

Doing Good Better by William MacAskill

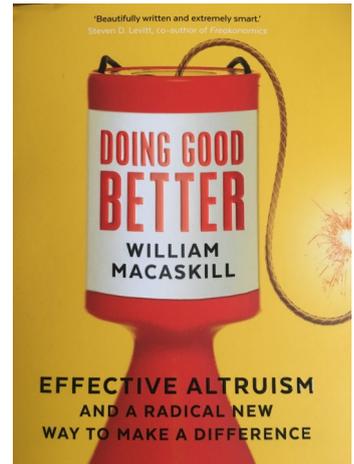
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Doing Good Better challenges us to make more effective choices about how we spend our time and our money. If, like most of us, you buy Fairtrade or give money to cancer charities, it might make you think again.

The book illustrates the complexity of some of the biggest challenges the world faces, and makes a good attempt at cutting through that complexity.

Although the book takes a scientific approach, it allows for value judgements and therefore differences of opinion. Which is good, because I certainly don't agree with all of the author's conclusions.

However, I do agree that adopting this approach of assessing the comparative effectiveness of actions could be a powerful way for you—and your organisation—to have a far greater positive impact.



“That we can't solve all the problems in the world doesn't alter in any way the fact that, if we choose, we can transform the lives of thousands of people.”

Summary / key points

We are the 1%. Anyone earning more than £34,000 a year falls into the top 1% of income-earners on a global scale. If you earn at least £18,200 a year, then you are in the top 5%. We are the global rich.

Programmes that seem to provide a great benefit don't necessarily have the greatest positive effect. We need to apply rigorous scientific principles to assess their value. For example, research has shown that providing more books for schools in Africa can have little effect on educational outcomes, although it feels like it should. The most cost-effective way to improve educational outcomes that William MacAskill has identified so far is to provide de-worming for school age children.

As well as considering positive outcomes, we need to consider what would have happened otherwise. For example, there is a programme in the US for troubled youngsters to visit prisons. With an initial review, the data looks positive; for those youngsters who visit the prisons, offending rates have dropped. However, comparing this data against data for those who have not had a prison visit shows that the offending rates of those not involved in the programme have dropped more over that period of time. Considering this new data, it looks like the prison visiting programme is actually having a negative effect.

It is vastly more cost efficient to give to people in poor countries. In fact, it is possible to benefit people in poor countries 500 times more than people in rich countries for the same financial input.

Fairtrade certification does not improve lives in the way that we might expect. We would do more good by buying less expensive products and donating the money saved to a cost-effective charity.

It is possible to effectively off-set carbon emissions at a cost of \$5 per metric tonne. For an average American adult, they could offset all of their carbon emissions for \$105 a year. This may be preferable to making significant lifestyle changes.

Action notes—what changes might you make, armed with this new learning?

Author notes

William MacAskill is an Associate Professor in Philosophy at Oxford University. He is also one of the founders of the Centre for Effective Altruism, Giving What We Can and 80,000 Hours.