The Donor's Dilemma: Thinking Politically About Difficult Choices

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Development aid donors are often faced with a dilemma when giving aid to non-democratic developmental states. Giving aid to governments that are committed to achieving development seems desirable, yet such assistance can also be seen as condoning or even supporting rights violations committed by non-democratic regimes.

This paper suggests a conceptual framework to help donors to address this dilemma in a normatively justified way. It suggests that there are three analytically distinct types of 'donor's dilemma': complicity, double effect and dirty hands.

It seeks to show that a 'thinking and working politically' (TWP) approach to the donor's dilemma does not have to be normatively silent; on the contrary, analysing and understanding political contexts and constraints is indispensable for normative evaluations of the dilemmas generated by development aid.

The framework

Recent methodological developments in normative political theory challenge the simplistic dichotomy between idealistic and abstract 'normative theory' on the one hand, and the kind of gritty political realism offered by TWP on the other. We suggest three possible models that acknowledge the political significance of the donor's dilemma and which offer tools to engage with it in a practical way.

Complicity dilemmas

In complicity dilemmas, an agent acts to achieve a desired outcome but others do wrong while progress towards that outcome is underway. To avoid complicity, the agent would have to withdraw and sacrifice the positive effect of her intended actions. In our use of the term complicity, the agent does not share the wrongdoer's intentions, and her acts do not, in themselves, constitute part of the wrongdoing. However, the agent can become complicit with the wrongdoing in at least one of two ways: either by causally contributing to it, or by condoning it even when she is not directly causally contributing to the wrongdoing itself. In all complicity cases, the dilemma arises from the link between the agent's actions (towards the positive effect) and the actions of the principal wrongdoer (towards the negative effect).

Double effect dilemmas

This name borrows from the ethical Doctrine of Double Effect, which in summary means sometimes it is permissible to cause a harm as a side effect – but not as a means – of bringing about a good result. In double effect dilemmas, the agent's pursuit of the desired effect has foreseeable side effects which, in most other contexts, would constitute a wrong. We suggest that a political reading of double effect dilemmas would interpret them as cases in which the structural realities that constrain the agent produce a situation in which actions towards desired effects will inevitably generate negative side effects. However, even when the dilemma is forced on the agent by the structure of constraints, it is still her actions that are generating the wrong.

Dirty hands dilemmas

In dirty hands dilemmas, the agent acts in a way that would generate a negative effect as a means – perhaps the only means – to achieve the desired positive effect. Understood politically, dirty hands dilemmas arise where different goals – for instance, stability, fairness, justice – are in tension with each other, and some have to be sacrificed, compromised or negated to maintain others. Importantly, however, this is not a tension between personal morality and political necessity. Dirty hands represent an exceptionally difficult case: one in which the agent herself has to do wrong. This understanding of dirty hands identifies it as a rare exception, unlike the more common cases of clashes between the politician's personal morality and the responsibilities of the political role.

Key insights

- The conceptual framework developed in this paper shows that the donor's dilemma is, in fact, three different dilemmas. It also shows that a politically realistic approach to these conundrums, sensitive to context and political complexity, need not be normatively silent. Instead donors can acknowledge that they face a dilemma, identify which kind of dilemma it is, and work towards transitioning away from the context that generates it. Both diagnosis and response require engagement with relevant actors and stakeholders.

- Approaching the donor's dilemma as a structural problem depersonalises it, and this helps to ensure that the donor avoids conflating the dilemma with the contingent leadership of the recipient state. This clarity will also help improve long-term outcomes, since all the evidence shows that relying too much on a particular leader or government is more likely to hinder than to help transition away from the context of a dilemma.

- An all-or-nothing approach to the donor's dilemma offers only two choices; either fully endorsing financial support to a developmental regime regardless of how it behaves, or withdrawing all aid to preserve the moral integrity of the donor. Correctly identifying contextual constraints and recognising that such problems are in fact dilemmas helps avoid perverse outcomes such as the misdiagnosis of non-dilemmas as dilemmas, or mistaking complicity dilemmas for dirty hands dilemmas. Our hope is that the framework outlined here illuminates some of the nuances of these situations.

- Finally, there are likely to be sound instrumental benefits from the framework developed in this paper. The long-term success of development aid depends on consistent public support. We argue that explicit acknowledgement of development aid dilemmas would make it possible for donors to build a coherent case for different responses to normatively distinct situations, and so strengthen the public legitimacy of development aid.

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