OPIS
Organisation for the
Prevention of
Intense Suffering

CONCEPT NOTE
Started 30 November 2020, last edited 17 March 2022

A new initiative to promote systemic ethical change

Jonathan Leighton, Executive Director, OPIS

Anthropologist Margaret Mead famously said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." In a world of political corruption and creeping totalitarianism, growing inequality and the threat of civilisational collapse, where increasingly sophisticated algorithms dictate the "facts" we see, manipulated by powerful economic interests, does the quote still hold true? Is it still possible to "change the world" – to alter the apparent trajectory our planet is on? Is it worthwhile to aim high? If so, how would we go about it? What kind of thinking would we apply, and what processes would we develop to make it happen? What would our goals be, what would our approach be, and how would we avoid the mistakes of others?

This proposal is for a fresh attempt to promote lasting, positive change by combining multidisciplinary expertise, reflection and consolidation, and a high degree of creativity.

Ethics

Extreme suffering is the worst thing that can happen to a sentient being,[1,2] and our highest priority must be to prevent it from happening. This applies to both extreme physical pain and emotional anguish. More generally, an ethical world is one where we apply the Golden Rule and treat others how we want to be treated. This means responding to current and potential suffering with the urgency it requires. It also means using resources to meet the basic needs of all and allow them to experience the joy and meaning that make life feel worthwhile.

Threats

The present moment may have dramatic significance for the quality of life of our planet's future inhabitants. While there is already a huge amount of intense suffering occurring, the decisions we make today as a global society may determine whether we can eventually hope to reduce and possibly even eradicate such suffering, or whether it will persist and expand far into the future.

While climate change and pandemics are among the most visible issues we face, other issues may have even more pernicious consequences. Many experts fear that super-human artificial general intelligence (AGI) could literally take over the world and cause huge amounts of suffering (s-risks[3]), intentionally or as a side effect of other goals. A separate but related concern is that sophisticated technology, including more narrow AI, may allow totalitarian governments with little concern for suffering to maintain an indefinite grip on power.[4] Either scenario could lead to a dystopia where people are continually born into a life that doesn't feel worth living and where extreme suffering persists.

---

[1] https://medium.com/@jonleighton1/opis-a-think-and-do-tank-for-an-ethic-based-on-the-prevention-of-suffering-eb2baa3d5619
[2] https://magnusvinding.com/2020/05/31/suffering-focused-ethics-defense-and-implications/
[3] https://centerforreducingsuffering.org/intro/
[4] https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20201014-totalitarian-world-in-chains-artificial-intelligence

These threats are ultimately rooted in the hard-wired human tendency to seek status and power, leading to corruption and the pursuit of economic self-interest at the expense of the wellbeing of others. Those in power are often not trusted to tell the truth, nor to demonstrate compassionate behaviour. Information itself is no longer trusted, as it is used to manipulate rather than to inform.[5] Technology risks steadily reducing the ability of the average person to create value, either through intellectual creativity or through physical labour. As a result, people's ability to earn a living is threatened, and they also lose power to exert influence on how the world is governed.

Our vision
Our highest-priority goal is to reduce the number of instances, duration and intensity of suffering within our control. The future could last a long time and, in the worst case, potentially contain huge amounts of extreme suffering. The possibility of humans expanding into space multiplies the potential for such suffering to be propagated. Reducing as much as possible the risk of such suffering coming into being is arguably the most inherently worthwhile cause we can focus on.

But our vision is broader. We envision a world of thriving that is not threatened by the dominance of powerful interests or totalitarian governance, human or algorithmic, which can undermine the ethics, cause suffering or deprive people of their freedom. We envision a world guided by a carefully conceived blueprint for ethical stability.

Past approaches
Even ambitious, well-coordinated initiatives aimed at social change tend not to adopt a sufficiently high-level perspective and take into account all the most relevant considerations in their strategy, including the constraints of human nature and the functioning of complex systems. There is also not nearly enough focus on the universal meeting of needs, on the core parameter of suffering, and on seeking solutions based on collaboration and collective intelligence, rather than blame.

For example, Extinction Rebellion is one of the most significant global movements of the last decades. Demonstrations were well organised, had great appeal to a segment of society, spread around the globe and briefly dominated headlines. Yet despite the massive mobilisation in some countries, especially in the UK, it appears that little has changed in countries' political agendas, and much of the momentum seems to have been lost. The underlying idea, based on historical research, was that 3.5% of the population committed to nonviolent protest is usually enough to achieve goals – in this case, the meeting of three essential demands related to climate change.[6] Yet the movement has been criticised for not reaching out effectively to a larger cross-section of the public and for not drawing the right lessons from past social movements[7], while the UK government weathered the protests and increasingly cracked down on them. A simple, unifying idea may not be enough to get entrenched interests to speak the truth, behave ethically or share power.

Strategic approach
We aim to develop a more comprehensive and effective strategy by integrating the most relevant findings from various key disciplines to ensure that no essential considerations are overlooked. These disciplines include the historical study of political change and successful campaigns, the study of complex systems, psychology, economics, game theory and AI. We will interview experts and integrate their insights into a unified strategy, with mathematical modelling if possible. We will aim for a long-term strategy where incremental improvements are stabilised and can be ratcheted up, rather than having to get everything right or risk ultimate failure. The approach will be modular and flexible so that other groups can apply the ideas and further the implementation.

[5] https://consilienceproject.org/endgames-of-bad-communication
[6] https://theconversation.com/extinction-rebellion-disruption-and-arrests-can-bring-social-change-115741
[7] https://www.resilience.org/stories/2019-10-31/the-flawed-social-science-behind-extinction-rebellions-change-strategy/

Some of the practical principles that will form the basis of the strategy include:
- An ethic based on the prevention of suffering, with priority to the most intense suffering, combined with anti-speciesism (suffering matters independently of species membership)
- A culture of problem-solving and restorative justice rather than of judgment, blame and threats
- Transparency and mechanisms to determine the truth (evaluation of evidence, fact-checking)
- Avoiding conflicts with our deepest moral intuitions, especially the intuition against causing harm or concentrating suffering
- Institutionalising active listening and respectful dialogue to ensure that everyone is given the opportunity to be heard and their needs and views taken into account
- Using society's resources to meet the basic needs of all
- Mechanisms to ensure stability and prevent ethical backsliding, including protection against authoritarianism and powerful AI

Creative campaigns

We will employ great creativity in developing powerful campaigns to seed the initiative, allowing the ideas to take root and spread.[8] The campaign will be carefully developed, with layers of complexity, so that it is not simply a blast of excitement that quickly dies off. This is an important component of the project. To give a rough sense of the kind of campaign we envisage, imagine combining elements of creative, high-visibility PR stunts, a sophisticated puzzle with Banksy-style intrigue, and personal outreach to journalists and influencers, along with a transparent, compassionate ethical manifesto and a concrete call to action based on a well-developed underlying strategy. This video captures part of the spirit of what we want to communicate.

Why support this initiative?

We need new approaches to reduce the risks of terrible things happening in the future. Political struggle in the traditional sense has shown its limits, and the pendulum continually swings backwards. The stakes involved mean that even a low probability of great success gives the initiative high expected value. But even partial success can still have major impact in reducing suffering as the ethics of compassion are applied more widely. The project will be designed to be robust, to improve iteratively through learning, and to easily accommodate other initiatives based on similar principles.

Key components

- Research and compilation of multidisciplinary expertise through interviews
- Drafting of a white paper/manifesto for compassionate governance
- Development of a communication and advocacy strategy based on the manifesto
- Creation of communication tools including a powerful documentary and videos
- Development and execution of creative campaigning to spread the ideas

Who we are

The Organisation for the Prevention of Intense Suffering (OPIS) is a think-and-do tank aiming to prevent intense suffering in human and non-human animals. We advocate for solutions to specific causes of suffering and the implementation of a compassionate, rational ethical framework in societal decision-making. We have advocated at the UN Human Rights Council and allied ourselves with international palliative care associations and patient organisations to advocate for access to effective medication for patients in severe pain. We also carry out advocacy for non-human animals and have been developing and communicating ideas on ethical governance. OPIS is closely connected with the effective altruism movement. The short film "The Battle for Compassion" captures our spirit and philosophy. www.preventsuffering.org

---

[8] https://80000hours.org/articles/communication