

Intro to Effective Altruism Presentation Script (~35 Min Version)

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We are grateful to Ajeya Cotra for her inspiring 2016 Intro to Effective Altruism talk, from which we draw heavily (with permission); to Catherine Low for her feedback; and to the many other authors whose work has helped inform introductory EA presentations.

[Slides](#) - Please make a copy to edit/personalize, for example changing the poster on slide 1, the contact email at the end, etc.

Suggested use: for a talk followed by a Q&A session and optionally an info session about intro fellowships (which I highly recommend running). Together, these should make up a 1 hour Intro to EA Event

SCRIPT

*Personalized parts that should probably be changed are in **bold***

SLIDE 1

(Don't say out loud) **[CHANGE GRAPHIC] *Intro poster for people to read as people trickle in—maybe include contact info/relevant links (e.g. for mailing list, FB group, fellowship advertisement, etc).***

SLIDE 2

Just about a year ago, I read a book called *Strangers Drowning*. It's probably been the most life-changing book I've read. One quote from the book really struck a chord with me: "What do-gooders lack is not happiness but innocence. They lack that happy blindness that allows most people, most of the time, to shut their minds to what is unbearable. Do-gooders have forced themselves to know, and keep on knowing, that everything they do affects other people, and that sometimes (though not always) their joy is purchased with other people's joy."

(brief pause)

Remembering that, they can no longer continue to live ignoring the unbearable—they feel an intense urge to dedicate their lives to helping.

When there is so much suffering, injustice, and death in our world, and when there will be far more in the years, decades, and centuries to come if we as a society don't get

our act together, it can be overwhelming to think about the huge mess that is the world we live in, and what we can do to help.

SLIDE 3

I got involved with activism and justice work in tenth grade, when I had a really tough time and struggled with severe depression and anxiety coming to terms with my sexual orientation and gender identity, and the implications these would have on the rest of my life. In the process of getting through this I realized that there were countless others out there going through situations similar to, and much worse than mine—I was in a fairly liberal neighborhood in Toronto, Canada and had very accepting friends and family (which I assumed wouldn't be the case due to internalized stereotypes about the lack of progressiveness of immigrants, even my own mother). Once I felt good enough about myself I felt an urge to start supporting others, and wanted to do the work so others wouldn't also have to go through intense suffering caused by the failings of our society. And when I started this journey, I began learning more about large-scale issues and just how unjust our world really is.

SLIDE 4

I learned about the millions of people who are already being harshly affected by climate change

I learned that about one in 10 people live off less than \$1.90 a day.

I learned that there are over 72 billion land animals, and over 1.2 trillion aquatic animals severely mistreated and killed for food each year.

I learned that over 2 million Americans are incarcerated, with incarceration rates being six times higher for Black Americans than for white Americans.

I learned, as we have all recently learned, of the threats posed by global outbreaks of disease, and of other risks that endanger generations to come.

SLIDE 5

Learning about these many problems, I felt really overwhelmed.

SLIDE 6

There was so much work to do, and so little guidance about how we can best go about it, given our limited time, energy, money, work hours, and relationships.

SLIDE 7

This is what intrigued me about Effective Altruism:

SLIDE 8

An attempt to make the most of the limited resources we can offer to tackle the world's most pressing problems, bring about long-lasting, sustainable change, and create a future we can be proud of. Effective Altruism is a growing community and philosophy based on asking, "how can we do the most good?", doing our best to figure it out, and acting accordingly.

Many of us have been given immense privileges that we take for granted. How can we make the most of the opportunity we have been given to make the world a better place? I hope today's presentation will provide a useful foundation to think about this very difficult question.

SLIDE 9

I'll start off by discussing why it's important to prioritize between causes when deciding what to work on, donate to, and advocate for. This is the idea of cause prioritization—the idea that you should actively compare different causes, figure out how much good you can do through each, and then mainly focus on the causes that, as best as you can tell, offer the best opportunities for doing good.

SLIDE 10

Cause prioritization might seem crass, or cold, or unfair. "Surely," we might think, "we don't want causes to get no support at all. Don't all causes deserve some support?" I think the emphasis here should be shifted. Causes don't deserve support; people deserve support. Since some causes and interventions support people far more effectively than others, we need to prioritize these over others that we care about, if we want to better support people. An example might make this more clear.

SLIDE 11

Suppose you have \$1,000 that you want to donate, and you're torn by two causes that you care about: helping to fund screenings to detect lung cancer, and funding insecticide-treated bednets to protect children from malaria. What if you treated the causes equally, and gave \$500 to each?

\$500 is enough to scan about two people for lung cancer. On average, doing this gives people about 10 additional *days* of life. At the same time, \$500 is enough to produce and distribute 50 bednets. Each bednet usually protects 2 people, often children under

the age of 5, from getting malaria for 3 years. So with \$500, you can protect around 100 children for 3 years from a disease that is fatal, debilitating, and tragically common. On average, doing this gives people multiple additional years of life.

SLIDE 12

This graphic shows how many people we can significantly support with a \$500 dollar donation toward each of these causes. If we donate \$500 to support lung scans, when we could have bought malaria nets for 100 children, then we're implicitly valuing supporting two people to some degree, over supporting 100 people to a larger degree. And that is deeply unjust. This is why

SLIDE 13

Supporting all causes equally is *unfair*. When we care about all people, we need to prioritize the most effective causes and interventions that allow us to best support people. Not because other causes aren't important, not because they aren't worth dedicating our lives to solving... but because our resources are limited, there is so much to do, and with every choice we make, people, potentially many people, bear the cost of what we didn't do.

SLIDE 14

So it is very important that we prioritize between causes. How should we go about doing this? It's far from obvious what the best opportunities to support people are. The following example demonstrates just how hard it can be to tell what way of helping is most effective.

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I'll give you a minute to think about which of these interventions increased school attendance the most per dollar spent in rural Kenya, and rank them.

(List them out if you don't have slides): unconditional cash transfers to families, merit-based scholarships, informing parents about the benefits of education, deworming (treating a parasitic disease); and providing free uniforms

Also think about how much more effective you think the best intervention is compared to the worst.

(If applicable): (If online) - Feel free to send your guesses to me privately in the chat
OR *(if in person)* - Feel free to share your guesses with your neighbors.

*** (wait for a minute) ***

SLIDE 16

The worst two performers were unconditional cash transfers and merit-based scholarships.

SLIDE 17

Free uniforms were around twice as effective as merit based scholarships

SLIDE 18

Deworming—providing medication to remove gastro-intestinal worms from students—was around 20 times as effective as free uniforms,

SLIDE 19

And informing parents about the benefits of education was around 50% more effective than deworming.

SLIDE 20

I give this example to show just how hard it is to determine what will work and what won't, if we go with our guts. This is why it's so important to use evidence and careful reasoning to decide what to work on and donate to.

Our intuitions alone aren't good enough. This is in part because our intuitions are heavily influenced by what problems are most visible to us.

SLIDE 21

But many of the worst injustices in the world are suffered silently and distantly—we need to look for them, if we want to help end them.

SLIDE 22

Another reason to be skeptical toward our intuitions is that, while our intuitions are great for many things, they're terrible at dealing with numbers—especially large numbers. A problem that affects thousands of people might feel similar to one that affects billions, but between them, there's a world of difference.

SLIDE 23

This is often hard to grasp. Stalin once said that a single death is a tragedy, but a million deaths are a statistic. He was wrong, in a way that we must recognize—a million deaths are *so much more* than just a statistic.

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A million deaths are a million bundles of hopes for the future cut short, a million families who will never see their loved ones again, a million or more moments of joy, never experienced.

A million deaths are a million tragedies, and we should treat them as such, even if our intuitive reactions can't feel anything close to the weight of a million tragedies.

SLIDE 25

Our intuitions are often blind to distance and scale, but the world's problems know no such boundaries. So, to find better opportunities to help, we need to look for and explicitly consider factors that make causes better or worse opportunities to help.

SLIDE 26

What are some of these factors? Three factors that are especially useful for identifying the best opportunities to help are scale, neglectedness and solvability.

SLIDE 27

Scale refers to the number of people affected by an issue, and how severely they're affected. We saw comparisons for interventions within a cause area earlier, but we can also compare between more different causes using this metric.

SLIDE 28

Consider the problem of climate change in comparison to ALS.

SLIDE 29

Climate change is estimated to cause 150,000 deaths per year already, and it's likely to kill millions more in the coming years, displacing more than 100 million individuals by 2050.

In contrast, ALS is expected to kill roughly 180,000 people by 2050.

So when it comes to scale—how many are affected, and how severely—climate change is a more important issue than ALS. Not because ALS isn't important—ALS causes patients and those who love them to suffer greatly. But because our world has many more tragedies than we have lifetimes to address, and, scale suggests, allowing larger problems to continue on their current paths would be turning our backs to even worse tragedies. We cannot avoid choosing between tragedies, but we can at least take care to choose the lesser tragedies, and considering scale helps us do this.

SLIDE 30

Another factor to consider is solvability, which is sometimes called tractability: how much of the problem can you expect to solve?

SLIDE 31

As we saw earlier, it's much more tractable to protect people from malaria than to protect people from lung cancer—offering people bed nets is much easier than performing expensive scans and treatments.

SLIDE 32

Similarly, developing cost-competitive, tasty, cruelty-free animal products like clean meat seems more tractable than getting many people to eat vegetarian or vegan diets.

SLIDE 33

A third factor to consider is neglectedness: how many resources—funding, careers, research, media coverage, etc—are going into an issue. Highly neglected causes are often better opportunities for impact due to diminishing returns. If a cause only has 100 others working on it, there's probably much more low-hanging fruit left—better untapped opportunities to help—than in a cause where thousands of people and billions in funding have already made use of the best opportunities to help.

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Consider the broad issues of human well-being in comparison to the well-being of other animals. There are around 8 billion people on Earth, compared to 72 billion farmed land animals, and another 1.2 trillion aquatic animals killed for food each year. In the US, for every human, there are about 28 land animals raised and killed in factory farms each year, and they are subject to cruel treatment throughout their lives. Still, over 97% of philanthropic funding in the US goes towards human-centered causes.

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Even among the less than 3% going towards non-human animals, most of the money goes toward shelters, while many more animals are mistreated in factory farms. So farmed animals are vastly more neglected than both pet animals and humans, while they are mistreated on a much larger scale.

Another important point to note: neglected causes often look weird. By definition, neglected causes are the ones that not everyone is talking about, and they often aim at improving the well-being of people or beings who aren't usually given attention, such as people halfway across the world living in extreme poverty, farmed animals, and future

generations. So, when an idea about improving the world is unintuitive or weird, it can be especially important to take it seriously.

On top of this framework for comparing causes, what are other considerations that may help us do good, better?

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One of the most important lessons I've learned from Effective Altruism is to expand my compassion, and think really hard about who we ought to care about.

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By default, most people care and spend most of our time thinking about ourselves, our friends, and our family. Many of us also advocate for causes benefiting our local communities, communities of identities we hold, and our country. But do the lives of people halfway across the world, of a different race, nationality, or religion matter any less than those of people within our conventional boundaries? I don't think so. When we include all humans in our circle of caring, we may realize that, in comparison to local issues, many global issues affect many more people, much more severely, and are much easier to address. Similarly, are humans the only species that is worthy of moral concern, or the only beings whose suffering and well-being matter? When we include tens of billions of animals or more in our circle of caring, we see how large and neglected animal welfare concerns are. And lastly, how should we think about the well-being of future generations, who will have to deal with the consequences of our society's myopic actions, but have no say in the political decision making that will impact their quality of life, and even their likelihood of existing?

It is for these reasons that global poverty, animal welfare, and improving the long-term future are such high-priority causes within Effective Altruism.

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Many members of the Effective Altruism community identify with longtermism: the idea that the primary determinant of actions' moral value is their impact on the long-term future. This is for two main reasons -

- 1) First, future humans are morally important, since the circumstances of people's birth, including when they were born, shouldn't lessen their importance, and
- 2) Second, there could easily be an immense number of people in the future.

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To elaborate on the second point: the number of people who could exist in the future is extremely vast. If each person on this graphic represents around 10 billion people, humanity has had around 100 billion people who've lived before us in the past, around 10 billion alive today, and when we think about the number that could exist in the future if humanity survives and flourishes,

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(brief pause)

SLIDE 41

The number is absolutely overwhelming.

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This is why for many EAs, a central priority is improving the long-term future. Promising ways of doing so include reducing existential risks, improving the trajectory of the future (for example by reducing the likelihood of international conflict), researching global priorities, and doing advocacy work.

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Next, I'm going to talk about some other considerations that many find helpful for increasing impact.

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As many of us are Americans and consume primarily American media, it can be easy to forget about issues outside the U.S. However on a global scale, even poor Americans tend to be far better off than many people elsewhere in the world. The median American household income per person is \$33,000, which puts us comfortably in the top 10% of the global income distribution, while the median US top university graduate's income puts us in the global top 1%.

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Another way of thinking that can help us better assess the impact of our actions is asking ourselves, "what would happen otherwise, if I don't do this?" For example, maybe you're thinking about becoming a doctor in the US to help people. It might seem intuitive that you'll be helping all of your patients. But many talented students want to become doctors. So if you don't become a doctor, it's likely that someone who's almost as good as you would be helping these patients anyway, as a part of a healthcare system that already offers pretty high life expectancies. In contrast, if you become a doctor in a place that has a shortage of doctors, or work in some other area with a

shortage of skilled, altruistic people, you'll be able to support more people who otherwise would not have received support.

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Another important consideration is the opportunity cost of our actions. It's useful to ask ourselves: how does the value of my action compare to the value of the best thing I could have done instead? The current pandemic offers a grim but useful example of this being applied. When hospitals are overwhelmed by the number of patients seeking treatment and do not have the resources to treat everyone, they have to make harsh but necessary trade-offs to decide how to use their limited resources. They often have to prioritize based on who is most likely to survive, and who has the most years of healthy life to live if they are saved. Not because every tragedy isn't worth avoiding, but because we can't avoid every tragedy, so if we don't allow the least terrible tragedies to happen, we'll be allowing worse ones to happen.

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Our time and money are limited, so we need to be strategic in figuring out, as best as we can, how we can most effectively use our limited resources to improve the world.

SLIDE 48

The stakes of our everyday actions are very high, and recognizing this might make us feel like devoting all of our time and money to giving support to those who desperately need it. But this is not a sustainable approach. People who have tried it will usually attest to how, if you don't take care of yourself, you will burn out, and that will make it so much harder for you to help people over the long term. So keep up your friendships, take care of your mental health, and don't donate every last penny, because you need to live in a healthy and sustainable way if you want to help people over a lifetime, and if you want to inspire others to do the same. An analogy I find helpful is what they always say on airplanes: put on your own oxygen mask before helping others.

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To clarify another idea: "Effective Altruist" is shorthand for someone who's trying to be effective at altruism. We still have so much to learn, individually and collectively. We sometimes fall short of how we want to live, but this isn't a reason to abandon our ideals—it's why we need them.

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What is important is that we keep learning, growing, and continually looking for even better opportunities to improve the world.

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To recap what we've gone over so far: it's important to prioritize between different causes and determine which ones have the largest impact. One helpful framework for doing this is comparing problems along the dimensions of scale, neglectedness, and solvability. We discussed expanding our circle of compassion, to people all over the world, to animals, and future generations. To finish up, we'll discuss some more concrete actions we can take to apply EA lessons to our lives.

SLIDE 52

The most impact-relevant decision we will make is probably how we will spend the approximately 80,000 hours of our working lives.

SLIDE 53

For this reason I recommend checking out the website 80000Hours.org. 80,000 Hours conducts research to find which careers have the largest positive social impact and provides career advice based on that research. **I have found it extremely useful as a student to get clarity on the most pressing problems and where my skill set would be best suited to help.**

SLIDE 54

Along with career choice, another high-impact decision is how we donate our money. Our choices about where we donate our money, and how we engage our friends, family and network to donate can have a lot of impact. According to a study by the Founders' Pledge, donations to the most effective climate charities are drastically more effective at reducing carbon emissions than other more popular interventions, such as changing our consumption habits.

SLIDE 55

Many Effective Altruists sign the Giving What We Can Pledge, a commitment to donating 10% of their income or more to cost-effective charities. You can go to givingwhatwecan.org to learn more about especially high impact charities as well as where you are on the global income distribution, and to sign the pledge.

SLIDE 56

There's always more to learn, so here are some great books for learning more. I recommend *Doing Good Better* to learn more about key ideas behind Effective Altruism, *Strangers Drowning* to see how some Effective Altruists and other extreme do-gooders maintain their extreme altruism and commitment over their entire lives, and *The*

Precipice to learn more about the biggest risks to our future, and how we can mitigate them.

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In addition, there's talking to others about EA. We may only have 80,000 hours in our career to do good, but if we can inspire others to prioritize positive impact in their career and donation decisions, we can multiply our impact. As EA is quite nuanced and complex, I recommend one-on-ones and small conversations when talking about EA with others over large-scale publicity, so there's a chance for discussion, answering questions, and not overly simplifying or distorting EA. Having friends to discuss and practice Effective Altruism with has made it much easier for me to get involved, and more enjoyable too.

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This brings us to how you can get more involved. I highly recommend getting involved with your local EA group, and having 1:1 chats with experienced members of the community to learn more and answer any questions you might have. Here's my email if you'd like to get in touch with me.

Please fill out [this form](#) with opportunities to get more involved (like signing up for our mailing list, for a 1:1 with an exec members, fellowship sign-up, and a few questions about how to improve our presentation).

If you have a fellowship/reading group/some other concrete thing people can sign up for, publicize it here. Send form in chat if virtual/hand out physical form before presentation if in person.

(Wait 1 minute).

SLIDE 59 + 60

If you'd like to learn more about the statistics I mentioned in the talk, here's a list of our sources, and I can send you the presentation if you shoot me an email.

SLIDE 61

And now we'll answer some questions!

****Answer questions****

1 minute before official ending time: (WRAP UP/have an official closing):

To end the session, I'd like to leave you with one other quote from *Strangers Drowning*. I think it captures the sense of urgency that drives many to dedicate themselves to doing the most good they can.

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"There is one circumstance in which the extremity of do-gooders looks normal, and that is war. In wartime — or in a crisis so devastating that it resembles war, such as an earthquake or a hurricane — ... what in ordinary times would be thought weirdly zealous becomes expected."

"Some feel that such a crisis "was the time when they were most vividly alive, in comparison with which the rest of life seems dull and lacking in purpose."

For people with the urge to help, "it is always wartime... there are always those as urgently in need as the victims of battle."

There is so much that is wrong with our world. If we want to help, we must look for, and not let ourselves forget, the silent atrocities that go on everyday. We must think carefully about how to prioritize our efforts, because finding the best ways to help is really hard, and we only have so much time—not enough for all of the causes worth dedicating our lives to. And we must act, because there is so much to do.

Because every second that we don't, too many beings suffer, and our future is further endangered.

When we recognize this, we might feel overwhelmed. For me, joining the effective altruism community—a community committed to ending atrocities as effectively as we can—helped turn my paralysis into resolve. I have found getting involved with the community to be deeply empowering and uplifting. And I hope you do too, because every day, there are strangers drowning, and every day, we have the opportunity to reach out a hand.

(Brief pause)

Thank you so much for coming. Some of our group members will be hanging around, if you'd like to keep chatting or ask any other questions.

END

(see slides for citations)