

# Billionaire Backfire

On April 15, 2019, the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris was greatly damaged by a fire.<sup>1</sup> Large donations to help rebuild the cathedral, totaling more than \$1 billion, quickly flooded in from wealthy individuals and major companies. Many people saw these donations as a good thing. After all, it seems important to preserve and protect things with major cultural, historical, and artistic significance.

However, these donations were not universally praised. Critics argued that the wealthy donors should have spent this money on solving larger socioeconomic problems, like homelessness and poverty.<sup>2</sup> Carl Kinsella expresses this sentiment: "With a click of their fingers, TWO French billionaires have given 300 million to restore Notre Dame. Just imagine if billionaires cared as much about uhhhh human people."<sup>3</sup> Proponents of effective altruism (EA) concur with this assessment. According to effective altruists, resources should be directed to charitable causes that will do the most good. In particular, resources should go toward charitable organizations that focus on an issue that meets three conditions: "It's important (it affects many lives in a massive way), it's tractable (extra resources will do a lot to fix it), and it's neglected (not that many people are devoted to this issue yet)."<sup>4</sup> So, an effective altruist might be inclined to donate to high-impact charities that address homelessness or water quality over rebuilding Notre Dame.

Some people respond that critics are presenting a false choice between donating to the rebuilding of Notre Dame Cathedral and helping the poor, and that it's reasonable to donate to both. Julia Wise, for example, argues that a person can have many goals: in addition to altruistic goals, we can have personal goals. When it comes to donating to charities, we can donate to causes for personal reasons or altruistic reasons. For example, donating to a friend's fundraiser for a sick relative serves a personal goal of supporting a friend, rather than the goal to make the world a better place in some bigger, impersonal sense. One should not have to feel bad about donating to something that is personally meaningful.<sup>5</sup>

But still, critics might respond, the fact that these philanthropists made such significant donations toward restoring a building when this money could have made a large impact on (and possibly saving) many people's lives does demonstrate that their priorities are misplaced.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

1. When is someone morally praiseworthy for donating money to a charitable cause? What makes this praiseworthy, when it is?
2. How does one compare the value of artistic, cultural, or historical artifacts versus the value of human life or wellbeing?
3. If you had a million dollars to give to charity, how would you spend it? Does someone who is making a charitable donation have a moral obligation to make sure that their donation will do the most good? Why or why not?

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/notre-dame-fire-what-was-damaged-n995371>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2019/04/18/notre-dame-cathedral-fire-billionaires-donations-spark-backlash/3514968002/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://twitter.com/TVsCarlKinsella/status/1118062954107342848>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.vox.com/future-perfect/2019/4/20/18507964/notre-dame-cathedral-fire-charity-donations>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.givinggladly.com/2019/02/you-have-more-than-one-goal-and-thats.html>