Extreme Altruism: Should You Care for Strangers at the Expense of Your Family?

by Larissa MacFarquhar

For many years, Julia Wise wondered if she would ever meet another person who thought as she did. Everyone she knew thought her ideas about morality were strange. Some people told her they thought she might be right, but they were not willing to make the sacrifices she made; other people thought her ideas were not only misguided, but actually bad. All this made her worry that she might be wrong. How likely was it that everyone else was wrong and she was right? But she was also suspicious of that worry: after all, it would be quite convenient to be wrong – she would not have to give so much. Although her beliefs seemed to her not only reasonable but clearly true, and she could argue for them in a rational way, they were not entirely the result of conscious thinking: the essential impulse that gave rise to all the rest was simply a part of her. She could not help it; she had always been this way, since she was a child.

Julia believed that because each person was equally valuable, she was not entitled to care more for herself than for anyone else; she believed that she was therefore obliged to spend much of her life working for the benefit of others. That was the core of it; as she grew older, she worked out the implications of this principle in greater detail. In college, she thought she might want to work in development abroad somewhere, but then she realized that probably the most useful thing she could do was not to become a white aid worker telling people in other countries what to do, but, instead, to earn a salary in the US and give it to NGOs that could use it to pay for several local workers who knew what their countries needed better than she did. She reduced her expenses to the absolute minimum so she could give away 50% of what she earned. She felt that nearly every penny she spent on herself should have gone to someone else who needed it more. She gave to whichever charity seemed to her (after researching the matter) to relieve the most suffering for the least money.

Julia has experienced depression in the past, and even now that she has been happy for several years, and is often funny, the dregs of her sadness still cling to her. You can imagine the doors of her self closing very tightly, to the point where no light at all can enter. Her depression has made her viscerally conscious of suffering in others in a way that most naturally happy people are not. She is young – 30 – but not so young that her youth accounts for any of her beliefs; she is long past the age when most people forget or distort or reject the terrible simplicity of the rules they learned as children.

Despite her extreme frugality, she is not an ascetic. She loves material things as much as anyone. She loves fireworks and ice cream, and she loves to cook. She loves to sew clothes and to make elaborate, old-fashioned hats out of scraps. She gets pleasure out of things like that; she does not get pleasure out of giving money. To her, giving is simply a duty, like not stealing, so it does not beget a feeling of virtue. If all were well with the world, she would like to live on a farm somewhere, and keep animals, and grow pumpkins and runner beans and sunflowers in the garden. She would sew curtains and read and bake pies and have children. But all is not well with the world.

Julia is a do-gooder – which is to say, a human character who arouses conflicting emotions. By "do-gooder" here I do not mean a part-time, normal do-gooder – someone who has a worthy job, or volunteers at a charity, and returns to an ordinary family life in the evenings. I mean a person who sets out to live as ethical a life as possible. I mean a person who is drawn to moral goodness for its own sake. I mean someone who commits himself wholly, beyond what seems reasonable. I mean the kind of do-gooder who makes people uneasy.

A do-gooder has a sense of duty that is very strong – so strong that he is able to repress most of his baser impulses in order to do what he believes to be right. Because of this, there is a certain rigidity and a focused narrowness to the way he lives: his life makes ordinary existence seem flabby and haphazard. The standards to which he holds himself and the emotions he cultivates – care for strangers, a degree of detachment from family in order to care for those strangers, indifference to low pleasures – can seem inhumanly lofty, and separate him from other people.

The usual way to do good is to help those near you: a person grows up in a particular place, perceives that something is wrong there, and sets out to fix it. Or a person's job suddenly requires heroism of him and he rises to the occasion – he might be a priest whose church becomes a refuge in wartime, or a nurse working in a hospital at the start of a plague. He may not know personally the people he is helping, but he has something in common with them – they are, in some sense, his people. Then there is another sort of person, who starts out with something more abstract – a sense of injustice in the world at large and a longing for goodness as such. This person feels obliged to right wrongs or relieve suffering, but he does not know right away how to do that, so he sets himself to figuring it out. He does not feel that he must attend first to people close to him: he is moved not by a sense of belonging but by the urge to do as much good as he can. The do-gooders I am talking about are this second sort of person. They are not better or worse than the first sort, but they are rarer, and harder to understand.

The first sort of person is often called a hero, and does not provoke the discomfort that do-gooders do. A hero of this type comes upon a problem and decides to help; when he is not helping, he returns to his ordinary life. Because of this, his noble act is not felt as a reproach: you could not have done what he did because you were not there. The do-gooder, on the other hand, knows that there are crises everywhere, all the time, and he seeks them out. He is not spontaneous – he plans his good deeds in cold blood. This makes him good; but it can also make him seem perverse – a foul-weather friend, a kind of virtuous ambulance chaser. And it is also why do-gooders are a reproach: you know, as the do-gooder knows, that there is always, somewhere, a need for help.

The term "do-gooder" is, of course, often demeaning. It can mean a silly or intrusive person who tries to do good but ends up only meddling. It can mean someone who seems annoyingly earnest, or priggish, or judgmental. But even when "do-gooder" simply means a person who does good deeds, there is still some scepticism, even antagonism, in it. One reason may be guilt: nobody likes to be reminded, even implicitly, of his own selfishness. Another is irritation: nobody likes to be told, even implicitly, how he should live his life, or be reproached for how he is living it. And nobody likes to be the recipient of charity. But that is not the whole story.

Ambivalence towards do-gooders also arises out of a deep uncertainty about how a person ought to live. Is it good to try to live as moral a life as possible – a saintly life? Or does a life like that lack some crucial human quality? Is it right to care for strangers at the expense of your own people? Is it good to bind yourself to a severe morality that constricts spontaneity and freedom? Is it possible for a person to hold himself to unforgiving standards without becoming unforgiving? Is it presumptuous, even blasphemous, for a person to imagine that he can transfigure the world – or to believe that what he does in his life really matters when he is only a tiny, flickering speck in a vast universe? There are powerful forces that push against do-gooders that are among the most fundamental, vital and honorable urges of human life.

For instance: there is family and there are strangers. The do-gooder has a family, like anyone else. If he does not have children, he has parents. But he holds himself to moral commitments that are so stringent and inflexible that they will at some point conflict with his caring for his family. Then he has to decide what to do. To most people, it is obvious that they owe far more to family than to strangers; caring for the children of strangers as much as your own, say, would seem not so much difficult as unnatural, even monstrous. But the do-gooder does not believe his family deserves better than anyone else's. He loves his more, but he knows that other people love their families just as much. To a do-gooder, taking care of family can seem like a kind of moral alibi – something that may look like selflessness, but is really just an extension of taking care of yourself.

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 – duty expands far beyond its peacetime boundaries. In wartime, it is thought dutiful rather than unnatural to leave your family for the sake of a cause. In ordinary times, to ask a person to sacrifice his life for a stranger seems outrageous, but in war it is commonplace. Acts that seem appallingly bad or appallingly good in normal circumstances become part of daily life. This is the difference between do-gooders and ordinary people: for do-gooders, it is always wartime. They always feel themselves responsible for strangers; they know that there are always those as urgently in need as the victims of battle, and they consider themselves conscripted by duty.

It occurred to Julia when she was quite young that she would be hellish to be married to. She was unwilling to compromise on moral questions, which meant, for instance, that she was unwilling to spend money on things that it was normal for married people to spend money on. And yet, when she was 22, having fallen in love with a young man named Jeff Kaufman, she proposed to him and they became engaged. Jeff knew about her principles, but money questions did not come up much while they were still in college, because their food and shelter were taken care of. And so it happened that the first real moral test of their life together did not arise until after graduation.

It was a sunny day in September, and they were at an apple orchard outside Boston. There were candy apples for sale, and Julia wanted one. Normally she would have told herself that she could not justify spending her money that way, but Jeff had told her that if she wanted anything he would buy it for her with his money. He had found a job as a computer programmer; Julia was still unemployed, and did not have any savings, because she had given everything she had earned in the summer to Oxfam.

That night they lay in bed and talked about money. Jeff told Julia that, inspired by her example, he was thinking of giving some percentage of his salary to charity. And Julia realized that, if Jeff was going to start giving away his earnings, then, by asking him to buy her the apple, she had spent money that might have been given. With her selfish, ridiculous desire for a candy apple, she might have deprived a family of an anti-malarial bed net or deworming medicine that might have saved the life of one of its children. The more she thought about this, the more horrific and unbearable it seemed to her, and she started to cry. She cried for a long time, and it got so bad that Jeff started to cry, too, which he almost never did. He cried because, more than anything, he wanted Julia to be happy, but how could she be happy if she went through life seeing malarial children everywhere, dying before her eyes for want of a bed net? He knew that he wanted to marry her, but he was not sure how he could cope with a life that was going to be this difficult and this sad, with no conceivable way out.

They stopped crying and talked about budgets. They realized that Julia was going to lose her mind if she spent the rest of her life weighing each purchase in terms of bed nets, so, after much discussion, they came up with a system. The most crucial element of the system was that henceforth Jeff's money and Julia's money would be considered entirely separate. Jeff decided he would give away 50% of his salary and keep the rest for spending and saving; Julia would give away 100% of hers. Out of the remainder of Jeff's salary, he allotted an allowance to each of them of $38 a week, which they would use to pay for everything other than rent and food – things such as clothes, shoes, transportation and treats like candy apples. Jeff decreed that this allowance had to be spent on these things: it could not be given away, and it could not be saved. That way, if Julia wanted to spend money on something, she would not be taking that money away from someone who was dying.

Having figured out a system, they stuck to it with rigor. They kept track of every purchase, however tiny, and entered it into a spreadsheet. After a year, they realized that giving away 50% of Jeff's salary, before taxes (they had forgotten taxes), while paying rent and student loans, and giving away 100% of Julia's salary, was basically impossible, so they adjusted the amount to 30%. In 2009, they spent $15,688 on themselves and donated $28,309. In 2010, they spent $20,591 and donated $36,056. In 2011, they spent $17,959 and donated nothing, because Julia was paying for social-work school and Jeff was taking much of his salary in stock options. In 2012, they spent $12,107 (their rent was less, because they moved in with Jeff's parents) and donated $49,933. At some point they decided to merge their finances and donate 50% of their joint pre-tax income; they also realized that it made sense to buy a house and rent part of it out, rather than pay rent themselves. Because they earned more, they were now giving away more than ever before, both proportionally and in absolute terms, despite buying the house: in 2014, they donated $127,556.

Once their financial system was in place, they spent some time looking into various organizations, with the goal of finding the charity that relieved the most suffering for the fewest dollars. At first, they settled on Oxfam. They liked that it employed local workers, and that it focused on long-term development rather than splashy but inefficient disaster relief. Later, they heard about an organization called GiveWell, which evaluated charities in terms not of how little they spent on overheads – a silly measure, since overhead costs, such as efficacy research, might be money well spent – but of how effective they were at improving lives. GiveWell promoted groups such as the Against Malaria Foundation, which distributed bed nets, and the Schistosomiasis Control Initiative, which administered cheap deworming treatments. People were always telling Julia and Jeff that they ought to help those in their own community first, before sending money abroad, but they thought that was wrong. For one thing, money went so much further in other countries; and then, why were strangers in some nearby town any more "their own" than strangers in Malawi? It made no sense.

Julia and Jeff knew that development alone was limited at best, and at its worst could be actively harmful: nothing could really change without the action of governments. But they thought that enabling some lives to be less stunted was as much as a regular person could hope to do, even if larger, systemic evils persisted. It was a dull way of giving – writing checks, rather than, say, becoming an aid worker in a distant country. There was a moral glamour in throwing over everything and leaving home and going somewhere dangerous that compensated for all sorts of privations. There was no glamour in staying behind, earning money and donating it. But so much depended on money, they knew – it took a callous kind of sentimentality to forget that.

Julia grew up in a suburb of Richmond, Virginia. Her father was a property manager; her mother taught in a preschool. When she was a child, she put her allowance in the collection plate at church, thinking the money would go to the poor. She agonized over whether to go to birthday parties, because she felt she could not show up without bringing a present, but she believed it would be wrong to spend $5 on a present when that $5 could be given to someone who needed it more. Until she was 11, she was fervently religious. She believed that, since God had given her life, she owed him a debt so enormous that she could never repay it, but that it was her duty to try as hard as she could. Then, one weekend, it occurred to her that other people in the world believed in their holy books just as strongly as she believed in the Bible, so what reason did she have to believe that hers was true? She had never seen or felt any evidence of God's presence. Quite suddenly, she lost her faith.

After she stopped believing in God, Julia stopped giving money to the church, and for a couple of years she just spent her allowance on herself: if God didn't exist, there was no one she owed it to. Then she began to learn about poverty in the world, and how rich she was compared to other people, and when she was 13 she began giving her allowance away again. Around this time, a boy who went to her family's church developed a serious illness that required major surgery, for which his family did not have insurance. The church took up a collection for them, and Julia's mother told her that here was someone she knew whom she could help – why not give her money to him? Julia said: "Why is the life of someone I happen to know worth more than the lives of many more people I don't know, whom I could help with the same amount?"

In her final year at college, she met Jeff. The summer after graduation – the summer before the candy-apple incident – she and Jeff worked at Pinewoods, a folk-dance-and-music camp. Jeff washed dishes and Julia was a cook. Together they saved about $5,000, which they donated to Oxfam. While they were working at the camp, it seemed to them that this was a good way to spend the summer: they were living simply, spending nothing, helping other people with hard, menial work, and saving the money they earned to give away. But after the summer was over and Jeff started donating, it occurred to him that they could have earned considerably more by doing something else, which would have enabled them to give more. Had that summer, then, been a self-indulgence? Did they have the right to spend three months of their expensively educated lives playing peasants by the seaside? Was there really any difference between choosing not to earn more money and spending their money on a new sofa or fancy clothes? Had they, in effect, been paying with the suffering of other people for the privilege of feeling wholesomely poor?

It was bad enough to worry about these questions in retrospect, but they became far more pressing when Julia had to think about a career. She had wanted to be a social worker for years, but she could earn far more money doing something else. Was it OK for her to be a social worker anyway? How much was she entitled to consider her own happiness? She could justify not going for the absolute maximum she could earn on the grounds that she would be so crushingly miserable in finance or law that she would have a breakdown within a few years, and then she would have lost the money she had spent on law school or business school or whatever it took to get into the field in the first place. But obviously there were lots of jobs that paid less than finance, yet more than social work. How could she justify going into a field that paid so little? All of this was much less of a problem for Jeff. He liked working as a programmer, and he imagined that even if he had no charitable duties he would probably be doing something pretty similar. It was not hard to make him happy.

Julia and Jeff rarely talked to other people about their giving. It was awkward. People did not like to talk about money in general, but they really did not want to feel they were being judged for keeping too much of their money for themselves. When Julia had tried to talk about giving, one person told her she was crazy and was just going to make herself miserable; another person made fun of her. She could not decide how to feel about this. On the one hand, she felt that one of the most useful things she could do was encourage other people to give more, and she worried that if she were braver and cared less about social niceties she would be more aggressive about it. On the other hand, she knew that it was important for the cause not to be off-putting, and if anything was off-putting it was preachiness. Or was that just her way of rationalizing what she wanted to do anyway? She was not sure. She realized that it was important for her not to seem too puritanical or constrained: people would think that she had some kind of martyr complex, or that it was impossible to give a lot of money without making yourself miserable, whereas in fact most of the time she found it easy to live an enjoyable life without spending much.

This sense of isolation lasted for a long time; but then Julia and Jeff discovered Giving What We Can. This was an organization that had been founded by Toby Ord, a professor of moral philosophy at Oxford University, to spread the idea that it was incumbent upon everyone to give more to help the worst-off. Julia and Jeff had always felt shy talking to people about giving, but Ord was not shy about it at all; in a short time, he had started something of a public debate. Reporters heard about his organization, and a spate of articles appeared; students started chapters at universities; other people began to find the group over the internet. Within a year or two of its founding in 2009, Giving What We Can had become a focal point for what became known to its members as the “effective altruism” movement. Six years after its founding, it had more than 1,000 members.

Ord was thin and pale, his skin stretched tightly over his skull, his expression tenacious. He grew up in Melbourne, Australia. When he was a student in the UK, he would see posters of starving children and think: “Arggh, I should be doing something about that.” Eventually, he thought: “Well, why don’t you just do something, then?” At the time he was earning about £8,000 a year on his student stipend and his life was perfectly fine, so he reckoned it would be pretty easy later on, when he was earning a professor’s salary, to give away everything he earned above £18,000. He sat down and worked out how much he would probably earn in the course of his working life. He calculated that he would earn about £1.5m, and he would need to spend about £500,000 of that on himself – including savings, probably a mortgage, and funds for emergencies – which left £1m to donate to charity. That was a pleasant surprise – £1m was a lot of money! He did some more calculations and arrived at the conclusion that with £1m he could save about 100,000 years of healthy life. That was really exciting. He thought: "I could either save a 100,000 years of healthy life, or I could garnish my own already happy life with some extra bells and whistles." The second did not seem like a very good option, so he went for the first.

When Ord first started Giving What We Can, he assumed that the altruism part of his message would be harder to push than the effective part: he thought it would be difficult to convince people to give more money, because that involved sacrifice, but easy to convince them to redirect their money to better charities, because who would not want to do more good with their money? It turned out that people were not so rational, and in fact the reverse was true: it was quite easy to persuade people to give more money if you moved them emotionally, but persuading them to abandon causes that they had believed in for years was very hard. It was easier for him to convert logical types who had never thought much about charity than it was to change the minds of longtime do-gooders. When Ord talked about his ideas in public, he tried to avoid imposing guilt – he believed that making people feel guilty did not get you anywhere. He told people instead that giving away money was an exciting opportunity. "We look at people like Oskar Schindler, who saved about 1,200 lives, and we think, 'That's an amazing kind of moral heroism.' But we could make fewer sacrifices than he did and save more lives if we wanted to," he said.

Sometimes people told Ord that his principles were too demanding – that it was not reasonable to require people to give most of their money to help strangers. "I think that's a very bad argument," Ord said. "Morality can demand a lot. Let's say you've been falsely accused of murder, you've been sentenced to death, and you realise that you can escape if you kill one of your guards. Morality says you can't kill him, even though it means you're going to lose your life. That's just how it is. Well, it turns out that we can save 1,000 people's lives. If you don't do that, then you have to say that it's permissible to value yourself more than 1,000 times as much as you value strangers. Does that sound plausible? I don't think that sounds very plausible. If you think that, your theory's just stupid."

As the effective altruism movement continued to grow, Ord's Giving What We Can co-founder, another philosopher named William MacAskill, founded a brother organisation, 80,000 Hours, to help the altruistically minded think about how they could do the most good with the hours of their working lives. MacAskill wanted to spread the idea that an altruistic type should not necessarily follow one of the traditional do-gooder paths – becoming an aid worker or a doctor in a developing country, say – but should consider a career that would earn a lot of money which he could then donate. MacAskill called this "earning to give". The idea began to catch on. An American student went to work in finance; in his first year out of college, he donated $100,000 to anti-poverty organisations. A British student graduated with an engineering degree; he had planned to move to Africa and build dams, but he went to work for an investment bank and donated money instead. Dozens more, after consulting with 80,000 Hours, were planning to do something similar.

Julia had always wanted children. Even in high school she had thought about her future children – the toys she would make for them, the games they would play together. She had always thought that if she gave up children, that would be the point at which she felt her life would be not just constrained but blighted. When she thought about a future in which her parents and Jeff's parents had died and there was no younger generation to replace them, just her and Jeff, living by themselves in some small rented apartment, that future looked desolate. But then she began to question this. Many people had told her that once you had children you thought about the world differently. It was a strange thing to contemplate – to make a decision that she knew in advance would change her in large and unpredictable ways, probably ones that would tend to undermine her convictions about obligations to strangers.

But once Julia opened herself up to the thought that children might not be necessary – once she moved them, as it were, to a different column in her moral spreadsheet, from essential to discretionary – she realized just how enormous a line item a child would be. Children would be the most expensive nonessential thing she could possibly possess, so by having children of her own she would be in effect killing other people's children. Julia talked about this with Jeff and she grew very upset. Once the prospect of giving up children felt real to her, it felt terrifying and painful. They started to think about halfway options. They dismissed the idea of international adoption – it was way too expensive – but they thought they could justify raising a child they had adopted from foster care in the US. She knew that outcomes for kids who stayed in the foster system without being adopted were awful – homelessness, suicide, drug abuse. For that very reason, of course, it was risky to adopt a kid like that; you had really no idea what sort of person it would turn out to be or what kind of life it would lead.

Jeff reasoned that any child of theirs would be likely to grow up thinking that giving money away was a good and necessary thing to do. They could not assume that the child would be as extreme on this issue as they were – undoubtedly it would regress to the mean to some extent, but probably not all the way. He calculated that if the child gave away around 10% of its income, then they would likely break even – that is, the money their child would donate would be equal to the money they did not donate because they spent it instead on raising the child. Of course, this did not take into account that it was better to give money now rather than later, especially to urgent causes such as global warming and Aids, so some discounting would have to be factored into the calculation. All this made Julia feel better for a while, and even though she realised that it would be pretty weird to tell a child that they expected it to pay for its existence in the world with a certain percentage of its income, she figured she was going to be a weird mother anyway, and her child would probably be weird, too, and so perhaps to a child of hers all this would seem perfectly sensible. Finally, Julia decided, sometime before her 28th birthday, that she would try to get pregnant. Their baby, Lily, was born in the early spring of 2014. The thought of leaving Lily in order to go back to work upset her, but she knew that she had to start earning again so she could keep donating. She felt that there were people in the world who needed her money as much as Lily needed her presence, even if their need did not move her as Lily's did.

Not long before Julia became pregnant, Jeff's mother, Suzie, was diagnosed with ovarian cancer. She did not expect to live much longer. When Julia found out that Suzie had cancer, she was as sad as if it were her own mother, and indeed she almost was – Julia had lived in Jeff's parents' house for more than two years. After the initial shock, Julia summoned her beliefs about family and strangers, prodding and testing them to see whether, in this terrible new time, she felt any differently. But when she thought about giving, she found that her beliefs had not changed.

"In talking with people who say, 'I fund XYZ research, even though I know it's not cost-effective, because my sister is sick with XYZ,' I'd always felt kind of bad that I had never been in their shoes," Julia said. "I wondered if I would feel differently if someone I loved were sick. But it really doesn't change my thinking about giving or cost-effectiveness at all. I love Suzie, and I hate that she's sick; and other people love their mothers and hate that they're sick. And if 10 families or one family can be spared that experience, even if the one family is mine, I'll go with the 10 families every time. I don't want to go through this, but neither do they."

She knew this would be difficult to explain. Even more than before, people would divide over whether this sounded to them like generosity, or justice, or a failure of love. Julia knew how it felt to her. But, ideas about love being what they were, she didn't expect much understanding.

What would the world be like if everyone thought like a do-gooder? What if everyone believed that his family was no more important or valuable than anyone else's? What if everyone decided that spontaneity or self-expression or certain kinds of beauty or certain kinds of freedom were less vital, or less urgent, than relieving other people's pain? An extreme sense of duty seems to many people to be a kind of disease – a masochistic need for self-punishment, perhaps, or a kind of depression that makes its sufferer feel unworthy of pleasure. Surely those who suffer from a disease like that must live dark, narrow lives, forcing themselves always to think about the misery of others and to endure misery themselves.

In fact, some do-gooders are happy, some are not. The happy ones are happy for the same reasons anyone is happy – love, work, purpose. It is do-gooders' unhappiness that is different – a reaction not only to humiliation and lack of love and the other usual stuff, but also to knowing that the world is filled with misery, and that most people do not really notice or care, and that, try as they might, they cannot do much about either of those things. 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. And, remembering that, they open themselves to a sense of unlimited, crushing responsibility.