

## Phone call between Elie Hassenfeld and Simon Knutsson, March 16, 2014

Elie: Co-Founder and Co-Executive Director of GiveWell

Simon: Chair of the Board of Directors of Animal Charity Evaluators (ACE)

Summary by Simon. Approved by Elie.

EH: How does ACE differ from GiveWell, besides the cause focus?

SK:

- The target audience is different. ACE provides guidance for people who value the suffering or well-being of animals for whom GiveWell's advice isn't enough.
- ACE advises on what to do for animals, not only where to give.
- ACE has a goal of increasing people's concern for animals.

EH: Two aspects that you didn't mention:

- Transparency: GiveWell practices extreme transparency.
- The traditional GiveWell (as opposed to GiveWell Labs) focuses on assessing rigorous evidence of effectiveness.

Are those similar in ACE?

SK: ACE aims to be as transparent as GiveWell. Our constraint has been the time it takes to publish material. We share our board meeting minutes etc. but I agree there's more info available about GiveWell.

EH: A couple pieces of advice from my experience if you aim for that level of transparency: We've made a commitment to be really transparent and we're constantly thinking about how to share more information publicly. We record our board meetings, which is a good illustration of something that could be sensitive, but we default to publish such information.

As a donor, I'm much more interested when I can find much information and sift through it rather than piecing together bits of information. Being more transparent can make you much more interesting to people who otherwise wouldn't take the time to engage with you. So I encourage you to think hard about how to be more open.

SK: It's a great advice and we're fully on board with that value.

Let's discuss the possible difference in "rigorous evidence" between ACE and GiveWell.

EH: It strikes me that the type of evidence for leafleting (for example) is very different from the evidence for bed nets to prevent malaria.

SK: I agree that the quality and amount of evidence is completely different. We face the challenge that there's not much rigorous evidence available, so we have to piece together the picture. One can look at history (what worked for other social movements) and evidence on similar behavior change interventions

in other areas. I also feel we can get pretty far with theoretical reasoning. We have a vision where people care much more about animals, both that people don't harm animals but also actively help them, even though humans might not be the cause of the suffering. So, a campaign with health arguments for eating less meat might lead to less consumption and fewer animals harmed but it's not really on the track towards our vision.

It might be better to compare ACE with GiveWell Labs in that there's less info to go on about what works than for traditional GiveWell.

EH: My impression from your website is that a substantial part of your focus is similar to traditionally GiveWell-type work which consists of assessing the evidence of effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of interventions and trying to find charities that implement those interventions.

SK: That's a part of ACE's work. There are also parts that are broader, such as foundational research on topics such as wild animal suffering, and comparing the quality of life of different farm animals to guide our work.

EH: If I were looking to donate to the cause of animal welfare, I wouldn't find it compelling to see an intervention report on leafleting saying it's the most promising intervention and that charities weren't recommended because they don't do leafleting. My impression of the evidence supporting leafleting is that it's not so strong that I would feel comfortable preferring to give to an organization because of it.

SK: What would be a compelling argument?

EH: In GiveWell's work on factory farming, we are talking to groups to get a sense of our key GiveWell Labs questions, which broadly speaking are 1) how crowded is the field, 2) how important is the problem, and 3) how tractable is the problem (how likely is change).

There are conditions of industrial agriculture that are incredibly problematic and if there are very small amounts of funding already there such that an increase in funding would change something substantially, then I'd be interested. I'm generally interested in cases where small amounts of money could potentially fix large obvious problems.

SK: We have a long term view in which we're concerned with a wide scope of animals, so besides issues such as factory farming, we are concerned about the mice that suffer in the forests, animals killed by harvesters in crop fields, etc. The giving opportunity you described might change a law, but the method for ACE feels more tilted towards building a movement and changing the discussion in society. We want people to look at animals differently than they do now. How does your thought apply to this vision?

EH: The historical precedence questions are good to ask. I.e., what have groups that have tried to build movements/change discussion in society tried in the past and how has that fared?

SK: I feel myself that I need something like ACE to guide me in how to spend my time and money to make progress on this long term goal. There are many different animal groups advocating different activities and there's no one place to go to get guidance. So that's why I feel there's a need for something GiveWell-like, an advisor.

EH: OK, so you have this long term vision and the concrete problem is that you and others have money and time and want to know how to spend it optimally to make progress towards the goal.

SK: Yes.

EH: What's ACE's focus this year?

SK: More analysis and refreshing our recommendations in May and Dec.

For example, we've had overall discussions among board and staff that resulted in our philosophy document. It narrows down the number of possible recommended organizations. We focus on where a lot of animals are harmed, so the food industry looks more promising than, for example, lab animals. Then we want to examine this area more closely, and look at the commonly used interventions and charities, and decide which the best bets are.

EH: How do you anticipate making recommendations this time around, what will be different? In ACE's previous work, I recall seeing cost-effectiveness estimates and surveys about whether the person was vegetarian or not, but the estimates don't seem nearly as robust as those in foreign aid research, and there are methodological issues. The reasoning seems to assume that we could take these leafleting studies as a major input, but it doesn't seem to consider (at least as much as I would) whether the results seem plausible, i.e., how likely it is that leaflets truly make someone vegetarian who otherwise wouldn't have been. Those cost-effectiveness estimates vaguely reminded me of the overly optimistic claims charities often make.

SK: I understand the limitations of these studies. One can hopefully learn something from them, and combined with theoretical reasons and the other considerations we've talked about, we aim to come up with recommendations that are good bets.

EH: What's important isn't a specific study but rather what epistemic weight to give it in thinking about where to give. I'd love to see an ACE that was really open about how it's thinking—how you could be wrong, concerns, and disagreements among staff. GiveWell has done that and I would, personally, find it interesting in another group.

I'd again pitch transparency. There are different ways to build a movement but the approach we've taken has appealed to a particular type of donor who's interested in this level of transparency and self-reflection. One point in favor of this approach is that I believe that donors like this are wealthier and more analytical than average. In addition, being transparent has improved our research because it has forced us to think harder about the conclusions we reached. My intuition is that you want that kind of people in your movement. For example, I found Effective Fundraising incredibly interesting; they were so open that one could really follow along.

Another point I'd flag is just being careful to assess organizations on their strengths and weaknesses and aim to equally weigh arguments for and against an organization, as opposed to trying to make the strongest case for a charity you recommend.

SK: I agree, good advice.

EH: Eliza is working actively on factory farming on our end. We have a slightly different approach than ACE as we're more focused on industrial agriculture. We'd be interested in approaches to reduce that suffering, regardless of whether or not they have the effect of spreading values etc. that you described in your philosophy. We're currently mostly talking to different groups and people about what works.

SK: Perhaps the ACE staff should reach out to Eliza and share knowledge?

EH: Feel free to follow-up.