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EFFECTIVE ALTRUISM IN OUR SOCIETY

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Abstract

In the present paper we aim to analyze two important ethical concepts altruism and generosity. Our research will focus on the philosopher Peter Singer's ideas of efficient altruism and generosity because we consider that his insight regarding this matter is adequate and realistic. How much money do we actually need in order to live at a decent level and how much we can dispose of in order to help other people and to increase the quality of life for everyone? In the second part of the paper we will refer to the situation in the Romanian contemporary society in which the multiples flows in the medical system is causing the necessity of important amount of donated money for medical investigation and treatments, mostly in foreign countries. It is clear that a generous attitude towards the other people (and not only people) can be an important source of personal satisfaction as well as a real salvation for the ones in need. We will mostly refer to the possibilities of donating in Romania taking into account the specificity of our social problems. At the same time, we are aware of the fact that we are not the poorest or the most helpless country and that Romanian people can also be generous with the less fortunate persons from the third world countries where children die of diseases that are now easily curable.

Keywords: effective altruism; generosity; morality; law; society;

1. INTRODUCTION

Even since ancient times, people have taken a special interest in identifying the origins of ethical and moral behavior, and have recognized the importance of complying with moral norms for the evolution and survival of society. The moral norms (dictated by the divinity, religion or the group leader) have always been essential to the proper functioning of human communities.

Almost everyone agrees that the essence of humanity contains a moral part. If initially, ethical issues were considered as belonging exclusively to the spiritual, rational, and not physical, part of the human being, the theories developed today by neurophilosophy and philosophy of science are directing in entirely new directions, if not opposed to the original ones. Several philosophers and neuroscientists, among which is Patricia Churchland, argue that "mammals — humans, yes, but also monkeys and rodents and so on — feel moral intuitions because of how our brains developed over the course of evolution. Mothers came to feel deeply attached to their children because that helped the children (and through



them, the mother's genes) survive. This ability to feel attachment was gradually generalized to mates, kin, and friends" (Sigal Samuel, 2019)

In Churchland's opinion, morality of human being is not a set of absolute true norms, but a set of rules that can keep a society or a group together. In order for the group to survive and prosper a certain amount of trust is necessary. The members must be trustworthy and keep their promises; otherwise no task can be fulfilled. Even though the idea that morality has a biological (neurological) origin can be shocking at first, it is undeniable that other animals show empathy, compassion and altruism for other beings. The fact that the origin of these emotions come from our brain does not diminish their value or importance: "there does not seem to be something other than the brain, something like a non-physical soul. So I think it shouldn't be that much of a surprise to realize that our moral inclinations are also the outcome of the brain. Having said that, I don't think it devalues it. I think it's really rather wonderful. The brain is so much more extraordinary and marvelous than we thought. It's not that I think these are not real values — this is as real as values get!" (Churchland Patricia, in the interview took by Sigal, 2019).

Churchland also offers a definition of morality as being "the set of shared attitudes and practices that regulate individual behavior to facilitate cohesion and well-being among individuals in the group. Social practices regarding how to get along create expectations that figure into decisions about what to do. Expectations concerning how others will almost certainly behave and react entail energy relevant efficiency in decision making, and failed expectations may generate a sense of something being wrong or at least amiss." (Churchland Patricia, *Conscience, the Origin of Moral Intuition*, New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2019, p. 169).

Over time, philosophers have identified positive emotions and the satisfaction of the human being who keep to moral norms, giving proof of altruism and generosity. Just that, traditionally, these values were considered rather spiritual and not pertaining to the physical body, the biology. According to Plato, Aristotle and Christian ethics, the good is objective, a value in itself, independent of any context, situation or being. On the other hand, in the concept of utilitarians the good is subjective, in relation to the beliefs or desires of individuals. And so on, the list with opinions and arguments related to the nature of morality and good may continue.

One of the philosophers concerned with morality and answering the question of "what should I do?" Was Immanuel Kant who considered that "our demands of knowingness are limited to the natural world, but we have no reason to believe that the natural world is the only one. [...] people are moral beings capable of action, and they could not live if they were not considered so. The concept makes sense as long as it is based on the assumption of free will. Kant holds that the latter and causality are compatible, provided that human freedom - the capacity to act autonomously, not be considered an aspect of the natural world. " (O'Neill Onora, *Kant's Ethics*, editor Singer Peter, *A Companion to Ethics*, First Edition, 2006, pg. 206). Kant's concept is original as it is based on a moral law called the categorical imperative: "it acts only according to that maxim through which you can also want it to become a universal law" (Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Moral*, 1972, pg. 29) and to always treat humanity, that is, every human being, as a purpose in itself and never merely as a means.

Finally, despite the great diversity of ethics developed by philosophers or theologians, we all agree that a morally correct social conduct is necessary. As Peter Singer noted in the afterword of the *A Companion to Ethics* paper, whose editor is, "it would be easy to regard ethics as a discipline in which, since ancient times, the proponents of opposing views have entered into endless disputes without any prospect of settlement. After all, does each culture have its own ethical tradition, being in a hopeless disagreement with all the others? and are there, even within the narrow framework of modern Western philosophical ethics, irreconcilable differences concerning what is good or compulsory? Even worse, philosophers cannot even agree upon what we do when we launch such ethical judgments: if we describe some kind of moral reality or express our own attitudes, prescribing what is to be done. " (Singer Peter, *Afterword*, in: Editor Peter Singer, *A Companion to Ethics*, First Edition, 2006, p. 573)

Values such as: justice, freedom, equity, altruism and generosity are good simply because they make our lives better, easier and, according to Peter Singer, that is what we must concentrate on. The nature or origins of these values are issues that, probably, will not be solved in a manner that everyone agrees on. The purpose of applied ethics is to move forward theories and never ending discussions and get to what each of us can actually do in order to live better and help others live better and this is what we will try to analyze in this paper.

2. SOCIETY, DEMOCRACY AND EFFECTIVE ALTRUISM

According to Wikipedia altruism is "the principle and moral practice of concern for happiness of other human beings and/or animals, resulting in a quality of life both material and spiritual. It is a traditional virtue in many cultures and a core aspect of various religious traditions and secular worldviews, though the concept of "others" toward whom concern should be directed can vary among cultures and religions. In an extreme case, altruism may become a synonym of selflessness which is the opposite of selfishness." (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Altruism>)

Peter Singer says that altruism is based on the idea that "we must do the most good we can" (Singer Peter, *The Most Good You Can Do, How Effective Altruism is Changing Ideas About Living Ethically*, Bucharest, Litera Publishing House, 2017, p. 19). It is not enough to respect the law and not harm others in any way (by stealing, killing, cheating and so on). We have to actually do all we can in order to improve other people lives. "An ethical life at a minimum acceptable level implies the use of a substantial part of the resources that thrive us to make the world better. A fully ethical life means to do as much good as possible. " (Singer Peter, *The Most Good You Can Do, How Effective Altruism is Changing Ideas About Living Ethically*, Bucharest, Litera Publishing House, 2017, p. 19).

Effective altruism is a way of living for some people who organize and donate significant parts of their lives and resources in order to do good to others. They may use their money, talent or work in order to help others and save lives. Effective altruists keep to themselves only what they need in order to live at a decent level and give everything else to others whom are in need of money, medicine etc.

Some of Peter Singer's books abound in examples of people who either have drawn from the applied ethics courses, or have felt themselves the need to act so and consistently donate much of their income to charitable organizations, working in such organizations to do good for as many people as possible, donated one kidney to strangers, and so on. All these selfless people feel great satisfaction that they can, through their effort, make the world a little better place.

Among the questions Singer is trying to answer is the following: what type of society and what kind of economy make possible the most significant occurrence of effective altruism? And the philosopher's answer is that the greatest development of effective altruism can take place within democratic societies with a capitalist economy. Although capitalism does not totally exclude poverty, nevertheless, through it, the general standard of living is higher, and some people may get to earn very large amounts of money which they can subsequently donate for charity.

This idea of keeping for oneself only the amounts of money needed to ensure a decent standard of living and of donating the remaining looks a bit like the communist slogan: 'from each according to his/her availabilities and to each according to his/her needs'. But another form of government other than democracy implies the fact that the distribution of the goods or amounts earned is done by those who lead authoritatively (and, for the most part, arbitrarily and abusively) excluding the possibility for individuals to donate as much and to whom they consider to be more appropriate. But effective altruism implies a free and individual decision to do good to others or to save the lives of strangers.

In his book, *Democracy and Disobedience*, Singer accomplishes a lucid and complex analysis of democracy and the individuals' obligations to observe the law and social order. In totalitarian regimes, an individual is entitled to violate the law since, many times, it is abusively and unfairly imposed upon him. On the other hand, democracy, ie the exercise of power by a group of people nominated by free, secret and equal vote, is much more permissive as regards the popular initiative. If a law is improper or unfair, members of the society have available legal levers to request its amendment. That is why democracy is preferable: any of us can get involved and act legally in order to amend or recall an unfair law.

Peter Singer argues that democracy is a fair compromise and " can be justified by virtue of the procedures with which decisions are made. These procedures involve a fair compromise among the alternative positions from which a choice is to be made. It gives everyone involved in the decision - making process an equal opportunity to influence the final outcome by allowing their views to be heard; everyone is allowed to explain their position and justify why it is worth adopting. Thus, the final decision represents the best and the fairest compromise that can be achieved when all the known factors are considered" (Policarp Iquenobe, *Introduction to Peter Singer, Democracy as Fair Compromise*, http://homepage.westmont.edu/hoeckley/Readings/Symposium/PDF/201_300/235.pdf)

The basic and original model for democracy is direct democracy. Even though the representative democracy is far more realistic as a model for any society, by choosing a small number of people whom will govern us for a certain period of time, decreases very much the level of individual implication. Singer very well noticed that “the idea of representative democracy implies representatives who will take the place of or are present instead of others. Representative democracy is therefore in the virtue of the meaning of the term a substitute for something else, and that something else can only be direct democracy.” (Singer Peter, *Democracy and Disobedience*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973, p. 106). And, as for any society to function properly is necessary that the individuals obey the law, another question arises: which one is entitled to make us obey the law: direct democracy or representative democracy? Singer feels that the right answer for that question is that direct democracy would be the correct answer as the representative democracy is a very difficult concept. To what extent the representative actually sustains and harmonizes the very different opinions of all the people he/she represents? To a quite low level actually, so, we return to the idea that, at the moment, democracy seems like a fair compromise, as most of the decisions are taken by voting and the final result is chosen by the majority, even if sometimes it is clear that majority is wrong.

On the other hand capitalism seems to be the best type of economy for the largest number of people. Even if capitalism doesn't eliminate poorness, it helps increase the level of life for a significant amount of population. If democracy is our best solution, it comes along with the capitalist economical system. Capitalism was, down the ages, subject to a large number of criticisms, on the ground that it does nothing but richens a small number of people while others (the majority) remain just as poor. But from the perspective of efficient altruism, the fact that some become wealthy or very wealthy is a good thing, for they will donate much of what they earn to the poor or in need. However, a totalitarian regime, involves a small number of wealthy people who also possess the power and who are unwilling to share neither power nor wealth with those less lucky than them.

Holding the benefits of capitalism, Singer states the following "Capitalism seems indeed to deepen inequality, but that does not prove that it really pushes people towards extreme poverty since inequality goes up when the rich become richer and the poor remain as poor, or even when the poor earn something, but not as much as the rich. [...] It is not clear whether the increase in the wealth of the rich, without the poor becoming poorer through this, has overall negative consequences. It is getting easier for the wealthy to help the poor, and some of the richest people in the world, including Bill Gates and Warren Buffett, have done this exactly, becoming, through the amounts of money donated, the greatest effective altruists in the history of mankind. " (Singer Peter, *The Most Good You Can Do, How Effective Altruism is Changing Ideas About Living Ethically*, Bucharest, Litera Publishing House, 2017, p. 79-80)

While it is true that there are very poor people in capitalism as well, however, this system has enabled hundreds of millions of people to go out of a state of extreme poverty. From the analysis of the economic situation of individuals in capitalism, it rather resulted that the number of the poor decreased and not the opposite. The philosopher's conclusion is that, until now, no one has succeeded in giving an alternative economic system that proves to be more efficient than capitalism.

3. EFFECTIVE ALTRUISTS IN ROMANIA AND ELSEWHERE. THE POWER OF EXAMPLE

Effective altruism is different from normal altruism because effective altruists are guided by the principle “do the most good you can”. This means that the effective altruists, whom want to spend a certain amount of money on charity, will document and choose the best way to help the biggest number of people and so on. While a normal altruist will just look around and give his money, talent or effort on a random case of charity, the effective altruism will search and make sure that every amount or money, talent or effort is spent in the most effective way.

Peter Singer offers in his book “The Most Good You Can Do, How Effective Altruism Is Changing Ideas About Living Ethically” a lot of examples and names of trustworthy charity organizations. So, if you want to help others, by reading this book you can actually find out a lot of ways and methods that will insure a good spending of your money and effort. I find these documentations very good because the power of the good example and the right information can actually improve a lot all the good that anyone can do.

As we are social beings it is clear that the behavior of others around us influences us. In the book we mentioned above, Peter Singer presented effective altruists from around the world, but a significant number of the charity cases were made by the students whom attended his classes of ethics or by himself and his family. Several students decided to attend classes of ethics in order to find a way to do the most good they could. Others changed their normal life style and became altruists by attending these classes.

So, it is probably easier to become an altruist when you see others around you doing it and feeling good about it and, actually not suffering for giving away to charity a significant part of their time and incomes. In a very recent study— *Ethics Classes Can Influence Students Behavior* (<https://schwitsplinters.blogspot.com/2019/07/ethics-classes-can-influence-student.html>) presented at the Society for Philosophy and Psychology, 2019 meeting, Peter Singer and his colleagues have argued that by attending classes of ethics and listening to argument pro vegetarianism, the students were inclined to by less meat. And we think that the same thing is valid with charity and donations.

We think that the arguments presented by Patricia Churchland and others philosophers and scientists that it is in our nature to be empathic and help, that our moral behaviour has a biological origin are valid and, also, precisely because we are able to feel empathy, seeing others do good inspires us to also do it or do it in the same way. So, basically, seeing others around us do the most good they can is an inspiration for us to also do it.

Romania people are generally known as generous, welcoming and altruists. But as our society in not as well organized as the American society or the West Europeans ones, it is clear that our altruism has different ways of manifesting. Effective altruism is not so powerful in Romania, but altruism and donations are to be met. Unfortunately, our medical system has a lot of gaps and a lot of treatments for severe and incurable diseases are not insured by the state so the patients and their families are obliged to organize public campaigns in order to gather the necessary amount of money for expensive treatments, usually outside the country. And this is how charity is done in Romania (mostly). Of course we have charity organizations but, many times, people choose to make their own campaigns to raise money on the internet, usually on Facebook. I myself have donated money directly to mothers with ill small children that needed treatment for cancer and got it in Italy or Turkey and fortunately those children are doing well now. For me the personal example and the tragedy of the event described by the mothers and fathers was the trigger to altruist behavior. I confess I didn't put aside an amount of money and then looked for the best way to spend it, but when I saw the pain that a mother and daughter went through (I am a mother of a daughter) I reacted and helped. Now, after reading Singer' arguments I begun to think if maybe, Romanian society could be better organized in the donation compartment. Surely, it is place for a lot better. In Romania there are NGOs and other form of charity associations which are concentrated to help ill people, pour children and so on. But it seems that many of them are not trustworthy enough and most people prefer to donate directly to the ones in need, rather than to organizations. Of course that this is not a scientific conclusion but rather an observation made by analyzing what happens in our society.

A recent example of Romanian charity action is the one where people are getting together for helping Mr. Vintilă Mihăilescu, a well known Romanian professor of antropology. He suffers from an incurable disease and needs a transplant and very expensive treatment which he is given in France. He has a public facebook page (www.facebook.com) which is edited and administred by some of his students. In order to help him, were organized a lot of events and a quite big amount of money was gathered quickly. On the 5th of July, on this page, the professor posted the following information: "The President of the Besançon Tribunal signs us some transcripts of legal acts, and when she finds out we are Romanian and we have no French insurance, she looks up to us and asks us with obvious compassion on where to get all that money. - We already have a group of over 4,000 people who donated and ... - my son starts explaining to the judge. - All my admiration for this solidarity! In France, I do not think that would be possible... I have not commented, I have only accepted the sincere admiration of a French court president and I will send it to everyone, hence, from Besançon. I have no more words ..."

I don't know to what extend are altruist the people of France, but I think that they don't have these kind of money problems in order to receive normal medical treatments and probably their charity is guided in other directions. In Romania, even doctors tell patients and their families to appeal to charity and go abroad for treatment. Unfortunately, this is our situation now. Romanian people are very giving, especially if the patient is a small child and there are a lot of groups and pages on Facebook (for example, *Împreună pentru Eva – Together for Eva* etc. – www.facebook.com).

4. CONCLUSION

Maybe our effectiveness in matter of altruism is focused on the particular problems of our society and we are more inclined to help people we know or heard of rather than to give money to organizations that will decide how to spend it better. The way we donate reflects our realities and that is a fact we must accept. Probably in time, as we will get to a better developed society (economically speaking) we will also be more effective and opened to donate more. Maybe we will learn that all lives are equally valuable and deserve the best chances to medical treatment, education and level of life. And when we will get to that point we will keep for ourselves only what we need to live decently and give the rest to others.

Helping people you know and donating for familiar causes is a source of satisfaction. But is there a satisfaction or any happiness when you donate money for somebody totally unknown? Asks Peter Singer. And the people who answered said yes (Singer Peter, *The Most Good You Can Do, How Effective Altruism is Changing Ideas About Living Ethically*, Bucharest, Litera Publishing House, 2017, p. 131-133). Those who live by the principles of effective altruism feel very good about their actions and don't think of them as sacrifices.

"Perhaps we imagine that money is important to our well-being as we need them to buy consumer goods, and shopping has become an obsession that prevents us from understanding what exactly brings us well-being. A detailed survey carried out on 32 families in Los Angeles reached the conclusion that three-quarters of them could not park their cars in garages since they had too many things stored there. [...] Are they happier for having so many things? " (Singer Peter, *The Most Good You Can Do, How Effective Altruism is Changing Ideas About Living Ethically*, Bucharest, Litera Publishing House, 2017, p. 133-134). Most probably not. Buying as many things as possible does not bring up the happiness of individuals.

Also, those who donated a kidney or part of the liver to strangers did not regret that deed later. The level of satisfaction in regard to such a donation remained high, especially through the fact that donors did not subsequently have a health problem that would make them regret the gesture. We are talking here strictly about those who made such donations to strangers, not to family members.

Singer argues that self-esteem is a more significant component of happiness than earning and spending some amounts of money. Thus, effective altruists have more reasons to be happy than those who have earned the same amounts of money, but kept them only for their personal expenses.

Therefore, if we want to live a life with the highest contentment and to be as happy as possible, it is advisable to choose the professional activities we enjoy, to earn as much money as we can and to keep for us and our families only as much as we need for living peacefully and decently.

The remaining of the money, time, effort and talent should be invested in the interests of the others, whether we are talking about people from poor countries, sick children, defenseless animals or any other good cause. It is in the human nature to have an empathic and altruistic behavior, and the more we let this side of ours develop, the more we will enjoy life and the world we live in.

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