**The dilemma of giving**

ASK THE PHILOSOPHER: Tim Soutphommasane   
From: [*The Australian*](http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/)  
November 21, 2009 12:00AM

**If giving to charity can save lives, am I morally obliged to donate all of my excess income and live on the bare essentials? N. C., Oxford, England**

THERE has always been a certain moral authority that comes with self-denial. History offers us no shortage of notable ascetics. From the Hindu and Buddhist to the Judeo-Christian and Islamic, religious traditions have had their charismatic, self-flagellating figures and accompanying acolytes.

The most dramatic of ascetics remains Simeon Stylites the Elder (c. AD388-459). A Christian saint whose religious austerity led him to live for 37 years on a small platform on top of a pillar in Syria, Simeon inspired a movement of stylites or pillar hermits throughout the Byzantine Empire.

Nowadays few among us would dream of living atop pillars with only bread and water and the clothes on our back.

In a capitalist society we devote a great deal of energy to manufacturing, marketing and ultimately consuming things that are surplus to our basic nourishment and survival.

Many may find refreshing, then, a new initiative devised by Toby Ord. An Australian moral philosopher based at the University of Oxford, Ord has pledged for the rest of his life to give away 10 per cent of his annual salary, plus any yearly earnings above pound stg. 20,000 ($35,000), to charity. Members who join his society, called Giving What We Can, will make a public pledge to donate at least 10 per cent of their salary to organisations that fight poverty in the developing world.

But must we all go down this young don's inspired, if not eccentric, path if we are truly to fulfil our moral obligations to help the vulnerable? The short answer is no.

This is not to deny that Ord's idea has some merit. There is much to commend in tithing (the practice of giving away one-tenth of one's income to your church or to charity), and Ord's commitment reminds us that we could live more modestly if we so choose.

However, there are many ways we can contribute to a better world and not all of them involve submitting to the notion that we can do more good by giving away more money.

After all, wouldn't such crude utilitarian logic imply we should all become investment bankers to maximise the income we could donate? We should also be wary of putting all our moral eggs into one charity basket. It is far from clear that giving our money away is the most efficient way of alleviating global poverty.

Setting up a business that would create jobs in sub-Saharan Africa or becoming a field volunteer for the International Red Cross could conceivably have a bigger and more immediate impact. All of which offers good reasons to think even harder before joining the likes of Ord in taking a heroic plunge into self-imposed poverty.

Indeed, as Friedrich Nietzsche wrote in one of his moments of clarity, all philosophers retain the appearance of the ascetic priest to disguise their overweening will to power (this columnist begrudgingly pleads guilty as charged). It is tempting to conclude that self-abnegation, even when it involves pious commitment, cannot be separated from moral spectacle.

In modern times, this is being done not from the top of stone pillars but, evidently, from the loftier heights of ivory towers.

*Readers are invited to suggest subjects for future pondering. The email address:* [*philosophercolumn@gmail.com*](mailto:philosophercolumn@gmail.com)<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/opinion/the-dilemma-of-giving/story-e6frg6zo-1225800463860>