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What we owe to distant others

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abstract

What morality requires of us in a world of poverty and inequality depends both on what our duties are in the abstract, and on what we can do to help. T.M. Scanlon's contractualism addresses the first question. I suggest that contractualism isolates the moral factors that frame our deliberations about the extent of our obligations in situations of need. To this extent, contractualism clarifies our common-sense understanding of our duties to distant others. The second, empirical question then becomes vital. What we as individuals need to know is how to fulfil our duties to the distant poor. Moral theorists tend to base their prescriptions on simple assumptions about how the rich can help the poor. Yet a survey of the empirical literature shows how urgently we need more information on this topic before we can know what contractualist morality — or any plausible morality — requires of us.

keywords

Scanlon, contractualism, global justice, global poverty, aid effectiveness

What morality requires of us in a world of poverty and inequality depends both on what our duties are in the abstract, and on what we can do to help.

T.M. Scanlon addresses the first question.¹ Scanlon's contractualism, like Rawls's justice as fairness, is intended as a theoretical alternative to utilitarianism. Yet Scanlon's is a theory not of institutional design, but of individual duty — of what you and I owe to each other, and to each other person in the world. In this article I first evaluate how well Scanlon's theory explains the patterns and content of our reasoning about our duties to distant others. I will suggest that contractualism does isolate the moral factors that frame our deliberations about the extent of our obligations in situations of need. To this extent, contractualism matches and clarifies our common-sense understanding of our duties to distant others.

The second, empirical question then becomes vital. What we as individuals need to know is *how* to fulfil our duties to the distant poor. We need to know what

we must actually do. Moral theorists tend to base their prescriptions on simple assumptions about how the rich can help the poor. Yet a survey of the empirical literature shows how urgently we need more information on this topic before we can know what contractualist morality — or any plausible morality — requires of us.

1. Justifying one's actions to others

Like Immanuel Kant, Scanlon begins with the question of moral motivation in order to reach the question of moral requirement. Scanlon holds that the fundamental moral motivation is the desire to justify one's actions to others on grounds that those others could reasonably accept.² This desire to justify oneself to others is a direct response to the value that one perceives in them. Others are (as we are) capable of assessing the reasons they have to live their lives in different ways, and are capable of guiding their actions by their assessments of these reasons. When we act in ways that are justifiable to others, we acknowledge the capacities that others have to govern their lives in accordance with their judgements of what is worthwhile.³

Of course in some sense utilitarianism can also be said to respond to the value of others, but contractualism is distinguished from utilitarianism both by the characteristics it deems valuable and by the response to value that it deems appropriate. Contractualism attends in the first instance to the capacity rationally to direct one's own life, rather than to feelings of pleasure and pain or well-being more generally. In this sense the contractualist motivation tracks the value *of* people, instead of the value *in* people. Moreover, the contractualist attitude toward value is not, as a utilitarian account would suggest, that it is always simply 'to be promoted'. Rather, the correct response to perceiving the rational natures of other individuals is to be motivated to justify one's actions to them.

The fundamental contractualist duty is then to act in accordance with principles that everyone could reasonably accept. This formula focuses on individuals, and not (as in utilitarianism) on collectivities. For each action we are to ask whether a rule permitting the action would be reasonably acceptable to each other individual, instead of asking whether the rule would promote the well-being of all people taken together. The rules that would be acceptable to all define the content of our duties from a contractualist perspective.

How well do these contractualist accounts of moral motivation and moral reasoning mesh with the structure of our moral sensitivities? The fit often appears to be good. For instance, contractualism can explain why we are attentive to the effects of our actions both on those who are better off and on those who are worse off, since our actions will have to be justified to both. Contractualism can in addition explain why our moral concern is usually first directed to the plight of the worst off, since the complaints of the worst off are often the strongest grounds for rejecting a potential principle.⁴

Contractualism can also explain why our moral concern tends to be activated by one-to-one comparisons of well-being, rather than by aggregative considerations. As charitable organizations have long known, those of us who live in the rich world tend to respond strongly to images of *individuals* in dire straits whose plights seem unjustifiable given our own surplus of resources. The contractualist interpretation of this reaction is that our moral concern is roused by the necessity of justifying our actions (or inaction) to such individuals, independently of the numbers of individuals in like circumstances.

An aggregative theory like utilitarianism might attempt to explain this focus on individuals by saying that our concern is raised by the possibility of increasing total happiness by transferring our surplus resources to individuals like the ones we see in the commercials. But a utilitarian theory will find it more difficult to explain, as contractualism easily can, why our moral concern would be triggered much more intensely by seeing a single person in great need than it would by seeing thousands slightly worse off than ourselves.

Scanlon sometimes expresses the contractualist moral motivation as reflecting ‘The reason we have *to live with others* on terms that they could not reasonably reject’.⁵ This way of putting it highlights the question of the relative priority of the contractualist desire with respect to other motivations that might compete for our attention. After all, the sense in which we ‘live with’ most of those whose value we must recognize is quite attenuated. We ‘live with’ the poorest in the world, for instance, in the sense that each group’s actions indirectly affect the political and physical environments of the other group — and in the sense that we in the rich countries have the potential to affect the poor by devoting our resources to charitable causes and political activism. This is a much lesser way to live with others than, for example, the ways in which we live with our friends, our colleagues, and our fellow citizens. What does contractualism have to say about the relative priority of the reasons we have to live with these different sets of people on particular terms, and how well does this correspond to our sense of what priorities these types of relations should have?

On the purely theoretical level contractualism says, as I believe it must, that the reasons we have to justify our actions to other human beings, regardless of our relation to them, take precedence over the more particular reasons we have to engage with those closer to us.⁶ In other words, our closer relations of friendship, family, and fellow citizenship have a ‘built-in sensitivity to the demands of right and wrong’.⁷ If they did not, we would not find them acceptable: we do not see these closer relations as licences for immorality. The universal morality sets the structure in which our closer relations must fit, and this is so even though any plausible universal morality will acknowledge the value of closer relations by making room for them in its requirements and permissions. The universal relation has priority over the particular, and its demands shape the acceptable forms of these special relations even as it takes the possible value of these special relations (so shaped) into account.

This priority of the universal is, I believe, the only intellectually satisfying construal of the priority relation. Moreover, contractualism plausibly locates the source of this priority in the great value that we recognize in each other person regardless of our relation to them. Yet although we acknowledge the priority of the universal, in everyday life this is typically a source of unease. We may register the moral importance of helping distant others in need, even as we turn to devote our time and resources to the routine expectations of those near and dear. This kind of ‘bad conscience’ in favouring the local over the urgent is a familiar feature of modern moral consciousness. It is a phenomenon that a contractualist moral psychology can go some way to explain.

A contractualist moral psychology says that our desires to act are responses to reasons and values. Specifically, our motivations to act flow from judgements about reasons to act that spring from our perceptions of value ‘in the world’. When we perceive something valuable, we judge that there is a reason to engage in a course of action that protects it, or pursues it, or promotes it, or honours it, and so on. When we judge that there is a reason to engage in some course of action, we thereby (insofar as we are rational) come to have a motivation to engage in that course. In this way, our motivations are responses to our perceptions of the values that there are ‘out there’.⁸ This holds for all of our motivations — your desire to contribute to the wildlife sanctuary is a response to the value you perceive in nature, just as my desire to eat the chocolate right now is a response to the value I perceive in the chocolate.

However, the strengths of our actual motivations do not always correspond to the relative importance of the values in the world, because our attention is constantly being drawn toward rather small portions of all the values that there are. Our biology and our social conditioning determine our psychology to keep drawing our attention back to more ‘local’ values and reasons — to the value of eating good food, to the value of attending to the needs of those we love, and to the value of engaging in the pleasures of discussions with colleagues. Our characters are set with a particular constellation of what Scanlon calls ‘desires in the directed attention sense’, so that certain kinds of considerations persistently present themselves to our consciousness in a favourable light.⁹ The contractualist ideal of virtue would be a person whose attention was always directed toward those values that were the most important for her to respond to at the time. None of us lives up to this ideal of character, and because we do not our attentions are constantly being pulled toward the charms of things that, objectively, matter less.

This habitual drawing of attention to nearer horizons can account for the fact that our recognition of the needs of distant others often has quite temporary motivational power. We will acknowledge the strong reasons we have to help distant others when we are presented with these reasons. But we are not so constituted that we can easily focus on these reasons over time. Our attention keeps getting dragged back to the reasons we have to engage with people and events close at hand.

Of course this motivational story has nothing to say about what we should actually *do* for distant others. That will be the subject of the rest of the article. But this contractualist account of motivation can explain why, when we are asked how much we should *attend* to the topic of our duties to distant others, we will invariably say: ‘More’.

Contractualism can explain both why we judge that we should attend more to the needs of distant others, and why this judgement is correct. What then does contractualism require us to do in response to the needs of the world’s poor? I believe that contractualism isolates and clarifies, but does not resolve, the two most difficult problems that the rich face in thinking about their duties to the distant poor. One problem is empirical, and we need to make progress on it through empirical research. The other problem is normative, and the contractualist approach shows how difficult it is to make progress on it at all.

2. The normative question

In sections 18 and 19 of *A Theory of Justice*, John Rawls conjectured that there should be an extension of the approach of justice as fairness to the question of what actions are morally right for individuals to perform. He called this conjectural theory ‘rightness as fairness’, and said that it would provide ‘a way for eliminating customary phrases in terms of other expressions’ so as to give ‘a definition or explication of the concept [of] . . . right’.¹⁰

I believe that Scanlon’s contractualism is a theory of ‘rightness as fairness’ — or more precisely, a theory of ‘wrongness as unfairness’. The contractualist characterization of wrongness focuses on principles that all could reasonably accept, or, equivalently, on principles that none could reasonably reject. It asks us to evaluate potential principles of conduct by examining the strength of the complaints that those affected by a principle could lodge against it. If a complaint to a principle is strong enough, that principle can reasonably be rejected. The grounds for reasonable rejection of a proposed principle typically resolve, I believe, into complaints that the principle is unfair.¹¹

Below I summarize three types of complaint against a proposed principle of conduct, all of which are complaints of unfairness. The first two will concern us especially in what follows.

1. *Disadvantage*. The proposed principle would leave some people badly off, and there are other principles available under which no one would be as badly off as those people would be under the proposed principle.
2. *Sacrifice*. The proposed principle requires a sacrifice from some that is too great, given the size of the benefit that others would gain from this sacrifice.
3. *Distribution by irrelevant criterion*. The proposed principle allows advantages to some people, but for no reason related to the justification of the overall distribution.

The complaint of *disadvantage* is the basis for the contractualist interpretation of some of the deepest rules of right and wrong.¹² For example, consider the grounds for rejecting a principle that allows wanton killing. A principle allowing wanton killing can be reasonably rejected by those who would be killed. This is because this principle would leave these victims badly off, and there are other principles available (forbidding wanton killing) under which no one would be as badly off as the victims would be under the proposed principle. In essence, a principle allowing wanton killing is unfair because it is worse to be killed than it is to be a frustrated killer. Since any principle allowing wanton killing could be reasonably rejected, wanton killing is morally wrong.

The complaint of *sacrifice* can be illustrated by an objection that is sometimes heard during debates over the priorities for a national health service. It would be unfair, it is said, to transfer the entire budget for 'optional' procedures like fertility enhancement into the budget for expensive treatments that prolong the lives of the terminally ill. The sacrifice for the groups needing the 'optional' procedures would be too great, it is said, given the small gains in longevity for the terminally ill that these sacrifices would buy. This is so even though the terminally ill are of course much worse off than those who would be asked to sacrifice the fertility-enhancement procedures.

The complaint of *distribution by irrelevant criterion* grounds Scanlon's discussion of free riding.¹³ It is unfair for some arbitrarily to gain extra advantages within a cooperative scheme in which all bear burdens, even if their gaining this extra advantage would not make anyone else worse off. So, for example, it would be wrong for some to be allowed secretly to exempt themselves from a scheme that reduces emissions from automobiles, even though the pollution that they would thereby cause is in fact too slight to endanger anyone.

The idea of fairness lies behind both the complaint of disadvantage and the complaint of sacrifice. Yet these two fairness-based complaints push contractualist morality in opposite directions. Consider for example the principles appropriate for two groups, the Rich and the Poor. The complaint of disadvantage puts pressure on contractualism to require redistribution of resources from the Rich toward the Poor — and at the limit, toward equalizing resources between Rich and Poor. This is because for any proposed principle that allows the Rich to control more resources than the Poor, there is a more egalitarian principle under which the Poor do better. So the Poor have grounds for rejecting principles that keep them poor, given the availability of principles that would redistribute resources to make them richer. On the other hand, the complaint of sacrifice puts pressure on contractualism to resist redistribution. The Rich cannot in fairness be required to give up huge amounts of resources just to provide the smallest gains to the Poor. The Poor, in other words, cannot reasonably reject a proposed principle *simply* because there is an alternative under which they would be better off, without consideration to the amount of sacrifice that the proposed principle would impose upon the Rich.¹⁴

In the context of our duties to distant people in need, the complaint of sacrifice may seem to be irrelevant. It may appear to be obvious that we in rich countries could easily sacrifice what is of little importance to us in order to bring about large welfare gains to those in poor countries. Yet right now I just want to emphasize the more abstract point that considerations of sacrifice are part of our thinking about our moral duties, and so that the complaint of sacrifice will have a place in any plausible moral theory. The complaints of the poor cannot have absolute priority.¹⁵

Indeed I believe that it is a virtue of contractualism that it isolates so clearly two of the factors that guide our reasoning about redistribution: the complaint of disadvantage and the complaint of sacrifice. The rich man should give some money to the destitute family at his door. Yet the rich man need not give up his entire fortune if somehow this would provide the destitute family with only a single extra penny. Our judgements in these extreme cases are certain, and they are explained by one and then the other complaint dominating our reasoning. It is the cases between these extremes, where both complaints have weight, that make us uncertain. How much sacrifice is enough?

Scanlon's own proposed principle of duties to distant others is a compromise between the complaints of disadvantage and sacrifice. His 'Rescue Principle' requires the rich to aid those in desperate straits (for example, those starving), but only if the rich can do so at 'slight or moderate' cost to themselves. Here the sacrifice required of the better off is clearly being weighed against the benefit to the badly off, the result being a principle that is only mildly burdensome to the better off.¹⁶

One might be tempted to express disappointment that Scanlon's principle requiring aid to distant others is relatively undemanding. Yet there is a deeper indeterminacy within contractualism that is more significant. Contractualism locates the two most important factors in our reasoning about our duties to aid distant others: the benefit to the poor, and the amount of sacrifice from the rich. But it gives us no tools for understanding how to resolve the tension between these two factors. It would be churlish to require a moral theory to give us an exact schedule of trade-offs between benefits and sacrifices. Contractualism, as far as I can see, provides no guidance whatsoever. It leaves the large area between the extreme cases (about which we were already certain) to be decided entirely by individual judgement. The fact that Scanlon's judgement about trade-offs (as expressed in his Rescue Principle) may be different from your own judgement highlights how little assistance contractualism gives in specifying our duties in the crucial 'intermediate' cases.

Here, for example, is Thomas Nagel's judgement on what principles of aid could be reasonably rejected:

While no one could reasonably reject some requirement of aid from the affluent to the destitute, the cumulative effect on an individual life of an essentially unlimited require-

ment to give to those who are very much worse off than yourself, whatever other affluent people are doing, would simply rule out the pursuit of a wide range of individualistic values — aesthetic, hedonistic, intellectual, cultural, romantic, athletic and so forth. Would the certain abandonment of all these things provide reasonable ground for rejection of a principle that required it — even in the face of the starving millions? The question for Scanlon's model would be whether it could be offered as a justification to *each one* of those millions, and my sense is that perhaps it could, that one could say: 'I cannot be condemned as unreasonable if I reject a principle that would require me to abandon most of the substance of my life to save yours.'¹⁷

Nagel here reaffirms our intuitions about the 'extreme' cases. The rich cannot reasonably reject 'some requirement of aid'; yet 'an unlimited requirement to give' would be unreasonable. What is distinctive in the passage is Nagel's judgement that it would be unreasonable to require the rich to give up 'most of the substance of [their lives]' in order to keep the poor from starving. The rich cannot, Nagel says, reasonably be expected to give up their aesthetic, hedonistic, intellectual, cultural, romantic, and athletic pursuits for the sake of improving the lives of the destitute.

How can contractualism help us in evaluating Nagel's judgements here? There are at least two kinds of objections that could be levelled at Nagel's proposal. First, someone might object that certain interests of the rich (for example, their hedonistic or athletic interests) have almost no moral significance when compared to the interests of the poor in avoiding the grotesque sufferings of deprivation. Nagel has, it might be said, taken these complaints from the rich too seriously. Second, someone might object that Nagel's proposal, even if accepted, leaves a great deal of uncertainty about what is actually required of the rich. Would affluent Americans be excessively burdened if they were required to sacrifice until they reached the average level of affluent Europeans? Until they reached the average level reached by their grandparents' generation? Would it be too much to require rich Americans to sacrifice 50 percent of their wealth and income for the sake of relieving the destitution of the poorest?

Each of us can come to a view with respect to the questions raised by these two objections. As we do so, however, we will be relying entirely on our own judgement, and not at all on resources that contractualism provides for us. Contractualism is useful in clarifying the structure of our reasoning about our abstract moral duties to aid distant others. But it does not help us further by showing us how to determine more exactly what the extent of our duties is, even in the abstract. So far as the extent of these duties is concerned, contractualism leaves us clearer about why we are where we already were.¹⁸

On the one hand, this will not encourage those who have worried about the seemingly *ad hoc* nature of contractualist reasoning.¹⁹ On the other hand, contractualism seems to have captured a central tension in our ordinary moral reasoning, and given the nature of this reasoning it is difficult to see how the theory could go on to say anything more definite than it does. Whether one thinks that contractual-

ism should be criticized for leaving a large role to individual judgement will depend on what one expects from moral theory. What is certain, however, is that contractualism in itself leaves unanswered important questions about what we owe to distant others.

3. The empirical question

I mentioned above that worries about how the sacrifice of the rich relates to the benefit to the poor might seem irrelevant to our current situation, since clearly what the rich could sacrifice would be of little importance to them compared to the tremendous benefits that their sacrifices could bring to the world's impoverished people. The situation of the rich is obviously at the 'extreme' where small or moderate sacrifice could bring great benefit — and contractualism echoes ordinary moral judgement in saying that in such cases some amount sacrifice is morally required. This empirical thesis that small sacrifice from the rich can bring great benefit to the poor is implicit in many public appeals for charitable contributions. This empirical thesis that small sacrifice can bring great benefit is also explicit in almost all analytical moral theorizing about our duties to distant others, as it has been since Peter Singer's classic 1972 article on famine relief.²⁰

I believe that the confidence expressed in this familiar empirical thesis is seriously misplaced. It is in fact quite difficult to determine how much the sacrifices of a rich individual will contribute to the long-term well-being of distant people in need. There is nothing clear or obvious about the relation between what a rich individual sacrifices and what the distant poor gain. If progress is to be made in contractualist theory or elsewhere about our duties to distant others, the empirical questions in this area require our attention.

We tend to pass quickly over the empirical questions about our duties to distant others. In everyday life, the thought that short-circuits the empirical questions says 'We must be able to do *something*'. For philosophers, it is the high professional standards of abstract clarity that tend to screen off the relevance of the empirical issues. We are doing moral philosophy, after all, not political theory or economics, and this can appear to license the assumption that individuals in the rich world can assist the distant poor almost instantly and without mediation.

Yet this natural assumption in moral theory ignores the extraordinarily complex causal nexus that lies between the rich and those distant from them who live in poverty. These causal connections between the rich and poor are relevant to the conclusions that moral theory can reach. Individuals must after all carry out their moral duties in this world, in all its reality and detail. If moral theorists demand action in this world, they should be able to give firm empirical support for their claims that the actions they require will have the effects that they predict.

The empirical question that rich individuals must be able to answer in order to understand their moral duties to aid distant others is this: *How will each dollar, given by me or my government, affect the long-term well-being of the poor?*

One cannot expect a precise answer to such a question. As with many complex issues we must be satisfied with informed, reasonable guesses. Nor of course will the answer to such a question be simple. There are many ways of giving, and many dimensions of well-being.²¹ Yet when one approaches the empirical (as opposed to the moral) literature that bears on this topic, four things are particularly striking. The first is that the question above is nowhere discussed. What rich individuals need to know is how each dollar they can give, or each hour they can devote to campaigning for more foreign aid, will affect the long-term welfare of distant people who need help the most. Perhaps understandably, the specialized social scientists who produce the empirical literature have not seen answering such questions as an important goal of their inquiries.

The second thing that strikes one in the empirical literature is what most researchers agree on. Certain gross facts in the history of poverty and aid are fairly widely accepted. Over the past 50 years the percentage of people living in dire poverty has declined, while the absolute number has increased. Aid flows during this period have been greater than the period before, yet in absolute terms have been fairly small. Many aid initiatives appear to have averted crises and reduced poverty. But the money spent on other initiatives has been worse than wasted — it has, for example, disrupted local systems of production, intensified corruption, or simply delayed democratic reforms. The direction of aid has often been guided by strategic and institutional rather than by humanitarian imperatives.²² Yet even the best-intentioned efforts have had unintended side-effects that have overwhelmed their benefits, and the projects that have seemed the most likely to have salutary effects sometimes have not.

Indeed the third thing that strikes one in the empirical literature is how much of this material is pessimistic about the effectiveness of aid. Here I will just report some of the main strands of pessimism that run through the literature on aid.

There are two main categories of aid: humanitarian assistance and development assistance. Humanitarian assistance is directed toward those in immediate peril. It includes provision of food and shelter, dehydration relief, and medical attention for those injured by armed conflict. This assistance aims at short- or medium-term benefits for those that receive it. Yet the wider effects of humanitarian assistance are often less certain.²³ The most pressing concern is that the efforts of relief organizations unavoidably affect the political situation of the area. This is especially clear in armed conflicts. Relief organizations may for example have to turn food aid over to a local army in order to gain access to the needy. The very presence of 'free' food or medical care may encourage combatants to continue fighting, or it may encourage them to drive 'unwanted' minorities out of the country into refugee camps. The camps themselves may also become havens for soldiers as they regroup to launch further attacks.²⁴

In non-combat situations, the availability of humanitarian assistance may encourage governments to shirk responsibility for the fates of their most impoverished citizens — that is, it may encourage them to divert funds to other

programmes or, worse, to ‘disown’ the poorest completely. Similarly, the availability of humanitarian assistance may undermine systems of local self-help (for example, the training of native doctors) and it may thwart efforts (even by foreign aid groups) to promote long-term self-reliance. In both combat and non-combat contexts, aid agencies must often hand over a significant percentage of their ‘project’ budgets to authoritarian governments, to corrupt officials, and to criminals in order to maintain their headquarters in the national capital, and in order to ‘get things done’ in the field. Dependence, moral hazard, fuelling conflict and oppression and corruption and crime: these are the major risks of inserting resources into the complex political disequilibria that define wars and other humanitarian crises.²⁵ They are the major risks of humanitarian assistance.

Development assistance attempts to promote long-term, self-sustaining political and economic improvements in poor areas. Development aid includes inter-governmental grants and loans (sometimes administered by the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund) that are intended to spur economic growth or to stimulate specific reforms in public policy in the recipient country. Development aid also includes direct initiatives by multilaterals and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to improve education, sanitation, contraception awareness, and so on. The complexities here are enormous, and some of the data available on bilateral and multilateral aid are particularly discouraging.²⁶ The influential World Bank special report *Assessing Aid*, for instance, is about as sceptical about the past 50 years of bilateral and multilateral aid as such a report can be, given that it is issued by an organization whose future existence depends on providing aid.²⁷ Some studies have found that, overall, bilateral and multilateral aid to governments has had little or no impact on economic growth, and has not benefited the poor.²⁸ Efforts by donors to ‘target’ intergovernmental aid at specific public policy areas like health or education are usually unsuccessful, since recipient governments simply spend elsewhere the money they would have spent in the targeted area.²⁹ Moreover, some studies indicate that development aid has not overall been an incentive for recipient governments to change their policies in the ‘right’ directions, and indeed has often delayed reform.³⁰ Worse still, aid has made some government elites more concerned with appearing to respond to foreign donors than to their own citizens, especially in Africa.³¹ One set of cross-country regressions from more than 100 developing countries indicates that higher bilateral or multilateral aid has had no correlation with decreased infant mortality, and has had a slightly negative correlation with life expectancy and primary schooling.³²

Non-governmental organizations do have advantages over governments in administering development assistance. The greatest potential advantage of NGOs is political independence.³³ Yet NGOs have had real difficulties coordinating their efforts with local governments and with each other, and have had some tendency simply to ‘plant a flag’ on particular projects regardless of the effectiveness of those projects.³⁴ The locally directed development efforts that NGOs

specialize in also face the general dilemma that these programmes must be extremely sensitive to local circumstances to ensure recipient participation (and so success), yet aim to impose large-scale changes on the political, productive, or reproductive practices of those who are meant to participate. (The dilemmas here can be appreciated by imagining oneself to be part of a 'recipient population' of development assistance.)

The strong sceptical currents in the empirical literature on aid effectiveness bring us to the fourth and most striking fact, which is the overall uncertainty in the empirical literature about what aid really works.³⁵ Several of the pessimistic studies of development aid effectiveness cited above have spawned fierce debates in the literature.³⁶ This is perhaps not surprising given how highly charged the topics are ideologically. Yet what is remarkable in these debates is how deep the disagreements run about what economic methods are appropriate for assessing the data, and about what data are relevant for evaluating particular development strategies. Indeed, even the most widely used World Bank statistics addressing elementary questions like how many poor people there are in the world, and whether that number is increasing or decreasing, have been strongly criticized by responsible academics as 'neither reliable nor meaningful'.³⁷ In fact it is sometimes remarkable how little of what appear to be relevant data about development aid are even recorded at all.³⁸

At the micro level, the obstacles for collecting and interpreting the data on aid effectiveness are even greater. Evaluations of the effectiveness of the particular projects carried out by aid agencies lack a standardization that would make meta-analyses of their impact on welfare possible. These evaluations are also often surprisingly limited in scope, tending to focus on short-term, 'concrete' criteria of success instead of long-term welfare benefits.³⁹ This is especially true of NGO self-evaluations,⁴⁰ and the relatively few independent evaluations of NGO projects have not borne out the NGOs' claims of success. The largest study to date of NGO effectiveness asserts that:

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 firm 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.⁴¹

Having reviewed this study and the other major study of NGO project effectiveness, one scholar concludes: 'These two multi-country studies raise serious doubts as to whether many NGOs *know* what they are doing, in the sense of their overall impact on people's lives.'⁴²

It may appear unseemly to question the efforts of the most active donors and aid organizations. For example, the Scandinavian governments have been rela-

tively generous in their bilateral grants, and Oxfam, Unicef, and *Médecins Sans Frontières* have made heroic efforts in tending wounds, distributing food, limiting epidemics, and teaching reproductive health. Indeed, the most common reply to worries about the effectiveness of aid is to call attention to the experience and conscientiousness of the people who staff government agencies and aid organizations. Why should we not expect that the efforts of good people familiar with the problems of administering aid will end up providing significant benefits?⁴³

There is no doubt that many people who work in aid agencies are knowledgeable and conscientious. Yet one might think that it takes more than this reliably to effect long-term increases in human well-being within recipient communities. When one looks at the institutional incentives — what individuals need to do to succeed within their organizations, and what organizations need to do to succeed in competition with other organizations — one finds that there are relatively few incentives for attending to the long-term well-being of the neediest, and unfortunately many incentives for ignoring or even counteracting this long-term well-being.

For instance, it will not surprise many to find that the main institutional incentive of the US government to provide food aid has been to respond to the powerful US industries who are the producers and shippers of excess American-grown food. Nor is it a surprise that it is often in the interest of officials in recipient governments to maximize aid flows into their countries, as this gives them more resources to exchange for patronage, and more independence from electoral politics. Both of these tendencies have had long-term negative impacts on the politics and economic self-sufficiency of countries which have received inter-governmental aid.

It is less well known that NGOs and those who work within them often face some of the same diversionary incentives. NGOs have incentives to propose projects that will meet the goals of those who will approve the projects (for example, the local government or the United States Agency for International Development). There is often little incentive for NGOs to study the long-term impact of the projects they propose, since projects are frequently accepted for reasons besides their anticipated effectiveness. Nor is there a strong institutional imperative to follow up projects with careful studies of their long-term effects, since future funding is often not dependent on past long-term project success. NGOs also have incentives to exaggerate humanitarian crises in order to increase their funding, and to exaggerate their own efficiency and effectiveness since this helps with fund-raising. Moreover, there is very little independent oversight of claims in these areas. This does not mean, of course, that there are no effective projects addressing real crises, but it does mean that it can be quite difficult for outsiders to know which projects these are.

We can express concern about these institutional incentives without impugning the motives of individuals working within aid agencies. Many politicians, bureaucrats, and NGO staff want to increase the power of their organizations, and

their own power within their organizations, so that they can try to do more good. The difficulty comes when what people need to do to attain this success fails to track the long-term well-being of those who are badly off.

The institutional incentives of aid organizations are as they are because of a historical deficiency in external accountability. Aid organizations have evolved to a great extent unchecked by the four major checking mechanisms on bureaucratic organizations. These four mechanisms are democratic politics, regulatory oversight, press scrutiny, and academic review. Because of this historical deficiency in accountability, it is not surprising that many aid organizations have become places where it is difficult for the good people within them to do good.

It is no part of my intention to argue that aid cannot be effective. I have reported on the scepticism about aid that appears in the empirical literature, but none of the studies I have cited are definitive and several have been vigorously criticized. I have described the structure of diversionary incentives faced by the individuals and organizations involved in aid, but people can overcome such incentives. I have not sought in any way to show that we know that aid cannot work.

Rather, I have hoped to bring out how difficult it is for us to determine the effects of individual contributions to aid efforts, and how urgent it is to gain better empirical information about what aid is effective. The simple empirical assumption that small sacrifice brings great benefit has been nearly universal in theorizing about our moral duties in the face of poverty. Yet we can only be as confident about such theorizing as we are about this assumption. Given the difficult history of aid, it is no longer sufficient for moral philosophers simply to inform their readers of the cost of an oral rehydration kit.⁴⁴ We need more information on the efficacy of aid. Moreover, the information we need is comprehensive and systematic information, instead of anecdotal reports of aid efforts that have succeeded or failed.

I have throughout emphasized the long-term effects of aid on human welfare because of the importance of the long term to moral theory. Recall that the contractualist motivation turns on 'The reason we have to *live with others* on terms that they could not reasonably reject'.⁴⁵ We 'live with' the poorest in the third world in the sense that our everyday actions indirectly affect their political and physical environments, and in the sense that we in the rich world have the potential to affect the poor by devoting our resources to aid. Yet this is the same way that we 'live with' the descendants of today's poor, and indeed with the descendants of today's potential donors. We must therefore justify our actions to future generations as much as to those now living. We must consider the possibility that current aid projects will hurt in the long run, even if (as not all do) they help in the short term. We must work to determine when our situation is like being able to pull a drowning child out of a shallow pond, and when it is more like trying to push through a crowd at the edge of a dock to save the child who has already fallen in.⁴⁶

4. Conclusion

I have suggested that contractualism isolates, but does not answer, the two most important questions regarding our moral duties to distant others. The abstract normative question is how much sacrifice from rich individuals is required for the sake of how much benefit to the poor. The empirical question is how rich individuals can effectively promote the long-term welfare of the poor. Without progress in answering these questions, the nature and extent of our duties will remain indeterminate.

The danger of this indeterminacy is that it will lead to what might be called the selfishness of uncertainty. Even those who wish to justify their actions to others must at some point decide to give a particular percentage of their income, or to devote a particular number of hours per week to advocacy. Yet settling on any particular level of contribution implies that one has arrived at defensible answers to our two questions: how much sacrifice is morally required, given how much one can reasonably expect others to benefit from this sacrifice. Defending answers to such questions is exactly what seems so difficult. The frustration associated with answering these questions then spurs avoidance of the entire topic.

The devastating magnitude of global poverty makes this response inadequate.⁴⁷ We live in a world where poverty causes massive human suffering. Ignoring this fact can hardly be justified. The familiar response of moral theorists *simply* to send more aid is, I believe, no longer appropriate. A more reasonable plan of action has, I believe, several elements.

First, we should support in any way we can independent research into aid effectiveness. This research can be carried out in universities, by the media, by governmental regulatory organizations, or by ‘aid-watch’ NGOs. Second, we should put pressure on aid agencies to become more accountable. Agencies must provide thorough assessments of the effectiveness of their projects — even though this will mean spending less on the projects themselves. These assessments should include detailed descriptions of all agency expenditures (costs of maintaining in-country headquarters, bribes paid, and so on). The assessments should also include evaluations of the impact of projects on the long-term well-being of recipient communities, carried out or certified by groups which have no incentive to provide positive reports.

Third, insofar as we do support aid projects, we should try to understand the political and economic contexts into which our resources will flow, and to seek out those projects which appear to combine the greatest potential for positive long-term impact with the fewest risks of counterproductive intervention (immunizing children against infectious diseases and iodizing salt supplies might be examples). Fourth, we should require high standards of transparency and effectiveness from our own governments’ foreign aid programmes, and insist that foreign aid not be regarded as just another mechanism for promoting domestic political and economic interests. In practical terms, following these four pro-

posals could mean doing our own research on aid effectiveness; offering conditional financial support to aid organizations; writing letters to politicians, aid organizations, and newspapers; and being careful when casting our votes.

We must also ask whether ‘aid’ is the only category that captures the content of our duties to the global poor. This article has been concerned specifically with questions about the rich aiding the poor, and so with questions about the *re-distribution* of resources from the rich to the poor. Our discussion has presupposed, as Scanlon says, ‘a framework of entitlements’.⁴⁸ Yet we can also question the fairness of the system of rules that has contributed to the rich being as rich as they are, and the poor being as poor. There is an elaborate set of rules that shape the outcomes of the global economic and political system — rules concerning trade barriers and domestic subsidies, intellectual property rights, the incurring and relief of national debts, and much else. It is plausible that the rich countries have used their overwhelming political power to skew these rules in their own favour, and that these rules could be reformed in ways that are beneficial to the poor without being tremendously burdensome to the rich. If this is correct, our practical duties with respect to the poor might direct us toward demanding, for example, that our own governments reduce domestic agricultural subsidies and tariff levels.⁴⁹ When we do moral theory we focus on individual duty, not on institutional design. Yet global poverty may present us with a situation in which we can best discharge some of our moral duties by working to improve the structure of global institutions.

Much more work is required for us to understand our specific duties with respect to the world’s poor. Making this effort is part of what we owe to distant others. The desperate situation of billions of human beings who live far from us is the contemporary moral problem with the greatest claim on our attention. We owe it to these people to keep our attention focused upon it.

notes

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1. T.M. Scanlon *What We Owe To Each Other* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).
2. In this article I will not distinguish between ‘what all could reasonably accept’ and ‘what no one could reasonably reject’. I will also use the word ‘desire’ to refer generically to our motivations.

3. Scanlon *What We Owe To Each Other*, pp. 103–6. In this way Scanlon’s contractualism is like that part of Kant’s moral theory that results in the Formula of Humanity: act so as to treat humanity whether in oneself or others always as an end in itself and never merely as a means. On Kant’s view it is ‘humanity’ (the ability rationally to set and pursue ends) that is of unconditional worth. This is quite close to Scanlon’s location of value in the ability to recognize and respond to reasons. In both Scanlon’s and Kant’s theories, moral motivation is a reaction to the reasons generated by the practical rationality of others. Indeed, echoes of Kant’s imperative against instrumentalizing humanity can be heard in Scanlon’s contractualist formula. The Kantian requirement that one accommodate others’ capacities to set ends when pursuing one’s own ends is analogous to the requirement of living by rules that others can reasonably accept. Moreover, Kant’s demand that one heed the ends that others have actually set is parallel to the injunction to imagine the complaints that others might have to what one proposes to do.
4. T.M. Scanlon, ‘Contractualism and Utilitarianism’, in *Utilitarianism and Beyond*, edited by A. Sen and B. Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 123.
5. Scanlon, *What We Owe To Each Other*, p. 154 (emphasis added); compare also p. 162.
6. I am using ‘other human beings’ as a convenient marker to indicate the largest class to which justification is due, without meaning to prejudge the question as to whether the scope of morality might be wider.
7. Scanlon, *What We Owe To Each Other*, p. 166.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 7–64.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 39. In this paragraph and the next the description of a contractualist moral psychology is an extrapolation from what Scanlon has written. The sketch of the contractualist ideal of virtue, for instance, is mine not Scanlon’s.
10. J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, revised edn. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 95–6.
11. This interpretation of contractualism as a theory of ‘rightness as fairness’, as well as the formulation of the complaints of unfairness that follow, are my own. Scanlon has not characterized contractualism in these ways.
12. See Scanlon, ‘Contractualism and Utilitarianism’, p. 123.
13. Scanlon, *What We Owe To Each Other*, pp. 211–13.
14. I discuss this tension at greater length in ‘Contractualism and Global Economic Justice’, *Metaphilosophy* 32 (2001): 79–94 (reprinted in *Global Justice*, edited by T. Pogge (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), pp. 79–82). It might be noticed that the complaint of disadvantage involves the claim that some are ‘badly off’, and so complaints of disadvantage will become weaker the better off the poor are in absolute terms. Since our concern here is with the global poor, and many of the global poor are about as badly off as humans can be while still being alive, we can put this complexity to one side. We can assume, that is, that absolute deprivation of many of the world’s poor makes their current disadvantage-based complaint about as strong as such a complaint could be.
15. As Scanlon observes in *What We Owe To Each Other*, pp. 228–9, Rawls’s argument for the difference principle (which does give absolute priority to the worst off) is something of a special case. First, the reasoning is confined to one particular arena:

- the justice of the basic structure of a society. Second, the argument proceeds from a baseline of equality — the assumption that equal citizens are all *prima facie* entitled to equal shares of the benefits of social cooperation. This baseline assumption gives a great deal of weight to the complaints of those who would be worse off under any proposed egalitarian principles. Yet even so, one might note that Rawls himself ends up defending the difference principle from objections of sacrifice — saying that it is empirically unlikely that the rich will have to make great sacrifices to provide tiny benefit to the poorest. See Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, pp. 135–7.
16. Scanlon, *What We Owe To Each Other*, pp. 224–5. It is important to note that we are here discussing principles of *aid* and *redistribution*. In such a discussion we are assuming that the rich have the right to control certain resources and that the poor do not. As Scanlon says in *What We Owe To Each Other*, p. 214, in discussing aid ‘we need to presuppose a framework of entitlements.’ This article is primarily concerned with duties to aid, but our duties to distant others may also require us to work to revise the frameworks of global economic and political rules that work to produce these entitlements. I return to this point in the paper’s conclusion.
 17. T. Nagel, *Concealment and Exposure* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 154.
 18. Rahul Kumar’s sensitive discussion of the contractualist duty of mutual aid is not intended to address this kind of indeterminacy in contractualism. Kumar, like Nagel, lists a variety of considerations that might allow an agent to resist certain principles of mutual aid. For instance, Kumar mentions having control enough over one’s life to be able to make and execute plans, the costs of keeping oneself alert for occasions when aid may be required, and the ability to control with whom one forms significant relationships. Kumar does not discuss global poverty, and only a few of the considerations he mentions are relevant to this context. More importantly for our discussion, Kumar does not mean to comment in this article on how we might go about weighting the kinds of considerations he mentions against the countervailing considerations that favour requiring aid. See R. Kumar, ‘Defending the Moral Moderate: Contractualism and Common Sense’, *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 28 (1999): 275–309. For a subtle discussion of contractualism with contrasting emphases to Kumar’s, see E. Ashford, ‘The Demandingness of Scanlon’s Contractualism’, *Ethics* 113 (2003): 273–302.
 19. T. Pogge, ‘What We Can Reasonably Reject’, *NOÛS* 11 (2001): 138 writes: ‘When Scanlon actually tries to settle substantive moral questions by reference to [the contractualist formula], he must invoke extraneous intuitions and considerations that (though he repeatedly assures the reader that they are not *ad hoc*) have no discernible basis in his formulas. Yes, Scanlon is right to caution us against the quest for a fully determinate algorithm. But one may surely expect something advertised as a “general criterion of wrongness” to contribute more content than Scanlon manages to milk out of his formula’.
 20. P. Singer, ‘Famine, Affluence, and Morality’, *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1 (1972): 229–43.
 21. On well-being see, for example, A. Sen, *Development as Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 14–110.
 22. See A. Alesina and D. Dollar, ‘Who Gives Foreign Aid to Whom and Why?’ *NBER Working Paper 6612* (1998), p. i, who write regarding bilateral aid: ‘We find

- considerable evidence that the direction of foreign aid is dictated by political and strategic considerations, much more than by the economic needs and policy performance of the recipients.’ See also R.J. Barro and J.W. Lee, ‘IMF Programs: Who Is Chosen and What are the Effects?’ *IMF Working Paper* (2001), URL: <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/staffp/2001/00-00/pdf/rbjl.pdf>.
23. A good summary of critiques of ‘classic humanitarian’ assistance is in C. Collins, ‘Critiques of Humanitarianism and Humanitarian Action’, *Humanitarian Coordination: Lessons Learned* (New York: Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 1998), pp. 12–26. An extensive survey of the humanitarian assistance literature is J. Gundel, ‘Humanitarian Assistance: Breaking the Waves of Complex Political Emergencies’, *Report for the Center for Development Research*, Copenhagen (1999), URL: http://www.cdr.dk/working_papers/wp-99-5.htm. For strong first-hand anecdotal criticisms of aid efforts in Africa, see M. Maren, *The Road to Hell: The Ravaging Effects of Foreign Aid and International Charity* (New York: Free Press, 1997). Alex de Waal, *Famines Crimes: Politics and the Disaster Relief Industry in Africa* (Oxford: James Currey, 1997) presents a more systematic exposition of the thesis that most current humanitarian efforts in Africa are useless or damaging because they disrupt local practices and political institutions.
 24. The refugee camps set up by international charity groups in Rwanda were used by government soldiers and Hutu extremists as staging points for further genocidal assaults. See J. Borton et. al., ‘The International Response to Conflict and Genocide: Lessons from the Rwanda Experience’, *Journal of Humanitarian Assistance* (1996), URL: <http://www.reliefweb.int/library/nordic/book3/pb022.html>. NGO activities during the Rwandan disaster spurred serious debates and new declarations of policy among aid agencies that work in conflict zones, although it remains uncertain how these agencies would do differently were a Rwanda-type situation to recur. See, for example, the charters set out in the SPHERE project, URL <http://www.sphereproject.org/>, consulted July 1, 2003; ‘Rwanda Scenario’, *Humanitarian Assistance Ombudsman*, URL: <http://www.oneworld.org/ombudsman/scen2.html>. For a frank appraisal of the difficulties of this sort of aid see F. Terry, *Condemned to Repeat? The Paradox of Humanitarian Action* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002).
 25. Thomas G. Weiss, ‘Principles, Politics and Humanitarian Action’, *Humanitarianism and War Project* (1998), URL: http://hwproject.tufts.edu/publications/electronic/e_ppaha.html, writes: ‘The ‘dark side’ of humanitarian action would include: food and other aid usurped by belligerents to sustain a war economy (for example, in Liberia); assistance that has given legitimacy to illegitimate political authorities, particularly those with a guns economy (for example, in Somalia); aid distribution patterns that have influenced the movement of refugees (for example, in eastern Zaire); resource allocations that have promoted the proliferation of aid agencies and created a wasteful aid market that encourages parties to play organizations against one another (for example, in Afghanistan); elites that have benefited from the relief economy (for example, in Bosnia); and resources that have affected strategic equilibriums (for example, in Sierra Leone)... Although humanitarian agencies go to great lengths to present themselves as nonpartisan and their motives as pure, they are deeply enmeshed in politics. Budget allocations and turf protection require vigilance. Humanitarians also

negotiate with local authorities for visas, transport, and access, which all require compromises. They feel the pain of helping ethnic cleansers, feeding war criminals, and rewarding military strategies that herd civilians into camps. They decide whether or not to publicize human rights abuses. They look aside when bribes occur and food aid is diverted for military purposes. They provide foreign exchange and contribute to the growth of war economies that redistribute assets from the weak to the strong.'

26. See for example S. Davarajan, D. Dollar, and T. Holmgren, *Aid and Reform in Africa* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank Publishing, 2001) on the detrimental effects of aid grants to African countries such as Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo) and Nigeria. W. Easterly, *The Elusive Quest for Growth* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001) is an accessible account, written by a former World Bank economist, of why the successive paradigms for international development since World War II have resulted ineffective or counterproductive aid strategies.
 27. World Bank, *Assessing Aid* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), URL: <http://www.worldbank.org/research/aid/aidpub.htm>.
 28. P. Boone, 'Politics and the Effectiveness of Foreign Aid', *European Economic Review* 40 (1996): 289–329; P. Boone and J.P. Faguet, 'Multilateral Aid, Politics, and Poverty', in *The Global Crisis in Foreign Aid*, edited by Grant and Nijman (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1998); W. Easterly, 'The Effects of IMF and World Bank Programs on Poverty', *IMF Working Paper* (2000), URL: <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/staffp/2000/00-00/e.pdf>; R.J. Barro and J.W. Lee, 'IMF Programs: Who Is Chosen and What are the Effects?'; and see the citations in World Bank *Global Development Finance 1999*, URL: <http://www.worldbank.org/prospects/gdf99>, p. 74. A. Przeworski and J.R. Vreeland, 'The Effect of IMF Programs on Economic Growth', *Journal of Development Economics* 62 (2000): 385, conclude: 'We find evidence that governments enter into agreements with the IMF under the pressures of a foreign reserves crisis but they also bring in the Fund to shield themselves from the political costs of adjustment policies. Program participation lowers growth rates for as long as countries remain under a program. Once countries leave the program, they grow faster than if they had remained, but not faster than they would have without participation.'
- David Dollar, in reports that have been influential for current World Bank policy, argues that aid has had a positive effect on growth in countries with a 'good policy environment'. See C. Burnside and D. Dollar, 'Aid, Policies, and Growth' (1997) and 'Aid, the Incentive Regime, and Poverty Reduction' (1998); and P. Collier and D. Dollar, 'Aid Allocation and Poverty Reduction' (1998) *World Bank Research Papers*, URL: <http://www.worldbank.org/research/aid/background/toc.htm>. Yet see also the arguments that Dollar's thesis is too pessimistic in the works cited in footnote 36 below.
29. World Bank, *Global Development Finance 1999*, p. 75; World Bank *Assessing Aid*, pp. 5, 19–20, 60–79. World Bank *Assessing Aid*, p. 74 states: 'Donors are, more or less, financing whatever the government decides to do.'
 30. J.W. Gunning, 'Rethinking Aid' (2000) *World Bank Research Papers*, URL: http://www.worldbank.org/research/abcde/washington_12/pdf_files/gunning.pdf; Burnside and Dollar, 'Aid, Policies and Growth'; World Bank, *Global Development Finance 1999*, p. 74.

31. T. Dietz and J. Houtcamp, 'Foreign Aid to Africa', in *The Global Crisis in Foreign Aid*, edited by Grant and Nijman, pp. 89–102.
32. Boone and Faguet, 'Multilateral Aid, Politics, and Poverty', pp. 15–19.
33. P. Burnell, *Foreign Aid in a Changing World* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1997), pp. 184–6; R. Cassen et. al., *Does Aid Work?* 2nd edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 51–2.
34. N. van de Walle and T. Johnston, *Improving Aid to Africa* (Washington D. C.: John Hopkins University Press, 1996); Cassen et. al., *Does Aid Work?*, pp. 174–5, 229; Iain Guest, 'Misplaced Charity Undermines Kosovo's Self-Reliance', URL: <http://www.bard.edu/hrp/hhrs/guest.htm>.
35. In a large evaluation of Swedish aid effectiveness, H. White, *Dollars, Dialogue and Development: An Evaluation of Swedish Program Aid* (Stockholm: SIDA, 1999): 89, URL: <http://www.sida.se/Sida/articles/4700-4799/4782/pdf/utv99-17.pdf>, sums up this phenomenon as 'The difficulty with saying anything'.
36. See, for example, the debate around the influential 'Dollar hypotheses' on aid. H. Hansen and F. Tarp, 'Aid Effectiveness Disputed', *Journal of International Development* 12 (2001): 375–98; R. Lensink and H. White, 'Aid Allocation, Poverty Reduction, and the *Assessing Aid* Report', *Journal of International Development* 12 (2001): 399–412; J. Beynon, 'Policy Implications for Aid Allocations of Recent Research on Aid Effectiveness and Selectivity: A Summary' (2001), URL: http://193.51.65.78/dac/pdf/aid_effecti/beynon_1.pdf; the essays in *Changing the Conditions for Development Aid: A New Paradigm?*, edited by N. Hermes and R. Lensink (London: Frank Cass, 2001); and P. Collier and D. Dollar, 'World Bank Development Effectiveness: What Have We Learnt?' (2001), URL: http://193.51.65.78/dac/html/pubs/aid_effectiv.htm.
37. S. Reddy and T. Pogge, 'How Not to Count the Poor', (2001), p. 1 URL: <http://www.columbia.edu/~sr793/>, write: 'The estimates of the extent, distribution and trend of global income poverty provided in the World Bank's World Development Reports for 1990 and 2000/01 are neither meaningful nor reliable. The Bank uses an arbitrary international poverty line unrelated to any clear conception of what poverty is. It employs a misleading and inaccurate measure of purchasing power 'equivalence' that creates serious and irreparable difficulties for international and inter-temporal comparisons of income poverty. It extrapolates incorrectly from limited data and thereby creates an appearance of precision that masks the high probable error of its estimates. The systematic distortion introduced by these three flaws likely leads to a large understatement of the extent of global income poverty and to an incorrect inference that it has declined. A new methodology of global poverty assessment is feasible and necessary'.
38. For example, there has only recently begun an initiative in the Development Assistance Committee of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development to record what proportion of overseas development assistance is spent on basic social services in the recipient countries. See J. Harrington, C. Porter, and S. Reddy, 'Financing Basic Social Services', in *Choices for the Poor* (2001): 173–202, URL: <http://www.undp.org/dpa/publications/choicesforpoor/ENGLISH/>.
39. For 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.
40. The qualified positive answer that Cassen et. al. give to the question of their book, *Does Aid Work?*, is actually relative to a slightly different question: Do aid efforts work in meeting their own objectives? The authors are candid about the methodological limitations of aid evaluation, and give several suggestions for improvements. They are also explicit that their conclusions do not take into account a variety of political and social 'systematic' effects of the type mentioned above. Cassen et. al., *Does Aid Work?* pp. 86–142, 174–5, 225. See also Burnell, *Foreign Aid in a Changing World*, pp. 176–7.
 41. R.C. Riddell, et. al., 'Searching for Impact and Methods: NGO Evaluation Synthesis Study', p. 99, URL: <http://www.valt.helsinki.fi/ids/ngo>. Similar conclusions are reached in P. Oakley, *Overview Report. The Danish NGO Impact Study. A Review of Danish NGO Activities in Developing Countries* (Oxford: INTRAC, 1999).
 42. R. Davies, 'Monitoring and Evaluating NGO Achievements' (2001), URL: <http://www.mande.co.uk/docs/arnold.htm>.
 43. Peter Singer has emphasized in conversation the importance of meeting this objection. See also his response in *One World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), pp. 189–91, to a conference draft of the current article.
 44. See, for example, Peter Unger's brief discussion of the empirical factors affecting the costs of improving one child's life-chances in *Living High and Letting Die* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 146–9. The empirical research cited in Unger's book concerning the efficacy of aid consists of a newspaper editorial on polio (p. 6 note 5), a book review by Amartya Sen (p. 37 note 6), two articles about cyclone shelters from an Oxfam newsletter and a newspaper (pp. 43–44, notes 11–13), and a telephone call to an official at the World Bank to get some summary figures (p. 147, note 3).
 45. Scanlon, *What We Owe To Each Other*, p. 154 (emphasis added).
 46. The first metaphor is from Singer, 'Famine, Affluence, and Morality', p. 231.
 47. Pogge's overview of some World Bank statistics gives a sense of the magnitude of the current situation. 'Out of a global population of six billion, some 2.8 billion have less than \$2 per day to live on, and nearly 1.2 billion of these have less than \$1 per day. [These are purchasing power figures, so this means that 1.2 billion people can at most purchase daily the equivalent of *what \$1 can buy in the USA.*] 815 million people are undernourished, 1.1 billion lack access to safe water, 2.4 billion lack access to basic sanitation, and more than 880 million lack access to basic health services. Approximately 1 billion have no adequate shelter and 2 billion no electricity.' T. Pogge, "'Assisting' the Global Poor", in *The Ethics of Assistance: Morality and the Distant Needy*, edited by D. K. Chatterjee (Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).
 48. Scanlon, *What We Owe To Each Other*, p. 214.
 49. On this theme see the work of Thomas Pogge, especially his recent book *World Poverty and Human Rights* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002). Pogge argues that the imposition by the rich countries of the current global economic and political institutional order implies that citizens of rich countries are violating a negative duty not to harm the world's poor. He offers specific proposals for reforming the global order so as to make it more just structurally.