

The Science of a Better You with Jim Davies

Christiane Wisehart, host and producer: I'm Christiane Wisehart, and this is Examining Ethics, brought to you by The Janet Prindle Institute for Ethics at DePauw University.

[music: Blue Dot Sessions, Capering]

Christiane: One of the best and worst things about the field of ethics is that it often takes a lot of thought, discussion and intellectual energy to sort out how to do good. My guest today, the cognitive scientist Jim Davies, claims that actually, there are some definitive answers about how to do the most good for the most people.

Christiane [clip from interview]: Let's say I have \$10,000. You have an answer for how I might spend that \$10,000 in the best way, right?

Jim Davies: I do. **[laughter]**

Christiane: Stay tuned for Jim Davies' answer to this question and more on today's episode of Examining Ethics.

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Christiane: Jim Davies is a cognitive scientist at Carleton University. His book, *Being the Person Your Dog Thinks You Are* is about how to live a good life and also how to be a good person. We're focusing on the second half of his book, where he uses scientific insights to figure out how to maximize the good we can do in the world.

[interview begins]

Christiane: The first half of your book is How to make yourself more productive, how to have a better day, things like that. And in the second half of your book, you focus on how to be a good person or how to be a better person. And I want to know just generally as a cognitive scientist, what's your sense about how often people think about being moral or think about whether their everyday actions are moral or not.

Jim Davies: Our natural moral response is... I think of in terms of a bunch of smoke alarms. So you've got a bunch of detectors in your head that might get triggered when you do something that they think is bad. So if you yell at somebody and they start crying, those are some signals that are very strong that make you think, oh, maybe I was too mean or something like that. And then sometimes some people will have a more structured approach. They'll maybe adopt or create a philosophy and have principles, like you shouldn't do this kind of thing. And what's

interesting about that is that then some people will recognize that they're doing something good or bad, even when they don't feel it. You know what I mean?

So I like to take piracy, like back in the Napster days. Everyone was getting music, and to most people, it felt like it was free. It felt like it was fine because it didn't feel like taking something away from somebody. And it was only people who had a particular kind of principle behind, well you shouldn't take intellectual property. That's not yours. It's kind of like sneaking into a movie or something, that they would recognize that it's bad without feeling it. So I think that a really important part of understanding psychology, is understanding that there are emotional responses to things, but there are also kind of thoughtful, more belief-based responses to things. So I think most people are mostly in the emotional side of morality. And as you've looked at the book, this book is to encourage people and for people who are already trying to take a more thoughtful approach to being good, and you can't trust your emotions, that's one of the themes of the book, is that your emotions will lead you astray and that kind of thing.

Christiane: So does that mean that gut reactions, gut instincts when it comes to morality should be thrown out the window? And then alternatively, what are some of the tools that we can use, if we want to get better at the thinking side of thinking through morality, as opposed to the feeling side of it?

Jim Davies: The moral feelings you get are a result of evolutionary pressures, and also your culture and what you've learned in your personal history. I don't think they should be completely ignored, but I think that it's important to recognize that they are there because of where they came from. And let's say you get a moral response, like this is really good, or this is really bad, or you get no response at all from that system. The more it is like what our ancestors would've dealt with on the plains of Africa, the more applicable it is in a way, like if you stab somebody with a knife and you feel like, oh, what I did was wrong... Well, killing somebody with your bare hands is something that our ancestors in the plains of Africa would've done, and maybe it's not good for humanity to do such a thing.

Whereas killing somebody by a remote controlled drone might not trigger the same intensity of emotion that you've done something wrong because we didn't evolve in a situation where we could kill people at long distances. So we never really evolved a way to feel bad about it. And there, you're feeling okay about it, is a situation not to trust. I think you should be thoughtful about your automatic responses because they're evolved in a different kind of world than we live in today. And today you have opportunities to do good and bad in ways that our ancestors couldn't even dream of.

Christiane: Is it possible to optimize one's goodness or morality in the same way that we might optimize how productive our mornings are?

Jim Davies: [laughter] Yeah, I think so. And this is one of the things I want to get across is that this kind of thing is even possible. We here in the Western world, actually, I think much of the world, we tend to think of morality as not being bad. So you're a really great person if you never

do anything wrong. So as long as you are not breaking these rules, then you are a perfectly good person, right? And I want to suggest that, rather than looking at being good as simply not being bad, that you should look at your goodness and badness in terms of the effect you have on the world. And when you look at it that way, there's really no limit to how good you can be. I mean, there might be, but it's certainly much larger than most of us imagine, right?

If you can save somebody's life or you can make somebody feel better, well, isn't it better to make 10 people feel better? Isn't it better to save 10 lives? And when you start thinking in terms of really maximizing your goodness, instead of just being good enough, because you don't kill anybody and you don't steal something, how could you be... If you're looking really interested in being the best person you can be, then what you want to do is you want to optimize that variable and maybe your potential for goodness is far greater than you ever imagined.

Christiane: What are some of the ways that we can do better than good enough?

Jim Davies: So I think once people get over the idea that just feeling like you're a good enough person isn't the end all be all of being a good person. Then you start to think about oh, well, what can I do with my time and my money and my effort to make the world a better place? And what does it mean for the world to be a better place? And this is something I thought would be a bigger problem than it was, like people not agreeing on what makes the world a better place. And I think that the differences in moral values between people and between cultures are very salient in our minds because we tend to focus on differences.

But for the most part, today, a lot of people have a lot of similar values, that human life is a good thing, pain is bad, all else being equal. And that joy and meaningfulness and love and compassion are good feelings, and we want to encourage those things. And when we look at things like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, we do find agreement, not on everything, right? We don't agree on how much women should cover up their bodies or something like that. But we think that people shouldn't be sick, we think people shouldn't have disease, right?

So when I wrote the book, I tried to pick ways of making the world better, that really nobody would disagree with. I mean, like any sensible notion of what a good world would look like, people would agree with these things. So we can look at human health and we can look at animal welfare and we can then look at helping the environment, and these different things that we would all agree on. And then it's a matter of trying to put numbers to those things.

Christiane: Does that mean that we should focus more on say, something that most people agree on, which is stopping climate change versus say, something that people still unfortunately have a lot of disagreement on, whether or not critical race theory should be in American public schools, right? If I'm more passionate about the critical race theory piece than the climate change piece, should I start to steer myself to the climate change piece?

Jim Davies: That's such a good question. I think you should, because I think the more disagreement there are between people, the less certain you should be that you're right. And I

had to face this head on when we dealt with animal welfare, which we can talk about, but really, I personally try to stay away from controversial topics, not because I'm worried about getting canceled or anything like that, but more that if it's really controversial, it's usually not a completely black and white issue—maybe the other side has a point.

But there are so many things that we all agree on, that to dedicate your life to something, you think about the probability that you're wrong. You might think that it's low, but the probability of being right about human health, for example, is probably much greater. So when you estimate the impact you're making, you always have to qualify it with the probability that you're actually making the world worse by doing what you're doing. And when you do that, it pushes you in the direction of more universally held moral values.

Christiane: You mentioned the numbers piece of it. That covers a lot of what you're talking about in the book. You have so many great examples of like, you might think that giving to this charity is good, but actually if you give to this charity over here, you're doing four times the amount of good with whatever money you're spending.

The problem where I get stuck on with the numbers and talking about maximum impact specifically came to a head in “The Numerical Value of Human Life.” It's a chapter in this second section, and I'm specifically thinking about the section on disability. The problem that I have with the numbers is that it doesn't seem nuanced enough to me to be able to tackle the topic of disability and whether or not having a disability is necessarily a completely negative thing or not, or whether we should always be trying to avoid disability. It's just sort of assumed that disability is bad for human flourishing.

Jim Davies: When we talk about disability, there are, I think two really important ways to look at it. Now there's a movement to call what were formerly called... well a long time ago, handicapped, and then moved to disability. And then there was a movement to call it differently-abled and this kind of thing. And I think there was a parallel movement going on with mental issues, for example, the neurodiverse movement, to call people who have different mental conditions, just referring to them as different and not as problems or mental illnesses, not medicalizing it, that kind of thing. And I know what they're trying to do. They're trying to reduce stigma, they're trying to increase the confidence, they're trying to make their lives... The people who have these conditions, their lives better by not painting them as victims or something like that.

And I think that's a perfectly reasonable thing to do. I think it's important though, to keep in mind that there's a completely separate question about whether or not these conditions make no effect on the person's welfare. Is being in a wheelchair worse than not? I understand that to avoid stigma and stuff, you might want to say, yeah your life can be just as good. On the other hand, it would seem strange to stop research on illness in general, because we just want to say that having an illness isn't any worse than not having an illness. And the range between a disability and having an illness is not a super clear one. Now, I think that the Deaf community is

a super interesting example because the fact that they're deaf actually encourages inclusion in a culture that is really unique and specific.

And you get where Deaf parents are hoping their child will be Deaf, which sounds strange to hearing people. But once you understand that they're in such an amazing tight-knit community and they just want their children to be a part of that, it becomes a little bit more understandable. That's sort of the extreme, where I think they have the best case. But for someone to be in debilitating pain all the time, or to have chronic fatigue, to suggest that we shouldn't try to find cures for these diseases, because they're just differently-abled and it's not actually disability, I think is a little more dubious.

Christiane: Correct me if I'm wrong on this, maybe I'm reading this incorrectly. When folks are running the numbers in terms of the worth of a human life and especially the worth of a human life with some disabilities, I just feel like the numbers flatten disabilities so that it's like deaf equals paraplegic, equals all of these other things, but am I just misreading that?

Jim Davies: They don't do that. No, not at all. They don't do it perfectly, but they do it better than that. So what they do is they have numbers that try to estimate how much worse your life is with a given disease. And the way they do it is they say, if you have a year of healthy life, that's worth one. If you have a year of life with severe depression, we count that as being as good as maybe... I'm really not good at remembering numbers. So let's just say that it's a third of a year.

So what this means is that if you cure someone of depression, then the next year that they... (that's very hard to do) but if you were to do it the next year that they would live would be worth one full year instead of a third of a year, in terms of the goodness that you're doing. And these numbers are different for different diseases. So you have diabetes, you have heart disease, you have being in a wheelchair, you have severe burns. And what they do is they try to come up with adjustments to how much a year of life is valuable, depending on what it's like to have that disease. So the worse the disease is, the less of a year, a year of living is worth in comparison to others. That's how they do it.

Christiane: And I should have started with this, but the "they," that we're talking about is the World Health Organization, right?

Jim Davies: Mainly. They're the biggest ones. Of course, anybody who has to make an intervention will often use numbers like this, like in human health, they'll say, okay, do we cure 50 blind people or 10 people with diabetes? To make those decisions, you have to run these numbers using these adjustments, and you can see if you have the same amount of money, you can do either one, which one's going to be most beneficial.

Christiane: You say that you want your book to fit into a broader discourse about ethics and about charitable giving and this broader discourse is called the Effective Altruist movement. What is Effective Altruism and why are you hoping to add to that discourse?

Jim Davies: So altruism is, for those of you who don't know, the idea of being really, really good and not caring about yourself so much and caring about others. Effective Altruism is an emphasis on doing that through a lens of data and accountability and effectiveness. If someone were to come to you on the street and say, "Hey, give me \$10, and I'm going to give you a return on investment in a month." Very few people would say, "sure, I'll give you \$10." Because what they would do is they would want to know a little bit more about the investment. What are you going to do with the money? What is the expected return? Those are very reasonable things to ask when you're doing an investment to make more money. But for some reason, if somebody from Greenpeace comes up to you on the street and asks you for \$10, you don't ask those questions, and I think you should.

So the Effective Altruists would say, "Okay, we give you \$10. Where is this money going? And what good are you affecting in the world?" Because if you're going to give \$5,000 a year, \$10,000 a year or more to charities, wouldn't you want to be doing as much good as you can with that money? Shouldn't you be asking about your return on charitable investment? So the Effective Altruism movement takes this very seriously, and they look at different things you can do, different jobs you can do, different charities you can donate to, different volunteer work you can do, and tries to look at, for the expense, the time, the money, the effort, the mental tax for example, how much good are you actually doing in the world? And that way you can make more rational, informed choices about how to make the world a better place.

Christiane: Since you are studying this so closely, I would assume that there is an answer to the question of how can I do the most possible good? Let's say I have \$10,000 that I just want to give away. You have an answer for how I might spend that \$10,000 in the best way, right?

Jim Davies: I do. So this is where I get to my contributions. So Effective Altruists have worked with charities and come up with how much you can do for a dollar invested. So for example, let's talk about animal welfare. One of the best animal welfare charities out there is The Humane League. And what Humane League does is they basically try to get farmers who raise chickens to have better conditions. And for a US dollar invested in Humane League, you save about 3.5 chickens. So that's what the data shows, right? Now, most charities don't have these numbers. They just don't have any numbers at all. So you don't know what is happening with the money. There are also climate change charities that try to avert greenhouse gasses and CO₂ in the atmosphere. And I did an analysis with an economist for this book, looking at very recent data that tries to predict how many people are going to die in the next a hundred years if you put a ton of carbon into the atmosphere.

So, and if you do that, then you can look at what the best climate change charities do, how much carbon do they prevent going into the atmosphere, if you donate a hundred dollars or something like that. And then you can see how many minutes of life does that save according to these estimates of the next a hundred years, and then finally of human health, you're trying to protect human health. These are the three main areas of Effective Altruism because we have the best data. And there are things that people agree on. And so, one of my contributions was I

tried to put all of these in terms of human life. So the human health and the climate change are already in human life. So, that's no problem.

The Humane League is interesting because we have to talk about chickens. If you save a year of human life, if you do something that makes an expected one more year of human life, how many chickens would you have to save from being in a factory farm to be of equivalent moral worth? And this was the hardest part of this book, was trying to figure this out. And we tried to do it, there's a lot of uncertainty, but we came up with estimates. And so what I did, I think for the first time ever, is to try to put all three of these different kinds of charities into a common currency and say, how much does it cost for the best of each of these kinds of charities? Climate change, animal welfare and human health.

How much does it cost to save a year of human life? And the answer was fighting malaria in Africa. The numbers work out to: if you want to save lives by preventing climate change, you have to spend about, (this is all American dollars) about \$5,108 estimated to save one year of human life over the next hundred years. To save the equivalent of one year of human life by helping chickens, you have to donate \$1,306 to The Humane League. Now, interestingly, it's almost five times cheaper to do good by helping animals than to prevent climate change. But however, if you donate to the Against Malaria Foundation, you can save a human year of life for only \$78. So you could see that even the most effective, if you look at the most effective charities in each of these three domains, even there you get wildly different, right? Many, many more times more effective by preventing malaria.

Christiane: That's fascinating. And I love that you had an answer to that. **[laughter]**

Jim Davies: I don't think anyone else does. That's one of my things I'm proud of is that these numbers are again, very uncertain. Just to give you an example, the studies done of The Humane League, I told you 3.5 chickens per dollar, right? But it's actually a range. It's -6 to 13, which means they might be doing harm. They might be doing harm, right? And we don't really know for sure, but the middle of that is 3.5. But there's huge uncertainty with all these numbers. But in my opinion, even very uncertain numbers are way better for rationality than no numbers at all. Because if you're using no numbers at all, and you're just going by your gut, "Oh, I'm going to donate to help my friend's cancer treatment," or "I'm going to give to The Humane Society of my city."

You may think you're not using numbers, but your mind is calculating magnitudes that you're not completely conscious of, and coming up with, this is the best thing for me to do. So it's based on numbers, but probably worse numbers than I'm giving you, even with all the uncertainty. And that's something I wanted to engender in my audience is that yeah, maybe future studies will replace these numbers with better numbers. Great! Maybe it'll turn out that fighting climate change is more effective than human health. I'm totally open to that. As long as that decision is reached through data and careful analysis.

Christiane: So you mentioned that when we donate to our friend's cancer fund versus another human health fund, we're still using numbers even if we think we're just going on feeling alone. But when the pandemic hit, I like very many other people, was reevaluating wholesale, how I spend my money, how I spend my time, what's really valuable to me. And after a lot of thinking, I decided to get heavily involved in mutual aid in my own community. And so I think that the problem that I... or the thing that makes me uncomfortable about Effective Altruism is that it seems to be saying like, "No, no, Christiane, turn your back on the people in your community for people that are really far away." And I realize how horribly racist that probably sounds, and it maybe is racist, and I need to investigate that. But, what's wrong with helping your neighbors? Helping your family, helping your friends?

Jim Davies: Now, the people that you help when you fight malaria are black people. So, but that doesn't mean that you're being explicitly racist. Okay, it might be, but I think it's much more about distance. Okay, we just did not evolve to care about people who we can't see. So I donate to the Against Malaria Foundation, I try to do what I can. One day I was just walking down the street and I was wearing some shoes, some sneakers that I was thinking they're getting a little worse for wear, I should probably get some ones. And I came upon a guy who was waiting for the bus with no shoes on. He had very big feet like I do. And I said, "Man, where are your shoes?" He's like, "Oh I don't have any." And he's waiting to get on the bus.

So I took off my shoes and I gave them to him. And I went to the store barefoot. Now, is this effective? Well, probably not. I mean, if I had sold the shoes for \$2 and donated that \$2 to the Against Malaria Foundation, I probably done would've done more good, but I'm a human being. And that just warmed my heart. And I still feel better about that than the thousands of dollars I've given to the Against Malaria Foundation, even though I know intellectually that it's done a lot more good. So one of the difficulties with Effective Altruism is that you are doing things that don't feel as good. And it's a little like dieting, where you're making yourself eat food that doesn't taste good, but you just know is better for you.

So when you look at it through a purely helping-the-world lens, absolutely, you should turn your back on everyone in the rich world. It is just too expensive to help them. To save someone's life in the United States or Canada costs so much more. Here's the way I look at it. So I looked at the American government makes these groups that try to do good for the world, and we looked at the most efficient one. The best, most efficient one was saving lives at a rate 19 times less efficient than helping people suffering from malaria. Okay? So the way I think about it is, let's just say that you, and I hate to pick on you, but you brought it up. But let's just say you are thinking of donating a hundred dollars to a local charity that's going to help the people around you, that you see every day, and it'll probably give you a nice, warm feeling inside you.

You kind of have to say, well, I think these people are at least 19 times more valuable than the people dying of malaria, for this to be a rational decision. And I think that's very hard for anyone to actually say out loud, and get behind. But if you see yourself as a global person who basically thinks that everybody's life is equally valuable, let's say people of the same age around the

world. Then I mean, the fact is that helping people in the poorest part of the world is a way... You just help so many more people for the same amount of effort, that I think that is kind of unjustified to help local people. That said, you have to have something that's sustainable.

And I don't blame people for going to see a movie or buying a new dress or something. I don't say, well, "If you really cared, you'd donate that to Africa." I see that as, okay, well, you're going to have some spending money for yourself just because you need to stay happy, you need to make it sustainable. When I think about local charities, because I donate to them too. But what I do is I think about, well, it's probably doing very, very little good. So most of that is actually my spending money. So I am donating \$78 to my local skate—they want to build a new skate park.

I'm taking that out of my discretionary spending budget. That's the money I would spend on movies and video games or vacation or whatever. It doesn't come out of the charity budget because, or a very small fraction of it comes out of the shared budget depending on how effective I think it is. So I think it's okay to do local stuff. I just think that you shouldn't fool yourself into thinking that you're doing a lot of good by doing so. And you should think of it as discretionary spending.

Christiane: Why should we trust you or any other Effective Altruist who's making these kind of arguments?

Jim Davies: You should trust us to the extent that we make sense and that the data that we're pulling from is credible. So, I try my best in all of my books to use peer-reviewed scientific evidence at every turn. And so, maybe there's something I completely missed or forgot and that's always a danger, but I can just tell you that I'm being honest when I say that every time I encounter counter evidence to what I believe, I report it. Every time. I don't just give a polemical one-sided view, I hate that when people do that. I don't think that it's a matter of just trusting me and just doing what I say. I wouldn't even necessarily encourage your listeners to just do what I say, merely because I said so on this podcast. I think that it's worth looking into.

Read my book and see what you think. I wasn't always an Effective Altruist, I learned about the movement and was convinced by it. Why is that? Well, the competing ways to think about being a good person to me are like a joke compared to Effective Altruism. I mean, they're based on nothing. They're all like feelings, and history, and assumptions and what's hot now. And I can't even take it seriously. I don't think people should have a huge reverence for me in particular. But it is an earnest attempt to use rationality and science to try to tackle these really important, thorny questions.

Christiane Wisehart: I am really worried about composting. A friend of mine, she often points out to me that the good that I'm doing there is smashed into the ground every single day by big corporations that are just belching carbon into the air constantly. And so that's another sort of question that I have about Effective Altruism is this focus on the individual and what an individual can do. Is there any sense where if we pooled our resources and time together in a

different way to gain maybe more political power, we might be able to change things in an even bigger way?

Jim Davies: So I think there's a couple things going on. So one is a futility argument. It's like, why am I recycling or composting when they are mining companies that are destroying ...whatever? And what you're doing is negligible. What's interesting is that people often will say such things when it comes to doing good, but not doing bad. If I were to just beat someone up for no reason on the street and leave them bleeding, and then when someone calls me on it, I say, "What, with all the people dying in Ukraine, you're worried about this person?" You'd think, that's not the right way to think about it. The badness of what's going on in a war, doesn't render what you've done meaningless. And I think people can understand that. I think people relate to that very well.

So I would encourage people to think similarly about doing good. So just because there are actors out there that are making the environment way worse doesn't mean that the things you do are meaningless, but it does mean that they're very small. And so the second part of your question is "Wouldn't we be better off trying to create a movement or something to try to encourage large scale change, systematic change?" And I think that is a great question. And that's a question that Effective Altruists think. And if you look at like, for example, The Humane League, they don't try to protect chickens by buying chickens and giving them better lives. They *are* trying to lobby for better laws for animal protection and to change at a systematic level, it's just, malaria isn't a political problem.

It's not like the lobbying is a really effective way to deal with malaria. Now, maybe doing research into curing malaria or eradicating malaria would be better use than bandaging the problem by malaria nets. That's a legitimate question that an effective altruist would be open to. We're not about dogma. We're committed to malaria. We will change our mind on a dime if something else becomes more effective, including a different way to fight malaria.

[Interview ends]

[music: Latché Swing, Songe D'Automne]

Christiane: If you want to know more about our guest's other work, download a transcript or learn about some of the things we mentioned in today's episode, check out our new and improved show notes page at prindleinstitute.org/examining-ethics.

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