Interview with Brian Tomasik

Robert Wiblin (https://80000hours.org/author/robert-wiblin-2-2-2-2-2/) on November 10th, 2012

Brian Tomasik (/members/brian-tomasik) is a member of 80,000 Hours who has spent many years thinking and writing essays about how to most effectively reduce suffering in the world. Research Director Robert Wiblin sat down with Brian (metaphorically) to learn about his intellectual journey and at times unusual conclusions.

(http://www.sccs.swarthmore.edu/users/09/btomasi1/Bellevue2012Pic.jpg)

What were the initial influences that led you to care about doing as much good for the world as possible?

I grew up in a family that cared about social issues. However, I wasn't terribly interested in them myself until late 2000, when I saw a speech by Ralph Nader at a local college. Nader's speech wasn't just about politics narrowly defined, but also about the extraordinary amounts of suffering (or, in his words, "injustice") in our world and the amazing ability that young people have to make a difference — especially educated young people living in the most powerful country on the planet. Inspired by Nader's example, I became a really good student, and I led many social-activism clubs and projects at my high school.

Later, in spring 2005, I heard the word 'utilitarian' and didn't quite know what it meant, so I looked it up. I was delighted to discover that there was a name for the philosophy of cost-benefit analysis applied to happiness and suffering that I had been following for the last few years. I soon found utilitarian.net (http://utilitarian.net/) and read Peter Singer's work on animals. Previously I had believed that non-human animals couldn't consciously suffer, but Singer persuaded me otherwise, and it soon became obvious that animal suffering was the most important current issue due to its sheer scale. This is true even when we consider just animals raised for food — there are ˉ24 billion livestock (http://www.utilitarian-essays.com/number-of-wild-animals.html) at any given moment and at least a trillion fish (http://felicifia.org/viewtopic.php?f=23&t=544) slaughtered per year but is even more the case if we count wild animals, which outnumber domestic animals by many orders of magnitude.

What were the first steps that you took in the direction of effective altruism?

There's not a black-and-white distinction between effective and less-effective altruism, so I wouldn't say that it began at a single point. During high school, I was really struck by statistics about how the number of preventable deaths due to mundane causes were orders of magnitude higher than deaths due to things like terrorism that people worry so much about.

Around 2005, the altruistic value of money became very clear to me. I remember reading one optimistic estimate that $500 spent on certain HIV-prevention programs could save a life, and similar suggestions were echoed in Singer's writings. I also began thinking about "replaceability'" in career choice — i.e., that if I get a salary while working at a do-gooder nonprofit, it means someone else won't be filling that role. (The details of replaceability considerations are more elaborate, which is why Benjamin Todd has now written a whole thesis on the subject!) So, while I had originally assumed I would pursue a life as an activist or policy analyst in the future, I began to see the merits of making money to donate (http://www.utilitarian-essays.com/make-money.html). I talked about these ideas with many friends and wrote an editorial on the subject for my school newspaper, and as it turns out that is what I've ended up doing so far.

… And what are you doing now?

After a lot of career exploration and research, I decided I wanted to focus on statistics and machine learning. I'm in the Core Ranking division [of Bing, the Microsoft search engine], which tries to improve the relevance of the 'ten blue links" (i.e., the main algorithmic search results). Not only is the work interesting (it's a lot like being a scientist, without the messy lab work), but the atmosphere, daily schedule, and culture of the team allow a lot of freedom for me. I even have a treadmill in my office that I use for a few hours a day while working. And the pay is quite good, which is important from the perspective of Earning to Give.

Microsoft has a "matching contributions" program that doubles any donation I make to a tax-deductible charity up to $12K per year. This is one of the more generous matching programs I know of. Each year, I max out this limit by donating to Vegan Outreach (http://www.utilitarian-essays.com/vegan-outreach.html) and The Humane League (http://www.thehumaneleague.com/), and sometimes I give a little extra. The remainder of my income that doesn't go toward taxes, rent, food, and other costs of living is divided between donations to a donor-advised fund (so that I can get more tax deductions without committing to a charity just yet (http://felicifia.org/viewtopic.php?f=23&t=123)) and buying stocks as personal savings (in case I need to spend money on projects that aren't part of a 501(c)(3) at some point in the future).

Do you find it difficult to maintain your commitment?

The answer is "no, I don't find it difficult," but this isn't due to any great powers of will on my part. Caring about the suffering of others and wanting to do something about it just come naturally, for which I'm very lucky. I'm not enticed by material possessions or expensive adventures, and my family was a little bit poor while growing up, so I am naturally frugal.

Reducing suffering has been my main priority in life for ˉ12 years, and I don't expect the feeling to die away any time soon. That said, you can't always control where your emotions take you, so it's important (http://reducing-suffering.blogspot.com/2010/04/salience-and-motivation.html) to embed yourself in social and environmental situations that will reinforce your motivation. Becoming friends with like-minded people, such as the members of 80,000 Hours or the contributors to Felicifia (http://felicifia.org/), can be extremely helpful, both because we learn from each other and we keep each other interested in topics that matter. It can also be useful to build altruism into your personal identity, so that you'll feel more intrinsic motivation toward it and will be less likely to let it go. Donating earlier rather than later can be a good step in this regard — also because it gets you into the habit of giving and ensures that you don't have loads of spare cash that you might be tempted to spend — although I recommend considering a donor-advised fund or even private trust if you expect your wisdom to improve (http://felicifia.org/viewtopic.php?f=23&t=206##p1578) over the coming years faster than the social rate of return on the donation.

How do those altruistic efforts intersect with your relationships with friends, family and colleagues, or your other plans in life?

Activism has definitely enhanced my friendships. Caring about suffering inspired me to talk to lots more people than I would have otherwise, both because (a) it showed me how important it is to learn from other people in order to improve the accuracy of your world-views and (b) talking with others is an opportunity to get them excited about crucial issues. Probably ˉ200 of my friends on Facebook I've met through nothing other than our shared interest in altruism. I find that with altruism, there's an abundance of fascinating people that I want to meet and talk to about all kinds of topics.

It's interesting how people sometimes struggle to find activities that will allow them to "meet people" (going bowling, hanging out in bars, joining fishing clubs, or whatever), yet I find that with altruism, there's an abundance of fascinating people that I want to meet and talk to about all kinds of topics. I have no trouble starting conversations or feeling engaged with the discussions. As Ralph Nader has said, "sometimes the best social life is a civic life."

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Religious and spiritual lecturers often talk about "living for a higher purpose," and I don't doubt that working to reduce suffering taps into the same neural circuits. It's quite possible that I'm happier and more fulfilled than if I had never thought about suffering and was still playing video games. (But probably not too much happier, in light of the hedonic treadmill (http://www.hedweb.com/hedethic/hedonist.htm).)

I have noticed that online you are extremely courteous and friendly when discussing altruism and ethics with others. Is this a conscious effort or just your personality? Do you have any advice on what attitudes make our ideas persuasive and community attractive to others?

Why thank you! This comes mainly from personality but involves some conscious effort, and these two components feed on each other over time.

Almost always I mean what I say. I honestly love the fact that people are interested in debating important ideas, even if I don't agree with those ideas. At the very least, people deserve props for saying whatever they think, so that the rest of us can learn more about their psychology. So when I reply "Interesting point, Rob" or "Bill, thanks so much for the comments," I'm being genuine, and this response comes naturally.

What's more, I find that being friendly actually helps me to be less biased. When someone posts an argument with which I disagree, there can be an immediate reaction against it and a desire to find fault. But when take a step back and think about what the argument gets right, I often see at least a sliver of merit to it, and so when I reply to say where and how much I agree with my interlocutor, this not only makes the conversation more positive, but it makes it much easier for me to change my own mind about the issue.

Finally, yes, I do find that being polite is often the best way to "win friends and influence people." I highly recommend Dale Carnegie's classic book from which that phrase is taken. It's interesting that some of the principles of friendship that Carnegie elaborates are similar to principles of rationality as expressed in places like LessWrong. For example, Carnegie's advice to "Let the other person save face" is not unlike Eliezer's "Leave a Line of Retreat. (http://lesswrong.com/lw/o4/leave_a_line_of_retreat/)" Both recognize that people need to feel emotional safety before they can consider changing their minds. There are some other nice books on the psychology of social change besides Carnegie's, including Change of Heart (http://humaneconnectionblog.blogspot.com/2011/01/psychology-of-social-change-nick.html) by Nick Cooney.

I think probably it's good when our community doesn't pretend to have all the answers and occasionally admits to being fallible humans rather than perfect saints, although there's no need to dwell on this excessively. I also recommend being thoroughly honest, continuing to seek better answers, focusing on important issues rather than minor details, and having a whole bunch of fun in the process. When we have fun doing good work, it shines through and can be infectious.

You started a popular website utilitarian-essays.com (http://utilitarian-essays.com). What is the story behind that, and what impact do you think it has had?

My 11th-grade English teacher introduced me to formal philosophy and assigned his class to write a short philosophical essay each week. I got into the habit so much that I kept writing philosophical essays after the course ended. Eventually I had a collection of them that I shared with friends, and in 2006, when I first contacted David Pearce (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Pearce_(philosopher)), he encouraged me to put the essays online. He gave me my website for free and he and his IT guru James Evans continue to host it without charge to this day.

Creating this website was the best thing I've ever done from the perspective of benefit-per-unit-cost. Since 2007, the site has had 120,000 unique visits, including ˜23,000 during 2012 alone (or about 120 per day). This is just something I did in my spare time, so I imagine that more focused web development and social marketing could have many times the impact in spreading awareness of issues like wild-animal suffering (http://www.utilitarian-essays.com/suffering-nature.html).

You currently make your own charity recommendation, to an organisation that promotes veganism and animal liberation. How did you conclude that that was the best option?

I recommend (http://www.utilitarian-essays.com/vegan-outreach.html) donating to Vegan Outreach (http://www.veganoutreach.org/) and/or The Humane League (http://www.thehumaneleague.com/), especially for people in the US, for whom the donations are tax-deductible. In immediate terms, these organizations prevent a huge amount of suffering for farm animals. For example, The Humane League can use marginal donations to fund advertisements promoting vegetarianism so called 'veg ads' – which I conservatively estimate (http://www.utilitarian-essays.com/veg-ads.html) to prevent ˜120 days of suffering on factory farms and 20 additional fish deaths per dollar. The number could plausibly be several times higher. However, I think the much bigger reason to fund veg outreach has to do with wild animals. Suffering in the wild is orders of magnitude greater than all other suffering on Earth.

That said, in addition to promoting ethical sympathy for animals, we also need to make it clear that preserving and spreading natural habitats is not necessarily a good thing for animals, and in fact is probably net harmful (http://www.utilitarian-essays.com/suffering-nature.html), especially when we consider that nearly all animals die painfully within a few days of being born on account of r-selective reproduction (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/R/K_selection_theory). For this reason it will be important to create an organization that popularizes the suffering of animals in the wild specifically, and I plan to switch my donations to this group when it arrives. In the meantime I do think 'veg outreach' is extremely efficient, and it reaches a huge audience of people who may not be ready for "stranger" ideas about our ethical obligations to, say, minnows dying from parasitism.

What are you planning for the future?

I'm very excited by the rise of possibly the first animal-welfare metacharity, Effective Animal Activism (http://www.effectiveanimalactivism.org), which assesses the cost-effectiveness of different interventions focused on reducing animal suffering. I helped advise the founders of the organization this past summer, and I'm continuing to support its growth. We've had some promising early successes encouraging more donations to The Humane League and Vegan Outreach and spreading knowledge about the best ways to campaign for vegetarianism. We're currently looking to find a full-time Executive Director for the organization.

Next year I also plan to support another new nonprofit called Animal Ethics. It aims to research and raise awareness about the ways in which animals suffer at the hands of humans but also in nature. The focus on suffering in the wild is what will make Animal Ethics unique compared against all existing animal charities, and we hope to begin shedding more light on this long-neglected topic.

In general, the growth of the effective-altruism movement in the last 1-2 years has taken my breath away. Earlier it had seemed like I was just one of a few close friends on utilitarian forums and email threads making plans for more concrete altruistic organization in the long-term future; now it appears those plans have already begun happening, much faster than I ever expected. The growth of membership in the movement has been explosive, and I can't any longer keep track of all the amazing projects that are going on. Seeing this makes the haste consideration (/2012/04/the-haste-consideration/) more viscerally salient. I'm super-excited for what the future of the movement to reduce suffering effectively will look like.

It has been great talking to you!

Thanks to Leah Ginnivan for help with editing.

You might also be interested in:

- Announcing the launch of Effective Animal Activism (/2012/08/project-launch-effective-animal-activism/)
- Donating toward Efficient Online Veg Ads (http://www.utilitarian-essays.com/veg-ads.html)
- Felicifia: global utilitarian discussion (http://felicifia.org/)
- Brian's essays on applied utilitarianism (http://www.utilitarian-essays.com/)

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Robert Wiblin
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