

TRANSCRIPT OF DEVELOPMENT DRUMS [EPISODE 29 – TOBY ORD: GIVING WHAT WE CAN]

Host: Owen Barder. Guest: Toby Ord

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Owen Barder

Thanks for downloading Development Drums. My name is Owen Barder at the Center for Global Development. And my guest today is Toby Ord, British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow in Philosophy at Balliol College. He is also a Research Associate at two of Oxford's research centers, the Uehiro Centre for Practical Ethics and the Future of Humanity Institute.

Toby is interested in ethics, not just from an academic point of view, but he is also very engaged in what this means in practice. He has decided to give away more than half his lifetime income, and to use that money to improve the lives of people in poor countries. And he founded an organization called "Giving What We Can" to bring together people who also want to give away a substantial part of their income and to help institute that effectively.

Toby, welcome to Development Drums.

Toby Ord

Thank you.

Owen Barder

So, we're going to talk in the second half of the podcast about "Giving What We Can", but I'd like to start off by exploring with you some of the ethical underpinnings of your view, that we have a more obligation to give money to people in poor countries. And I have heard some of the talks you've given in the past, and you said that your interest in this was triggered, in part, by looking at cost-effectiveness calculations, particularly in global health. Most people who listen to this will have heard vaguely of quality-adjusted life years and they will think that that's something to do with how we measure cost-effectiveness in health. Can you tell us something about QALYs and DALYs and what all that means and why that focuses your attention on this question?

Toby Ord

Sure. I think that this is very good starting point. So when it comes to thinking about cost-effectiveness in aid and trying to work out what leads to the most improvement in people's lives, you need to have some kind of a metric or way of comparing these different things. And that can often stop people if they try and think of an easy way to compare even two different ways of helping people in terms of their health. Maybe they are different illnesses, or one is a lifesaving operation whereas another one is curing blindness, and they might not be able to compare them.

So there are techniques for comparing them. They're not perfect, but they are good enough to get somewhere. So, the most intuitive idea is to say how many lives to be saved, but that's not a very good metric because it really depends upon how much life you saved. There is this truism in the public health that no one ever really saves a life. All they do is stop the person dying at that point and the person still dies at some later point. And if that later point is 3 hours later, then it's even not really that much of improvement, whereas if that point is 30 years later, it's a very big improvement.

So, there is a move then to say instead of lives saved let's focus how many years of life saved. And even then, there is a bit of an issue that in some cases there are quality-quantity tradeoffs. So for example, it could be the case that someone has an option to cure a cancer with invasive chemotherapy and it could be



that this lowers someone's quality of life by quite a lot, but extends the duration of their life, and whether they should accept this tradeoff. And there are also cases like curing blindness which improves someone's quality without taking the quantity. So what health economists and moral philosophers together have come up with is a system where we look at how many years of life someone has and we weigh each of those years of life by the health-related quality as a percentage.

And so it could be that if you've got some moderately severe illness but your health quality is 90% or full quality say. And if you got quite a severe illness it could be only half as good as a year of full health.

Owen Barder

And how do we work out what the quality of life is for somebody, say, somebody who unfortunately goes blind, what has that done to their quality adjusted life years?

Toby Ord

So, it's quite hard to work this out, and the number of life years is much easier to get a grip on. But to work out the quality, a lot of – there are various techniques, but one of the main things involves giving people surveys where they ask them a series of questions about different medical conditions and how bad it would be to have them, so in particular, to consider tradeoffs. So, one of the popular versions of this is the time tradeoff where you say, would you rather have 10 years of life at full quality of health, or 20 years of life, but be blind for those 20 years, if they're the only options. And in that case, a lot of people are about even on them and so then what they do is they set the quality weighting of blindness to be about half because of that. Whereas for many other illnesses, you don't need to offer as many 20 years before they'll accept this tradeoff of life with that condition.

Owen Barder

And if that kind of broad consensus, if you ask, say a group of people in the U.K. that question, do they cluster around a similar kind of weighting or is there a big variance of what people say?

Toby Ord

I'm not really sure how big the variance is on this.

Owen Barder

Okay.

Toby Ord

But definitely there have been a lot of experiments where they have asked people to try and elicit these quality weightings with a number of different questions and a lot of tests to see how these different questions correlate with each other and so forth including trying to ask people more in-depth interviews and try to explain exactly to get them to really think seriously about the situation what would it be like if you had this condition ideally to talk to many people who have the condition, to talk to people who have had the condition and then were cured of the condition and to talk to doctors who deal with the condition regularly.

There is a lot that can go into this. It's also not clear that it would be the same for everyone So, it could be the case that for one person being blind is not so bad or for another person it's very bad depending on their interests and their job. But what we're trying to look at typically is the answer to the population level questions. So, is that the case that we should fund this program which will avoid 10,000 cases of malaria versus another program which will avoid 1,000 people going blind? And so at that point, you want to get the population averages anyway.

Owen Barder

So it doesn't matter so much whether it's – and so you have these measures of quality adjusted life years, what is it you then do with those?

Toby Ord

Good question. So the measures themselves as you can see are not perfect for a number of reasons, I mean if someone says that the weighting for blindness is 0.5 and someone else thinks it really should 0.4, it's

pretty hard to work that out. So they should be taken as reliable or you need to really take plus or minus 20%, like that.

Owen Barder

Right, right.

Toby Ord

However, what's really interesting is that if you look at a selection of interventions in developing countries, you get really wide disparity in how cost effective they are in terms of qualities produced.

Owen Barder

So give us an example.

Toby Ord

So as an example, there is a volume produced by the Disease Control Priorities Network, DCPN, and the current version is the second edition. And in that, they assess more than 100 different interventions in health in developing countries. And they look at how cost effective they are in terms of these QALYs per – dollars per QALY is what they look at. And the range that they found was between about \$30,000 per QALY to about \$3 per QALY.

Owen Barder

So what kind of thing costs \$30,000?

Toby Ord

So treatment for an illness called Kaposi's Sarcoma, which is an AIDS-defining illness is at about \$30,000 per Kaposi's Sarcoma and...

Owen Barder

Giving people an AIDS treatment, people who have HIV/AIDS and they have this condition that cost \$30,000 per quality adjusted life year?

Toby Ord

Yes, to treat that condition.

Owen Barder

Treat that condition.

Toby Ord

And this is quite interesting actually, if you look at the HIV treatments, I haven't got the numbers with me, but you find that it's much more effective to instead use antiretroviral drugs as an HIV intervention. And then it's quite a bit more effective again to distribute condoms and quite a bit more effective again to educate sex workers about the risks. And together, you get something like a factor of 500 between the least effective and most effective HIV interventions even within a single cause.

Owen Barder

It's 500 times more cost effective to educate high-risk workers about HIV/AIDS than it is to treat diseases that are associated with AIDS.

Toby Ord

Yes, for this particular disease, Kaposi's Sarcoma.

Owen Barder

In terms of the quality adjusted life years that you save by doing that.

Toby Ord

Exactly. So in terms of the kind of that measure of health improvement for that population.

Owen Barder

And presumably there are things that are cheaper still outside this?

Toby Ord

Yes, that's right. So in this report, you get it down to about \$3 or \$4 per quality adjusted life year for – as listed there for treatment of neglected tropical diseases in particular that was soil transmitted helminth infections, so de-worming programs and also hygiene correction, both estimated to be between \$3 and \$4 per year of quality adjusted life.

So that – the way thinking that is how much does it cost to give an entire year of healthy life to someone or it might not be an entire year of life of full health, it might be improving 10 years which were at 90% and moving them up to full health or some combination of these things. It could be a little bit therefore hard to get a nice crisp picture of it. But what's really interesting is that even if, as I said, the health weights could be out by 20% or something, if you do have interventions which are estimated to be 1,000 times more effective than other interventions, then this type of 20% thing is not so relevant.

Owen Barder

So this big difference between the most cost effective interventions and the least cost effective interventions, that seems to be something that has struck you as being important in terms of the way we respond and the way – and the choices we make. Tell us why this big variance matters so much?

Toby Ord

Well, I mean it matters a great deal. So there are many things you can say about it. One of the interesting things is that the least effective interventions which we studied are about as effective as the marginal healthcare spending in the U.K. So if you look at what the NHS is prepared to spend for a year of healthy life, it's around about £20,000, which is about \$30,000. So it's about the same amount as this Kaposi's Sarcoma treatment. So they would fund all of these interventions which were studied. However, it is interesting that there many interventions which are not getting enough funding and there is still room for more funding where they would produce – as far as we can tell 1,000 or even 10,000 times as much benefit. So this would be a case where we're helping – using money to help British people which could help by the same amount 1,000 people in developing countries or 10,000 people.

Owen Barder

So all the things in the U.K. that you could do for, say, \$10 or \$15 per quality adjusted life year we are already doing. The cutoff that you've described which is the National Institute for Clinical Health and Excellence cutoff is where they're deciding which treatments at the margin they are prepared to fund, which things are just inside; and that in that case is \$30,000?

Toby Ord

So that's exactly right. So what NICE, this institute do is to basically order all of the interventions they can do in the U.K., to order them by their cost-effectiveness and then to fund them from the most effective down to the least effective until they run out of money. And the point at which they note that they will run out money is at about £20,000 or £30,000, somewhere in that range.

So they set that as their cutoff. And I think that there is a lot to be said for when thinking about funding development interventions to think about them in terms of cost-effectiveness and to do a similar approach to fund the most effective ones first and then fund progressively downwards using our budgets. So this is – if you do that then – well, if you take the example with the U.K. by doing that NICE end up producing the greatest amount of health benefit they can for their budget. So to do anything other than that, they would be producing less health benefit for the people of the U.K. And so it seems that the onus would be on them to explain why they want to produce less health benefit.

Owen Barder

So there are a lot of people I think working in development who find this a slightly kind of desiccated approach, this idea that were all numbers on a spreadsheet and some authority is going to maximize the

health benefit for the population they are serving. And they want to live in a country where doctor treats the patient in front of them and if you have an expensive disease, they treat that and if you have a cheap disease, they treat that and that we should all be respected as individuals and we all have the disease we have or have the disability we have. And the idea that we should sit around crunching numbers to figure out – I think Sarah Palin referred to the death panels. And she was referring to the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence. So what do you say to people who say that this kind of approach that you're talking about, it is not moral for us but this is immoral for us but it isn't treating people as people are treating people as numbers?

Toby Ord

Well – so it's an interesting style of argument and I think that there is an interesting response to it. One thing to say is that we'd like to live in a country where they just funded everything regardless of cost so long as they funded everything. If it was a country where one person comes in and has a very expensive disease and they fund them and then the next 1,000 people come in and can't be funded, can't be treated and have terrible diseases that a more sensible allocation of funding would have actually prevented, then it's not so clear we'd want to live in that country. So that's the first thing to say. If it was this ideal utopia where have enough money yeah, we'd love that. But that's not really a relevant consideration which is what should we do given our budgets.

So we could also increase the budgets, but we'd actually don't have enough money even if, say, in America, they spend, say, 100% of their GDP on health there's not enough money to fund all of these things. So it's not just the case of arguing for an increased budget. Also, I'd say that I think that the idea of having the doctors treat the patient in front of them and do whatever is in the interest of that patient is a great idea and – rather than have a system where the doctor feels that they are always constantly second guessing, is it worth these medications or not and so on because I know this is a very expensive one. What they do in the U.K. is that they have got – they removed that layer and so the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence make these decisions, they be the bad cop in a situation and they tell the doctors what treatments the doctors are allowed to approve for their patients and then the patients act as the advocates – the doctors act as the advocates for their own patients. So it's a nice way of separating that out into a couple of levels to allow the doctors to be just more benevolent to that patient.

Owen Barder

Right, okay. So – and the key point here is that we have constrained resources and within a set of constrained resources, we are going to try and get the biggest impact that we can, in this case for health. And your comparison is interesting between what we are prepared to pay in the U.K. is \$30,000 and the kinds of amounts we are prepared to pay in developing countries.

Toby Ord

Yes.

Owen Barder

And one of my colleagues, Amanda Glassman at the Centre for Global Development, she has asked me to press you a bit on this notion of comparing across countries and her hypothesis is that these choices about whether priorities and most cost effective are essentially national decisions that different countries should make, whereas you're making an explicitly international comparison across countries, what's your response to her point?

Toby Ord

Well, it would be nice if we could have her here in person as to some extent I have trouble making sense of this comment. So I mean this was driven home to me quite forcefully just as I'm an Australian citizen and I'm living in the U.K. and so if the government of the U.K. says we need to do this thing for the British people, everybody will wonder what's so special about British people. It's much easier to get caught up in these kinds of nationalistic or patriotic endeavors if you are within your home country. But once that kind of spell is broken on that and you think, well, hang on, I just like to help people. I don't care if they have got a British passport or an Australian passport or whatever. It seems that we have a moral duty to look beyond that just as we look beyond their skin color and so forth.

Owen Barder

So I would like to come back to that in a second but this brings us right to, I think, a bit of moral philosophy and it is after all what you do to step back and think about consequentialism, the idea the way we should make choices is by looking at the consequences for a group of people. Can you explain to us what consequentialism is and tie it to utilitarianism and how should we understand these things? And remember most of your audiences are not moral philosophers, these are development people.

Toby Ord

Yes, so utilitarianism to start with is a theory of ethics, which is to say that whenever you are trying to make a decision, you are trying to produce an action that the right action to do is the action that will lead to the most happiness. So the greatest sum of happiness among all people and animals or anything else that could be happy. And Jeremy Bentham said the amount of pleasure minus pain or happiness minus suffering or something in those – in that direction, there is debate about exactly what. Now, there is also a debate about a number of other aspects to do with this idea. So some people like the general approach but they say we should also weight in equality as well as just the sum of benefits. We should think about the distribution or they disagree about what exactly constitutes welfare for an individual. So there is a large cluster of theories where you could take different opinions on these different aspects and the cluster of theories is called consequentialism and so utilitarianism is one of the many consequentialist theories. It says that what we should maximize with our actions is the sum of happiness. You could also say it's an equality-weighted sum of happiness or it's something else altogether. It could involve justice, for example, within the benefits you are trying to produce. But the idea is that you look at the outcome, you look at what happens in that outcome and that is the sole determinant of what you do. Now the...

Owen Barder

The end justifies the means. You look at the end and that determines whether it's a good action or not.

Toby Ord

Yeah, that's a slight simplification but that's a pretty good interpretation.

Owen Barder

Okay. Now that sounds like it's kind of obvious that the way you should judge the moral worth of an action is, what effect it has on people. Add it up in some way and the effect defined in some sense as being to do with their welfare. So what – tell us about the alternative ideas that will compete with consequentialism as a moral framework?

Toby Ord

Well, so there is two main rival schools of thought, one of which is called deontology, which is the view that ethics is fundamentally about rules of some sort, unbreakable moral rules. For example, you might think of the Ten Commandments or you might think of Kantianism and this idea that you ought to act only if the maxim on which you act could be rationally willed to be universally followed or something like that.

Owen Barder

That's often called the Golden Rule isn't it? That you should treat other people as you would wish to be treated.

Toby Ord

Well it's slightly different. This is – Kant didn't like the Golden Rule actually. The Golden Rule is in fact a bit more similar to utilitarianism, which is to think how would I like to be treated, well that's to increase my own welfare and so I should just act to increase everyone's – the sum of everyone's welfare. That's in some ways a more natural interpretation of the Golden Rule. But Kant had more of the idea what if I everyone did it, which is a little bit different. But deontologists, if they are to have a plausible theory, I think then they have to care about consequences. But they don't care solely about consequences. They say there are other things that matter as well. For example, you couldn't murder an innocent person in order to create a greater benefit.

Owen Barder

Okay. So moral philosophers have the stories of fat men on railway lines and you have this choice about can you divert a runaway train so that it will slam into a person on a railway line, but by diverting it you have stopped the train from running into a schoolyard full of children. And the story from a deontological point of view is that you cannot murder this one person in order to save the schoolyard full of children.

Toby Ord

Yes, well deontologists have very complex answers about these things. Consequentialists tend to have very simple answers. They will say, so long as we are assuming we are taking into account all the consequences of this action, it's not that there are going to be spillover effects that will incentivize certain behavior in the future which will have bad effects and so on. Assuming we can bracket all of that and that all works out, then we should generally lead to saving the greater number. So if you have to divert the train so that it hit one person but saved five, then we should do that.

Deontologists sometimes will support that, but they can depend upon subtleties about how the case is set up and they might say, it's not okay to use a person as a means to an end, but it is okay if the person dies as a side effect. So they have more complex debate about that.

And the third school is virtue ethics, which is a view more about – thinking about your own character and that what ethics is fundamentally about is about displaying certain excellences of character or good virtues. So compassion and love and honesty, integrity, things like this.

So I think that you can actually marry together quite a lot of these ideas within the consequentialist framework, a fairly sophisticated consequentialist framework, but in terms of the main ideas that I support, what I would say particularly characterizes my views is that they are very consequence sensitive, but they don't have to be consequentialist.

So consequentialists, because they are concerned with consequences are very interested as to whether a particular thing that you will do will save 10 people or save 100 people, because that's a really big difference, it's ten times bigger than the difference between saving 10 people and saving no one.

Owen Barder

Right.

Toby Ord

So it's just much more important to make that second move say from zero to 10 and then 10 to 100. And that we really need to care about these issues of scale even if they sound like boring numbers to us, because using the numbers is a short hand kind of, looking all of those 100 people in the eye or all of the extra 90 people in the eye and saying that if we cavalierly disregarded their benefits then that's a real problem to real people. That's the idea there.

Now when it comes to thought experiments and moral philosophy, there is a lot of heat on these issues about coming up with very complicated thought experiments. What if you had to murder 10 people to save 100 people and you had to kill them cold blood...

Owen Barder

Would you have killed Hitler – right.

Toby Ord

Yeah, things like this and these things often divide people's opinions. However, when it comes to aid, I think that there is a lot less reason to have divided opinions because in a lot of cases choosing to donate to one charity over another is not going to violate any of these conditions that deontologists sometimes call side constraints, where they might think yeah, you can try to do what helps more people and makes the best benefit within certain side constraints. So it doesn't really run into that.

The other thing that comes up that is a big difference is that as well as side constraints limiting what you can do, they also have a concept of options which are things that you are always allowed to do even if they wouldn't increase the sum of welfare.

So the idea is that maybe in your personal life, you are allowed to marry whoever you want, even if it turned out that marrying a particular person would enable you to do more good in the world. You have got the choice, you have got the options. And maybe in your family and so on you have got other options. You go to the zoo, it's not impermissible to go to the zoo if that means you can't do as much good. So they have this idea of having options as well and often giving money to aid organizations is counted as an option and often when we think of the word charity, we think that in that sense that it is mere charity or it's optional.

Owen Barder

It's nice to have if you want to.

Toby Ord

Yeah, and they are happy to admit that it is better to do it than to not do it. But they don't think that that's enough reason to say that we have to do it.

Owen Barder

You are listening to Development Drums with me Owen Barder and my guest today is the moral philosopher Toby Ord. We have talked so far about the idea that we should make moral choices according to what will have the biggest overall impact for the most people. In the next part of the program we are going to be talking about some of the possible objections to that. And then in the final part of the show I'm going to ask Toby to tell us about the choice he has made as a result of this thinking, before we get into that let me plug a different podcast about development, produced by my colleagues at the Center of Global Development. The Global Prosperity Wonkcast is shorter, snappier and looks at some of the recent works that the center has been doing and you can find this at the [Center of Global Development website](#).

So, the idea that we should judge an action according to its consequences, it seems quite appealing. You talked about some of the alternative views but they all seem as you were saying in your own words you are developing a way of thinking about how these ideas converge. But not everybody accepts consequentialism and it comes up notably in – we had Peter Singer on Development Drums and if listeners haven't listened to that [episode 15](#), really worth listening to. So we don't need to go through it in detail, but for people who haven't listened to that, the discussion there is this famous moral philosophy question about – which you were touching on just now about options. The question is do we have an obligation to give up a luxury for example in order to save a life. Can you tell us a bit about that?

Toby Ord

Yes. So in our lives in rich countries, assuming that's where your listeners are, we have many luxuries in our lives and the money that we spent on these things could go very far towards helping people in much poorer countries and helping the poorest people within those countries. And in some cases, we could realistically save someone's life for – somewhat difficult to get numbers on this because the estimates vary as we get more information, but probably a couple of thousand dollars.

Owen Barder

So Peter Singer's example was, you are walking through a park and there is a child drowning in a lake and you just bought a new suit for \$2,000 and the question is do you wade into the lake to save the child, but ruining your expensive new suit or do you think, so I've just paid £2,000 for this new suit, let the child die. And in that case, most people think well no, you have some kind of obligation to wade in and save the child.

Toby Ord

That's right.

Owen Barder

And what conceivable opposition could there be to that, right. Who could disagree with that?

Toby Ord

Pretty much no one disagrees with that.

Owen Barder

So the problem comes when – it isn't a question when you give up one luxury, but where does that stop? That mean – because there is always some further luxury that one of us could give up and save another child.

Toby Ord

Yes. So this idea of taking an iterated predicament is what I think causes a lot of concern for people when they think about this. So if you think – so Singer's point obviously was that we are in a similar situation to the drowning child situation every day we could donate money to the most effective means of life saving or if you think there is something even better than using lifesaving things, you think it's more important to have certain empowerment or educational programs, well if they are even more important than the lifesaving one, and you would be obliged to do the lifesaving one, surely you are obliged to do that.

And some people I think stop already at that point and they have some idea that this is charity and somehow that charity means optional. And even before they thought about this iteration they are the one to stop, whereas other people maybe get a bit further, but then it dawns upon them, this kind of precipice of well I have to give my first £2,000 up or \$2,000 and then my next \$2,000 and my next \$2,000 and where will this stop? And Singer quite correctly points out in the paper where he introduces this problem that you wouldn't have to stop at the point where you are as poor as the person you're trying to help, because what you actually would want to stop at is the point at which it would be less productive to give more money away, which could happen quite a bit earlier.

For example, if you can no longer afford to live in town where you work or something like that it's very important that you keep a job in this case because you could do so much with your money. So it might also be that you would be passed up for a promotion if you weren't out going down to the pub with your boss on a Friday night or something like that.

So it could be quite a few things which it turns out to be optimal life course you could take would include these luxuries in it.

Owen Barder

Nonetheless it does suggest an obligation much greater than most people accept in their life. And one thing that seems to be – if I talk to my friends about this they seem to think there is a difference between your obligation to someone in a pond drowning in front of you and your obligation to somebody far away, in a developing country for example. And it does seem to be – again back to the idea that moral philosophers and economists are these dedicated calculating machines.

We treat every life, every colleague as equal but most people – that isn't how many people experience moral values. They think they would look after their family first and then they would look after their community and their neighbor and maybe they would care about their compatriots, but most people think it as a kind of sliding scale of connection between them and fellow human beings and would be quite surprised by the idea that we have as great moral obligation to somebody in Malawi as we do to somebody down our street. Explore that for us.

Toby Ord

Well, it's interesting to try to work out what different analogies there are between the drowning child case and more typical cases of aid and to see if there is any real principled placed in which people can draw a line. One thing is that we might be suspicious, if we're trying to work out what ethics demand of us or what morality demand of us, we might be suspicious of people who say it demands – it doesn't demand that I give up that much money, because in the same as we'd normally be suspicious if someone happens to choose the options – suppose you are in business and they happen to choose the option, which means they don't have to move to town and they say that's the best option for the company you might think well, are

you really thinking that – there is room for bias there. And similarly our judgment on this is there's room for bias if they are saying we don't want to give up this stuff in this situation.

Owen Barder

Right, so what you're saying is that one reason people might look for these kinds of reason not to give aid is that they are either consciously or subconsciously worried about their self-interest. They don't like the idea they might have to give up.

Toby Ord

Yeah. I think that's right and I also think that's very reasonable. I understand where they are coming from. There's a philosopher, Peter Unger from NYU, who took this thought experiment of Peter Singer's and really ran with it in a book called Living High and Letting Die.

Owen Barder

Living High and Letting Die?

Toby Ord

Yes, Our Illusion of Innocence is the subtitle. And he went from kind of an example much like the drowning child example to an example much like the development aid example. And he tried to isolate all these factors that people could appeal to and they could say well, the person is very close to you physically and then he has another example where you – that the person is actually very distant.

Owen Barder

You have a button that you can press.

Toby Ord

Exactly, you are communicating on a radio to them, and it turns out if you are the only person who could help them and so on and he shows that our intuition is still saying you need to save this person. And then there are versions where you say what about – one difference of aid is that there's more people in the causal chain. It's not just you and then the child or the adult whoever. And so he shows that actually you can come up with examples where there is more people in the causal chain and it still very much feels like it would be wrong to not help. And then he has examples where there is kind of messy causality and he shows that it still feels like this and he has examples where there is no unique savior. So it's not the case that every person who is in need could be saved by a particular individual. Instead for example, you're walking past this pond and there are many people basking in the sun and they are not saving this child and then you just decide to walk on by because you realize there are a whole load of other people there. Does that make walking on by okay and again it feels to most people that it doesn't.

So a lot of these things that we try to draw a distinction on, a principled thing, don't seem to work. They don't seem to actually be able to explain it and after exploring this in very interesting depths in this book, Peter Unger I think reluctantly concluded that we really have these strong obligations.

A really nice thing about this argument by Singer and Unger is that whilst it's connected to consequentialism in the sense that it is thinking seriously about consequences, it's not a consequentialist argument because it doesn't show that you have to – you can only come up with this action if you only care about consequences.

Instead anyone who thinks that it matters at least somewhat what happens when we do things, which surely is very sensible, seems to get drawn to this conclusion. He has just got a consistency argument that in common sense you don't need to have to be thinking about a complex theory. Just in common sense, yeah you're doing wrong if you don't save this child in this situation and also in common sense it seems like it's an analogous case and then there's this other case with the case of donating to a charity, where our intuition goes against that. So we have an inconsistency between two different intuitions and the question is how to resolve that inconsistency? Is there some way that we can rescue our intuitions and that's where it really comes forward.

Owen Barder

So a blogger called Atheist Missionary on his or her Twitter, asked me to ask you about this specific idea of that, the reason why we don't do enough for developing countries is that we lack empathy, we're just unable to – whereas a child in a pond, we can empathize with their situation and understand that we need help. But we seem to be unable to summon that kind of empathy for the kind of people in developing countries. Is there – the question was can – is there something we can do to make people more empathetic to – if that ingredient is missing.

Toby Ord

So, I think that probably is a large part of the missing ingredient, is this issue with empathy and it's much easier to empathize with people who are closer to you and with someone in the same room with you it's very easy and as they become more distant, particularly if you we have very little contact with them or perhaps no contact at all and hence then there's a case of treating them just like a statistic and you mentioned that there might be some fear that the types of people who are going to do calculations about these things like myself and the types of people who are treating people as statistics. But I think actually the type of people who don't feel the pull, who are treating people more like mere statistics, whereas people who are going to calculate and think about cost effectiveness, trying to treat these people as they would treat people in the same room as them and then they notice that it's difficult to have that empathy for all seven billion people in the world and to really feel that. So they try to work out: if I did feel that empathy, what would it entail of me. And then you try to do what you would do where if you feel that empathy.

Owen Barder

That's a great point, that's a great point. I just want to touch on this briefly because I think that some people will be thinking about it is the distinction between action and inaction and moral philosophers move quickly to the idea that the moral equivalence between the consequences of what you do and the consequences of what you don't do. So we should treat it equally or – many people find that contrary to common sense. They feel that there's something different between doing something to hurt somebody and not doing something that could have saved somebody for example. Where are you on that? What's your answer?

Toby Ord

So, in terms of – it's a slightly tricky question. So I would say that when it comes to what we should do that there really isn't much distinction between action and inaction and technically I would say there is no difference. And there are a whole lot of examples that philosophers use to try to spell this out. So one example concerns someone – two different people.

One person wants to kill their young nephew because they stand to inherit a lot of money if he dies and so they go into the bathroom where he is and see he is playing in the water and hold his head underwater and drowns him. That's the first person.

The second person is in very similar situation with their own nephew and they go into the bathroom to drown the nephew and find that he is already struggling. He slipped and he is underwater and he is drowning and they could just pull him out of water but they decide not to, and they just wait in the room until he dies and then leave the room and I think for a lot of us our intuition is actually pretty similar about these people that what's going on here is that – it is more to do with the intentions of the people and so on to understanding this.

In general, there are some differences between action and inaction just to do with if you go out to murder someone as opposed to not saving someone's life. You're probably a much nastier person and the type of person who is going to cause a lot of problems for the society and very sort and type of person you shouldn't leave your children with. And all of these things are definitely true. But there's a separate question about how bad the different things are. And I think the actions of both of these, the murderer and would be murderer in that example are pretty similar.

You can have other cases where you could imagine that something – some sort of situation where they are told – we've captured someone and we are going to kill them if you remain completely still for the next

minute. If you do anything else we will let them go and then the person remains completely still for that minute. That's an interesting – it's a case of inaction. They do nothing, but it's their doing nothing which causes this person to die, very clearly.

And what seems to be interesting is that – what felt odd about that situation is because that doing nothing is very singled out. They had to go to a lot of effort to do nothing in that case. And so it seems like our intuition is not so much to do with whether an act is active versus passive. But it's more – they go through a lot of effort to single out that course of action and it seems in this case they did. But I certainly would hold a lot more contempt for someone who killed 100 people than for someone who merely failed to save 100 people.

Owen Barder

You would?

Toby Ord

I would.

Owen Barder

I wasn't expecting that, okay.

Toby Ord

Because there's a separate question from how bad are the actions in terms of their overall effect to a question of what does it say about the character of these people and so on and I think that...

Owen Barder

Okay.

Toby Ord

You – certainly the person who kills 100 people is going to be a lot nastier than the other person. Whether nastiness is what ethics is really all about is a different thing. I don't think it is. I certainly think that they would be a lot nastier and I would dislike them.

Owen Barder

So the content of somebody's character isn't equivalent to the moral value of – the sum of their moral choices?

Toby Ord

I think that's right. Although, it is very interesting as to look at exactly how much we could achieve. So while the figures for how much it cost to save a life vary quite a bit as we get more evidence on these things. Recently the figures for saving the life from people who are suffering from tuberculosis through the DOTS program was around \$250 for saving a life. And on that figure the average person living in the U.K. – so a medium income earner in the U.K. could if they wished with their salary while still living a reasonable life certainly by world standards, could save more than a thousand lives from tuberculosis.

And so more than 50% of the population of Britain could save actually more than 1,200 lives, which is the number I picked because it is the number of lives Oskar Schindler saved in World War II and is generally thought to be a very heroic person in the time of heroes and villains where there were terrible things going on, but also amazing opportunities for heroism. And it's very interesting to see that actually most people on the street could achieve that level of benefit for other people. And that's interestingly both the case of saving rather than the case of saving versus killing or something.

And to try to reflect on this and try to reconceive the world in these times and try to think about what's going on, I find very challenging and also very interesting and to try to say, why don't we talk about that. Why isn't there a big public discussion about the fact that we all could do as much good as Oskar Schindler and yet we tend not to?

Owen Barder

You are listening to Development Drums with me Owen Barder from the Center for Global Development. And my guest today is Toby Ord, a moral philosopher at Oxford University. So we are talking about the ethical duty for people who have more money than they need to use it to improve the lives of people who have much less and we'll be talking about this very question of what kind of obligations we have and what Toby himself is doing personally and I think that's a remarkable story.

Before we get to that let me remind you that you can subscribe to Development Drums in iTunes free of charge. So that it is downloaded automatically to your mp3 player or iPhone whenever there is a new episode to listen to and there is a Facebook page for Development Drums where you can suggest future episodes you wish to talk to, questions you want me to ask. So please go to Facebook and search for Development Drums.

So let's, Toby, concentrate on this idea that – we have talked about the idea that there is a moral obligation for everybody to be concerned about improving the welfare of other people in the world that – whether through action or inaction and we could give up – and the Peter Singer example is a suit to save a life, \$2,000 we should do and it you just gave this very compelling example that the average citizen in the U.K. on a medium income could quite easily give up enough money to save the same number of people as Oskar Schindler saved. So is it your view that citizens who are in that position do in fact have a moral duty to do that or that they would be heroes if they did it?

Toby Ord

Well, I think that at this point you could have both of those things, but my view would be more that they have a duty to do it. This is my personal view on the matter and my view as a philosopher. However, I think that there are a lot of talks about these things where that ends up in a conclusion that they say we could all be helping a lot, but we are not, we are very bad people. Let's all go home and feel bad about ourselves as the conclusion. Whereas what I think is much more important at that point is to say maybe we should do this, I'm going to do this. Why aren't people doing this? I'm going to start doing this and see if other people want to join with me and do a similar thing. And to try to think of it more in terms of empowering people to achieve more of what they value.

So a lot of people, if I think about different professions, I might think about a firefighter and imagine someone who at a few stages in their lives went into a burning building and saved two people here and one person there and three people there, end up saving 10 lives over the course of their career. And I think that's really quite amazing in terms of the things I value in my life. That's the kind of life I would have wanted to have lived, a life of where I achieved things like that.

And then – but we often systematically fail to achieve much bigger things which we could achieve with much less sacrifice. And so it seems why not do that, if we can get even more for even less cost. It sounds like a very obvious thing to do but we get stuck. So I have been trying to convince myself and I succeeded for myself to take these things seriously and try to step up to the plate and do much more of what I could be doing and also to see who else wants to do that. Obviously many people are doing this type of thing before I came along. But I did want to try to encourage more people to do.

Owen Barder

So tell us what is it exactly you are doing?

Toby Ord

Sure. So in light of these figures about the effectiveness of the most effective aid programs and I should stress that those figures that I talked about were figures within health and it's not clear that health is the most effective thing we could focus on. But it is something that has very good evidence about what are the best things and what are the least good things, and somewhere there's a – if you wanted to just pick out the best things, it looks quite plausible for finding them. But I don't think that it is obvious that health is the whole story.

Anyway though, in light of that just how good the best things were compared to what I would spend my money on for myself. What I spend \$4 on compared to an entire year of healthy life is just – there is no comparison. I mean it's less than going to a cinema for an hour or two. And so clearly we could achieve much more quite easily a factor of one thousand more we could achieve for other people if we compare it to what would you spend – a few thousand dollars to give yourself an extra year of healthy life, of course. So we can do thousands of times more for people in other countries.

So taking that insight led me to think well I need to donate a lot of my money and then taking the insight that within aid there are some programs which are a lot less effective than others, I also thought it is really important that it goes to the most effective things. And so I set up an organization called Giving What We Can, and Giving What We Can is a society of givers who have each pledged to give at least 10% of their income until they retire to whichever causes or whichever charities they think can most effectively help people in poor countries. And so no one gives us any money. They just pledge to give it directly to the organizations they want to help. But it's got these twin aims to give more and to give the money more effectively and together to have much more impact.

And quite realistically many people could give – if we look at the say average figures in the U.K., could give 10 times as much as they are giving to global issues and could often give that money and more than 10 times as effectively as they are currently giving it to multiply their overall impact for the poorest and most vulnerable people in the world by a factor of 100. I know it's very realistic to make it.

Owen Barder

So it's very realistic for people to have 100 times more impact by both giving more and giving better.

Toby Ord

Yes.

Owen Barder

You also – I have seen interviews of you on the newspapers have a remarkable commitment which goes beyond the 10% commitment that your group Giving What We Can recommends. Tell us a – I don't want to pry, so...

Toby Ord

No, no, by all means. So particularly I was very influenced by Peter Singer's arguments and as a student in philosophy actually finishing my doctorate and started to take this very seriously and some other very influential philosophers like Thomas Pogge have some similar very strong views on this and I thought I should give more than just a fraction of my income or a smallish fraction of my income and I should give – started with my first dollar and keep giving until I get down to some point where it's less clear that I can do more good by giving more and that it wouldn't actually be meaning that I can't get close to work anymore and I'm spending longer and trying to – you know – and so on and so forth. So I have tried to do this. I'm not sure that I have found the right level yet. I may well be not giving away enough money.

Owen Barder

You are worried that you are not giving away enough, I mean...

Toby Ord

Yeah. I'm not too worried that I'm giving away too much at the moment, but I have made a commitment to give away everything above £18,000 per annum, which is about the medium income in the U.K. And thus to give away everything above £18,000 after tax to the most effective aid organizations that I know of. And over my life I have worked out that I will earn about £1.5 million. This is a calculation I'd encourage everyone to do as it really helps you to see the scale of things.

Owen Barder

And you are putting that on your website?

Toby Ord

Yes I will. Working out how much you will earn in your career is a bit tricky because you have to think a bit about how it's going to go up over time for someone if you are not already at the peak. But that's just in today's terms and then I also worked out how much I needed to keep living as a graduate student in Oxford having a very good quality of life with all of the things that really matter in life, I have. So I have a fantastic relationship with Bernadette, my wife, and I have access to all of the great works of literature that one could ever want to read, actually for free because you can get it in the libraries, it despite being one of the most valuable things in terms of people's leisure and access to many great works of music and so on which only a few hundred years ago would have been – you would have to own your own orchestra in order to hear these things in your own room, but now we have access to and we are very wealthy in historical terms and world terms.

And so I have these great things and I thought well okay, I have got all this stuff already. So what if I just kept living on a similar income to that, how much would I be able to donate over my life? And I worked out I would be able to – of the £1.5 million to give away about a million of those pounds and to keep about £500,000 over my life.

So at the moment I am donating about 40% of my income, and that is going to increase though over time to be in total about two-thirds, but in the later part of my life it will go over 100% because I would be not needing that kind of buffer in my savings. So this takes into account all of the savings and retirement money and everything like that. It's a bit easier to do something as bold as this in a country like U.K., where we have – your children's education is going to get covered at least to some extent.

Owen Barder

And we have the National Health Service.

Toby Ord

We have the National Health Service. So these things do make it easier. It does depend on the country you are living in and it also depends upon the town you are in and things like this and the climate and the other features and I definitely think that it's going to be easier for me than it will be for some other people, which is why I have tried to give a lot more than 10%. I have to say, well, since it's easier for me and since people in rich countries are in rather arbitrarily in a position of great power with great wealth compared to people in other countries. We shouldn't just feel bad about ourselves. We should use that opportunity, that power to do as much as we can to help people.

Owen Barder

Have you worked out roughly how many lives that's likely to save or what difference that's likely to make?

Toby Ord

It's a bit tricky to work out in terms of those quality adjusted life years, I think it should be able to achieve about 500,000 quality adjusted life years over my life. So 500 millennia of life of full health and a standard way to convert between quality adjusted life years and lives saved is to assume that when you save someone's life maybe there's someone in middle of their life and you might save something like 30 years of life. So divide that by 30 and then you would get something over 10,000 lives.

Owen Barder

Around 10,000 lives saved.

Toby Ord

Well, saved. I mean...

Owen Barder

Right, no one's life is saved forever.

Toby Ord

Yeah, and also I haven't managed to achieve that yet. So we will see whether I manage to follow through with this. Although I managed to quite successfully I think tie myself to the mast and make it so that it

would be very embarrassing for me to stop doing this. So I think that that is quite unlikely. As the cost to me is actually very small. Financially, the cost is quite large. But as I said, in terms of actually sacrificing things that really matter in someone's life I think it's very small. And then the peace of mind is actually quite valuable. So...

Owen Barder

I know there are people listening who would want me to say how impressed I am and I'm sure other people are at that commitment. I'm also sure the people want me to ask you what Bernadette thinks about.

Toby Ord

Oh yes, as I said she is completely engaged with us and has made a similar commitment herself. So she has committed to give at least 10% of her income and moreover to give away everything above £25,000 per annum and she is a doctor, working in the NHS. And so giving away everything above £25,000 will actually mean something. She will be able to donate more money than I will and she has also noticed that she will be able to help people more and produce more benefit in her life by donating a part of her salary than she will be able to achieve as a doctor, which is a somewhat odd experience to notice but she is impressed that she can in that sense more than double the impact she is having in her life, not just what she is doing for her career, but what that makes her earn in order today to even more effective ways to help people.

Owen Barder

We are going to need to wrap up soon but I would like us to explore this idea of giving more effectively. I mean, it's a really remarkable commitment you are making in terms of the amount of money you are giving. But there is also something quite interesting about this rationality about focusing on giving in ways that have the most impact. And one thing that I have learned working in this industry is that there is a tendency to say well there are a lot – all these different good causes and really it's very hard to distinguish between different people's rights and experiences and we have to help everybody and so we are going to spread money across different things that are good causes. You are partly pushing against that by what our discussion about quality adjusted life years and saying that we need to focus much more on the things that have the biggest impact. Tell us how you are doing that and why that's important?

Toby Ord

Yes, so that is right. I should say that it's – there are some distinctions between acting on a personal level and acting on a governmental level or someone else who has access to very large amounts of funds. For example, it could be the case that if someone have enough funds, then they can fund a very effective program so adequately that it fulfills its mission or it solves all the easy cases of this disease and the final cases which are left are actually not that cost effective to treat compared to other things, which are now the most cost effective. So if you are looking on a very large margin as an economist would say, then...

Owen Barder

Right. You can be...

Toby Ord

...it can be quite a bit more complicated and having a more diversified portfolio makes more sense. When it comes to individuals though, I think that finding the thing which is the most effective and donating your money, just that is the best approach. And what I try to do in order to avoid this type of death by 1,000 cuts of being asked all the time for charity and having to feel that emotional burden of a lot of people who make genuine requests of you for things which are really quite effective in national terms for example, but aren't the most effective in international terms.

And also to avoid the challenges of going to the supermarkets and agonizing about whether to buy the slightly cheaper version of something, what I do is just every year I work out what I can live on for the next year, set myself a budget and just we believe in that budget as if that was just the amount of money I have. So it's no more difficult than living within your normal budget. You just have to shrink that budget slightly.

And then to also just once per annum think about where to divide out the money. But it seems that when we think about investments for ourselves, we care a lot about how much you are going to get for your money, when we are going to get the product. And if you could go to a wrong store – we wouldn't have this conversation if you were saying, I don't understand when people go to buy clothes and one shop sells clothes for 1,000 times as much as another. Some people like you say that we should buy it from the shop that sell 1,000 times cheaper. But I don't understand why that is. No one will say that, and seems very natural. If you are going to spend the money, you want to get the most you can for what you have got to offer.

But when it comes to aid, I think we just get a bit more confused, because it's a bit more abstract and we don't see the connection as clearly between what we pay and what benefits are produced. And that's due to one of these areas where the aid sector doesn't work like a market. That has some advantages and has some disadvantages. And one disadvantage is that it doesn't function like the high street example I just gave. You have to hope that it would be impossible to have a world where some of these organizations are 1,000 times more effective than others, at least I would hope that, because why would we get less than 0.1% of what our money is worth? Why wouldn't we just choose to get 100% of what our money is worth? You think that they would go out of business in some way, and maybe works with building all the funding opportunities of the most effective ones but those things just spring back into life. But we don't get that and I think one of the reasons we don't get it is because of this disconnect that the person who buys the aid isn't the person who receives it and so we don't get that feedback from them.

Owen Barder

Right. So they essentially ill-informed about the fact that they could have gone to the next door shop and bought 1,000 times more lives.

Toby Ord

I think so. Yeah, I certainly would have been ill informed about this before I saw these statistics. I was really quite shocked about it and I think it is really valuable to do these cost effectiveness analogies and to try to find out global prioritization and to really think about our global priorities, not just kind of blindly stumble around that.

So, yes, I think that we should help more people rather than fewer. And in part my approach to this is to think in terms of a recipient centered view of the ethics of donation rather than a donor centered view. And it could be that it perhaps displays certain kind of virtues of character if you don't think about it this much and you don't calculate so much and instead you feel more just the kind of sheer warmth of joy of connecting with people when you give.

Owen Barder

Right.

Toby Ord

But, surely the benefits of that, whatever they are and not as big as thousands of more people dying. And you might say what's great to have spontaneity is, well it is great. It is also great to have thousands of people living, who otherwise would have died from bad diseases.

Owen Barder

Right.

Toby Ord

And so I think that we really want to move it away from the donor to think in terms of the recipients and think less about ourselves as donors.

Owen Barder

I was talking to somebody last night he got very shirty when I was pressing him on why the organization he works for was investing in something that is highly cost ineffective. And he just thought it was improper for me to challenge – that was how they wanted to spend their money. And he couldn't get – he found it

offensive that I was pressing him on why they should spend their money on something more useful. It seemed they have a right to spend their money on stuff that isn't that great.

Toby Ord

Yes.

Owen Barder

So tell me how you do decide. So who would you give money to and how did you arrive at that?

Toby Ord

Good question. I have donated money to quite a few different groups. Two of them are groups that focus on deworming and so try to avoid various neglected tropical diseases particularly in school aged children in Africa or in India and I came across that by reading through these reports about global prioritization, trying to look at what are the most cost effective things, seeing that deworming is a highly cost effective, it's similar level to the most effective malaria and that type of treatments and deciding to donate quite a bit of money to a couple of organizations, Schistosomiasis Control Initiative or SCI which operate out of London and Deworm the World, which operate out of Washington, and to fund them.

Also I gave I think about £1,000 to a group called J-PAL, who are based at MIT and they focus on doing randomized controlled trials to try to work out which aid interventions are the most effective. And I thought that was really interesting to donate to them as a major charity, the type of organizations who had improved in the process that I'm relying upon and that could be extremely valuable as well.

Owen Barder

And listeners of Development Drums who haven't listened to my interview with Rachel Glennerster, who is the Executive Director of J-PAL may want to run back a few episodes and listen to that. Bill Gates once said that his bedtime reading was the Disease Control Priorities Project report, which is a great doorstep of a book. Many people listening to this won't have time or inclination to read it. Does your website help people to – give people the summary that they need to know or is there some pre-digested version of this knowledge that they can access?

Toby Ord

Yes, so I was very impressed by this DCP2, I have just put the second edition of this report which Bill Gates partly funded after being so impressed by his bedtime reading. And what we are trying to do is to lean heavily upon reports like this. The WHO has one as well called WHO-CHOICE, and to try to look at this research done by more than 500 researchers, just trying to aggregate all of this information. But the report is quite hard to read and we have tried to make it much more clear on our website, which is givingwhatwecan.org, in the resources section. We go though, we have some very nice and easy to follow bar charts and summary pages about some of these most effective interventions and what they are about, which organizations that we found which work on those subjects that you can actually donate to help them. Rachel Glennerster has been very helpful and is a member of Giving What We Can as are Peter Singer and Thomas Pogge as I mentioned earlier.

Owen Barder

Toby Ord, thank you very much for coming on to Development Drums and thank you for all you are doing to help people in the developing world.

Toby Ord

Oh, well, again thanks for having me, I'm glad to be able to talk to people about these issues.

Owen Barder

I have been talking today to Toby Ord, a moral philosopher and the President of Giving What We Can. If you want to find out more about Giving What You Can, visit the website www.givingwhatwecan.org.

You have been listening to Development Drums with me Owen Barder and Development Drums is produced by Anna Scott. Please do visit our Facebook page and thanks for listening.

