

If you want to maximize your positive impact on animals' lives, you should consider pursuing a high-earning career. Most people can do more good indirectly (by earning money and donating it) than directly (by becoming full-time activists).

This might seem counterintuitive: isn't becoming directly involved in a cause the best way to advance it? Probably not, for several reasons. First, animal activists get paid relatively little. For example, Matt Ball, the executive director of Vegan Outreach, was paid \$39,750 in 2009; Ingrid Newkirk, the president of PETA, received \$40,439.¹ Salaries for non-executives often are far, far lower. This means that if you work in a highly paid profession, your money could be enough to hire a full-time activist, or even more part-time leafleters.

But your increased impact would be even greater than it seems. This is because the amount of good that you would do as an activist must be compared to the amount of good that would be done if you pursued a different career. Plenty of people are willing to become activists, but animal-rights organizations have limited budgets. If an animal-rights organization didn't hire you, it would hire someone else. If the organizations are good at hiring people, they would choose you only if you would do a better job than other applicants.

To illustrate this point, let's say that Vegan Outreach is looking to hire another full-time leafleter. If you were hired for the position, you would pass out maybe sixty thousand leaflets a year. If someone less talented than you were hired, that person would pass out fifty-five thousand leaflets. Because you are the better candidate, you get the job. How much good have you actually done? The relevant figure is not the total booklets you'll pass out in a year; it's the five thousand *additional* booklets that get passed out owing to your superior leafleting abilities. So the amount of suffering prevented by working directly in animal activism is less than it might seem.

Still, you are doing some good. How does this compare with the good you'd do in a conventional career? Let's say that your only alternative career is in pharmacy, and that you'd be a below-average pharmacist. Because of your lackluster study skills, you'd do only OK in pharmacy school. And because the wages in your part of the country are low and you can't easily relocate, your earnings would be in the 10th percentile for pharmacists. Should you become an activist or a pharmacist? Probably the latter. A pharmacist in the tenth percentile of earnings [makes \\$77,390 annually](#), enough to support at least one additional full-time leafleter or two

¹ The cost of hiring executives for animal-welfare organizations is actually higher than the direct costs of their salaries and benefits. This is because the executives could instead have worked at conventional jobs and donated a portion of their earnings to organizations that they work for. So the organizations forgo some donations when they hire people sympathetic to their cause. On the other hand, if you decided to work at an animal-welfare organization instead of at a conventional job, the organization would face the same costs.

part-time leafleters—people who wouldn't be leafleting if not for your donations.

Some activists have done more good by working directly in animal activism than they would have if they worked in conventional careers and donated their earnings. But there is reason to think that such instances are rare. Many people are willing to become animal-rights activists, and you should think about what you have to offer that they don't. Keep in mind that people overestimate their abilities, a phenomenon known as the [Lake Wobegon effect](#). If you think you really would be an exceptional activist, ask people who would give you their honest opinion—other people often are better at evaluating our strengths and weaknesses than we ourselves are.

Another important consideration is how much you are able to do directly for the animals even with a full-time non-animal-related job. Even with their careers, VO's top volunteers—Eugene, Casey, Joe, and Stewart—have, together, reached over 1.5 million individuals with the animals' message!

A final advantage of indirect support for the animal-rights movement is its flexibility. If you decide to become an animal-rights activist, you might be able to get a job only at an organization that is less effective than the others. On the other hand, directing your financial support to the most effective organization is as easy as writing a check. And if later you decide that you would be more effective working at an animal-welfare organization than in a high-earning career, you could make the switch without much difficulty. But if you started as an animal-welfare activist, you would have a more difficult time making the transition to a professional career.

You might think that other jobs would be less fulfilling than direct advocacy. Keep in mind that many jobs offer relatively high salaries. Jobs in law, medicine, and finance require a lot of education and intellectual firepower. If you would prefer a more “realistic” occupation, electricians, mechanics, and plumbers are well compensated, especially in certain metropolitan areas. If you're into math, consider becoming a quantitative analyst, actuary, or computer programmer. There are many careers that allow would you to support the animal-welfare movement, so you should be able to find one you'll enjoy.

Resources

Most of the ideas for this article came from a lecture titled [Talk On The Most Ethical Careers](#). Though it focuses on poverty in the developing world, much of what's said applies to animal welfare well.

[80,000 Hours](#) is an organization that encourages people to choose ethical careers. They'd be glad to hear from you and help you with this important decision.

Thanks to Brian Tomasik and Matt Ball for their input and encouragement.