extinction of intelligent life on earth) will require means far superior to any aid we are able to provide for contemporary people.<sup>18</sup> Even though it remains to be an underfunded issue, progress in this regard is apparently possible; man's self-destructive capabilities are dramatically increasing, but on the other hand halting the anthropogenic disasters seems easier than, for instance, manipulation of celestial body motion. Although many contemporary philosophers regard humanity as the biggest problem afflicting our planet, effective altruists appreciate the value of intelligent life, reckoning the deliverance of mankind, also from itself, among the priorities.

Effective Altruism is not the first proposal for world optimisation put forward by philosophers. An attempt at creating a paradise on earth is fraught with the risk of an epic failure. Suffice it to mention failed attempts by Plato or the creator of the concept of altruism: Auguste Comte, while the world optimisation pursued by some continuators of Marx's thought is still horrifying. At the moment, Effective Altruism seems valuable on account of the proposed mode of life which is alternative to the consumerist one, and is targeted at helping others, rather than catering to one's ever-increasing needs. What is more, effective altruism promotes taking care not only of people in need, but all creatures capable of feeling pain, as well as... future creatures of this kind. Hence, it is one of the most demanding ethical theories.

Since we are dealing with a philosophical idea formulated by professional philosophers, effective altruism has been a subject of controversy from the very beginning. Therefore, its proponents are compelled to put intellectual effort into perfecting arguments in support of this position. Some commentators call attention to the weaknesses that Effective Altruism has inherited from utilitarianism, e.g. the inaccurate estimation of the results of our actions, especially in the long term. This

<sup>18</sup> See N. Bostrom, *Existential Risk Prevention as Global Priority*, "Global Policy" 4 (2013) issue 1, pp. 15–31.

accusation certainly serves to question the calculations concerned with the effect our aid will have on future people.<sup>19</sup>

Besides, Effective Altruism can also be viewed through the prism of the consumerist world logic and found to be another form of “buying oneself” something nice. All the more so because theoreticians of effective altruism in a way promote this kind of attitude by emphasising mainly the financial dimension of the aid. MacAskill even goes as far as to imply that one’s negative impact on the environment can somehow be offset by supporting the organisations that combat it, thereby making up for the noxiousness of a powerful engine with a donation made to an organisation fighting the greenhouse effect.<sup>20</sup> And although MacAskill explicitly writes that such a course of action is not a good way to compensate for suffering, it is easy to imagine effective altruism as a modern form of “buying indulgences” or at least buying a feeling of being a good, worthy man without regarding one’s life in its entirety. Also, a question arises to what degree effective altruism can be reconciled with other utilitarian world-views. Even though the movement is very anxious to stress its openness, and many of its postulates are in keeping with the Catholic social teaching,<sup>21</sup> the leading roles are played by utilitarians, and such projects as Christians and Effective Altruism do not enjoy much popularity. The concept of world change, which is promoted by utilitarians, presupposes a specific understanding of good – which is proper to the movement and can be appropriately defined as elimination of suffering – which from the viewpoint of other ethical positions appears

<sup>19</sup> The subject of obligations to future people is considered fascinating by philosophers, and interesting by effective altruists. Many research papers have been devoted to the subject; the discussion by Derek Parfit in the book *Racje i osoby* (Warszawa 2012, particularly pp. 403-410) is considered to be a classic. Recently, in Poland an attempt at systematisation of the discussion was made by Tomasz Żuradzki in the paper *Granice troski o przyszłe pokolenia*, “Diametros” 26 (2010), pp. 206-225, and by Wojciech Lewandowski in the book *Przyszłość i odpowiedzialność. Problem uzasadnienia odpowiedzialności za przyszłe pokolenia we współczesnej etyce*, Lublin 2015.

<sup>20</sup> See W. MacAskill, *Doing Good Better...*, op. cit., p. 174.

<sup>21</sup> On the possibility of collaboration between Christians and effective altruists see A. Liberman, *Effective Altruism and Christianity: Possibilities for Productive Collaboration*, “Essays in Philosophy” 18 (2017) issue 1, pp. 2-24.

to be a reductionist conception. A discussion of this concept, which is crucial for the movement, might serve to open it to other schools of ethics, especially to the thought inspired by Christianity, and thus make it more universal.

In response to Singer's book several philosophers have argued against effective altruism. The critiques have been gathered and convincingly refuted by Jeff McMahn in his paper entitled *Philosophical Critiques of Effective Altruism*.<sup>22</sup> There are reasonable grounds to believe that the next few years will be critical. If Effective Altruism is able to convincingly demonstrate that the enormous means that it has transferred to selected charities have really helped squeeze more good out of every donated dollar, then it will be a thoroughgoing success, or it will be doomed just like other great initiatives that for just a moment raised hopes of changing the world, e.g. OLPC<sup>23</sup> or the Millennium Villages Project.

### Prudence and Effective Altruism

In this part of the paper I will be trying to demonstrate that prudence is the key virtue of an effective altruist, and that Effective Altruism is in a sense a response to the postulates put forward by common sense with regard to charity. Common sense – as it is popularly understood – is a concept that generally has positive associations, though it is ambiguous and vague; what is more, philosophers have suggested disambiguating the term, but the results of the process are disparate. *Słownik języka polskiego* [A Dictionary of the Polish Language] defines 'common sense' as "the ability to accurately judge situations and behave in a manner matching the judgement,"<sup>24</sup> i.e. a capacity to reason, appropriately evaluate and

<sup>22</sup> J. McMahan, *Philosophical Critiques of Effective Altruism*, "The Philosophers' Magazine" 2016 issue 73, pp. 92–99.

<sup>23</sup> OLPC (One laptop per child) is a programme developed to overcome the IT divide in less affluent societies. The underlying assumption was to produce and distribute cheap, durable and user-friendly portable devices.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. *Rozsądek*, in: *Słownik języka polskiego PWN*, <http://sjp.pwn.pl/slowniki/rozs%C4%85dek.html> (accessed 18.09.2016).

choose a suitable course of action. Such a conception of common sense seems to correspond to the popular use of the term prudence in the Polish language.

In philosophy, there have been many suggestions as to possible conceptions of the term “common sense;” Kant’s differentiation between ‘common sense’ and ‘reason’ plays a crucial role here.<sup>25</sup> The English term *common sense* apparently corresponds to the Polish term of *zdrowy rozsądek* [sane reason]: a set of convictions shared and regarded as right by all people.<sup>26</sup> As we regard ‘prudence’ as a virtue of an effective altruist, we naturally refer to the philosopher who popularised the concept of virtue in its ethical sense: Aristotle. He reckons ‘prudence,’ or ‘practical wisdom’ (*phronesis*) among dianoethical virtues, belonging to the rational part of the soul. In *Nicomachean Ethics* the reader can find several expressions making his conception of prudence more specific. For instance, Aristotle claims that prudence is “a true and reasoned state of capacity to act with regard to the things that are good or bad for man,”<sup>27</sup> and prudent people can “see what is good for themselves and what is good for men in general, we consider that those can do this who are good at managing households or states,”<sup>28</sup> and last but not least “practical reason... [is] a reasoned and true state of capacity to act with regard to human goods.”<sup>29</sup> These thoughts of Aristotle’s appear to be in line with recommendations to be practised in life by effective altruists, who - as they set their sights on the goal: world optimisation - should be in a position to see what is good for other creatures. What is more, this is effected by, among others, good management of households and states.

What effective altruists might find problematic is Aristotle’s focus on “good for men in general” with the disregard for other creatures, particularly animals, for which care plays an important role in the movement. However, it must be taken into account that as we say “men,”

<sup>25</sup> Cf. J. Hartman, *Rozsądek*, in: *Słownik filozofii*, ed. J. Hartman, Kraków 2004, p. 194.

<sup>26</sup> J. Hartman, *Rozsądek*, in: *Słownik filozofii*, op. cit., p. 194.

<sup>27</sup> Arystoteles, *Etyka nikomachejska*, op. cit., p. 197, 1140b.

<sup>28</sup> Arystoteles, *Etyka nikomachejska*, op. cit., p. 197, 1140b.

<sup>29</sup> Arystoteles, *Etyka nikomachejska*, op. cit., p. 198, 1140b.

we certainly mean a different set of creatures than Aristotle and his ancient readers had in mind. For this reason it seems justified to accept that 'prudence' is "a true and reasoned state of capacity to act with regard to the things that are good for creatures that we take into consideration in our moral deliberations." Such a definition does not *a priori* exclude any creatures from the set of those whose good we should care for.

It is noteworthy that such an understanding of 'prudence' means that it is not only about some technical capacity to adequately suit means to a specific goal. It is rather about a particular goal, that which is "good for men," and there is a reference to good and evil, and so 'prudence' is characterised by a special ethical feature.

Reflection on the significance of prudence for effective altruists should begin with noting that when it was applied to "ineffective altruism," that is traditional forms of aid, it acted as discouragement of giving away at all. A great number of scandals concerned with aid organisation, and feature programmes prepared by the media have considerably eroded the trust placed in charities, as well as the belief in the genuineness of the intentions of individuals asking for help. All this has subverted the conviction that by providing help we do something good. Suffice it to say that many are of the opinion that it is better to throw some money into a hat held by someone who is "honestly" collecting for beer, than to give it to someone who says he is collecting for bread. Intellectual deliberation on aid has given rise to radical opinions by many philosophers and researchers who question the meaning of aid provided to developing countries. Such voices widely echo throughout the public sphere, and to some extent drown out the remorse felt on account of withholding aid. The voices sound more or less as follows: "It is injudicious to help, because we cannot accurately judge how our aid is used, what the effects are," or even thus: "the effects of our aid are bad/harmful to the beneficiaries."<sup>30</sup>

<sup>30</sup> A critique of charity can be found, among others, in the book: W. Easterly, *The White Man's Burden. Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done so much Ill and so Little Good*, New York 2006. Compelling arguments pointing to the ineffectiveness of aid are presented by Adam Leszczyński in the book: *Eksperymenty na biednych. Polityczny, moralny i ekonomiczny spór o to, jak pomagać skutecznie*, Warszawa 2016.

However, we can determine the conditions that aid needs to meet to be compliant with prudence. Capability to analyse the effects of the aid appear to be the main condition. This intuition can be found in the guidance commonly present in the public sphere: instead of giving money “for bread,” one should offer food to needy individuals who justify their request with afflictive hunger – money can be more easily misused.

The analysis of the effects of aid enables assessment of its effectiveness, that is the ratio between the costs and the effects achieved. In a case like this Effective Altruism is a fruit of prudence, because it promotes evidence- and analysis-based selection of goals and aid methods, as well as the capacity for assessment of the effectiveness of aid organisations, based on facts and analyses of a mathematical rather than emotional character. To satisfy the requirements of prudence, aid organisations must become transparent, just like financial institutions. In a case like this, practical ethics follows the standards of practical economics, because in both cases of crucial importance is an effective allocation of financial means.

The evidence of effective altruists’ mode of life as well as reflection engaged in by the movement theoreticians indicate that prudence encourages development of the virtue of temperance. As we regard the postulates of the practice of everyday life formulated by effective altruists, one might say that the recommendation as to observing moderation and practising prudence are closely related.

### **Temperance and Effective Altruism**

The aim of this part of the paper is to demonstrate that the virtue of temperance features in an effective altruist’s practice of life, and results from applying prudence to the most important resource that we have: our life. What is more, it appears that temperance is one of the basic ways of making the world the best of all possible worlds, and so of attaining happiness. The idea is not new, because temperance is one of the cardinal virtues and is understood as a virtue “that moderates the attraction of pleasures and provides balance in the use of created goods.

It ensures the will's mastery over instincts and keeps desires within the limits of what is honourable. (Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 1809). Many philosophers have recommended temperance, moderation, abstaining from excess, restraining one's needs, and controlling desires as the path to happiness, both in the immanent and transcendent concepts of happiness.

In Aristotle's conception each one of the virtues is a certain kind of temperance, the right measure between its peculiar extremes – excess and deficiency. What is more, according to Aristotle, it is with regard to us that each virtue is the right measure “determined by a rational principle, and by that principle by which the man of practical wisdom would determine it.”<sup>31</sup> Therefore, it appears that at least in Aristotle's thought observing moderation can be related to practical wisdom.

The virtue of temperance is a special case of observing moderation. As Aristotle relates it to pleasure, temperance is the right mean between insensibility and self-indulgence.<sup>32</sup> The Stagirite writes that as regards the temperate man, “the things that, being pleasant, make for health or for good condition, he will desire moderately and as he should, and also

other pleasant things if they are not hindrances to these ends, or contrary to what is noble, or beyond his means.”<sup>33</sup> He goes on to stress that the temperate man acts like this, because that is what the right rule prescribes. These deliberations by Aristotle appear to be akin to the postulates of effective altruism. Pondering that which is right leads to changes in life. However, such changes do not mean giving up pleasure in general,<sup>34</sup> and effective altruists are not encouraged to “give away all they have,” but to enjoy life in a manner that allows for sharing one's

<sup>31</sup> Arystoteles, *Etyka nikomachejska*, op. cit., pp. 113, 1107a.

<sup>32</sup> See Arystoteles, *Etyka nikomachejska*, op. cit., p. 115, 1107b.

<sup>33</sup> Arystoteles, *Etyka nikomachejska*, op. cit., p. 145, 1119a.

<sup>34</sup> Singer claims that if people were completely rational and able to impartially juxtapose our own and other people's interests, then they would sacrifice everything that is less valuable than human life to save people from destitution. But demanding that people act like this would be counter-productive - it would probably discourage aid. Therefore, I propose accepting the standards that people are ready for. See P. Singer, *Zycie, które możesz ocalić*, trans. E. De Lazari, Warszawa 2011, pp. 231–265.

goods with the neediest. It appears that enjoying life without taking into account one's share in making the world a better place is "contrary to what is noble." At the same time, an effective altruist should steer clear of the other extreme, which is shutting oneself off from pleasure, if that would make his life miserable.<sup>35</sup>

Singer openly advocates temperance, and already at the very beginning of his book *The Most Good You Can Do* he stresses that an effective altruist "lives modestly,"<sup>36</sup> devoting the whole third chapter to a temperate lifestyle. Thanks to practising temperance, even not particularly well-paid individuals reduce their pleasure only slightly, and they can considerably contribute to other people's happiness - if transferred to right organisations, money saved on unrealised and unnecessary pleasures normally engaged in by individuals living in affluent societies can save someone's life or restore their sight. What is more, sharing with others, and doing the most good you can makes your life meaningful, and is the path to happiness.

As we regard the contemporary world, one might get the impression that the postulate of observing moderation with regard to pleasure does not touch hearts or intellects of those who do not "feel compelled" by economic and social reasons. In the consumerist mode of life, temperance - understood as restraint in purchasing new goods and services, or fulfilling one's desires - can be viewed as something that stands in the way of happiness.

By propagating the idea of temperance, effective altruism stands in contradiction to consumerism seen as simply materialistic hedonism, that is unjustified pursuit of material goods and services, as well as judging the quality/meaning of life by material status. As she describes the contemporary trends in public life, Joanna Mysona Byrska writes: "the world of consumerism evaluates and passes judgments in terms of material goods that the individual possesses. More means better, and

<sup>35</sup> P. Singer, *The Most Good You Can Do...*, op. cit., pp. 29-30.

<sup>36</sup> P. Singer, *The Most Good You Can Do...*, op. cit., p. 4.



hence more valuable,<sup>37</sup> and elsewhere she adds: “The greatest quality of life is the one of the consumer who can consume expensive goods, in large quantities (with frequent changes of objects that he surrounds himself with) and throw away the excess (the remains).”<sup>38</sup> The stance adopted by an effective altruist is in contradiction with this logic. Applying reason to such experience data as different levels of affluence in wealthy and poor societies, or change in the quality of other people’s lives that can be effected by sacrificing relatively little – when coupled with recognition that the world needs optimising – results in rejecting the “magical world of consumption” in favour of the magic-less world of temperance that attracts with its power of logical necessity. Realisation of the virtue of temperance in an effective altruist’s everyday life involves limiting “wants” to essential needs, and conscious looking for those manners of meeting our needs that will produce the best effect in relation to the costs. Instead of choosing an exotic destination for one’s holidays and taking photos to impress social media friends, an effective altruist goes on holiday in order to rest, and looks for solutions that incur the lowest costs. Faced with the necessity to buy a car, an effective altruist will not go for a powerful SUV, the purchase of which is more often than not motivated by mere vanity, but will settle for a car suited to his real needs, that is one that will ensure efficient attainment of specific goals. Temperance in the fulfilment of automotive needs is also significant for “future people.” Instead of discarding things and replacing them with new ones, an effective altruist uses them as long as they are in good working order. Even when they are no longer fashionable, their definition is too low, or when the latest applications will not run. An effective altruist will also show temperance in cooking, e.g. giving up meat, especially if it was produced at industrial farms (consider reducing animal suffering), or preparing meals in a way that ensures nutritional values rather than caters to aesthetic or gustatory

<sup>37</sup> J. Mysona Byrska, *Odpowiedzialność konsumenta w świecie konsumpcji*, in: *Spółeczna odpowiedzialność gospodarki. Perspektywa interdyscyplinarna*, ed. S. Fel, Lublin 2014, p. 151.

<sup>38</sup> J. Mysona Byrska, *Wpływ wartości świata konsumpcji na sferę publiczną*, “Filo-Sofija” 15 (2015) no. 29 (2/I): Z problemów współczesnej filozofii, p. 107.

delights. Not wasting food may also be a consequence of temperance, which results from the fact that an effective altruist tries to effectively use the foodstuffs that he has bought.

Aristotle's perfectionist ethics saw practising temperance as a way of attaining virtues, and hence happiness. Effective altruism too sees happiness as the goal of practising temperance, but it is about happiness – by many viewed from the hedonistic perspective – of the greatest possible number of people taken into account. Temperance is manifested in the areas connected with the possibility of saving means to be used to optimise the world, as well as the ones in which we influence the lives of other creatures, including future generations. Since the motivation behind practising temperance is willingness to hand over additional financial means with a view to making the world a better place, in effective altruism this virtue has an economic dimension and essentially means thriftiness. However, it is not about thriftiness consisting in putting aside funds for more expensive delights, but a form of transcending the primacy of the “I,” restraining one's needs in order to help others fulfil their more basic needs. An effective altruist understands that if you have more, you can give more. This motivates him to work harder and save money. Then he can give the saved money to the needy, enjoying his life nevertheless.<sup>39</sup> The joy of life does not result here from the adoption of temperance as the objectively proper position, but from the feeling that it changes the world for the better, and temperance – voluntary renunciation of some pleasures – is in this case the means.

### **Towards rehabilitation of virtues**

Aristotle offered convincing argumentation whereby man could never find fulfilment in acquisition of material goods, even though a minimum

<sup>39</sup> The proviso that one should enjoy one's life is crucial for the idea of effective altruism. However, it also contains some extreme tendencies, e.g. a question whether an effective altruist can have children, if they generate costs. For more on what temperance in an effective altruist's life should look like see: P. Singer, *The Most Good You Can Do...*, op. cit., pp. 23–37.

amount of these is necessary as a means of attaining happiness.<sup>40</sup> Similar thinking is presented by Singer, an effective altruism theoretician, who for many years now has been pointing out that the consumerist lifestyle and looking for happiness in the selfish fulfilment of one's own desires cannot give people what they promise. They do not bring happiness, but rather the opposite, even in the case of the richest. According to the philosopher, true happiness can only be attained by living an ethical life oriented at other creatures' good.<sup>41</sup> Those who practise effective altruism can confirm that.<sup>42</sup> Once they began living for others, and practising self-restraint for the purposes exceeding self-interest, they found happiness and fulfilment unlike any they had known before. Charity may be associated with denying oneself something in order to give it to others, and so it might bring to mind suffering rather than happiness. Effective Altruism is about actions that benefit both the sides. That is perhaps why year in, year out effective aid organisations receive more and more money. According to the website [givewell.org](http://www.givewell.org) in 2015 the organisations recommended by the website received through its agency a total of approximately \$110 million (28.2 million in 2014; 17.5 million in 2013; 8.6 million in 2012).<sup>43</sup> Therefore, it appears that effective altruism is not only a way to make the world a better place, but also to promote prudence and temperance in public life. Changes in the lives of individuals inspired by and involved with effective altruism, effective aid programmes that change the poor's fortunes, a new look at charitable organisations, and last but not least, an enormous amount of resources that thanks to the idea have been transferred all go to show that philosophy is changing the world.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Arystoteles, *Etyka nikomachejska*, op. cit., p. 83, 1096a.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. P. Singer, *How Are We to Live. Ethics in an Age of Self-Interest*, New York 1997.

<sup>42</sup> Selected statements by effective altruists were collected and published by Singer in: P. Singer, *The Most Good You Can Do...*, op. cit., pp. 97–104.

<sup>43</sup> The data I cite come from Givewell.org: <http://www.givewell.org/about/impact> (accessed 17.09.2016).

## Abstract

### Temperance and Prudence as Virtues of an Effective Altruist

The aim of the paper is to analyze the importance of two virtues: temperance and prudence for genesis of the Effective Altruism and practice of life of effective altruists, on the basis of philosophical works of two main representatives of the idea and movement: Peter Singer and William MacAskill. In the first part of the paper genesis of the movement and its basic assumptions are presented. Then, the paper focuses on the role of temperance and prudence in both theoretical reflection on effective altruism and practice of life of people identifying themselves with the movement, with reference to Aristotle's understanding of the virtues. It is argued, that these virtues are crucial in the practice of life of an effective altruist. In the last part the paper focuses on the idea that Effective Altruism is in a sense an alternative to consumerism and can play a role in bringing mentioned virtues back into public life.

## Keywords

Effective Altruism, temperance, prudence

## Bibliography

- Arystoteles, *Etyka nikomachejska*, trans. D. Gromska, Warszawa 2008.
- Bostrom N., *Existential Risk Prevention as Global Priority*, "Global Policy" 4 (2013) issue 1, pp. 15–31.
- Easterly W., *The White Man's Burden. Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done so much Ill and so Little Good*, New York 2006.
- Givewell.org: <http://www.givewell.org/about/impact> (17.09.2016).
- Leszczyński A., *Eksperymenty na biednych. Polityczny, moralny i ekonomiczny spór o to, jak pomagać skutecznie*, Warszawa 2016.
- Lewandowski W., *Przyszłość i odpowiedzialność. Problem uzasadnienia odpowiedzialności za przyszłe pokolenia we współczesnej etyce*, Lublin 2015.
- Lieberman A., *Effective Altruism and Christianity: Possibilities for Productive Collaboration*, "Essays in Philosophy" 18 (2017) issue 1, pp. 2–24.

- MacAskill W., *Doing Good Better. A Radical New Way to Make a Difference*, London 2015.
- McMahan J., *Philosophical Critiques of Effective Altruism*, "The Philosophers' Magazine" 2016 issue 73, pp. 92–99.
- Mysona Byrska J., *Odpowiedzialność konsumenta w świecie konsumpcji*, in: *Społeczna odpowiedzialność gospodarki. Perspektywa interdyscyplinarna*, ed. S. Fel, Lublin 2014, pp. 149–158.
- Mysona Byrska J., *Wpływ wartości świata konsumpcji na sferę publiczną*, "Filo-Sofija" 15 (2015) no. 29 (2/I): *Z problemów współczesnej filozofii*, pp. 105–114.
- Parfit D., *Racje i osoby*, trans. W. M. Hensel, M. Warchala, Warszawa 2012. *Podręcznik efektywnego altruizmu*, ed. R. Carey, joint translation, Warszawa 12.
- Singer P., *How Are We to Live. Ethics in an Age of Self-Interest*, New York 1997.
- Singer P., *The Most Good You Can Do. How Effective Altruism Is Changing Our Ideas About Living Ethically*, New Haven–London 2015.
- Singer P., *Why and how of Effective Altruism*, [https://www.ted.com/talks/peter\\_singer\\_the\\_why\\_and\\_how\\_of\\_e/ective\\_altruism](https://www.ted.com/talks/peter_singer_the_why_and_how_of_effective_altruism) (17.09.2016).
- Singer P., *Życie które możesz ocalić*, trans. E. De Lazari, Warszawa 2011.
- Słownik filozofii*, ed. J. Hartman, Kraków 2004.
- Słownik języka polskiego PWN*, <http://sjp.pwn.pl/slowniki/rozs%C4%85dek.html> (accessed 18.09.2016).
- Synowiec J., *Ethics for Everyday Heroes – from Utilitarianism to Effective Altruism*, "Ethics & Bioethics" (in Central Europe) 6 (2016) issue 3–4, pp. 147–156.
- Żuradzki T., *Granice troski o przyszłe pokolenia*, "Diametros" 26 (2010), pp. 206–225.