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The life you can save

The Fray's "How To Save A Life" is based on a real-life experience of one of its composers, Isaac Slade. And no, despite how some people may interpret this tune, there does not appear to be any direct allusions to suicide within the lyrics. That is to say that the singer is not really referring to 'saving a life' in a literal, physical sense. Rather to him what this term equates to is the individual at hand – who is indeed woefully depressed and alienated – coming clean, accepting his mistakes and moving on constructively with his life. Or as the vocalist puts it, ideally this person "will admit to everything". And the alternative isn't that he takes his own life. Rather it is more akin to the singer's friend remaining in his established self-destructive mode, with the singer himself regretting his decision to intervene in the first place. And yes, this song is based on an act – or perhaps more so we can ideology – of intervention. Once again going back to Isaac Slade, he decided to volunteer for an organization that deals with troubled teens. While there, he was paired with one who was not only a drug addict but also practiced physical self-harm. And due to such disturbing behaviors, dude had been ostracized by his family, friends and even best friend, the latter of which really depressed him. Slade had decided to intervene in the life of this individual for a weekend. He did his best verbally – and one can even say faithfully – to positively impact his life. And it is that interaction which these lyrics are fundamentally based on. And considering how serious the situation is, yes, it could be put forth that the title alludes to saving a life literally. But all things considered, it does not necessarily connote a person committing suicide – rather more along the lines of said individual wasting himself gradually. Meanwhile based on the actual wording of the song, the singer puts it into the context that he is rather dealing with "a friend", i.e. someone he's been associated with for a long time, as opposed to the setting mentioned above. But once going back to the concept of intervention, it is the singer who decides that this same individual needs a good talking to. And from the onset there is a sense of pessimism on the narrator's behalf that such will not be successful. For the two of them are not on the same page, apparently due to the friend not being truthful. But this is not because he is a bad person. To the contrary, it is "fear and blame" which is preventing him from confronting his past and indeed present. Then the singer's next objective is to present himself as a credible mentor pertaining to the matter at hand. Verily, he is quite confident that he does "know best". And he extends said understanding to anyone who is objectively out to achieve a similar goal, i.e. bravely instructing another individual to his or her betterment. And the primary challenge at hand is gaining his mentee's trust while at the same time not giving this person the impression that everything is all good. So he proceeds to delineate the problems he perceives in the person's life to him. Indeed the situation reads like he has constantly been in his ear about said issues. Then the singer also incorporates a little bit of prayer on his friend's behalf. It has been noted that The Fray are in fact a band consisting of dedicated Christians. But even beyond that, the narrator's decision to do so – and to encourage his friend to do the same – would also be representative of his overall feeling of hopelessness, i.e. the perceived need for divine intervention in this situation. Then it is in the third verse that the story concludes as aforementioned, with the narrator leaving his buddy to make his own choice concerning the future. Meanwhile the chorus is indicative of how the singer feels about his own role in the grand scheme of the matter. And basically, he believes that he himself has failed. The reason the narrator is under such an impression is slightly touched upon in the song. And the said reason has something to do with him apparently at one point becoming so 'bitter' with his friend that he excommunicated him as opposed to practicing this same type of intervention when the time was riper to do so. And at the end of the day, what the title is actually symbolic of is the vocalist having learned a valuable lesson along the way, which is "how to save a life". In other words, the narrator concludes that if he had taken his friend's condition more seriously and sympathetically from the jump – and acted accordingly – then that person would not have degenerated into the unsavory state which he is currently in. This is the title track from The Fray's maiden album. And The Fray is a rock band hailing from Denver, the capitol of the state of Colorado. This track was officially released, via Epic Records, on 13 September 2005. And it also acted as the second single from the album it shares its name with. This is considered to be The Fray's signature or at least most-successful song, as it performed impressively in a number of ways. For instance, it peaked at number 3 on the Billboard Hot 100 and remained on said list for 58 weeks straight. It also appeared on six other Billboard charts (including the Christian Songs listing), in the process topping three of them: Adult Alternative SongsAdult Contemporary The Adult Top 40 In addition to the above, it earned fourth place on the UK Singles Chart. And it charted in approximately 20 nations overall, achieving multi-platinum status in the US and Italy. Moreover it holds the distinction, as of 2015, of being one of the top 5 rock songs in terms of digital sales (coming out around the time digital songs just started taking off), having moved almost 5,000,000 copies electronically. And along those same lines it should be noted that "How to Save a Life" (the album) did take home a 2006 Billboard Music Award, being named Digital Album of the Year. In 2007 this song also earned The Fray a Grammy nomination, specifically in the category of Best Rock Performance by a Duo or Group with Vocal. However, it lost to a Red Hot Chili Peppers' tune entitled "Dani California". Greatly contributing to the success of "How to Save a Life" is the fact that it has been featured quite prominently on "Grey's Anatomy", a popular television show which itself focuses largely on a group of lifesavers. In fact one episode of the show, which aired in 2015, was even named after this song. But even prior to that, it could be argued that the track buttressed the series just as much as vice versa. Other well-known TV programs which have utilized this tune include Scrubs (another show about medics) and Big Brother UK. At the time of the release of this track, The Fray's lineup consisted of vocalist: Isaac Slade Dave Welsh Joe King Ben Wysocki Dan Battenhouse (who had left the crew in 2004) There are actually four official music videos to "How to Save a Life". Two of them feature clips from "Grey's Anatomy". However, neither of them are what is considered the primary one out of the bunch. Rather that would be the third music video created, which the well-tenured Mark Pellington directed. And the track was written by the two primary members of the band, who would be Joe King and Isaac Slade. Meanwhile the producers of "How to Save a Life" (the song and album) are Mike Flynn and Aaron Johnson. Image 1 of Teaching at the Right Level Africa We do the research to make sure your donation has the highest impact With our theory and your action, we can strategically work together to end extreme poverty Our recommended charities In partnership with In times of crisis, the most vulnerable often face the greatest risks. Recent funding suspensions are disrupting essential services in some of the world's most fragile regions. From maternal health to disease prevention, these interventions save millions of lives each year. Strategic action is urgently needed to fill critical gaps and ensure life-saving programs continue to protect those who need them most. DONATE NOW Explore our list of carefully selected charities making a real impact on poverty. Learn about the critical issues they tackle and the measurable results they achieve. Our Evaluation Framework helps us identify the most effective organizations and interventions, ensuring your donation has the highest possible impact. Our Recommended Charities Recommended This fund is our recommended option for donors because it leverages the power of all of our research and evaluations so that your gift will have the highest impact with a defined strategy against multiple characteristics of extreme poverty. All the causes we address in our other funds are funded within the Maximize Your Impact Fund. Managed by our team, this fund supports charities and interventions with a demonstrated impact. maximize your impact fund The best charities can be hundreds or even thousands of times more impactful than others. Get philosopher Peter Singer's book, The Life You Can Save, for free as an eBook or audiobook. High-impact giving, made simple. Get the book We exist because one person brought together action and philosophy. Since our founding in 2013, our community of donors have gifted more than $100 million to fund interventions across the multiple dimensions of extreme poverty. Learn how reading philosopher Peter Singer's book led a former executive to co-founding this organization, helping you make the most effective donations possible in the fight against poverty. ABOUT US "Thanks to your work, we likely donate more to charity than we would otherwise, and it is highly likely that our contributions do more to ease suffering in the world than if we researched individual charities ourselves." "Thanks for helping me feel more confident about giving. I am aware of the phenomenon of toxic giving, also wasted giving, so sometimes am not certain how to proceed. Your organisation helps." "I felt so small and helpless in view of all the problems and The Life You Can Save has given me the confidence that I can do something worthwhile and given me the guidance how to do it." Loading… Living Goods supports and trains local community health workers, the majority of whom are women, to deliver lifesaving medicines, health education, diagnoses, and health products to millions of people who need them in Burkina Faso, Kenya, and Uganda. They focus especially on preventing and treating the leading causes of child deaths. Read more > By Kiki Arochas, Staff Writer Trigger Warning: Deals with themes of substance abuse. "Anyone who has lived through it, or those who are now living through it, knows that caring about an addict is as complex and fraught and debilitating as addiction itself." So writes David Sheff in his book Beautiful Boy: A Father's Journey Through His Son's Addiction. He refers to the constant dissonance that accompanies caring for an addict. The hope that one has for recovery, squashed by the despair of a relapse. The love that they feel for the person, coinciding with the anger they inevitably experience. The mixed emotions of rage and pity, frustration and patience, understanding and confusion, acceptance and denial. The Fray's hit "How to Save a Life," a song you inevitably heard in a car ride some summer in your childhood, tackles the beginning of the journey of caring for an addict: having the conversation. Starting a dialogue. Something isn't right here. We are worried about you. Step one, you say we need to talk He walks, you say sit down, it's just a talk The grownup of a thousand emotions begins with a single phrase. The confrontation has begun. He smiles politely back at you You stare politely right on through "Staring politely" symbolizes the inherent awkwardness of the exchange. Now that you have his attention, what do you say? Starting is always the hardest part. Some sort of window to your right As he goes left, and you stay right There is a divergence in the conversation. The dialogue is going nowhere; you and your friend cannot seem to find common ground. "Right" also serves as a double entendre here. In addition to serving as the opposite of "left," it can also be taken in a different sense of the same word – you stay right, you stay to what is true, what is right. He goes left, to what is false, back into his denial of the severity of the situation. I also loved this interpretation from Genius.com: "As a person who has been in the 'we need to talk' position this line also means that the person is trying to change the subject, because they don't want to talk about it. It is your job as the person trying to talk them down to stay adamant and keep talking about this subject. Hence 'and you stay right' line. -lilmusicgeek." This interpretation adds a layer that the addict, deep down, understands the truth of your words – that is why rather than deny your words like the first interpretation, he attempts to distract you instead. Between the lines of fear and blame You begin to wonder why you came As the conversation devolves into a blame game, compounded by the fear of the implication of your words, you begin to wonder whether you should have even done this to begin with. Where did I go wrong? I lost a friend Somewhere along in the bitterness In the chorus, the narrator pulls out of his conversation with you, the listener, and remembers when he himself was in the same situation: having a friend who was an addict. In his case, though, he failed to act, caught up in the "bitterness" – the feelings of anger and betrayal he had toward his friend. And I would have stayed up with you all night Had I known how to save a life The narrator, with this hindsight, would have done anything necessary, would have heard his friend out, if only he had known he could have been the catalyst toward his recovery. The narrator now comes back to addressing you, the listener, in the next steps to speak to an addict. Let him know that you know best 'Cause after all, you do know best The redundancy of "knowing best" speaks to the inherent egotism behind the advice you're giving – or at least, the egotism that can be perceived. "Who am I," you might think, "to tell my friend, or anyone for that matter, how they should live their lives?" But that is the point. You do know best. As uncomfortable as it is, your friend is going down a dark path. You need to snap him out of it. Try to slip past his defense Without granting innocence You must try and break through to him using empathy, while also not allowing him to deflect blame. Balancing both is quite the juggling act, but it must be done: being too antagonistic can cause him to become defensive, and therefore the words will not get through to him, while conceding to any of his points may allow him to ignore his own wrongdoing. Lay down a list of what is wrong The things you've told him all along Make very clear what it is you are seeing. Don't skirt around; rip the band-aid clean off. It's the only way he may hear you. And pray to God he hears you And I pray to God he hears you The redundancy here speaks to the desperation of the situation. At a certain point, there is nothing left to do but pray; blindly hope you can get through to him. The song then repeats the chorus again, before entering into the final stages of the process. As he begins to raise his voice You lower yours and grant him one last choice Your words are beginning to have an effect. Now he has retreated into defense; yelling in denial of the truths you are laying out. You keep your cool, and set down an ultimatum: Drive until you lose the road Or break with the ones you've followed He can either break this habit, or break with his friends. You've laid it down very bluntly: you must choose between the drugs or us. It's your choice. He will do one of two things He will admit to everything Best case scenario; he breaks. He admits he has a problem. Although the journey is far from complete, the most vital and difficult step has been taken: speaking the problem into reality. Now the steps can be taken toward recovery. Or he'll say he's just not the same And you'll begin to wonder why you came Or, the circle will continue, and he'll deflect your ultimatum by continuing to dance around the issue. You are back at square one; what was the point of all of this? Where did I go wrong? I lost a friend Somewhere along in the bitterness And I would have stayed up with you all night Had I known how to save a life The chorus repeats for the rest of the song as the narrator compounds his regret at having not saved his friend. Maybe, hopefully, things will turn out differently for you. Maybe you can make a difference now that you know how to save a life. Where did I go wrong? I lost a friend Somewhere along in the bitterness And I would have stayed up with you all night Had I known how to save a life How to save a life How to save a life… Jump to ratings and reviewsIt is 2021 and the world has experienced unimaginable suffering, death and despair. The pandemic has had a devastating effect on global extreme poverty and harrowing scenes from around the world continue to leave us shocked. As the pandemic rages on, it's natural to ask: how can I help? Peter Singer – often considered to be the world's most influential living philosopher– answers this question in The 10th Anniversary Edition of his seminal book, The Life You Can Save. This book will inspire and empower readers to ACT NOW and SAVE LIVES. Moreover, the ebook and the audiobook (narrated by mission–aligned celebrities including Stephen Fry, Kristen Bell, Paul Simon and Michael Schur!) is available to all readers for FREE on The Life You Can Save website. In The Life You Can Save, Peter Singer compellingly lays out the case for why and how we can take action to provide immense benefit to others, at minimal cost to ourselves. Using ethical arguments, illuminating examples, and case studies of charitable giving, he shows that our current response to world poverty is not only insufficient but morally indefensible. And he provides practical recommendations of charities proven to dramatically improve, and even save, the lives of children, women and men living in extreme poverty. The Life You Can Save teaches us to be a part of the solution, helping others as we help ourselves. 748 people are currently reading24252 people want to readPeter Singer is sometimes called "the world's most influential living philosopher" although he thinks that if that is true, it doesn't say much for all the other living philosophers around today. He has also been called the father (or grandfather?) of the modern animal rights movement, even though he doesn't base his philosophical views on rights, either for humans or for animals.In 2005 Time magazine named Singer one of the 100 most influential people in the world, and the Gottlieb Duttweiler Institute ranked him 3rd among Global Thought Leaders for 2013. (He has since slipped to 36th.) He is known especially for his work on the ethics of our treatment of animals, for his controversial critique of the sanctity of life doctrine in bioethics, and for his writings on the obligations of the affluent to aid those living in extreme poverty. Singer first became well-known internationally after the publication of Animal Liberation in 1975. In 2011 Time included Animal Liberation on its "All-TIME" list of the 100 best nonfiction books published in English since the magazine began, in 1923. Singer has written, co-authored, edited or co-edited more than 50 books, including Practical Ethics; The Expanding Circle; How Are We to Live?, Rethinking Life and Death, The Ethics of What We Eat (with Jim Mason), The Point of View of the Universe (with Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek), The Most Good You Can Do, Ethics in the Real World and Utilitarianism: A Very Short Introduction. His works have appeared in more than 30 languages.Singer's book The Life You Can Save, first published in 2009, led him to found a non-profit organization of the same name. In 2019, Singer got back the rights to the book and granted them to the organization, enabling it to make the eBook and audiobook versions available free from its website, www.thelifeyoucansave.org.Peter Singer was born in Melbourne, Australia, in 1946, and educated at the University of Melbourne and the University of Oxford. After teaching in England, the United States and Australia, he has, since 1999, been Ira W. DeCamp Professor of Bioethics in the University Center for Human Values at Princeton University. He is married, with three daughters and four grandchildren. His recreations include hiking and surfing. In 2012 he was made a Companion of the Order of Australia, the nation's highest civic honour.Displaying 1 - 30 of 862 reviewsSeptember 8, 2013I chose to read Singer's book because I've often wanted to do more for the world's poor, but I want to do so in an informed way and see to it that my money is going to be used in a meaningful way that does not have politically or religiously motivated strings attached. I've tried to research charities before, but quickly became frustrated with the the lack of solid evidence as to their efficacy that even the most well-known charities couldn't (or wouldn't) provide. So I was already sold on the idea of giving to those in Third World countries, but didn't really know how to do so. I hoped Singer's book would offer me some practical advice as to which organizations to give to and some information regarding the difference these organizations are making. The first part of the book is dedicated to making the philosophical case for our responsibility as a wealthy, industrialized nation to give to help end worldwide poverty. This part of the book I would give more of a 3 star rating, namely because this was a part of the book that I didn't really need. I was already convinced; I just wanted to know how. However, there are some interesting tidbits that explain our psychological and social aversion to giving, which helps explain why so many of us can turn a blind eye to the world's poor. For example, if we're on our way to work and a small child is drowning in a nearby lake, almost all of us would rush out to save the child. We wouldn't worry about being late to work or about risking our own life; we would simply act because we know a child's life is in danger. And yet 1 in 5 children living in Third World countries die before the age of 5. We know that, but statistics don't move us to act in the same way witnessing one particular child whose face we can see and whose voice we can hear can. An argument that I found compelling in this part of the book is his case against the "give close to home" idea. While Singer is not advocating that we do nothing for those in our community (indeed, he does argue that we need to be more involved in our communities and give more of our time and resources to volunteering), he does argue that there is a difference between what poor in America looks like and what poor in Ethiopia, Nepal, or the Congo looks like. Whereas 1 in 5 children die before the age of 5 in impoverished countries, 1 in 100 children die of poverty in the U.S. (and, yes, that is definitely too much, but it does show where our money can do the most good). The American poor still have access to education, health care, and social services. 3/4 of their households have a car, air conditioning, and a VCR or DVD player. 97% of them own a color TV. American poverty has its own set of challenges and setbacks, but, as Singer points out, it's not necessarily the kind of poverty that kills as viciously and indiscriminately as it does in the Third World.The last part of the book is the part that I found most effective for my purposes and, for those of you who are like me and just want some practical advice on how and to whom to give, you might want to skip ahead to this part of the book or you may just want to visit GiveWell.org, a website that reviews the effectiveness of various charities and advises as to which ones are efficiently making a true, quantifiable difference in the lives of the poor. I've already chosen two charities that I'll be giving to: The Fistula Foundation and The Small Enterprise Foundation.What I found interesting about many of the negative reviews is that the number one reason cited for disliking the book was "it made me feel guilty about not doing more." Well, no shit, Sherlock. And, frankly, you should. I should. We all should. 1.4 billion people live on less than $1.25 a day--the Starbucks coffee I drank while reading this is approximately someone's salary for 4 days of work. If I have to skip the occasional Caramel Macchiato or bottled water or pair of shoes to help save a life, it's hardly a sacrifice on my part considering what's at stake.Cross posted at This Insignificant CinderAugust 11, 2019Like most of Singer's writings, this has ruined my life all over again, but in the best way possible.I have been spending a considerable amount of time carefully navigating the implications of this book and considering what moral obligation requires me to give. I have not found (and do not expect to find) a precise answer to this concern, yet, after reading The Life You Can Save, concluding that I should be doing and giving more to help the world's most vulnerable was one of the easiest developments of an ethical conviction that I have ever experienced (second only, perhaps, to my introduction to animal ethics, which was also Singer's doing).August 14, 2014You are walking past a shallow pond and you see a small child has fallen in. No-one else is around. The child is in obvious distress and will drown without your immediate help. You are however, wearing a gorgeous set of clothes you have lusted over for months and have just managed to purchase. You are also running late for work. Do you wade in to help the child, ruining your clothes and being late for work, or do you walk on by?This is the thought-experiment with which Peter Singer, a Professor of Bioethics at Princeton, opens his discussion on the ethics of charity. Given this story, the vast majority of people will of course say that they would save the child and would consider it reprehensible to do otherwise or to consider their clothes or lateness for work as serious obstacles. The underlying premise being that if we can lessen the suffering of an innocent other at minimal cost to ourselves, it is wrong not to do so. The situation can also be thought of in terms of the golden rule, stated in various forms by all the major world religions.Singer states a simple argument : First premise : Suffering and death from lack of basic necessities such as food, shelter and medical treatment are bad things.Second : If you can prevent something bad without sacrificing anything nearly as important, it is wrong not to do so.Third : By donating to aid agencies you can prevent some bad things.Conclusion : Not donating to aid agencies is wrong.If we accept this argument, we are led to some radical conclusions. It is morally wrong to spend money on anything unless it is to prevent something bad happening – or for something nearly as important. From this argument, Singer goes on, buying a bottle of mineral water or a can of soda, when one can get perfectly potable water from a tap is morally unjustifiable as the outcome is not nearly as important as saving a child's life. 18,000 children every day die of malnutrition or preventable/treatable conditions. That's about one every 5 seconds. (Several objections to this line of argument are discussed. Some brief highlights:Objection : There is no binding universal moral code. People have a right to their own beliefs and practices.Response : Agreed. But as a society we try to stop rape and murder and would not accept that someone has the right to torture animals or children because they believe it is fun. This suggests we are not complete moral relativists.Objection : People work hard and have the right to decide what they spend their money on.Reponse : Agreed. This is simply one argument for what people should do with their money. People have the right to do whatever they wish with it, but if they chose to flush it down the toilet or bury it rather than to save human lives, we would likely consider it wrong.Objection : If we did not cause the suffering of others, we have no general moral obligation to alleviate it.Response : There are many ways in which we can indirectly contribute to the suffering of others, for example in our pollution of the atmosphere, commercial fishing which devastates local communities, or our extraction of oil and minerals from countries whose people do not benefit from them. Nonetheless, even in cases where we have demonstrably done nothing wrong, our moral obligation is not lessened. Thinking back to the child drowning in the pond, the fact that we did not push them in does not lessen our feeling of obligation to help them.Objection : Philanthropy breeds dependency, undermines real economic and political change and sustains the immoral status-quo.Response : There are situations such as disaster-relief in which immediate donations are required to save lives. In the longer term, we must be extremely careful in how we give charity. Many charitable organisations these days do not simply give hand-outs but aim to engineer sustainable change in communities. Revolutionary change in global socio-economic and political structures may be desirable, and if one believes that, it would be right to devote serious resources of time, money and energy towards achieving it. Our concerns are practical and pressing. We know that doing nothing will not help. In the absence of revolutionary change, or while such change is being brought about (by your Che Guevara T-shirt) – if we can do something to help, we should.Objection : It is natural and ingrained by evolution to treat yourself and those close to you, as more important than people very far away, with whom we have no ties.Response : Agreed. But it does not necessarily follow that it is right to spend extravagantly to purchase luxuries for ourselves, our friends and our families when the money could help relieve serious suffering.Objection (freebie, not in the book): Doctors/nurses/paramedics/etc. save lives every day. Surely they're already doing their bit?Response: In the developed world, jobs in healthcare are generally prestigious and well-paid. For every position there are tens, sometimes hundreds of applicants. If any one person were to choose to do something else, there would be several people eagerly ready to take their place. In the drowning child scenario (and in many catastrophic situations around the world), there is little or no help available and our personal choices will have a more significant difference on the outcome.The book goes on to discuss some of the economics of charity in more detail, particularly in terms of governmental donation and ways to measure the efficacy of aid. The organisation GiveWell is plugged as an independent monitor of aid organisations' bang for buck. Of Singer's several striking examples of charitable work, one is the Fred Hollows foundation which provides sight-restoring cataract operations in the third world. Between 1993 and 2003, the foundation restored sight to a million people, at a cost of around $50 a pop.Another example is the Worldwide Fistula Fund. Childbirth without adequate medical attention (particularly in young or malnourished women who have small pelvises) can be very prolonged. This can cause tears called fistulae between the vagina and the rectum or bladder. Women suffering from such fistulae have a continuous flow of urine or faeces through the vagina and are outcast from their families and communities. The Worldwide Fistula fund provides fistula repair operations for these women and girls. Speaking of Lewis Wall, president of the fund, Singer tells us: « In Liberia the previous summer, he had operated on a sixty-seven year old who had developed a fistula when she was thirty-two and had been living soaked in urine for thirty-five years. It tooks twenty minutes to repair it in surgery. » Ongoing long-term approaches focus on education and prevention, particularly to reduce pregnancy in young girls but in the interim, asks Dr. Wall « What is it worth to give a fourteen-year-old girl back her future and her life ? » Although we cannot answer the question of how much it costs : about $350.The last section of the book discusses the bottom line: how much are we willing to give? What is our fair share? A variant of the drowning-child story illustrates the problems with the fair-share question. Imagine that you come across a shallow pond with ten drowning children in it. There are nine other adults around. You leap in and pull out a child, expecting the other adults to do the same. But looking around you see that the other nine have ignored the children and walked on. Having done your fair share, do you now leave – or do you try to save another child?If rigorously applied, Singer's moral argument would make it impossible for us to spend our money on anything that is not of equal value (or nearly) to saving a child's life. Excepting a few saintly ascetics, this is clearly untenable for the most of us. Fortunately, Singer also recognises it as such. After (qualified) praise of the Bill Gates foundation and scathing denunciation of the uncharitable super-rich – the Larry Ellisons and Paul Allens of the world with their $200m super-yachts, he turns to the likes of me and you. After all, as we have seen, the can of soda and the Patek Philippe watch sit morally in the same super-yacht.Singer's solution is a scale of regular charitable donation starting at 1% of personal income below US$100,000 per year, 5% between $100-150k and increasing thereafter to a maximum of 33% of income over ~$10m per year. A little arithmetic shows that even a fairly limited subscription to this modest standard would meet the funding requirements of the UN Millennium Development Goals several times over.As a point of departure it seems reasonable. This is a rare book that is not only thought-provoking, but action-provoking. I've been swayed by Singer's arguments and have signed his online pledge (thelifeyoucansave.com). The tap-water in Canada is amongst the cleanest in the world.aid-and-development colonialism-and-post economics-finance February 20, 2013Although this book provides a heart-felt argument on why you should donate 5-10% of your total income to the world's poorest people, it is sensationalized writing at best and lacks the depth of analysis on:1. Why the global poor are poor2. What organizations are currently doing3. What organizations lack the capability to do4. What goes wrong with in NGOs 5. Where your money will go if you do donate...As a student of international development I will be the first to tell you that if you are donating money to an international organization your odds of helping the worlds poorest of the poor are small. There is good being done and there is good to be done, but the reliability of donations is remarkably questionable. I agree with the basic premise of this book that the world needs to do more for the poorest of the poor and that the richest of the rich could do more, but if it were that easy we would have done it by now. If you are calling for blanket donations, you have to do your homework first. In no part of this book is there a clear suggestion of how your money can be most useful when donated (i.e. what types of organizations to donate).Overall nice sentimental value, but worthless if you want to critically think about how to help the world's poor. March 6, 2019Probably one of the worst works of Peter Singer. In this book he proposes that we should all donate 5% of out annual income (if we can) or more to organizations such as UNICEF and Oxfam to help with poverty relief. By stressing the individuals social responsibility of ending poverty he essentially totally misses any reasons for why there exists poverty in the first place by granting global capitalism legitimacy. Singer shows the typical data about millions being lifted out of extreme poverty the last 40 years, something which is inherently false as the international poverty line is set extremly low, making it impossible to avoid malnutrition in many poor countries for example. This poverty line has also not been adjusted for inflation as there has been many market crashes which have created more poverty since roughly the 80s onwards making it arbitrary. Singer doubts that millionaires and companies donates to good causes simply to better their imagery. As we've seen with many of these huge donations in the past it has been done directly to build investment and brand-loyalty etc. Singers main line of "everyone donating what they can" outright denies structural problems, predatory lending to foreign countries and the mechanisms of how large corporations function. Corporations always need to increase profits, something which can only be done by producing something under the average cost or by cheap or free labour. The inherent contradictions here is for Singer non-existent. Although Singer does makes some good moral points on why we should donate, he never seem to realize that ending world poverty and poverty relief are two quite different things. In the book he shys away from politics, with the exceptions of demanding taxes on the super-rich and increasing national spending on foreign aid. He essentially tries to solve an inherently political issue outside the realm of politics. It is however true that the super-rich holds most of the wealth and that with that wealth we could essentially end poverty but this is in direct contradiction with the super-rich need for profit. The need for profit depends on unemployment and poverty in order to force wages lower in poor countries. Without realizing it, Singer kindaa supports the problem that he himself sets out to fix. March 29, 2009This book underscores why Peter Singer is the most influential philosopher living today. He takes his utilitarianism very seriously, and the implications of this philosophy, if followed, would radically change our world for the better. In this book, Singer lays out the case for why those of us in affluent nations should be giving to charity to help the poor worldwide. What is actually most surprising to me is the final section in which he lays out the numbers: if the richest 10% of those in the US (and the equally wealthy worldwide) would give at higher levels than they do now but at levels that do not adversely affect their lifestyles, we could effectively end world poverty. Still, the burden should not fall on the richest 10% alone: most of us not in the top 10% of America's wealthiest (those of us earning less than $102,000 annually) could still easily give far more than we do by simply giving up some of our more frivolous spending. This book provides an excellent case for being more generous and eschewing the oft touted American individualism (what I would actually call selfishness: for a literary example of this selfishness-as-a-virtue, see Ayn Rand's Atlas Shrugged); rather than looking out only for ourselves, we should be looking to help those less fortunate than us, and Singer's arguments here provide the basic moral and practical reasons for such altruism.April 8, 2010I am not part of the target audience for this book, and neither, I suspect, are you. I'll come to why later...I do like the way Singer approaches his books - he starts out by telling you where you're going to end up, and then proceeds to take you to your destination in a clear and concise manner, dealing with likely objections before they arise as he goes - but reading this I thought for a while that we were heading squarely for a two-star rating, partly because of that target audience problem I mentioned at the start. Let me explain...Singer starts out by stating the case for why it's morally wrong not to give, and give substantially, to those much less fortunate. But frankly, if any of what he says here hasn't already occurred to you, and subsequently seemed obvious and irrefutable, then what have you been thinking about all your life? He then goes on to tackle common objections to this view, which is a good approach, but few of the objections make you think "ooh, I wonder how Singer's going to refute THIS one!" when you read them - most of them are blatantly excuses right from the off. There are some interesting stats about foreign aid thrown in here, but mostly they're aimed at an American audience, which isn't what I'm refering to when I say you're probably not his target reader, I mention it just in case (like me) you aren't American...Things pick up a bit in part 2, which is probably where I started to shift my opinion into three-star territory. Here Singer relates some of the psychology of giving, some of which may be familiar to you already but overall it's still quite interesting.Part three, however, is definitely interesting, as Singer sums up attempts to determine how much it costs to save a life. Frankly, I was surprised. Not by how little it costs, but actually the complete opposite. Somehow I'd picked up the idea that donating twenty or thirty pounds or so to Oxfam was there or thereabouts enough to save a life, when in fact you'll see that that's not the case. Donate that much every month for a year or so and that's more like it...It was when I got to part 4 that I realised just how far I was from being the target of Singer's arguments (although the extent to which he states the bleeding obvious in part 1 is a substantial clue). Here he sets out his guidelines for how much you should be giving based on your income. He considers the superrich, the rich, and the comfortable. How does he define comfortable? Anyone earning more than $105,000 per year. Ooooookay. Anything less than that he doesn't really bother with - there's a sentence or two about giving around one percent of your income, and he keeps banging on about water bottles for us mere mortals, as if he doesn't realise that people refill them with tap water dozens of times before buying a new one, but that's about it.So there I was at around the halfway point, all ready to recommend that you instead buy something else with many more pages than this and then donate the money you would therefore save overall (by not spending thick-book money on something thin) to charity, when it turned out that Singer was thinking more in terms of yachts and supercars than paperback books and a dollar or two here or there.And that is what I mean when I say that you're probably not his target audience. Yes, for a successful businessman or lawyer or doctor etc this book is a clear, concise, well reasoned, practical little handbook that ought to convince and may well set off a few light bulbs and therefore deserve four or five stars. For my imagined average user of GoodReads - already well read, thoughtful, probably not that well off (otherwise you'd be too busy drinking champagne and out of crystal goblets to bother reading this stuff) - it's a mildly interesting but largely redundant confirmation of things that you already figured out for yourself a long time ago...Still, you can't fault his intentions.September 22, 2013 The World Bank defines extreme poverty as not having enough income to meet the most basic human needs for adequate food, water, shelter, clothing, sanitation, health care, and education. Many people are familiar with the statistic that 1 billion people are living on less than one dollar per day. That was the World Bank's poverty line until 2008, when better data on international price comparisons enabled it to make a more accurate calculation of the amount people need to meet their basic needs. On the basis of this calculation, the World Bank set the poverty line at $1.25 per day. The number of people whose income puts them under this line is … 1.4 billion. Author Peter Singer thinks and writes about "acting now to end world poverty" from philosophical, ethical and practical points of view. Singer is the challenging author of Practical Ethics and Animal Liberation ; both books have their own histories of stirring up controversy. Here are some of the questions and issues that The Life You Can Save addresses: Is it wrong not to help? Common objections to giving. Why don't we give more? Creating a culture of giving. How much does it cost to save a life, and how can you tell which charities do it best? From his other books, I saw Peter Singer as a person who is committed to certain ideas and who does not pull any punches. I trusted that he would "tell it like it is" and that I could find his message persuasive. I wanted to be convinced to donate more of my income and assets to make the world a better place. I have the example of my father and mother who were very generous with their financial resources. My father still is. For example, when someone who helped my father do chores and repairs around his house found his income reduced, the value of his house "under water" with high mortgage payments, Dad offered $1000 monthly to help with the mortgage until the man's wife became eligible for social security.Since I have retired, I have increased my charitable giving to the point where it is 10% of my gross income. Instead of buying a new car or doing some home improvements, I would like to increase my charitable giving. I support local organizations like the Greater Lynchburg Meals on Wheels and the Free Clinic of Central Virginia. I support state organizations like Virginians for Alternatives to the Death Penalty and the Virginia Legal Aid Society. I support national organizations like the Human Rights Campaign and the Natural Resources Defense Council. I would like to increase my giving to UNICEF and Doctors without Borders and have more of an impact internationally since I know the most severe poverty is outside the U.S. So I wanted Peter Singer to give me a pep talk! And it worked! I now have a goal of becoming a philanthropist! Can I do that on a gross annual income of $50,000? I have decided based on examples in the book that I can! All things can be done with sufficient exclamation points!Singer is a controversial philosopher. He supports a utilitarian world view: you determine what is best by determining what creates the most good for the most people. I always thought that was an over simplification, but it does sound good on the face of it, doesn't it? But I have a hard time reconciling Singer's view that the sanctity of life is highly overrated with this book. In his book Practical Ethics he more or less supports euthanasia for defective infants. He has taken a lot of shit for that. He has been controversial in other ways as well. I usually like to evaluate the "whole person" to make decisions about how much credence and credibility to give to a person. I have some trouble with Singer since I think he has some weak links to go with his brilliance. But there are real and serious dilemmas for the conscientious person who wants to help. The real dilemma for most of us, is whether it is wrong and unnatural to reject our children's pleas for the latest expensive computer games, to spurn designer-labeled kids' clothing, and to send them to the local (entirely adequate but not outstanding) public schools. The savings you gain by taking the less-expensive option in each case will allow you will allow you to donate sums toward saving the lives of strangers. But do your obligations to your own children override your obligations to strangers, no matter how great their need or suffering? Peter Singer introduces us to people who have made decisions that many, if not most, of us would consider impossible.Sometimes in Haiti, Farmer will hike for hours to see patients far from any roads. He insists on doing this because to say that it takes too much time and effort to visit these patients is, in his view, to say that their lives matter less than the lives of others. Flying from the peasant huts and their malnourished babies in Haiti to Miami, just 700 miles away, with its well-dressed people talking about their efforts to lose weight, Farmer gets angry over the contrast between developing countries and the developed world. What troubles him most is what troubled him all those years ago about the American doctor who was about the leave Haiti: "How people can not care, erase, not remember." Now you might want to say, "If you are going to quote the entire book, why don't you just tell me to read the book myself?" Well, I certainly urge you to do that but here is just one more thought: …the conflict that Farmer and Kravinsky feel so acutely, between being an ideal parent and acting on the idea that all human life is of equal value, is real and irresolvable. The two will always be in tension. No principle of obligation is going to be widely accepted unless it recognizes that parents will and should love their own children more than the children of strangers, and, for that reason, will meet the basic needs of their children before they meet the needs of strangers. But this doesn't mean that parents are justified in providing luxuries for their children ahead of basic needs of others. I think that this is the kind of book where you are probably going to be receptive to the message if you decide to read it. I could quote more but I am going to resist. I strongly urge you to read this book if you have a goal of making the world a better place. Peter Singer does not mince words and you may not like or agree with all of them, but they give me pause and make me want to do more for the stranger. I think this book is going to make a difference in my life. That makes it a five star book for me. economics nonfiction social-actionAugust 5, 2019Why is this over 4 stars??????????????????????????? It was fine, mostly because Singer put himself in a position where I don't have much to disagree with and not because it changed my life in any way. The whole theme of the book was "Please if you are rich then give like 5% of your money to poor people. Please! You will help people and feel good about it and it won't even affect you that much because you already have so much money!", said in a hundred different ways, supported by some mildly interesting psychological studies anyone will have read about in an introductory psych course. His target reader is the individual with an income of over 100k in the West who either wants to help the world and doesn't know exactly how, or who needs some convincing that their money is needed to help the poor. It's hard to say this book is "bad", or that it doesn't achieve its flimsy purpose. His approach on the level of many individuals making many individual contributions can only be a net positive for the world: at worst they'll ignore the book, at best they'll choose to donate more than they would have if they hadn't read it. Annoyingly, he explicitly says he is "not arguing here for higher taxation or any other coercive means of increasing aid." Why not?????? Because apparently the role of government in aid is "separate" from the argument he's making, which he says is to convince the individual reader. Honestly I think this is stupid—he spends an ample amount of time shitting on how billionaires like Larry Ellison spend their money on extravagant luxuries that pollute the Earth, even says that we should "judge them accordingly", but doesn't want to go so far as to argue for higher taxes. He's the kind of author that'll spend more time convincing a thousand people to go vegan to offset Larry's yacht emissions, when really all we need to do is take the yacht away from Larry.Analysis of why people live in poverty is also extremely lacking in this book. Instead of delegitimizing the ideology that keeps so many people very poor and so few people very rich, Singer's band-aid solution is to literally calculate exactly how much money poor people need to get out of poverty, and have the very rich each exercise their free will and happily choose to donate a little bit more and make up that sum. This is somehow more utopian than any communist literature I've ever read. The worst part is that he does recognize some of the reasons that have driven developing nations into poverty—the West exploits their natural resources and their labour, supports their dictators, and takes away their ability to reinvest their wealth into developing their own countries—but he never once argues that we should just....stop doing those things. It's almost a disservice to the poor to not address the system that keeps them that way.Maybe this

may be reasonable for us to value our own well-being more highly than that of others, but not by very large multiples.) In addition, issues of desert (whatever one may think of them overall) are much less plausibly raised in a global context than in a local context--one can hardly argue that someone in a developing country who lacks access to clean drinking water just isn't working hard enough.Indeed, Singer's focus in this book is less on changing individual minds (though that is important), and more on shaping the cultural mores around giving so that a higher level is expected of the well-off. I think he takes an admirably pragmatic view on this matter. One problem with the moral issue he raises is that the obligation can feel practically unlimited, and therefore overwhelming--I could give away virtually all of the money I make and still be very much better off than the people it would be going to help. Singer recognizes that ultimately the "right" level is something that each of us will have to decide individually. Instead, he proposes a societal standard that is significantly higher than the status quo, yet low enough that it is difficult to argue credibly that it's too high. (In other words, it's difficult to argue that the amounts he proposes would meaningfully lower the givers' well-being--in fact, given what we know about the psychology of giving, it's quite plausible to argue that they would raise it.) It's roughly as follows (using marginal brackets as with taxes, such that an increase in gross income across a bracket boundary never results in a decrease in take-home income):-0% of income if you're below the poverty line, then-a sliding scale of 1% to 5% of your income between the poverty line and about $100k, then-5% up to $150k, then-10% up to about $400k-and several higher brackets above thatNote that all the way up to $400k, which covers the vast majority of people I know (maybe everyone??), this standard is less stringent than the traditional "tithe" standard--the key distinction being that it is much more specifically targeted toward effectively alleviating the maximum amount of human suffering. Singer based his standard brackets on a rough back-of-the-envelope calculation of the total amount needed to end extreme poverty (as articulated in the UN development goals), spread across the wealthy population of the planet, with some judgment to set the brackets at levels that seemed reasonable. While it's easy to pick at any one premise of Singer's argument, I find it pretty difficult to argue with his general conclusion. For myself, I plan to at least meet Singer's standard for my own income for this year, as well as to try and "backfill" some of what I would have given if I had been meeting it since starting to work. I'll see what that feels like, and think about whether I should set a higher personal standard.I encourage others reading this to do the same, especially if your income is in the 6-figure range (or more!). If my paraphrase isn't totally compelling, pick up Singer's book and read it in a weekend. You can check out his website (thelifeyoucansave.org) to find a list of 10-20 organizations that meet his standards of (a) working on behalf of the poorest people in the world, and (b) having produced strong evidence of their effectiveness. Some of them really do save lives; others do non-life-saving things that can nonetheless have a profound impact on quality of life, such as surgery for blindness or for obstetric fistulas. At the beginning of reading about this general topic, I was really focused on just how much it costs to actually save a life. It's obviously very difficult to estimate this precisely, but the order of magnitude for the most cost effective interventions (e.g. against malaria) is somewhere north of $1k and south of $10k. But the more I read about it, the less I focused on that specific outcome. Some of the quality-of-life interventions are hugely important and much more easy to price out--for example, something like $350 pays for a cataract surgery. If you gave $3500 (about what Singer recommends for a gross income of $90k), you could know with pretty high certainty that your gift restored sight to 10 people. To me that is even more compelling than a statistical one-ish life saved (although that is also pretty cool too!).April 21, 2025Believe me when I say that this rating was generous. It's not so much that the book was written badly, just that I'm not the target audience for it at all despite being someone who regularly donates. (I'm literally not even in the income bracket where they recommend you donate a certain amount of money ... I checked with the calculator.)I enjoyed being shown psychology studies of why and how we donate to certain causes, but I didn't end up agreeing with Singer on a lot of points. While I think it's great to consider effective aid while choosing organisations etc. to support, I don't think there's anything inherently bad about donating to a niche cause that might only help a certain minority. Generally, I felt like there was judgment if you donated to organizations/causes that they didn't personally recommend. I also think that Singer was way too lenient with billionaires and put too much onus on regular folks to fix the issue of global poverty. Why do they get to have DaVinci's hand written manuscript, but I get scolded for buying a concert ticket once?I probably could go on some more, but lets just conclude it by saying that I don't think some of the metaphors and examples were fair comparisons and therefore didn't feel applicable. Maybe that makes me inconsiderate or selfish, but I guess I'm gonna be able to live with that.October 24, 2020The Life You Can Save, er ligeså provokerende som den er overbevisende, den er simpelthen et must-read. Peter Singer kan virke ekstrem i visse henseender, men det afsporer på ingen måde læseren fra Singers egentlige budskab om, at vi alle er moralsk forpligtigede til at bidrage til bekæmpelsen af global fattigfordom i gennem effektiv velgørenhed. August 16, 2024No início deste livro somos imediatamente confrontados com uma verdade desconfortável: se temos dinheiro para gastar em garrafas de água num país com água potável a sair das torneiras, então somos ricos (para os padrões globais) e temos gastos supérfluos, ainda que não o queiramos admitir.Todo o livro é uma sequência deste tipo de verdades, seguidas de exemplos de pessoas virtuosas que doaram todo ou quase todo o seu património, e que me fizeram sentir muita vergonha pelo quanto as minhas ações não acompanham os que considero serem os meus princípios e valores, em especial nas atitudes face ao valor da vida humana que não se encontra imediatamente à minha frente.Os penúltimos capítulos já se sentem um bocado como se o autor só estivesse a bater no ceguinho - no caso em apreço, o ceguinho sendo eu mesma - mas o último capítulo ameniza a dor de barriga de culpa.Podia ter avaliado com quatro estrelas, porque discordo de certos raciocínios ao longo do livro, mas acho a mensagem (sobre o impacto individual que podemos ter para salvar pessoas da pobreza absoluta) tão relevante e tão diferente de tudo o que li antes, que acho que merece as cinco estrelas.December 17, 2020I just binged this both through the audiobook and the e-book and I have to say that this might be one of my favorite books of 2020, if not all time. Singer really magnified giving, why we ought to give, and how we can do so most effectively. I'm already acquainted with the ideas of effective altruism, so I really didn't expect how much I would still grapple with the ideas Singer presented. He presented everything with a clear logical flow, and it really ties up the idea of EA being a pair of the brain and the heart. Was also fun listening to Kristen Bell and Stephen Fry, who narrated a couple chapters of the audiobook. ^_^ I highly recommend this, so let me know if you check it out!June 17, 2023This book leaves me feeling very conflicted. On one hand, Singer's proposition is very simple: why not take the insane excess resources many of us accumulate in life and redirect it to the most impactful ways to alleviate suffering across the world? On the other, why the focus on individuals and not on systems? Can this rigidly utilitarian view give us a way to make complex trades offs between things like preventing blindness or preventing the erosion of democracy? I think everyone can of course do more immediately in the world we currently live in (because obviously capitalist exploitation won't be stopped overnight), but the ideas taken to their extreme here won't eradicate suffering. It would just have better bandaids and palliative treatments for the ills of the world rather than getting at root causes. I'd like to see more ideas where individual giving can work in parallel with addressing structural issues that lead to extreme poverty.June 2, 2011This book has a lot of misdirected energy. For the majority of the book, the author makes the philosophical argument that as citizens of wealthy nations, we have the ethical responsibility to live ascetically and give all of our disposable income to charity. He then proceeds to explain our resistance to that idea as a function of "human nature", but comes off sounding like his knowledge of human nature is derived from the analysis of clinical studies more than from interactions with actual humans. He sounds petty and self-righteous at times, listing (to a weird degree of detail) the luxury items that certain uber-wealthy individuals have purchased, the cost of which could have saved countless lives. He derides parents who send their children to expensive private schools, but teaches at Princeton and tells *his* students (when they ask if it's morally wrong for their parents to be paying $44,000 a year to send them there) that the cost is justified because their Princeton education will open doors to lucrative jobs that will then allow them to donate more money to charity. He ultimately acknowledges that expecting people to give away all of their disposable income, while ethically obligatory, is unrealistic (even he doesn't do it), and closes by asking people to give a reasonable percentage of their income... so why not devote the book to that instead of alienating readers with a theoretical argument that even he can't abide? Beyond those issues, his approach for ending poverty - through generous donations of individuals to charities - address the symptoms of poverty, not the systemic causes.July 8, 2020This is a hard book to “rate”. It’s basically an appeal to open your heart (and your wallet) to the plight of the world’s most economically disadvantaged people. One story after another of people who are living on under $2 a day. They are hungry, they are malnourished, they are dying of malaria, and their prospects for a better life are bleak. We, the citizens of first world countries, are not doing out share to lift these people out of their disheartening circumstances. I found the appendix at the end quite interesting. Peter Singer has an actual formula based on annual income of how much you should donate to vetted organizations that are the most cost effective to really improving lives. I will say this: if you can finish this book and not donate you must be really hard hearted and selfish.Displaying 1 - 30 of 862 reviewsGet help and learn more about the design. Advance praise for The Life You Can Save“Part plea, part manifesto, part handbook, this short and surprisingly compelling book sets out to answer two difficult questions: why people in affluent countries should donate money to fight global poverty and how much each should give. . . . Singer doesn’t ask readers to choose between asceticism and self-indulgence; his solution can be found in the middle, and it is reasonable and rewarding for all.”–Publishers Weekly (starred review)“If you think you can’t afford to give money to the needy, I urge you to read this book. If you think you’re already giving enough, and to the right places, still I urge you to read this book. In The Life You Can Save, Peter Singer makes a strong case–logical and factual, but also emotional–for why each of us should be doing more for the world’s impoverished. This book will challenge you to be a better person.”–Holden Karnofsky, co-founder, GiveWellThe Life You Can Save, Peter Singer challenges each of us to ask: Am I willing to make poverty history? Skillfully weaving together parable, philosophy, and hard statistics, he tackles the most familiar moral, ethical, and ideological obstacles to building a global culture of philanthropy, and sets the bar for how we as citizens might do our part to empower the world’s poor.”–Raymond C. Offenheiser, president, Oxfam America Peter Singer is Ira W. DeCamp Professor of Bioethics at Princeton University. He is the author, co-author, or editor of more than thirty books, including Animal Liberation, widely considered to be the founding statement of the animal rights movement, Practical Ethics,and One World: Ethics and Globalization. On your way to work, you pass a small pond. On hot days, children sometimes play in the pond, which is only about knee-deep. The weather’s cool today, though, and the hour is early, so you are surprised to see a child splashing about in the pond. As you get closer, you see that it is a very young child, just a toddler, who is flailing about, unable to stay upright or walk out of the pond. You look for the parents or babysitter, but there is no one else around. The child is unable to keep his head above the water for more than a few seconds at a time. If you don’t wade in and pull him out, he seems likely to drown. Wading in is easy and safe, but you will ruin the new shoes you bought only a few days ago, and get your suit wet and muddy. By the time you hand the child over to someone responsible for him, and change your clothes, you’ll be late for work. What should you do?I teach a course called Practical Ethics. When we start talking about global poverty, I ask my students what they think you should do in this situation. Predictably, they respond that you should save the child. “What about your shoes? And being late for work?” I ask them. They brush that aside. How could anyone consider a pair of shoes, or missing an hour or two at work, a good reason for not saving a child’s life?In 2007, something resembling this hypothetical situation actually occurred near Manchester, England. Jordon Lyon, a ten-year-old boy, leaped into a pond after his stepsister Bethany slipped in. He struggled to support her but went under himself. Anglers managed to pull Bethany out, but by then Jordon could no longer be seen. They raised the alarm, and two auxiliary policemen soon arrived; they refused to enter the pond to find Jordon. He was later pulled out, but attempts at resuscitation failed. At the inquest on Jordon’s death, the policemen’s inaction was defended on the grounds that they had not been trained to deal with such situations. The mother responded: “If you’re walking down the street and you see a child drowning you automatically go in that water . . . You don’t have to be trained to jump in after a drowning child.”1I think it’s safe to assume that most people would agree with the mother’s statement. But consider that, according to UNICEF, nearly 10 million children under five years old die each year from causes related to poverty. Here is just one case, described by a man in Ghana to a researcher from the World Bank:Take the death of this small boy this morning, for example. The boy died of measles. We all know he could have been cured at the hospital. But the parents had no money and so the boy died a slow and painful death, not of measles but out of poverty.2Think about something like that happening 27,000 times every day. Some children die because they don’t have enough to eat. More die, like that small boy in Ghana, from measles, malaria, diarrhea, and pneumonia, conditions that either don’t exist in developed nations, or, if they do, are almost never fatal. The children are vulnerable to these diseases because they have no safe drinking water, or no sanitation, and because when they do fall ill, their parents can’t afford any medical treatment. UNICEF, Oxfam, and many other organizations are working to reduce poverty and provide clean water and basic health care, and these efforts are reducing the toll. If the relief organizations had more money, they could do more, and more lives would be saved.Now think about your own situation. By donating a relatively small amount of money, you could save a child’s life. Maybe it takes more than the amount needed to buy a pair of shoes—but we all spend money on things we don’t really need, whether on drinks, meals out, clothing, movies, concerts, vacations, new cars, or house renovation. Is it possible that by choosing to spend your money on such things rather than contributing to an aid agency, you are leaving a child to die, a child you could have saved?Poverty TodayA few years ago, the World Bank asked researchers to listen to what the poor are saying. They were able to document the experiences of 60,000 women and men in seventy-three countries. Over and over, in different languages and on different continents, poor people said that poverty meant these things:•You are short of food for all or part of the year, often eating only one meal per day, sometimes having to choose between stilling your child’s hunger or your own, and sometimes being able to do neither.•You can’t save money. If a family member falls ill and you need money to see a doctor, or if the crop fails and you have nothing to eat, you have to borrow from a local moneylender and he will charge you so much interest at the debt continues to mount and you may never be free of it.•You can’t afford to send your children to school, or if they do start school, you have to take them out again if the harvest is poor.•You live in an unstable house, made with mud or thatch that you need to rebuild every two or three years, or after severe weather.•You have no nearby source of safe drinking water. You have to carry your water a long way, and even then, it can make you ill unless you boil it.But extreme poverty is not only a condition of unsatisfied material needs. It is often accompanied by a degrading state of powerlessness. Even in countries that are democracies and are relatively well governed, respondents to the World Bank survey described a range of situations in which they had to accept humiliation without protest. If someone takes what little you have, and you complain to the police, they may not listen to you. Nor will the law necessarily protect you from rape or sexual harassment. You have a pervading sense of shame and failure because you cannot provide for your children. Your poverty traps you, and you lose hope of ever escaping from a life of hard work for which, at the end, you will have nothing to show beyond bare survival.3The World Bank defines extreme poverty as not having enough income to meet the most basic human needs for adequate food, water, shelter, clothing, sanitation, health care, and education. Many people are familiar with the statistic that one billion people are living on less than one dollar per day. That was the World Bank’s poverty line until 2008, when better data on international price comparisons enabled it to make a more accurate calculation of the amount people need to meet their basic needs. On the basis of this calculation, the World Bank set the poverty line at $1.25 per day. The number of people whose income puts them under this line is not 1 billion but 1.4 billion. That there are more people living in extreme poverty than we thought is, of course, bad news, but the news is not all bad. On the same basis, in 1981 there were 1.9 billion people living in extreme poverty. That was about four in every ten people on the planet, whereas now fewer than one in four are extremely poor.South Asia is still the region with the largest number of people living in extreme poverty, a total of 600 million, including 455 million in India. Economic growth has, however, reduced the proportion of South Asians living in extreme poverty from 60 percent in 1981 to 42 percent in 2005. There are another 380 million extremely poor people in sub-Saharan Africa, where half the population is extremely poor—and that is the same percentage as in 1981. The most dramatic reduction in poverty has been in East Asia, although there are still more than 200 million extremely poor Chinese, and smaller numbers elsewhere in the region. The remaining extremely poor people are distributed around the world, in Latin America and the Caribbean, the Pacific, the Middle East, North Africa, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia.4In response to the “$1.25 a day” figure, the thought may cross your mind that in many developing countries, it is possible to live much more cheaply than in the industrialized nations. Perhaps you have even done it yourself, backpacking around the world, living on less than you would have believed possible. So you may imagine that this level of poverty is less extreme than it would be if you had to live on that amount of money in the United States, or any industrialized nation. If such thoughts did occur to you, you should banish them now, because the World Bank has already made the adjustment in purchasing power: Its figures refer to the number of people existing on a daily total consumption of goods and services—whether earned or home-grown—comparable to the amount of goods and services that can be bought in the United States for $1.25.In wealthy societies, most poverty is relative. People feel poor because many of the good things they see advertised on television are beyond their budget—but they do have a television. In the United States, 97 percent of those classified by the Census Bureau as poor own a color TV. Three quarters of them own a car. Three quarters of them have air conditioning. Three quarters of them have a VCR or DVD player. All have access to health care.5 I am not quoting these figures in order to deny that the poor in the United States face genuine difficulties. Nevertheless, for most, these difficulties are of a different order than those of the world’s poorest people. The 1.4 billion people living in extreme poverty are poor by an absolute standard tied to the most basic human needs. They are likely to be hungry for at least part of each year. Even if they can get enough food to fill their stomachs, they will probably be malnourished because their diet lacks essential nutrients. In children, malnutrition stunts growth and can cause permanent brain damage. The poor may not be able to afford to send their children to school. Even minimal health care services are usually beyond their means.

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