

Aid Agencies: The Epistemic Question

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ABSTRACT *For several decades, there has been a debate in the philosophical literature concerning whether those of us who live in developed countries are morally required to give some of our money to aid agencies. Many contributors to this debate have apparently taken it that one may simply assume that the effects of the work such agencies do are overwhelmingly positive. If one turns to the literature on such agencies that has emerged in recent decades, however, one finds a number of concerns about such agencies and the work they do that put that assumption in serious doubt. This situation raises a number of pressing questions, many of which have received little or no attention from philosophers. After articulating a number of those questions, I focus mainly on what I call the ‘Epistemic Question (for potential contributors to aid agencies)’: How can those of us who are not experts in international aid arrive at an estimate concerning the effects of the work aid agencies do that we have at least some good reason to believe accurate?*

1. Introduction

For several decades, there has been a debate in the philosophical literature concerning whether those of us who live in developed countries are morally required to give some of our money to aid agencies.¹ Call this the ‘Aid Question’. Presumably, the answer to this question depends in part on how good or bad the effects of the work aid agencies do are.² And so it is important to find out how good or bad the effects are.³ For until we do so, we will not know whether or not we are morally required to give to such agencies.

Of course, it would be unrealistic to expect any very precise judgement about the effects. International aid is a complex business, and any such judgements are therefore likely to have to be very rough and probabilistic. And for the same reason it would also be unrealistic to expect anything approaching certainty that any such estimate is correct. If we literally had no idea at all about how good or bad the effects were, though, then we would also have no idea about whether we are morally required to give to such agencies, given that the answer to the second question depends on the answer to the first. In order to determine whether or not we are morally required to give to aid agencies, then, we do need to form at least some sort of rough estimate about the effects that we have at least some good reason to believe accurate.⁴

How good or bad are the effects, then? Unfortunately, it is not easy to say. There are certainly a number of strong presumptive grounds — stemming from the extreme poverty of many of the people such agencies work with, for example, and the cheapness (by our standards) of the goods and services many of them lack — supporting the claim that the effects of the work aid agencies do might be overwhelmingly positive.⁵ Indeed, such grounds are so strong that it may be reasonable simply to assume that claim unless strong reasons to doubt it are provided. Unfortunately, though, a number of concerns

about aid agencies and the work they do have emerged over the last two decades, concerns that I think do provide such reasons. Given space constraints, I won't attempt to summarise those concerns here, but I will briefly list a few of them for purposes of illustration, as well as giving references for those who want to find out more.⁶

Some of those concerns focus directly on the effects of the work aid agencies do. Humanitarian aid, for example, can help to fuel a war economy,⁷ while service delivery can undermine the very forces necessary to put the poor in a position to meet their own needs.⁸ And it appears that little is known at all about the effects of other major categories of aid, such as capacity-building.⁹ Other concerns focus more on aid agencies as organisations. Many NGO specialists accuse such agencies of not investing sufficiently in evaluation and research, for example;¹⁰ of failing to learn from experience, and consequently repeating the same errors again and again;¹¹ of indulging in various forms of dishonesty;¹² of failing to cooperate with one another or coordinate their activities;¹³ and more broadly of giving more attention to 'institutional' ends (such as increasing 'market share') than to 'developmental' ends (such as alleviating poverty).¹⁴

Given such concerns, all of which have been raised by many credible commentators,¹⁵ it no longer seems reasonable simply to assume without further investigation that the effects are overwhelmingly positive. If that is right, a number of questions become pressing. Are there any other considerations that might vindicate that claim after all, despite the kinds of concerns just cited? If not, would it follow that we are not required to give to such agencies? Or might we be required to give even if the effects are not overwhelmingly positive? Might we still be required to give even if the work aid agencies do causes significant negative effects, for example, if it also causes enough positive effects? In general, how good do the effects need to be in order to be good enough to ground a requirement to give? And how much reason for confidence that the effects are good enough in this sense is 'sufficient' for giving to be mandated in practice?¹⁶ What can those of us who are not experts in this area do, in any case, in order to arrive at a credible estimate about the effects? What sources of evidence are available, how reliable are they, and what do they tell us? What forms of argument might we use, and what are the advantages and disadvantages of each? How might answers to these questions affect how arguments for giving to aid agencies might best be framed? How might they affect how much we are required to give, if we are required to give something?

To my knowledge, there is little discussion of such questions in either the philosophical literature or the aid literature. Most philosophers who have tackled the Aid Question have simply ignored the kinds of concerns about aid agencies sketched above, and therefore apparently seen no need to engage with such questions.¹⁷ Aid specialists, by contrast, have discussed such concerns at length, and have also given some attention to the difficulties in arriving at a judgement about the effects of the work aid agencies do. Aid specialists tend not to discuss the Aid Question, however, or more broadly to take up the perspective of potential contributors to aid agencies. And this, in conjunction with the traditional reticence of many non-philosophers about tackling normative questions in an explicit way, has meant that they too have tended to say little about the questions that are most pressing for such contributors, such as those sketched above.¹⁸

This lack of explicit discussion of the kinds of questions sketched above is, I suggest, a very bad thing. If we can't simply assume that the effects are overwhelmingly positive, then each of us needs to tackle at least some of those questions, if not as philosophers with a professional interest in the Aid Question, then simply as moral agents who need

to decide whether or not to give to aid agencies. Evidently, though, those questions raise complex and difficult issues. And so it would surely be helpful if we could draw on a shared debate about those issues, rather than each of us having to tackle them from scratch by ourselves.

One of my main aims in this paper is to help stimulate such a debate. Substantively, I focus here mainly on one of the relevant questions, which I am calling the ‘Epistemic Question (for potential contributors to aid agencies)’: How can those of us who are not experts in international aid arrive at an estimate about the effects that we have at least some good reason to believe accurate?¹⁹ In particular, I discuss a number of measures one might take in an effort to establish how good or bad the effects are, first in relation to NGO aid in general (in §§2–4), and then in relation to more specific sets of aid activities (§5). As I do so, though, I also point out some of the connections between the Epistemic Question and some of the other normative questions that come to light when one takes account of the messy realities of aid.

2. Basing a Judgement on Suitable Data

One might think the answer to the Epistemic Question is obvious. One should simply turn to the most authoritative and independent review of the data on the effects of the work aid agencies do. NGOs have been active for several decades, and some manage huge budgets. Given this, it seems reasonable to suppose that a great deal of data on the effects of their work would have been amassed, data that would enable us (or would at least enable experts who know how best to interpret that data) to arrive at a reasonably reliable assessment about the effects. And if such an assessment existed, then the answer to the Epistemic Question would be very straightforward: one could arrive at a judgement about the effects that one had good reason to believe accurate simply by accepting that assessment.

Unfortunately, though, no such assessment is available. It turns out that at least until quite recently, NGOs themselves have tended to give surprisingly little attention to attempts to measure the effects of their own work.²⁰ Further, they have tended not to publish those evaluations of their work that they *do* commission or conduct, or indeed any other reliable data on the effects of their activities.²¹ And there is no independent body charged with evaluating the activities of aid agencies and reporting back to the public on their findings.

Furthermore, it appears that many of the evaluations that *have* been conducted are of very poor quality. According to the authors of the most comprehensive review of evaluations of NGO activities to date:

. . . a repeated and consistent conclusion drawn across countries and in relation to all clusters of studies is that the data are exceptionally poor. There is a paucity of data and information from which to draw conclusions about the impact of projects, about efficiency and effectiveness, about sustainability, the gender and environmental impact of projects and their contribution to strengthening democratic forces, institutions and organizations and building civil society. There is even less firm data with which to assess the impact of NGO development interventions beyond discrete projects, not least those involved in building and strengthening institutional capacity. . . .²²

In part for these reasons, the authors of the review in question do not feel able to give any kind of overall assessment of the effects of the work NGOs do.

The review in question, which focused on development aid, was published thirteen years ago. Since then, no further attempt at synthesising the available data on NGO development aid has been made, and indeed the situation concerning development aid has not changed very much.²³ There has been a considerable increase in evaluations of humanitarian aid, however, and some of this material is publicly accessible in one form or another.²⁴ Again, though, ‘the data and information on which to judge the impact of humanitarian aid remains extremely crude and sketchy’,²⁵ chiefly because of the poor quality of the evaluations in question.

Naturally, a lot more could be said about the data on the effects of NGO aid. For now, though, the key points are these. First, there is no review of the data that contains an authoritative assessment of the effects of NGO aid, and so one can’t arrive at a judgement about the effects that one has good reason to believe accurate simply by accepting such an assessment. Second, and more generally, the data that is available is at best of limited use in helping one to form a judgement about the effects of NGO aid.²⁶ Even on the most positive reading, this data does not offer any quick route to a reliable judgement about the effects. And third, more specifically, the available data does not do much to ease worries about the kinds of concerns about NGO aid mentioned in §1. In particular, one can’t respond to those concerns by saying, ‘Those concerns may be legitimate, but there is nonetheless sufficient reliable, positive data to licence the conclusion that the effects are overwhelmingly positive (or at least good enough, if the effects do not have to be overwhelmingly positive in order to be good enough)’.

What other steps might one take, then, in an effort to establish how good or bad the effects are?

3. Studying the Relevant Issues in Depth

One obvious strategy is simply that of studying these issues concerning NGO aid and its effects in depth. Though the available data does not provide a quick route to a conclusion about the effects, it is not entirely without value, and so one may study what data there is and glean what one can from it. And of course one may also study the literature on NGOs by aid specialists. More broadly, by drawing on whatever sources of evidence are available, one might try to build up a detailed understanding of the relevant issues, and use this as a basis for a judgement about the effects.

Following this strategy obviously makes a lot of sense. It also faces a big problem though. Given how many issues reaching a judgement about the effects of NGO aid raises, how complex and difficult those issues are, how little reliable data on them is publicly available, and how little guidance on them has been provided by the relevant experts, it would be a major epistemic task to arrive at the kind of thorough understanding of those issues that would enable one to make a judgement about the effects that one has good reason to feel confident about. And the fact that it would be a major epistemic task to do so is problematic for a number of reasons. For one thing, one might reasonably wonder whether that task is actually achievable, especially for certain people, such as those who have little time to devote to studying these issues. Even if it is achievable, moreover, it would be likely to take a great deal of time and effort, and thus impose not

inconsiderable personal costs. This seems unfortunate in itself. But it also raises the question of whether it is reasonable to expect individuals to pay such costs. On any sane view, agents will be morally required to put a reasonable amount of work into studying matters relevant to important moral choices they face. Whether the amount of work necessary to arrive at the kind of understanding of NGO aid that would enable one to make a judgement about the effects that one has good reason to feel confident about is 'reasonable', though, may be a matter of dispute. Whatever the answer to this question is, moreover, the difficulties and resultant costs of carrying such a task through seem likely in fact to deter many people from doing so.

For all of these reasons, it would be helpful if there were some shortcut — some way, that is, of establishing how good or bad the effects are that is less epistemically demanding than that of studying the relevant issues in depth for oneself. Is there such a shortcut? I have already in effect considered one candidate, and found it wanting: basing a judgement on suitable data. What other plausible candidates are there?

4. Relying on the Judgements of Experts

One obvious candidate is to rely on judgements about the effects of experts on NGO aid. Of course, virtually any way of establishing how good or bad the effects are would involve taking account of what the experts say, and so relying on their judgements in some sense. Here, though, I am thinking of something more specific and direct: finding out what judgements experts make about the effects, and then simply accepting those judgements.

This strategy too makes a lot of sense. If successful, it would involve a lot less labour than examining the relevant issues in detail. And even if one were prepared to put in that labour, one would presumably be less likely to reach an accurate judgement than those who have years of experience and training in the relevant field, as well as a thorough grip on the relevant data — that is, the experts.²⁷ Much better, then, simply to rely on their judgements.

Unfortunately, though, there are a number of problems with this strategy too. The first is simply the fact that few if any experts seem willing to offer such judgements, at least in print. I have already pointed out that there is no authoritative review of the work aid agencies do, written for the general public, that contains an assessment of the effects (see §2). This, however, is just one manifestation of a more general phenomenon — the lack of material aimed at helping the general public make informed decisions about giving to aid agencies. Indeed, this is a fact that aid experts themselves sometimes comment on. In 1996, for example, Alan Fowler and Kees Biekart wrote that 'a consumer's guide to agencies, produced by an independent entity, is long overdue'.²⁸ Absent such a guide, they continued, one is left with 'a bizarre situation of agencies competing in a donor market-place where buyers cannot reasonably compare the products on offer or their relative value for money; they must still choose by an act of faith' (*ibid.*). In the intervening years, though, the situation has not changed very much.²⁹

Given the lack of any such authoritative review or consumer's guide, one might hope that at least some experts would offer their own personal judgements about the effects. I do not know of any clear examples of experts doing so, however. Those experts who do address the question of how good or bad the effects are tend to focus mainly on emphasising the lack of reliable data, and the consequent difficulty of making such an

estimate.³⁰ They don't then go on to ask the next questions that arise next for potential contributors: 'Given this lack of reliable data, what is the most reasonable assumption to make about the effects? If one really can't make any estimate, no matter how rough or qualified, about the effects of NGO aid as a whole, are there at least *certain* types of aid or aid agencies that one can make more confident judgements about? Are there, in particular, any activities that one *can* say with at least some confidence have effects that are good enough?'

The main problem with the strategy of relying on the judgements of experts, then, is simply the difficulty of finding experts willing to offer such judgements. Even if one were able to find such experts, though, there may be further complications. For one thing, there would be the usual problems of sorting out which experts are reliable, and of dealing with any disagreement among those experts who do seem reliable. And there is also an additional problem here, which stems from the fact that making the kind of judgements needed would at least often involve prior judgements about controversial normative matters.

The way NGO aid is often described obscures this problem. For often the only kinds of effects mentioned are such things as saving people's lives, reducing disease, getting people out of extreme poverty, and so on. And it is uncontroversial that such effects are very positive (at least viewed in themselves, apart from any associated effects). On all accounts, though, these are not the only kinds of effects that need to be taken into account. This is particularly clear in the case of activities aimed explicitly at bringing about social, cultural, and political changes. One of the points most often emphasised in the aid literature, however, is that even activities aimed primarily at meeting immediate needs can have significant side-effects of these and other kinds, including negative ones.³¹

So judgements about how good or bad the effects are will depend on answers to such questions as which social, cultural, and political changes are positive and which negative, how positive or negative such changes are, and what kinds of trade-offs between such effects and other kinds of effects might be advisable or permissible. Such complications would evidently make relying on the judgements of experts concerning the effects (assuming such judgements were available) less straightforward. For those judgements would often involve assumptions about such normative questions, assumptions one may not share.

For all these reasons, relying on the judgements of experts is at best far from straightforward. What other shortcuts might be available?

5. Narrowing Down

So far, I have been focusing on the search for a judgement about the effects of the activities aid agencies do in general. If one is discouraged by the difficulties doing so raises, though, one might consider instead 'narrowing down', as I shall put it — trying to find a more narrow, specific set of aid activities, that is, that there is sufficient reason to believe has good enough effects. Call any set of activities that meets this standard 'eligible'.³² Such a set of activities might be either the activities constituting a particular type of aid, or the activities a particular (kind of) aid agency does, or both. If it is easier to find such a set of activities than to establish whether the effects of the work aid agencies do as a whole are good enough, then following this strategy would reduce one's

epistemic demands. And that seems very likely, in part because there will presumably be more evidence concerning certain sets of aid activities than others, fewer serious concerns, and so on. If one can find just one set of such activities that is eligible, moreover, that may have the same implications as establishing that the work aid agencies do in general has good enough effects, from a practical point of view. For it might follow that one is morally required to fund that set of activities, whether or not there is a moral requirement to give to aid agencies in general.

Where might one look for promising candidates for eligible sets of aid activities? I discuss some of the options below.

5.1. Types of Aid

One approach is to begin by looking for a particular type of aid that looks especially likely to have good enough effects. One might focus, for example, on one of the broad types of aid (humanitarian aid, service delivery, capacity-building) I mentioned in §1. Though none of these types of aid appears to be entirely without its problems, one might nonetheless think it relatively straightforward to establish that one of them has good enough effects, at least if performed to a certain standard in or in certain circumstances, whatever might be said of the others. Or one might divide the field of aid up differently, for example by focusing on a particular sector, such as health, or education, or agriculture. Or one might carve more finely, looking for a particularly promising candidate within one of these wider fields — indoor spraying to control malaria, say, or iron supplements.

How might one seek to establish that one or another type of aid is eligible? One can try many of the same strategies I discussed above in relation to NGO aid in general. For example, one may seek out reliable data indicating that one or another type of aid has good enough effects. As I said in §2, there is a lack of reliable data concerning the effects of NGO aid in general. The landscape here is not completely undifferentiated, though. In recent years, for one thing, there has been an expansion in the use of more rigorous evaluation methods, such as the use of randomised trials of development interventions (on the model of randomised trials of medical interventions).³³ So one might seek out types of aid that have done well in such evaluations as especially good candidates for eligibility.³⁴

The next strategy I considered above was that of making a thorough study of NGO aid. The main disadvantages of this strategy, I suggested, was that doing so would be highly demanding and time-consuming, and therefore involve not inconsiderable personal costs. If one is able to find one or two types of aid that are promising candidates for eligibility, however, it would presumably be much less demanding to research them in detail than to conduct a thorough study of NGO aid in general. And so once again, narrowing down would appear to offer certain advantages.

The strategy of relying on the judgements of experts is in some ways more problematic. For one thing, as I noted in §4, aid experts do not tend to recommend particular types of aid that they think have particularly good effects. And to make matters even worse, there appears to be significant disagreement among the experts concerning which types of aid are to be preferred. In relation to development aid, the dominant trend in the literature has been that NGOs should focus less on providing services aimed at meeting immediate needs, and more on less direct forms of aid aimed at more fundamental

political and institutional change.³⁵ Some commentators question this view, though, in part because of scepticism about whether NGOs are actually able to do much to foster such ambitious ends.³⁶

Nevertheless, those who seek a particular kind of aid that is eligible have a number of options to explore. Which of these possibilities one finds most promising will depend, of course, on what any available evidence suggests concerning the effects of these different types of aid. But it will also depend on one's view about a number of normative questions. The questions mentioned at the end of §4 concerning which effects are positive and which negative and how positive or negative they are constitute one group of such questions. But there are many others. I shall give one or two illustrations here.

One such issue concerns what attitudes one should take to the risk of significant negative effects. Some people might think that there is a very strong constraint against (aid agencies) causing (or perhaps even being implicated in certain ways in causing) certain kinds of negative effects (such as reinforcing the causes of poverty, or fuelling a war economy). If so, they may regard activities in which the risk of such effects reaches a certain threshold as being morally prohibited, even if those activities are also likely to bring about great positive effects. If such activities are prohibited, then of course we will not be morally required to fund them. Those who think like this will look for types of aid which seem relatively unlikely to have such effects, then, even if those activities also seem likely to have fewer positive effects than other types of aid. Those who believe that it is proper for aid agencies to risk significant negative effects if the potential pay-off is large enough, by contrast, may be drawn to other types of aid.

This issue relates to the question raised in §1 concerning how good the effects need to be in order to be good enough to imply a requirement to give. Other normative issues relate to another question I articulated there, concerning how much reason to believe the effects are good enough is sufficient for giving to be mandated in practice. One might argue, for example, that the answer to this question varies depending on the context. When people are in more or less immediate peril, one might suggest, and there is at least a fair chance that aid agencies (whatever their shortcomings) would be able to save more lives, given more funds, one should simply assume for practical purposes that the effects of such activities are good enough unless very strong reasons are put forward to think that in these circumstances in particular such activities are likely to lead to major negative effects. In effect, this would put the burden of proof is on those who deny that the effects are good enough.

If one took this view, one would need relatively little evidence in order to take oneself to be morally required to act in such cases. And so it would be at least relatively easy to establish that certain kinds of humanitarian aid (and perhaps of service delivery too) have good enough effects. When people are not in immediate peril, by contrast, one might argue that one needs more evidence about the overall balance of effects in order to have 'sufficient reason' to believe that the effects are good enough. If so, then in these cases the burden of proof would be on those who *affirm* that the effects are good enough. If one took this view, it would be harder to establish that less direct forms of aid such as capacity-building have good enough effects.³⁷

This is just an illustration of the variety of normative issues that affect which types of aid might be considered eligible. Though aid specialists tend not to discuss such normative issues explicitly, it is evident that their views about such issues affect what

they do say, including what they say about the respective merits of different types of aid. This reinforces the point made in §4 above that any judgements experts make concerning how good or bad the effects are will involve assumptions about controversial normative questions, which complicates the process of relying on such judgements. My main point here, though, is that such issues affect which types of aid it would be best to focus on when arguing for a requirement to give. For this reason, it would again be helpful if those philosophers who are interested in the Aid Question were to say more about those issues. Indeed, if philosophers were to say more about those issues, that may prove helpful not only to individuals seeking to determine which type of aid (if any) to support, but also to aid agencies seeking to determine which type(s) of aid they should concentrate on.

If one is able to find an eligible type of aid, that would of course constitute important progress. But one's work may not be over. For one thing, one would have to check that that type of aid had not already absorbed all the money it usefully could. For if it had, then it would presumably not make sense to fund it further. And one would also have to find a particular agency that does such activities, and that (one has sufficient reason to believe) does so effectively (enough). Even if one begins the process of narrowing down by looking for an eligible type of aid, then, one will eventually have to turn to selecting a particular agency.

5.2. Particular Aid Agencies

Alternatively, one might focus in the first instance on the search for an eligible aid agency — one, that is, that there is sufficient reason to believe achieves good-enough effects. This might be either a specialist agency that focuses on just one type of aid, or a 'generalist' agency that does a range of different kinds of activities. Looking for an especially promising specialist agency would have many of the same advantages as looking for an especially promising type of aid — one would only need to find sufficient evidence concerning one type of aid, for example (the type performed by that agency) — and so it is obvious why one might take this path. Given these advantages, is there any good reason why one might focus instead on the search for a particularly promising generalist agency, or at least include such agencies in one's search?

Doing so might make sense if one takes concerns about aid agencies as organisations (such as those I listed in §1) to be more worrying than concerns focused directly on the effects. One might think there is good reason to believe that more than one type of aid — perhaps all the major types of aid — would have good enough effects, as long as they were performed by a sufficiently capable, scrupulous, and well-run agency. In that case, the primary task would be to find such an agency, rather than to pick out a particular type of aid. And so there would be no need to exclude generalist agencies.

Whether one decides to search among specialist or generalist agencies or both, where might one find evidence that certain agencies achieve good enough effects? The best evidence would be based on rigorous evaluations of representative NGO activities, conducted by independent bodies. As I pointed out in §2, though, there is a serious shortage of such data. Some NGOs have started to publish evaluation data of one sort or another on their websites, however, such as summaries of evaluations of some of their activities. This is a positive step, though many of those I have seen are not written in a form that enables one to form a very clear idea about the effects of the relevant activities.

And it is often also unclear how such material is selected and how representative it is. Other agencies have started to publish more comprehensive reviews of their own work, but again those I have seen do not help much in enabling one to estimate the effects of the relevant activities.³⁸

Given this lack of probative data on the effects, rigorous evaluations of such agencies as organisations might be the next best thing. For evidence that certain agencies are highly competent, well-organised and well-focused may provide strong reasons to believe that the activities they perform tend to have very good effects. Unfortunately, though, it appears that even less attention has been given to the evaluation of NGOs as organisations than to the evaluation of their activities,³⁹ and I do not know of any publicly available evaluations of such agencies as organisations that have the necessary rigour.

The situation is little better with respect to expert advice. As I said in §2, no aid expert or group of experts has put together a substantive consumer's guide to aid agencies. Nor do aid specialists seem inclined to say what they think about particular agencies in print. A number of organisations have been set up in recent years by would-be philanthropists, however, frustrated by the lack of reliable information available about the effects of the work NGOs (of various kinds) do. Many of these organisations are directed primarily at those who are able and willing to be philanthropists on a significant scale,⁴⁰ but there is at least one that is directed at the average donor. This is GiveWell, which aims to pick out NGOs, including aid NGOs, that there is good reason to believe achieve particularly good effects.⁴¹

Another potential source of evidence concerning particular agencies consists in personal or institutional endorsements. One might point to Amartya Sen becoming Honorary President of Oxfam, for example, and describing it as 'this wonderful organisation'.⁴² It seems unlikely that Sen would do and say these things unless he at least had a good deal of faith in Oxfam, and though he is not (to my knowledge) an expert on NGO aid in particular, he is presumably a lot better-informed about these matters than most of us, and so one might give such an endorsement considerable evidential weight. Similarly, on the institutional level, one might point to Médecins sans Frontières (MSF) winning the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1999, and Muhammad Yunus and the Grameen Bank doing so in 2006. If the committees deciding who should be awarded these prizes were well-informed, and looked carefully into all the evidence before granting such prizes (as seems likely, at least on the face of it), one might again take such endorsements as strong evidence at least that the agencies in question are doing good work.⁴³

There are also a number of other ways in which one may be able to pick up clues about particular agencies. One can check, for one thing, whether they have signed up with the more proactive initiatives to improve standards and accountability in international aid — for example, the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP), and the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP).⁴⁴ One can also observe some aspects of their behaviour. It was notable that very soon after the Indian Ocean Tsunami in 2004, for example, MSF-France announced that it had already received all the money it could usefully spend on that disaster, and was therefore no longer soliciting funds in response to it.⁴⁵ This was a very unusual step, and might be taken as evidence that MSF-France at least maintains certain standards of probity, and is not bent on increasing its 'market share' above all else.

5.3. Taking Stock on Narrowing Down

Narrowing down, then — trying to find some particular set of aid activities that one has sufficient reason to believe has good enough effects — offers considerable possibilities. And if the search is successful, that may be of the greatest significance, from the point of view of one's practical reasons for taking an interest in these issues. For as I said above, it may follow that one is morally required to fund that set of activities. Though I will not try to argue the point through here, moreover, it does seem to me very hard to maintain that one cannot find *any* set of activities that one has sufficient reason to believe has good enough effects — at least unless either the criteria for 'good enough' or for 'sufficient reason' (or both) are set extremely (and therefore perhaps unreasonably) high. If that is right, then this strategy poses a stiff sincerity test for those who say, 'I would give to an aid agency if I could find one I had sufficient reason to believe achieves good enough effects'.

Narrowing down also imposes costs, however, costs that are the greater the narrower the slice. Unless the set of activities in question were those of a generalist agency, for one thing, doing so may fail to provide sufficient grounds for supporting any of the big generalist agencies, such as Oxfam, World Vision, and CARE. More broadly, doing so would fail to provide sufficient support for an argument for giving to aid agencies in general, even given suitable moral premises, or for a major increase in funding of such agencies. These implications would be unfortunate if any such arguments are in fact sound.

If a lot of people followed the strategy of narrowing down, moreover, certain sets of activities (those that it is easiest to establish have good enough effects) may become swamped with more resources than they can profitably use, while other activities that may have effects that are as good or even better are neglected. And such problems would be compounded if there were a mismatch between the sets of activities that most people would gravitate to if they followed this strategy, and the sets of activities that have the *best* effects. For if so, little money would go to the activities that have the best effects.⁴⁶

For such reasons, I do not think one should give up too quickly on the aim of establishing whether the effects of the work aid agencies do in general are good enough.⁴⁷

6. Review

To my knowledge, this is the first paper focused mainly on the Epistemic Question in either the philosophical literature or the aid literature. That in itself seems rather extraordinary to me, given the immediate practical importance of that question. And there is also surprisingly little work on many of the other questions that become pressing when one takes account of the messy realities of NGO aid, such as those highlighted above in §§1, 4 and 5.1. Evidently, I have only made a start here, but I hope I have said enough to show how important it is for philosophers and others to say more about such questions.⁴⁸

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NOTES

- 1 See e.g. Peter Singer, 'Famine, affluence, and morality', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1,3 (1972): 229–243, *Practical Ethics* 2nd edn. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), ch. 10, and *The Life You Can Save* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009); William Aiken and Hugh LaFollette (eds), *World Hunger and Moral Obligation* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1977), and *World Hunger and Morality* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1996); Onora O'Neill, *Faces of Hunger* (London: Allen and Urwin, 1986); Peter Unger, *Living High and Letting Die* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); Thomas Pogge, *World Poverty and Human Rights: Cosmopolitan Responsibilities and Reforms* (Cambridge: Polity, 2002); Deen K. Chatterjee (ed.), *The Ethics of Assistance: Morality and the Distant Needy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); and Garrett Cullity, *The Moral Demands of Affluence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). To say that someone is 'morally required' to do something, as I shall understand it, is to say that it would be morally wrong for them not to do that thing. By 'aid agencies', I mean Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) working in the field of international aid such as Oxfam, and CARE. I shall also sometimes refer to them simply as 'NGOs'.
- 2 It does so unless there is some conclusive reason why we would not be required to give to aid agencies even if the effects of their work were as positive as they could be. This paper is addressed to those who do not think there is such a reason.
- 3 'The effects', henceforth, is my shorthand for 'the effects of the work aid agencies do'. Unless otherwise specified, when I use this phrase I will mean the effects of the work aid agencies do in general, rather than the effects of particular types of aid or of the work of particular agencies.
- 4 For ease of exposition, I shall continue sometimes to write about 'finding out' or 'establishing' how good or bad the effects are, but these phrases should be interpreted with the points just made in mind; that is, as shorthand for 'arriving at an estimate about the effects that one has at least some good reason to believe accurate'.
- 5 Let us say that the effects of such work are 'overwhelmingly positive' if that work achieves very positive effects, does so at very cheap per capita rates, and causes few if any significant negative effects. This is very rough, of course, but what I am trying to capture here is a rough ballpark view.
- 6 I give a more detailed description of such concerns in Keith Horton, 'The epistemic problem: Potential solutions' in K. Horton and C. Roche (eds) *Ethical Questions and International NGOs* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2010).
- 7 For brief overviews of humanitarian aid that discuss such concerns, see e.g. Thomas G. Weiss, 'Principles, politics, and humanitarian action', *Ethics & International Affairs* 13 (1999): 1–22, and Roger Riddell, *Does Aid Really Work?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), chs 18–19. For more detailed studies, see e.g. Alex De Waal, *Famine Crimes: Politics and the Disaster Relief Industry in Africa* (London: African Rights and the International African Institute, 1997), and Fiona Terry, *Condemned to Repeat? The Paradox of Humanitarian Action* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003).
- 8 For discussion of some of the problems with service delivery and other forms of development aid, see e.g. David Korten, *Getting to the 21st Century: Voluntary Action and the Global Agenda* (West Hartford, CT: Kumarian Press, 1990), chs 9–10; Ian Smillie, *The Alms Bazaar: Altruism Under Fire — Non-Profit Organizations and International Development* (London: IT Publications, 1995); David Sogge, Kies Biekart and John Saxby (eds), *Compassion and Calculation: The Business of Private Aid Agencies* (London: Pluto Press, 1996); Michael Edwards, *Future Positive* (London: Earthscan, 1999); Alan Fowler, 'Civil society, NGOs and social development: Changing the rules of the game' Occasional Paper (Geneva: UNRISD), available at <http://www.unrisd.org/unrisd/website/document.nsf/0/F553495F06F98DCE80256B5E005C9DDC?OpenDocument>; David Lewis, *The Management of Nongovernmental Organizations* 2nd edn. (London: Routledge, 2007), ch. 3; and Riddell op. cit., chs 16–17.
- 9 According to Roger Riddell, 'of all the different ways that NGO aid is allocated and spent, least is known about the overall impact of capacity-building initiatives' (op. cit., p. 283). Indeed, he continues, it 'is extremely rare for NGOs separately to assess even the direct impact of such activities, never mind the wider effects on the lives of beneficiaries' (ibid.). I draw especially on Riddell op. cit. here, as it contains the most authoritative review of NGO aid to date (see esp. chs 16–19).
- 10 See e.g. Ian Smillie, 'At sea in a sieve?' in I. Smillie and H. Helmich (eds) *Stakeholders: Government-NGO Partnerships for International Development* (Paris: OECD, 1999), pp. 21–31; Rick Davies, 'Monitoring and evaluating NGO achievements', available at <http://www.mande.co.uk/docs/arnold.htm>; and Roger Riddell, op. cit., 265f.

- 11 See e.g. Edwards op. cit., pp. 82–5; Larry Minear, *The Humanitarian Enterprise: Dilemmas and Discoveries* (West Hartford, CT: Kumarian Press, 2002), pp. 46f; Terry op. cit., pp. 224f; and Riddell op. cit., p. 346.
- 12 See e.g. Alan Fowler and Kees Biekart, ‘Do private aid agencies really make a difference?’, in Sogge et al. op. cit., p. 111; Smillie op. cit. 1995, p. 152; de Waal op. cit., p. 144; Smillie op. cit. 1999, pp. 11–14, 28; James Darcy, ‘Acts of faith? Thoughts on the effectiveness of humanitarian action’ (Overseas Development Institute Discussion Paper, available at http://www.odi.org.uk/HPG/papers/Aid_effectiveness.pdf), p. 3; David Rieff, ‘Tsunamis, accountability and the humanitarian circus’, Humanitarian Practice Network 2005 (available at <http://www.odihpn.org/report.asp?id=2711>), pp. 3–4; and Riddell op. cit., pp. 278–80.
- 13 See e.g. Smillie op. cit. 1995, p. 233; Edwards op. cit., p. 105; Biekart op. cit., p. 299; Minear op. cit., ch. 2; and Riddell op. cit., pp. 338–9.
- 14 See e.g. Michael Edwards, ‘International development NGOs: Legitimacy, accountability, regulation and roles’, in *Meeting the Challenge of Change: The Report of the Commission on the Future of the Voluntary Sector* (London: Commission on the Future of the Voluntary Sector, 1996); Biekart op. cit., pp. 77–92; and Thomas Dichter, *Despite Good Intentions* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003), ch. 6; cf. de Waal op. cit., 66.
- 15 In particular, by people who are knowledgeable about NGOs and sympathetic to their aims; not (only) by journalists looking for a good story, or by those who seek to denigrate NGOs for ideological reasons.
- 16 Henceforth, when I write about whether the effects of the work aid agencies do are ‘good enough’, I will mean whether those effects are good enough to imply that we are morally required to give to such agencies. This way of putting it leaves open one of the questions I have just highlighted, of course, concerning how good those effects have to be in order to imply a requirement to give.
- 17 The main exceptions I am aware of — philosophers who have engaged with some of those concerns — are Leif Wenar (see ‘What we owe to distant others’, *Politics, Philosophy, and Economics* 2 (2003): 283–304; ‘Accountability in international development aid’, *Ethics and International Affairs* 20, 1 (2006): 1–23; ‘The basic structure as object: Institutions and humanitarian concern’, in *Global Justice, Global Institutions, Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, supp. vol. 31 (2007): 253–78; and ‘Poverty is no pond: Challenges for the affluent’ in P. Illingworth, T. Pogge, and L. Wenar (eds) *Giving Well: The Ethics of Philanthropy* (Oxford: Oxford, 2010)); Garrett Cullity (see op. cit., esp. ch. 3); and Dale Jamieson (see ‘Duties to the distant: Humanitarian aid, development assistance, and humanitarian intervention’, *Journal of Ethics* 9 (2005): 151–70). To my knowledge, though, none of these philosophers has gone on to tackle any of the questions just sketched in the main text in any detail.
- 18 I say a little more about these matters in §4 below.
- 19 Cf. Wenar op. cit. 2007, pp. 270–1.
- 20 On these issues, see e.g. Kees Biekart, *The Politics of Civil Society Building* (Utrecht/Amsterdam: International Books and Transnational Institute, 1999), ch. 3; Smillie op. cit. 1999, pp. 21–31; Davies op. cit.; and Riddell op. cit., pp. 265f.
- 21 As Michael Edwards and David Hulme put it, ‘Internal evaluations are rarely released, and what is released comes closer to propaganda than rigorous assessment’ (‘Introduction’ to Michael Edwards and David Hulme (eds), *Beyond the Magic Bullet: NGO Performance and Accountability in the Post-Cold War World* (West Hartford, CT: Kumarian Press, 1996), 6). Cf. Fowler op. cit., pp. 13–14 and Riddell op. cit., pp. 267–268. I note some exceptions in §5.2 below.
- 22 Sten-Erik Kruse, Timo Kyllönen, Satu Ojanperä, Roger Riddell and Jean Vielajus, *Searching for Impact and Methods: NGO Evaluation Synthesis Study* (Helsinki: Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1997, available at <http://www.valt.helsinki.fi/ids/ngo/>), §9.4. One problem is that many evaluations focus on whether the relevant activities have achieved their ‘immediate objectives’, which often consist merely of a description of the concrete steps taken, such as wells dug, loans supplied, or people trained. Experience has shown, however, that taking such steps often fails to lead to the benefits hoped for, and that it can lead to significant negative side-effects. Leif Wenar gives the following example: ‘an aid project might be evaluated as “successful” were it to meet its objective of installing a fresh water conduit system into a village, without being sensitive to the fact that after the aid agency leaves the system breaks down, or is captured by local powers as a source of revenue, thus forcing the poorest villagers to travel even farther than before to find a source of fresh water’ (Wenar op. cit. 2003, pp. 303–4, n. 39).
- 23 For a recent review, which includes some qualifications to this claim, see Riddell op. cit., esp. p. 268. See also §5 below.
- 24 See e.g. the evaluation section of the ALNAP (Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action) website at <http://www.alnap.org/themes/evaluation.htm>.

- 25 Riddell op. cit., p. 312; see also more generally chs 16–17.
- 26 As usual, unless otherwise specified, I mean the effects of NGO aid in general, though I think it fair to say that these points also apply to each of the broad types of aid (humanitarian aid, service delivery, capacity building) mentioned in §1. I say something about the data on more specific types of aid in §5.1.
- 27 On the conception of expertise that I have in mind here, one is an expert in a certain field to the degree that one is well-placed to make reliable judgements about it. The relevant judgements here are generalisations about the effects of NGO aid, and so the experts are those well placed to make such generalisations. And that would typically reflect such factors as relevant training and experience, familiarity with the relevant literature and data, as well more general traits such as intelligence, insight, and so on.
- 28 Fowler and Biekart op. cit., p. 131.
- 29 There is still no substantive guide to aid agencies or NGO aid as a whole. Some organisations have been set up that aim to pick out NGOs that there is good reason to believe achieve particularly positive effects, however; see §5.2 below.
- 30 See e.g. Fowler and Biekart op. cit.; Biekart op. cit., esp. ch. 3; Fowler op. cit., pp. 11–20; and Riddell op. cit., chs 16–19.
- 31 See the references given in notes 7 and 8 above.
- 32 How demanding this standard is will depend, of course, on the answers to two of the questions I raised in §1, concerning how good the effects need to be in order to be good enough (to imply a requirement to give), and how much reason for confidence that the effects are this good is sufficient for giving to be mandated in practice.
- 33 See e.g. Abhijit V. Banerjee and Ruimin He, ‘Making aid work’, mimeo (MIT, 2003), reprinted in William Easterly (ed.) *Reinventing Foreign Aid* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008); Esther Duflo and Michael Kremer, ‘Use of randomization in the evaluation of development effectiveness’, in G. K. Pitman, O. N. Feinstein, and G. K. Ingram (eds) *Evaluating Development Effectiveness* (New Brunswick, NJ/London: Transaction Publishers, 2005); and William Easterly, *The White Man’s Burden* (New York: Penguin, 2006), pp. 372–6.
- 34 See <http://www.povertyactionlab.org/MDG/>, where the Poverty Action Lab at MIT, which conducts such trials, lists its ‘best buys’.
- 35 This theme is particularly prominent in David Korten’s influential work — see e.g. Korten op. cit. — but one also finds it in the work of many other writers, such as Ian Smillie (see e.g. op. cit. 1995, esp. ch. 13) and Michael Edwards (see e.g. op. cit. 1999, esp. ch. 4).
- 36 See e.g. Michael Kremer and Edward Miguel, ‘The illusion of sustainability’, National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper no. W10324, 2004 (available at http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=509855); and Easterly op. cit. 2006, pp. 368–9.
- 37 I am not advocating any of the views sketched here, but simply citing them for illustrative purposes.
- 38 See e.g. David A. Goldenberg, *The Mega 2002 Evaluation (Meta-Evaluation of Goal Achievement in CARE projects)*, CARE USA Program Division, February 2003, available at <http://care.ca/libraries/dme/>. I discuss these issues (and those raised in the next paragraph in the main text) in greater detail in Horton op. cit.
- 39 See Fowler op. cit., p. 14.
- 40 For example, New Philanthropy Capital and Geneva Global. For a number of relevant articles, see *The Economist*, 25 February 2006.
- 41 For a general description of how GiveWell assesses organisations, see <http://www.givewell.net/research-process>. For details on some of their ‘top charities’, see <http://www.givewell.net/recommended-charities>. For some critical discussion of GiveWell’s methodology, see Wenar op. cit. 2010.
- 42 Interview with AsiaSource, 6 December 2004; see http://www.asiasource.org/news/special_reports/sen.cfm.
- 43 Another noteworthy recent development is the founding of Philanthropedia, which provides rankings of NGOs based on experts’ recommendations (see <http://www.myphilanthropedia.org/>). For critical discussion of their methodology, see <http://blog.givewell.org/2010/01/01/philanthropedia-report-on-microfinance/> and <http://goodintentionsarenotenough.com/2010/01/my-response-to-philanthropedia/>.
- 44 See the relevant websites.
- 45 See Rieff op. cit. Few other agencies followed suit, and as a result US\$7,100 a person was raised for the victims of the Tsunami, ‘which contrasts starkly, for example, to funding of only US\$3 per head actually spent on someone affected by floods in Bangladesh in 2004’ (Tsunami Evaluation Coalition, *Joint Evaluation of the International Response to the Indian Ocean Tsunami: Synthesis Report*, 2006 (available at <http://www.alnap.org/initiatives/tec/synthesis.aspx>).

- 46 Narrowing down often seems to lead people to activities at the more tangible, material end of the aid spectrum, in part because it is easier to measure the effects of such activities in a rigorous way. If (though of course only if) such activities tend to have less good results in the long run than political and institutional work of certain kinds, as some aid experts argue, then narrowing down may lead to sub-optimal results.
- 47 ‘The effects of the work aid agencies do in general’ needn’t of course be interpreted as meaning ‘the effects of the work of every single aid agency’. But it would naturally be interpreted as including at least a broad sample of such agencies.
- 48 I’d like to thank audiences in Canberra, Wagga Wagga, and Birmingham (UK) for comments on earlier versions of this paper; Emma Rooksby for written comments; and Chris Roche for discussions about related issues. All remaining errors and shortcomings are of course entirely my own responsibility.