

MILAN GRIFFES

Principal, Lionheart Ventures

Researcher • Operator • Founder • Investor

This report profiles Milan Griffes as a model for a particular archetype: the intellectually serious, cause-driven professional who moves fluidly between rigorous research, operational leadership, entrepreneurship, and venture capital. It is written for someone who wants to understand his skillset, trace how he developed it, and identify what to emulate.

Milan's defining feature is a systematic interest in what he calls "ultra-neglected cause areas" — domains that matter enormously but receive almost no serious attention. This drive shapes everything from where he has worked to what he invests in and writes about.

1. Career Timeline

Period	Role	What he did & what it signals
2012–2016	BA + Early Studies	History & Music at Michigan State; Classics at the Intercollegiate Center for Classical Studies in Rome. A humanistic, not technical, undergraduate foundation.
2014–2016	Research Analyst, GiveWell	Charity evaluation: cost-effectiveness modeling, literature reviews, philanthropic case studies. GiveWell demands extreme analytical rigour around evidence and quantitative reasoning.
2016–2018	Head of Risk, Sendwave (YC '12)	First dedicated risk hire at a YC-backed fintech remittance startup. Sendwave later sold a unit to WorldRemit for \$500M. He built a risk function from scratch — a classic "zero to one" operational challenge.
2016–ongoing	MHS, Johns Hopkins (Mental Health)	Formal graduate training in mental health policy and science alongside his industry career. Signals that he invests in credentials when they directly unlock expertise he wants.
2018–2024	Co-founder & CEO, Atman Retreat	Founded a legal psilocybin retreat in Jamaica. Grew it to cash-flow positive with an NPS of +76. Acquired by Odyssey in 2024. This is the heart of his operator story: he didn't just write about psychedelics as an EA cause — he built the company.

Period	Role	What he did & what it signals
2021–present	Strategic Advisor, Qualia Research Institute	Long-running advisory role at QRI, an organisation focused on the mathematical structure of consciousness and suffering. Reflects his sustained commitment to consciousness science.
2022–present	Principal, Lionheart Ventures	Investing in AI safety and frontier mental health (psychedelics, neuromodulation). Portfolio includes Anthropic, Calm, Reconnect Labs. Check sizes \$100K–\$5M, seed-stage focus.
2024–present	Angel / Board Observer	Angel in Keeper; board observer at 2a Biosciences. Building a personal deal portfolio alongside his fund role.
2025–present	Co-Sentience Initiative	Co-founded an initiative around consciousness science and inter-species sentience. Continues his pattern of field-building in neglected areas.
2026–present	Advisor, Harvard/MGH Meditation Research Program	Advising academic meditation research at Harvard Medical School — credentialling and legitimising a cause area he has championed since 2022.

2. Education & Academic Background

Milan’s education is unusually pluralistic, which helps explain his intellectual range:

- History & Music, Michigan State University — a humanistic undergraduate education with no obvious “pipeline to finance”. History trains you to think about causation, institutions, and long-run change; Music trains sustained attention and pattern recognition.
- Classics, Intercollegiate Center for Classical Studies (Rome) — a semester immersed in ancient languages, philosophy, and history, studying primary texts in Latin. Signals intellectual seriousness and a willingness to invest in slow, deep learning.
- MHS in Mental Health, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health — a research-oriented master’s that gave him formal fluency in epidemiology, policy analysis, and clinical evidence standards. This was likely pursued deliberately to build expertise in the area where he was founding a company.

Key pattern: He did not take an MBA or finance degree to “become an investor.” His credentials follow his curiosity, not a conventional career map.

3. Skillset Breakdown

Skill	Evidence & How He Acquired It
Research & Evidence Evaluation	GiveWell is famous for its exceptionally high bar for evidence. Analysts build cost-effectiveness models from scratch, critique academic studies, and write publishable-quality analyses. His two GiveWell posts show comfort with health economics metrics (cost-per-life-saved) and intellectual honesty about errors.
Quantitative & Causal Reasoning	Cost-effectiveness analysis at GiveWell; risk modelling at Sendwave; catastrophic risk quantification (a project he led in 2023). He is comfortable moving between “what does the evidence say?” and “what number should we attach to this?”
Risk Management & Compliance	As the first Head of Risk at a YC-backed fintech, he had to design policy from zero — assessing fraud vectors, regulatory exposure, and operational risks — while the company was scaling fast.
Entrepreneurship & Company-Building	Atman is the clearest evidence: he identified a gap, navigated a difficult regulatory environment (operating in Jamaica for legal reasons), scaled to cash-flow positive, maintained a very high NPS, and executed an acquisition exit. That is a full founder story.
Cause Prioritisation & Philanthropic Strategy	Trained at GiveWell and extended through his EA writing and advising. He is unusually skilled at the question: “given limited resources, what should we work on?” His posts on the EA Forum (104 posts, 1,124 comments) show this operating at a high level for over a decade.
Intellectual Writing & Synthesis	His blog (Flight From Perfection) covers AI, consciousness, ethics, and social dynamics. His EA Forum contributions include critiques of the movement from the inside. He writes with precision and is willing to hold unpopular views — e.g., arguing “AGI” is a harmful framing, or that EA has systematic blindspots.
Network-Building & Field-Building	He does not just write about neglected areas — he builds organisations and communities around them: psychedelics as an EA cause (2019), Atman retreat (2018), Spirit Tech Collective (2024), Co-Sentience Initiative (2025). This is social entrepreneurship applied to ideas.
Venture Capital & Deal Sourcing	Early-stage seed investing (\$100K–\$5M) with a tight thesis (AI safety + frontier mental health). Connected to investors like Gokul Rajaram and Josh Elman. His deal sourcing advantage is credibility in the niches he covers — founders in psychedelics or AI safety know who he is.
Mental Health Domain Expertise	Formal Hopkins training combined with hands-on clinical and operational experience running a psychedelic retreat. He sits at the intersection of the science, the policy, and the business — a rare combination.
Contemplative Practice	His sustained interest in jhana meditation, consciousness science, and Internal Family Systems suggests he takes “inner work” seriously as both a personal practice and a legitimate area of inquiry. This likely also informs his judgment and equanimity as an investor.

4. Intellectual Character

4.1 Systematic interest in neglected problems

His career is best understood as a sequence of bets on under-appreciated areas: global health evaluation (before EA was mainstream), psychedelics (before they were investable), jhana meditation as a cause area, consciousness science as a field. He is not contrarian for its own sake — he genuinely asks “what is important and ignored?” and then goes there.

4.2 Insider-outsider epistemics

His EA Forum post on “EA blindspots” (22 specific critiques) exemplifies a mode of thinking: deep enough inside a community to understand it, but willing to critique it rigorously. He identifies things like the movement’s neglect of embodied virtue ethics, burnout, community psychological homogeneity, and the political implications of institutional reform. This is only possible if you maintain independent judgment rather than absorbing the consensus.

4.3 Connecting levels of analysis

He moves comfortably between: (a) individual experience and contemplative practice, (b) organisational dynamics and EA community health, (c) civilisational-scale risks like AI alignment and nuclear safety. This multi-scale thinking is unusual and makes him a valuable advisor and investor.

4.4 Integrating the rational and the embodied

He explicitly engages with Internal Family Systems therapy (an evidence-based psychotherapy) alongside EA-style expected value reasoning. His argument is that addressing existential risks requires more than intellectual assent — it requires “lower-down-in-the-body” psychological engagement. This integration of cognitive and somatic approaches is a relatively rare intellectual move in the EA/rationalist tradition.

4.5 Willingness to challenge terms

His 2025 post “AGI considered harmful” argues that the term “AGI” is under-specified enough to be actively misleading — even when people nominally agree it’s not well-defined, they keep using it as if it were. This kind of conceptual hygiene — auditing the language itself — is a core analytical skill.

5. What You Can Learn From Him

The question “how did he get so smart?” is probably the wrong frame. The more useful question is: what habits of mind and career moves created his particular form of expertise? Here are the most transferable lessons.

5.1 Do serious analytical work early

GiveWell is arguably the best place in the world to train rigorous cause prioritisation thinking. He got in at 22–24 and did the hard work of building cost-effectiveness models and critiquing evidence. If you want analytical depth, find an institution with extremely high epistemic

standards and do real work there. Analogous places: top policy research institutes, serious EA organisations, rigorous academic labs.

5.2 Take operational roles, not just research roles

The move from GiveWell analyst to Head of Risk at Sendwave was crucial. Research tells you how to think; operating a function from zero teaches you how organisations actually work, how decisions get made under uncertainty, and how to manage risk live rather than retrospectively. He didn't stay in research. He got his hands dirty.

5.3 Build in the domain you care about

His most distinctive achievement is founding Atman. He could have just written papers about psychedelics as an EA cause. Instead he built a company, navigated legal complexity, hired staff, served clients, and exited. The lesson: if you think something is important and neglected, the highest-value contribution is often to build the institution, not just write the argument for why someone else should.

5.4 Write publicly, consistently, and candidly

104 EA Forum posts, 1,124 comments, years of blog writing. Public writing does several things: it forces you to clarify your thinking, it builds a reputation, it surfaces collaborators, and it attracts deal flow (as an investor) and opportunities (as a founder). His writing is not hedged or generic — he takes real positions and defends them. That's what makes it worth reading.

5.5 Get credentials when they unlock real expertise

He didn't get an MBA. He got an MHS in Mental Health from Hopkins because he was literally running a mental health company and needed the clinical and policy knowledge. The lesson is not “get more degrees” but “identify the knowledge bottlenecks that actually constrain your impact and address them directly.”

5.6 Cultivate a specific, defensible niche

Lionheart's thesis (AI safety + frontier mental health) is narrow. That narrowness is a feature: it means he has genuine expertise in both domains, founders in those spaces know who he is, and he can evaluate deals that generalist investors can't. Being known for something specific is more powerful than being generically smart.

5.7 Treat personal practice as legitimate inquiry

His investment in jhana meditation, consciousness science, and psychedelics is not separate from his professional work — it is continuous with it. He seems to believe that understanding mind and experience from the inside is necessary for working on problems related to AI alignment, mental health, and human flourishing. This is an unusual but coherent epistemology.

5.8 Build communities, not just arguments

Every few years he catalyses something: a cause area gets an EA Forum post, then an organisation, then a network. The pattern is: write clearly about why something matters, attract collaborators, then formalise. The Spirit Tech Collective, Co-Sentience Initiative, and Atman all follow this shape.

6. Bodies of Knowledge Worth Studying

Based on his career and writing, these are the intellectual domains where he has genuine depth. Each represents a serious area of study if you want to develop similar expertise:

- Cause prioritisation methodology — GiveWell and Open Philanthropy’s published research, 80,000 Hours’ career guide, the academic literature on moral uncertainty.
- Evidence-based global health — cost-effectiveness analysis, randomised controlled trials, the Cochrane methodology, health economics.
- Risk management in fintech — fraud detection, regulatory frameworks (FinCEN, AML), operational risk design.
- Psychedelic science & clinical practice — the MAPS Phase 3 trials, Johns Hopkins psilocybin research, the clinical model vs. the retreat model, Oregon Measure 109.
- Consciousness science — Integrated Information Theory, Global Workspace Theory, the Qualia Research Institute’s mathematical approach, the hard problem of consciousness.
- Contemplative traditions & meditation research — jhana states, the Theravada Abhidhamma, recent cognitive science of meditation (Willoughby Britton’s work, the contemplative neuroscience literature).
- AI safety & alignment — the technical and governance literature; his blog post on AGI terminology suggests familiarity with the MIRI/Anthropic/DeepMind discourse.
- Effective altruism epistemology — longtermism, population ethics, moral uncertainty, cluelessness, the EA community’s internal debates.
- Early-stage venture mechanics — seed-stage diligence, term sheets, cap tables, the YC model.

7. Summary

Milan Griffes is best understood not as someone who followed a career template but as someone who **repeatedly went towards important, ignored problems and built real things there**. The combination of analytical rigour (GiveWell), operational experience (Sendwave), entrepreneurship (Atman), and deep domain credibility (Hopkins, QRI, Harvard/MGH) is what gives him the standing to invest at Lionheart.

The “how did he get smart” question probably bottoms out in a few things: early training in genuine rigour (GiveWell), consistent public intellectual output (blog, EA Forum), willingness to take personal and professional risks on neglected areas, and a personal practice that he treats as epistemically serious rather than merely recreational.

For someone who wants to follow a similar path, the most important asymmetry is: **most people write about neglected problems; very few build things in them.** That is where the real differentiation happens.

8. Links & Sources

Blog: [Flight From Perfection](#)

Firm: [Lionheart Ventures](#)

LinkedIn: [linkedin.com/in/milan-griffes](https://www.linkedin.com/in/milan-griffes)

EA Forum profile: forum.effectivealtruism.org/users/milan-griffes

EA blindspots post: [Milan Griffes on EA blindspots](#)

GiveWell author page: blog.givewell.org/author/milan-griffes

Investor profile: signal.nfx.com/investors/milan-griffes