A Question on the Ethics of Work

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Consider the following, fairly recent, projects that people have dedicated their time to:

1. MIT Mechanical Engineer Amy Smith has worked on a number of solutions to reduce the rate of infections from breathing smoke from indoor cooking fires (the number one cause of death worldwide). For example, in India, cow dung is used as cooking fuel; but, it produces a lot of smoke. Amy Smith has worked on a several different types of cleaner, healthier, cooking charcoals, each made from locally available, environmentally sustainable sources. (Here’s one of her TED Talks.)

2. Astonished by the inability of the richest nation in the world to provide clean water to Hurricane Katrina victims, Michael Pritchard developed a water filter that purifies water of all entities 15 nm or less. It is estimated that $20 billion dollars (less than the yearly cost of the 2003 Iraq War) could provide clean drinking water for the entire world. Surely, this would have a serious impact on those suffering and dying from diarrhea (the number two cause of death worldwide). (Here’s Pritchard’s TED Talk.)

With these projects in mind, consider the following argument:

P1: We have an ethical obligation to minimize the suffering of humans and other sentient animals (i.e., animals that can feel please and pain, and thus, have preferences).

P2: Some projects are more likely than others to contribute to the minimization of suffering.

C: Thus, we have an ethical obligation to take on projects that have the greatest chance of minimizing suffering.

I think that this argument is strong (if not valid). So, the best way to attack it is by attacking the veracity of the premises.

Now, consider the following support for P1:

1. One ethical theory claims that we ought to act in a way that makes things go better in the future (Consequentialism). According to this theory, things go better when suffering is minimized.

2. Another ethical theory claims that we ought to act in accordance with certain duties (Deontology). Plausibly, one of those duties might be to, as far as possible, not cause undue suffering.

3. Finally, a third ethical theory claims that we ought to act out of virtue (Virtue Ethics). Plausibly, allowing others to suffer is not virtuous.
Thus, on most accounts, it seems plausible that we have an ethical obligation to minimize suffering (i.e., \( P_1 \) seems plausible).

Now, consider the following support for \( P_2 \):
Consider (1) finding a cure for male pattern baldness and (2) further developing the water filter mentioned above (e.g., making it more affordable, more widely available, etc.). Though (1) might reduce some suffering for some individuals, (2) is much more likely to reduce real suffering. Thus, there is an ordering on projects with respect to suffering and \( P_2 \) seems plausible.

So, if \( P_1 \) and \( P_2 \) are true, and the argument above is strong, then \( C \) is probably true.

So, are we doing wrong by not taking on projects that we know would be most beneficial to humans and sentient beings?