



OPIS

Organisation for the
Prevention of
Intense Suffering

Organisation for the Prevention of Intense Suffering (OPIS)
Promoting compassionate ethics focused on the prevention of suffering
<http://www.preventsuffering.org>

OPIS main page

About OPIS

The Organisation for the Prevention of Intense Suffering (OPIS) is an international think-and-do tank developing new ways of effectively addressing the most urgent issue in our world: the intense suffering of sentient beings. Our activities include research and thinking about ethical principles and strategies for effectiveness, advocacy, and the development of projects and creative campaigns to spread compassion and prevent the suffering of human and non-human animals. OPIS was founded in June 2016 as a [Swiss non-profit association](#). Follow us on [Facebook](#) and now also on [Twitter](#).

[À propos d'OPIS](#)

[Über OPIS](#)

A different kind of think-and-do tank

OPIS strives to make a difference in preventing suffering by developing projects that explore new terrain and present the opportunity to have real impact, complementing the work of existing organisations. We identify with the effective altruism (EA) movement and the importance of quantifying and optimising impact, while also experimenting with new, creative approaches that we estimate can make an effective contribution. These include new ways of value-spreading and raising awareness through advocacy, education, films and campaigns; collaboration on developing new blueprints for society; and concrete, evidence-based recommendations on how both individuals and institutions can make a difference.

Our structure is flexible and unbureaucratic. We will be looking to expand our activities by

collaborating with other like-minded organisations and social change agents around the world.

Why "intense" suffering?

Suffering is rarely if ever a good thing in itself, even though it can lead to personal growth and sometimes allow us to appreciate happiness that follows it even more. But the intense suffering of torture or certain chronic diseases can make life literally unbearable. This suffering, which cries out to be relieved, is on a whole different level, and it makes minor forms of suffering pale in comparison. There is nothing else that has greater urgency than preventing or relieving the intense suffering of sentient beings. Because so much of it is preventable, and in many cases even caused by human beings, it is essential that we explicitly recognise it as our highest priority as a society. OPIS supports all efforts to prevent or reduce any kind of suffering, but the focus on "intense" suffering ensures that we do not lose sight of our most urgent priorities.

Human and non-human animals

Does the suffering of non-human animals matter as much as human suffering, or are "some animals more equal than others"? OPIS takes the rational ethical stance that suffering matters for its own sake, regardless of who experiences it, and that equal degrees of suffering matter equally. Although we naturally have the strongest feelings for those closest to us and value their lives most, as an organisation OPIS cares as much about any sentient being, human or non-human, that is suffering intensely. The sheer number of animals suffering on this planet, including the huge numbers kept in horrific conditions on factory farms or otherwise treated with cruelty, means that animal suffering is the area with by far the greatest potential for harm reduction, and it is also the area where the most impact can be achieved for a given amount of resources. But OPIS is not only an animal rights organisation. We think that a holistic approach to preventing suffering on our planet requires that we also aim to relieve our own suffering. We believe that this approach provides a strong basis for new social, political and economic frameworks for society. By drawing a parallel between human and non-human suffering without ignoring the former, we hope to build greater awareness of the latter as well.

The 20-minute film [The Battle for Compassion](#), based on the book of the same name, captures the thinking and philosophy of OPIS.

And in case you were wondering: the OPIS logo is based on [Hathor](#), the Egyptian goddess of love and joy, who wore a sun disc with cow horns. Love and joy are emotions that are instrumental in reducing suffering and are key elements of the world we strive for. The horns also reflect the significance of animal suffering.

Projects

OPIS plans to run various projects and activities to promote compassion worldwide and help protect human and non-human animals from intense suffering. Some of the specific current sources of widespread intense suffering that OPIS is focused on include:

- factory farms and cruelty to animals
- insufficient access to pain relief
- depression, mental health and social alienation
- poverty and wealth inequality
- torture and other human rights abuses

OPIS is also interested in raising awareness of wild animal suffering, and in potential sources of suffering in the far future and the role of technology, including ethical AI (artificial intelligence) in mitigating these risks.

The projects include clarifying the ethical framework to make it tangible, identifying the most important targets for action, the development of communication and education tools, the execution of creative communication and advocacy campaigns, and other means of promoting collaboration and the sharing of expertise. Projects are selected based on identified needs and the ability to have impact, as well as on opportunities to experiment with new approaches. The following projects are underway or being planned. If you are interested in contributing or collaborating, please [get in contact!](#)

Develop and promote a more coherent ethical framework

The priority of preventing intense suffering is clear, but there is a need for a comprehensive ethical framework that overcomes some of the shortcomings of existing ethical theories and that can help guide decision-making. Work is underway to develop and promote such a framework that

acknowledges the role and limits of both rationality and intuition. More information is contained in the [ethics & values](#) section.

Quantify and visually display worldwide suffering

A project is underway to collect data on suffering in the world and represent it in a visually powerful way. The purpose is to create a rough numerical and visual overview of the phenomenon of suffering that can be used to help evaluate and adjust our priorities as a society. Data are being gathered on sources of suffering, numbers of individuals affected and estimated intensities. Both human and animal suffering are being included and will be both treated separately and compared. More background on this project is contained in [this document](#).

Toolkit for teaching compassion in schools

A crucial element of reducing suffering in the future is to develop a more compassionate global culture. One of the key approaches to achieving this is to bring up a new generation of young people whose empathy for other sentient beings has been nurtured, and who have learned about the importance of reducing suffering - including their own - through education in compassion and self-compassion. To this end, a toolkit for educators is being prepared that will bring together some of the most effective tools and approaches in one place, and provide guidance on how to introduce compassion training to schools. The toolkit will be translated and widely communicated. In the meantime, we have a list of existing resources for [teaching compassion](#).

Short films and full-length documentaries

One of the most effective tools for raising awareness of suffering and promoting compassion is the production of videos and films. The film "[Earthlings](#)", for example, had a dramatic effect in raising awareness of the widespread intense suffering of animals at the hands of humans. OPIS plans to create a series of short videos to address specific aspects of human and non-human suffering, and produce a major full-length documentary film that will reach many people worldwide with a message of action-oriented compassion.

Campaigns

We will be conducting various kinds of creative campaigns aimed at raising awareness of human and non-human suffering and pressing for specific actions, in collaboration with other like-minded organisations.

Workshops and conferences

OPIS will be organising events aimed at sharing experience and ideas on reducing suffering in the world among activists and others interested in making a difference.

Team

Board of Directors

Jonathan Leighton

[Jonathan](#) founded OPIS in 2016 and serves as its **Executive Director**. He brings a mixture of rationality and creativity to his passion of helping to reduce suffering in the world. Jonathan obtained a PhD in molecular biology after studying at Harvard and the University of Basel, and spent several years in industry before turning to writing and public speaking on ethics and compassion. He is the author of [The Battle for Compassion: Ethics in an Apathetic Universe](#) (New York: Algora Publishing, 2011), which offers a sweeping overview of our situation as a species and methodically addresses the question “What matters?” He also produced a [short film](#) with the same name, based on some of the key ideas in the book. [@JonLeighton1](#)

Jean-Christophe Lurenbaum

[Jean-Christophe](#) decided at an early age to dedicate his life to organising the creation of greater happiness in the world. With this aim, he first trained as an economist and became a key strategist in charge of major projects at France's largest public corporation, La Poste. He wrote [Naître est-il dans l'intérêt de l'enfant? Idéologie de reproduction versus non-souffrance](#) (2011), the result of a decades-long historical exploration of the conflict between the ethic of non-suffering and the ideology of reproduction. In 2013 he co-founded the [Algosphere Alliance](#), a network and direct democracy for the alleviation of suffering.

Jonas Vollmer

[Jonas](#) is the head of the [Effective Altruism Foundation](#)'s communications and outreach

department. He studied medicine and economics with a focus on health and development economics, during which time he acquired expertise central to charity evaluation. He previously served on the boards of several charities. His career choice, motivated by effective altruism, was covered in major Swiss media outlets. [@Jonas_Vollmer](#)

Associates

Manuel de la Herrán Gascón

[Manu](#) is a passionate thinker and communicator dedicated to finding ways to prevent suffering. A computer engineer, he has created AI and life simulations, and he is the author of fiction stories and about 100 essays investigating issues related to evolution, cooperation, conscience, sentience, intelligence, death, ethics and other themes. He is the founder of the [REDcientifica](#) magazine and author of the philosophical book [Arena Sensible](#) (in Spanish; "Sensitive Sand"). [@mherran](#)

Robert Daoust

[Robert](#) is one of the world's experts on suffering and has long advocated for a discipline dedicated to its study, for which he created the term "algonomy". Over the years he has systematically compiled a wealth of references and accumulated extensive knowledge on the topic of suffering, for which he was a main contributor to the [Wikipedia entry](#). In 2013 he co-founded the [Algosphere Alliance](#), a network and global democracy for the alleviation of suffering.

Advisory Board

David Pearce

[David](#) is an influential philosopher who defends a form of negative utilitarianism and advocates the abolition of suffering in all sentient life, an argument he detailed in [The Hedonistic Imperative](#), a book-length web-based manifesto from 1995. A committed vegan and an inspiration to countless philosophers and activists for his compassion and intellect, David is also a leading figure in the transhumanist movement and co-founder of [Humanity+](#). He envisions a world where science and technology are used to replace suffering with gradients of bliss. [@webmasterdave](#)

Tobias Leenaert

[Tobias](#) is an international public speaker and writes a popular blog called [The Vegan Strategist](#).

Together with Melanie Joy he co-founded and co-directs the [Center for Effective Vegan Advocacy](#). He is known for his pragmatic, non-confrontational approach to encouraging people to adopt a cruelty-free vegan lifestyle. Tobias was also the founder of the Belgian non-profit vegetarian organisation EVA, and was elected a Fellow of [Ashoka](#), an international organisation supporting high impact social entrepreneurs. [@TobiasLeenaert](#)

Ria Rehberg

[Ria](#) is Co-Executive Director of [Animal Equality](#) Germany and an animal rights activist for several years. In 2016 she was voted one of the top 25 women making our world a better place by German business magazine EDITION F. Animal Equality, one of Animal Charity Evaluators' standout animal charities, strives to be as effective as possible in the struggle for long-term social change and prioritises the impact and efficiency of their work. Ria's group has conducted several investigations into the animal industry, including duck farms, organic egg farms and welfare labels of the pig industry. Through vegan outreach, media work and social media and online outreach, Animal Equality engages several million people on a daily basis. [@RiaRehberg](#)

Sandeep Sibal

[Sandeep](#) is CEO of Fourth Frontier, which builds wireless products for assessing health and enhancing wellbeing using novel biosensors and advanced algorithms. The technology allows the objective measurement of stress and pain and its management, and is applicable to both humans and other mammals. Previous positions included VP Business Development for India and South Asia at Qualcomm and Founder & CTO of hi-tech startup Kirusa. He is also a co-inventor of 25 US patents. Sandeep has a keen interest in the prevention of suffering of all sentient beings. He is a patron of Amnesty International, PETA and Humane Society International, and has participated in the India Against Corruption movement. He also serves on the board of [GiveIndia](#), one of India's leading philanthropic exchanges. [@sandeepsibal](#)

Nell Watson

[Nell](#) is an engineer, entrepreneur and futurist thinker who grew up in Northern Ireland. Nell lectures globally on Machine Intelligence, AI philosophy, Human-Machine relations and the Future of Human Society. She is also Co-Founder of [OpenEth.org](#), an 'ethical explication engine' that aims to crowdsource ethical heuristics for autonomous systems, and she serves on the Faculty of AI & Robotics at Singularity University. [@NellWatson](#)

Oscar Horta

[Oscar](#) teaches philosophy at the University of Santiago de Compostela, Spain. He has been involved in vegan and anti-speciesist activism since the mid-1990's and is a member of the organisation [Animal Ethics](#). His main fields of work are speciesism and the moral consideration of animals living in the wild. He has many publications addressing these issues and has given talks about them in more than 15 countries.

Lucius Caviola

[Lucius](#) is a co-founder and current advisor to the [Effective Altruism Foundation](#). He studied psychology at the Universities of Basel and Oxford and is carrying out research in [cognitive and moral psychology](#) at the Department for Experimental Psychology and at the [Uehiro Centre for Practical Ethics](#) at the University of Oxford. He previously worked as an IT entrepreneur. [@LuciusCaviola](#)

Jamie Catto

[Jamie](#) is a creative catalyst – a musician, filmmaker, author and coach who also runs workshops on personal development. Jamie was a founding member of the British supergroup Faithless and one half of the film-and-music project [One Giant Leap](#). Jamie has become a strong opponent of factory farming and the suffering it causes to animals, viewing it as one of the greatest moral issues of our time, and actively supports creative projects to help end it. [@JamieCatto](#)

Joe Brewer

[Joe](#) is a complexity researcher and a leader in the field of culture design, dedicated to helping humanity make the transition to sustainability. Much of his work has focused on values, identity and modes of thought that shape cultural understandings of political and social issues. He is co-founder and editor of [Evonomics](#) magazine, served as research director for [TheRules.org](#), and is coordinator for the newly forming Cultural Evolution Society. [@cognitivepolicy](#)

Samah Atout

[Samah](#) is a humanist, career diplomat and political advisor dedicated to building a more peaceful civil society. She held key diplomatic positions representing Palestine at the UN in Geneva and at the EU in Brussels. She has worked as a lobbyist to European Union institutions and as a political advisor to the President of the UN General Assembly, and served with the UN in Libya to work with the General National Congress President on institutional building. Samah has also founded two key social projects in the West Bank, [Project Hope](#) and Zajel, and is a [partner](#) at a private investment boutique in Geneva. She strongly believes that change towards a more peaceful world is possible through grassroots work and diplomacy.

Ethics & values

Compassion

There is no meaningful ethics without compassion. Compassion means caring about others' suffering and taking concrete actions to relieve it. The focus on "others" is central to ethics, encapsulated in the Golden Rule in all its variations over the millennia: "That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow." Compassion is the starting point for any ethical framework and activism that stems from it, with the circle of compassion extending to all sentient beings with the capacity to suffer.

In principle, rationality alone can provide a sufficient argument for being compassionate, because the distinctness of our individual identities is actually an illusion and we are all, in a sense, variations of one other. So from a bird's eye perspective, another one's suffering is equally important to one's own. But in practice, spreading compassion requires more than just rational argumentation. It requires that we tap into people's capacity for empathy, raise their awareness of suffering and also promote self-compassion.

Ethical philosophy

Ethics is essential for deciding on the principles by which we should run our lives and organise ourselves as a society. By combining compassion with rational thinking, we can arrive at a basic ethical framework that gives highest priority to the prevention of intense suffering. It is often unclear what our optimal courses of action should be when so many conflicting opportunities for action exist. Even in theory, it is often impossible to arrive at a definitive conclusion that does not depend at all on our intuitions or on arbitrary decisions. But it is clear that compassion calls us on to strive to eliminate as much intense suffering in the future as possible.

There are many ethical theories in existence, but most of them are arguably flawed by inconsistencies and imprecisions, including the use of numbers in ways that are not rationally justified or that are disconnected from what we actually care about. Nonetheless, ethics must ultimately be about influencing outcomes: about choosing courses of action that have positive impact on the subjective experience of sentient beings.

Ethical theories such as “negative utilitarianism” (NU) that focus on suffering rather than happiness have in the past been overlooked because they seemed to conflict with our intuitions, such as that minor suffering is trivial, or that bringing more happiness into the world is also a good thing. But as individuals, we can personally value the creation of happiness, while still recognising that alleviating intense suffering will always be the ethical priority, because it cannot be cancelled out simply by adding more happiness elsewhere. One shorthand way of formulating this pragmatic ethical philosophy is with the term “**xNU+**”: “U” stands for utilitarianism - but only in the narrow sense of focusing on optimising impact, without aggregating suffering and happiness; “N” stands for negative - that is, focusing on suffering; “x” refers to extreme or intense suffering as our ethical priority, and not minor pains such as pinpricks or the occasional headache; and very importantly, the “+” explicitly acknowledges that human beings have the need and desire to lead happy, meaningful lives, and a workable ethical framework has to allow space for people to thrive if they are also to be effective as ethical agents of change.

This approach to ethics shifts the emphasis away from judging individual people as more or less "virtuous", and even from the distraction of labelling specific actions as either "ethical" or "unethical". Ethics is better seen as a continuous process of promoting compassion and rationality, and taking concrete steps to prevent as much future suffering as possible. However, whenever there are decisions to be made about having impact in reducing suffering, all things being equal, we should focus on the most intense suffering and on situations where the greatest number of individuals are affected. More reflections can be found [here](#).

Get Involved

Are you interested in helping to reduce suffering in the world? Although OPIS is not currently hiring staff, we are looking for enthusiastic and creative people willing to contribute some of their time and expertise to projects and campaigns. Specific expertise that would be useful:

- Political advocacy and activism
- Teaching and education
- Fundraising
- Graphic design
- Video, film and animation
- PR and marketing

Even if you do not have any of these specific skills or experience, you can collaborate, share your own expertise and help us organise events and campaigns. You can contact us [here](#) - please let us know about your background and interests. We look forward to hearing from you!

We are also looking for financial supporters and philanthropists interested in supporting creative new projects and promoting the prevention of intense suffering as our highest global priority. You can donate directly [here](#).

[Support Us!](#)

We welcome donations of any size that will help support our organisation, covering our costs and allowing us to run new projects. The Donate button below allows you make a donation via your PayPal account or credit card. We are a Swiss non-profit association, and although we are not yet tax-exempt, we expect to be granted this status in the near future. If you have any questions please do not hesitate to [contact us](#).

Donation

s can also be made directly to:

OPIS

IBAN: CH17 0900 0000 9116 4774 4

BIC: POFICHBEXXX

Postfinance Ltd, Mingerstrasse 20, 3030 Berne, Switzerland

Resources

[Tools for compassionate living and activism](#)

[References \(ethics\)](#)

[OPIS documents](#)

[Compassion in education](#)

[Other organisations](#)

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