

They can be choosers: Aid, Levinas and unconditional cash transfers

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Abstract

In this article, I seek to critically examine unconditional cash transfers (UCTs) and conditional cash transfers (CCTs) and consider how a Levinasian ethics might offer normative guidelines to evaluate such aid programmes. Such an analysis will serve to both critique and supplement the traditional utilitarian analyses of such programmes. In so doing, this article also hopes to contribute to the business ethics literature in which a Levinasian ethics may be brought to bear on real-world problems. I argue that this can be done by allowing a more complex representation of the Other's alterity. Two UCT programmes are then examined using this framework.

1. Introduction

The old adage has it that beggars can't be choosers. The one who proffers alms is the one who chooses the form that help will take. For the beggar to protest an offering, however small or unsuitable, is to display an unforgivable ingratitude. The poor would seem to fall into this category: although they are not always the desperate supplicant soliciting with outstretched hand, they need help, and there are plenty of NGOs and charities willing to assist. Those driving poverty alleviation believe that certain initiatives will be more effective than others at achieving this goal. Some advocate, and get donors to back, sanitation infrastructure projects as a means to overcome poverty (see Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2018), while others believe that improving adult literacy rates achieves better outcomes (see Project Literacy, 2018). Experts thus prescribe how the poor will be helped after careful consideration of how much impact a particular intervention will deliver over a particular time frame.

Such a cost-benefit analysis fits well with a utilitarian¹ ethics, where one aid intervention is preferred over another because it leads to more desirable consequences.² However, I will argue in this article that using only utilitarianism to evaluate aid programmes leaves something of ethical importance out – the ethical singularity of the Other. Furthermore, in some instances, cost-benefit outcomes are ambiguous in determining which aid interventions are ‘better’ precisely because their utility cannot be objectively determined. Based on this ambiguity, funders may decide to shelve an aid programme. In this article, I examine two particular aid interventions – UCT (unconditional cash transfer) and CCT (conditional cash transfer) programmes in light of these concerns.

My analysis seeks to position CCT and UCT programmes beyond just understanding them as mere positive cost-benefit outcomes, and so, “remind us of our unfinished responsibility” (Jordaan, 2009:98) towards the poor. I will enlist the ethics of Emmanuel Levinas to interrogate UCT and CCT aid interventions which will aim at critiquing and supplementing the traditional utilitarian analysis used to evaluate such programmes.

In one of Emmanuel Levinas’s interviews he remarks that: “My task does not consist in constructing ethics; I only try to find its meaning” (1985:90). Levinas, therefore, does not seek to define a particular system of ethics, or provide a set of normative guidelines but rather, the essence of the ethical relation in general; what Simon Critchley (1999:3) has called the “primordial ethical experience”. Frustratingly, Levinas offers us few concrete examples of such a primordial ethical experience (what he calls the face-to-face encounter) beyond the everyday and common gestures that involve us saying, in recognition of the Other, ‘After you, Sir’ (1998:117).

While Levinas’s caution that he does not seek to construct ethics is perhaps one of the most quoted lines in the Levinasian literature, less often repeated is the immediate follow-up remark he offers: “one can without doubt construct an ethics in function of what I have just said, but this is not my own theme” (1985:90). As such, Levinas leaves the door open to normative approaches that seek to build upon his ‘ethics of ethics’ (Derrida, 1978:111). However, if such an enterprise is fraught with difficulty – because Levinas offers us very little guidance on how to proceed – it is doubly so when considered within a business or organisational context. Paper after paper within the literature contains the implicit, and not so implicit warning that using Levinas as a framework to interrogate business or organisational ethics themes should proceed with extreme caution and care lest Levinas’s project be misconstrued or subverted.

Karamali (2007:317) argues that reducing Levinas’s ‘strangeness’ in order that he may help us “write about business ethics in a way that might make a difference [...] will always involve a homogenisation of his thought”. Bevan and Corvellec flatly deny that a Levinasian ‘corporate ethics’ is possible, while even the Levinasian managerial ethics they posit instead proceeds with a “tentative tone” and which is “propositional, rather than assertively normative” (2007:11). Introna (2007:271) warns that “Levinas’s ethics cannot solve cases” and that any attempt to “apply” Levinas risks “enter[ing] into the economy of the category and the instance to be covered by the category” – the very thing Levinas criticises as a “totalising” of the Other. Similarly, Forstorp (2007:300) argues that “applied

ethics” as an example of the totalising tendencies inherent in philosophy go against the Levinasian grain, especially within business (and business ethics) which, more than most social practices, exemplify the “potential reduction of the other to the same”.

Forstorp (2007:300) continues by arguing that in spite of the seemingly unlikely context of business or organisational ethics in which to consider the “ethical reasoning of Levinas”, there are nonetheless opportunities for doing so. This is borne out by several attempts within the business ethics and organisation studies literature and which span a broad context, for example: software piracy (Introna, 2007), marketing (Desmond, 2007), corporate governance (Mansell, 2008), health care tenders (McMurray, Pullen & Rhodes, 2010), human resource management (Dale, 2012), fair trade (Staricco, 2016), and more pertinent to this article’s topic, fundraising (Forstorp, 2007).

While this article’s main contribution lies in a rethinking of UCT and CCT programmes, an ancillary (though important) contribution to the business ethics and organisational studies literature is how a Levinasian understanding of ethics may be brought to bear, albeit imperfectly, on real-world problems. By ‘constructing’ a Levinasian ethics – that is, moving beyond determining ethics’ meaning – I hope to offer a positive account on how to proceed in using Levinas’s ideas to address practical organisational issues and not just add to the list of proscriptions alluded to above. So, for example, I will argue that a Levinasian framework allows one to place an ethical value on non-quantifiable and immeasurable utility such as spiritual well-being in order to advocate one course of action rather than another.

The article proceeds as follows: In the following section, the place of CCT and UCT aid programmes in addressing poverty is examined. Thereafter, the ethics of Emmanuel Levinas is introduced – how the Other as “exteriority” leads to an infinite responsibility to and for the Other. This is followed by an explication of Levinas’s notion of the “third”, and how it allows distributive justice, or politics, to enter and restore balance to the asymmetrical ethical relation. I will then follow Jordaan (2009) in arguing that one way in which a ‘Levinasian ethical politics’ can be instantiated in practice is through institutional designs that attempt the representation of the (poor and marginalised) other in as complex and nuanced a manner as possible. This prescription will then frame the Levinasian evaluation of two UCT/CCT programmes in the final section.

2. Addressing poverty: conditional and unconditional cash transfers

Assessing which aid projects will be the most cost-effective in addressing a particular aspect of poverty alleviation, as well as the subsequent monitoring and evaluation of that project, requires resources. Managing an aid programme will necessarily divert money away from the intended beneficiaries of that poverty-alleviation intervention (GiveWell, 2018). Partly as a response to this, governments in the early 2000s started giving poor households cash stipends to spend as they saw fit. These cash transfers, called CCTs, were however, subject to certain conditions being met, the most common

being ensuring that children were enrolled in school (Fiszbein & Schady, 2009). These conditions aimed to support the realisation of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (UN, 2018), in particular the second MDG which strives to ensure universal primary schooling for all citizens around the world. The largest and best known of these CCT programmes, Bolsa Familia, operating in Brazil, pioneered the CCT wave, and by the end of the first decade of the 21st century, over 37 developing countries had implemented a form of CCT programme (Groh et al., 2011, in Baird, Ferreira, Özler & Woolcock, 2013:11) as a means to lift their citizens out of poverty. Impact studies have shown that CCTs have, in general, reduced poverty levels by providing a steady stream of income. CCTs have increased school enrolment and also visits to health providers for preventive check-ups and immunisations (Fiszbein & Schady, 2009).

Monitoring the conditions attached to the CCTs, by a means- or proxy-means test, however, still diverts financial and other resources away from the beneficiaries of the poverty-alleviation interventions, albeit considerably less so than traditional forms of aid. Mitigating this diversion of resources even further led to the idea of unconditional cash transfers (UCTs) being mooted, and UCT programmes initiated. Give Directly, an NGO operating in Kenya and Uganda, gives extremely poor recipients \$1000, which is approximately a year's budget for a typical household in Kenya, directly (via M-Pesa, an electronic payment system accessed on cellular phones) to spend as they wish (Give Directly, 2018).

“The main argument for UCTs is that the key constraint for poor people is simply lack of money, not knowledge, and thus they are best equipped to decide what to do with the cash” (Hanlon, Barrientos & Hulme, 2010, in Baird et al., 2013:10). Thus, a poor family may decide that what they need most, to raise their standard of living, is to replace their thatch roof with a tin roof. A thatch roof is leaky and needs to be replaced twice a year (*The Economist*, 2013). Replacing the roof is thus not merely an aesthetic intervention but because a leaky roof is also more likely to be a vector of disease, replacing it is likely to improve health outcomes. Furthermore, as the roof does not have to be replaced as often, the money saved can be used to start a small business, selling chickens, for example. The resulting income stream can in turn be used to send one or more of the household's children to primary school.

Since the launch of UCT programmes, several studies have been conducted to determine whether UCTs are more, or less effective than CCTs in achieving certain outcomes, in particular, educational outcomes. A report by Sarah Baird and her colleagues (2013) which analysed data from 26 CCTs, five UCTs and four programmes that ran CCTs and UCTs in parallel, concluded that in general there is no significant difference between CCTs and UCTs in raising school enrolment and attendance. However, refining the categories further revealed that “programs that are explicitly conditional, monitor compliance and penalize non-compliance have substantively larger effects (60% improvement in odds of enrolment)” (2013:8). One of the studies cited in the report above concerned a joint UCT/CCT programme in Malawi that focused not just on schooling but also on marriage and fertility outcomes. Baird, McIntosh and Özler (2011) discovered that although CCTs were

more cost effective than UCTs in raising school enrolment and attendance, UCTs were much more effective in reducing teenage pregnancies and marriage (thus increasing the likelihood that they would not drop out and would complete their schooling).

The upshot of these empirical studies then, is that cost-benefit analyses to determine whether UCTs or CCTs are better aid interventions, remain inconclusive. That is to say, utilitarianism, as an ethical strategy to evaluate UCTs against CCTs falls short in certain respects. Part of the reason for this is that the moral calculus required of utilitarianism in order to pronounce on a preference depends on a reductionist aggregation of those affected as well as the purported utility that results from any one aid intervention. The utility arising from the aid interventions above are cashed out as either raising school enrolment and attendance or reducing teenage pregnancy; so, the programmes determine from the outset what utility they are looking for and thus will measure. In other words, a utilitarian evaluation assumes that it can objectively declare that one outcome is better than another because a particular outcome produces more utility. However, it is a utility it has already pre-defined in claiming that reducing teenage pregnancy is more valuable than raising school enrolment (or vice versa, or by using different criteria). But who determines this? Certain outcomes are privileged and then imposed upon those targeted for assistance, regardless of whether those outcomes are desired by the recipients themselves. Or, couched in utilitarian terms, the recipients of aid have no, or little, say in what they believe is more valuable – reduced teenage pregnancy or raised school enrolment – and thus produces greater utility *for them*.

The above points can be tied to the notion of marginal utility which often operates in step with utilitarianism. Marginal utility requires us to give up until “the level at which, by giving more, I would cause as much suffering to myself or my dependants as I would receive by my gift” (Singer, 1972:241). While this is a morally demanding standard, we can, once this level is reached, justifiably claim that we have discharged our ethical obligations to the poor. This is because the determination of what response, or level of giving is required (the level at which marginal utility kicks in) is dependent on a particular representation of the target of our giving (and a concomitant representation of their needs) which, I have argued, involves a reductionist aggregation of their ethical subjectivity.³ Marginal utility forecloses a wider representation of the Other and needs of the Other. A utilitarian evaluation of aid programmes will thus always leave something of ethical importance out. As a first approximation, what that something is can broadly be described as the recognition of the ethical singularity of the Other, which resists his/her reduction into a moral aggregation. Part of the reason utilitarianism ignores ethical singularity can be traced back to the previous paragraph’s claim that utilitarianism maintains the fiction that value and/or utility can be objectively determined.

In order to develop this argument and then apply it to two UCT case studies, I offer a brief explication of Levinas’s ethics. The first case study is based on a blogger’s report of an Oxfam UCT aid intervention in Vietnam, while the second is based on an academic paper published in *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* concerning a joint UCT/CCT aid intervention in Malawi. The differing formality of these sources will inform the depth

of analysis I offer in each case. The first case, being based on a blog, will rely more on description than analysis. This will serve to frame the more systematic analysis I offer in the second case, and which is based on a scientific study. The case studies will also serve to further illustrate how CCTs and UCTs operate and differ from one another.

2.1 Levinasian ethics

In *Totality and Infinity*, Emmanuel Levinas (1969:43) defines ethics as “the calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other”. What Levinas means is that when we encounter the Other, face-to-face (and the face has a specific meaning for Levinas which I will get to shortly), it is not a simple engagement which I, as a supposedly rational and autonomous subject, have control over (Jones, 2003:227). Levinas claims that our subjectivity is held ‘hostage’ by the Other (1998:117). Furthermore, the relationship that is established between myself and the Other in this encounter is non-reciprocal and asymmetrical.

The reason for this, simply put, is that the Other is ‘strange’ (1969:43), that is, the Other is singular and hence unknowable. The Other is not merely different, her ‘otherness’ is an alterity – alterity is not “a dialectical opposition to the other [... nor] the simple reverse of identity, and is not formed out of resistance to the same, but is prior to every initiative, to all imperialism of the same” (1969:38). The ‘imperialism of the same’ should be understood as a totalising ontology which, in attempting to know the Other, reduces the Other to its same such that there is no Being exterior to it. The alterity of the Other is *prior* to this ‘imperialism of the same’ and thus Levinas argues that metaphysics precedes ontology (1969:43). By metaphysics, Levinas simply means ethics and by ontology Levinas means all totalising systems of knowledge and representation. In summary, Levinas argues for “ethics as first philosophy”.

How then can the Other, who is exterior to all systems and modes of representation, be represented? Levinas’s solution is to adapt the idea of infinity as analysed by Descartes in his *Third Meditation* (1969:48-52). The idea of infinity as an idea whose content exceeds its concept (or more technically stated, as that which is surpassed by its ideatum) becomes the model for the representation of the Other. The other presents himself as “the exceeding of *the idea of the other in me*” (1969:50). Levinas calls this way of the Other’s presenting itself ‘face’. Perpich (2008:69) describes what the face represents: it “represents the inadequacy of every image to the task of representing the other and, as such, paradoxically, represents the impossibility of its own representational activity”.

The face can thus signify the needs and suffering of the Other, because, as Levinas explains, “access to the face is straightaway ethical” (1985:85). The needs and suffering of the Other do not need to traverse ontological categories, such as ‘moral reasons for action’ because the face is “an imperative given to your responsibility: to encounter a face is straightaway to hear a demand and an order” (Levinas, 2001:48). In summary, Levinas’s central argument is that because the Other is unrepresentable; or rather, because only the Other, as face, can present himself (as unrepresentable) I cannot discharge my

responsibilities to him. Otherwise put – because I can never be sure that what I have responded to is the true demand of the Other I can never discharge my responsibility to him, thus my responsibility to the Other is infinite.

The asymmetry of the face-to-face encounter is the asymmetry of representation – only the Other can represent himself, I can never do so and so only *I* can be infinitely responsible. Levinas (1985:99) claims that “I am responsible for a total responsibility, which answers for all the others and for all in the others, even for their responsibility. The I always has one responsibility *more* than all the others.”

At this stage, we are bound to wonder that if I am infinitely responsible to the Other what is there left for me, or any other others? Levinas outlines the way out of this quandary, answering that if the Other “were my interlocutor I would have had nothing but obligations! But I don’t live in a world in which there is but one single ‘first comer’; there is always a third party in the world: he or she is also my other, my fellow.” The third then, in the words of Alford (2004:156), “saves us from being consumed by the infinite need of the other”. Levinas (1998:104) continues delineating the impact of the third: “Hence, it is important to me to know which of the two takes precedence [...] must not human beings, who are incomparable, be compared? Thus, justice here, takes precedence over the taking upon oneself of the fate of the other.”

Justice is for Levinas “something which is a calculation, which is knowledge, and which supposes politics; it is inseparable from the political. It is something which [he] distinguishes from ethics, which is primary” (1998:171). So, while the face of the Other holds my subjectivity hostage, Simon Critchley (2012:57) notes that “autonomy [and symmetry] comes back into the picture for Levinas at the level of another demand, namely the demand for justice, the just society and everything that he gathers under the heading of ‘the third party’”. The third therefore, marks the movement from ethics to politics in Levinas’s work.

2.2 Levinasian politics

The third marks the beginning of the attempt to contain the radical demand of an infinite ethical responsibility within a finite political existence. However, the third party does not arrive after the Other: “[W]e cannot speak of the Other without immediately and simultaneously speaking of *all* Others...” (Introna, 2007:267). Jordaan (2009:97) describes how the third is both another Other to me, but also, at the same time, the third is an Other to that Other; so that “I am not to commit myself to one other at the expense of all Others. In order to be just, I have to limit my responsibility to the specific other and divide it amongst numerous others.”

The third thus introduces notions of equality “as the self divides its responsibility, and of politics as competition emerges over how equality should be interpreted and responsibility should be apportioned” (Jordaan, 2009:86). Distributive justice, or politics, introduced by the arrival of the third, is thus not a ‘superimposition’ (Alford, 2004:156) on the original face-to-face, encounter but rather, the mechanism whereby the ethical demand of the

Other and the Other Others can be responded to. The third, argues Levinas (1998:157), “is of itself the limit of responsibility and the birth of the question: What do I have to do with justice?” Justice, or politics as the limit of responsibility does not imply “ethics [as] necessarily a restraint on power – i.e. one where politics comes first and then ethics evaluates it later – [rather] politics is the machinery through which the ethical demand can be responded to” (McMurray et al., 2010:546).

How might this machinery, which Jordaan (2009:100) calls a Levinasian *ethical politics*, work in practice? Jordaan offers a very simple prescription with which to operationalise Levinas’s ethics: convey the alterity of the Other in greater complexity by presenting a fuller and more nuanced representation of the Other (ibid.). While “general institutional and theoretical designs”, such as CCT and UCT poverty alleviation schemes, must necessarily suppress “other’s otherness”, this “is tolerable as long as this otherness is not lost sight of, for it is the otherness of the other, his face, that reminds us of our unfinished responsibility for him and the incompleteness of justice” (ibid.).

I intend to examine two UCT case studies below which attempt to illustrate, in a concrete manner, how the otherness of the Other is not lost sight of. In so doing, I hope to demonstrate not only how a Levinasian ethics might offer normative guidelines to evaluate aid programmes so considered; but also how such guidelines might improve aid intervention practice insofar as cost-benefit (utilitarian) analyses do not always provide sufficient ethical motivation for their existence, continuation or adaptation.

2.3 Two UCT case studies

Two UCT programmes, one set in south-east Asia, the Other in southern Africa, will be interrogated to determine how far the intervention succeeds in not losing sight of the ‘other’s otherness’, and thus remaining more faithful to Levinas’s injunction to respect the alterity of the Other manifested in the face-to-face encounter.

2.3.1 A UCT programme in Vietnam

The first, initiated in 2006, involved once-off, unconditional cash grants by a British aid organisation, Oxfam, to 550 households in a poor community on the central coast of Vietnam. Two years later, the intervention was deemed a success, with local poverty rates down by 20%, declining dropout rates at schools and increased female participation in the community.

My interest in the intervention, however, arises from the arresting moniker given to the project – ‘cash for coffins’ – by an Oxfam blogger, Duncan Greer (2009). Several elderly recipients chose to spend their UCTs on funeral arrangements by investing in coffins and family tombs. Greer describes that although this type of spending was not the target of the project – coffins and tombs are not productive assets – “there is an inextricable link between people’s spirituality and their physiological well-being that cannot be discounted”. This had long-term significance to the beneficiaries’ lives, and they mentioned this to the fieldworkers on several occasions.

Most people have a spiritual dimension and addressing this is not usually considered in aid interventions. Concerns about burying the dead only materialise after a natural catastrophe, such as an earthquake, has occurred, or a contagious epidemic, such as Ebola, has ravaged a community. In the event, burying the dead becomes a public health issue, not a means to honour the dead. The aid workers are concerned with cadavers, not the representatives of a religious afterlife. Subject to a cost-benefit analysis, spending limited aid resources on coffins and tombs is politically unjustifiable – there are no substantial ‘multiplier effects’, as economists call them (discounting the economic demand stimulated by the manufacturers and sellers of coffins and tombs), the money literally goes into the ground.

The project can be said to embody distributive justice when the otherness of the Vietnamese community is represented as gendered Other, uneducated Other and poor Other, which correspond to the increased female participation in the community, decrease in local poverty rates and school dropout rates respectively. However, if the project had not been structured as a UCT, but as a CCT – the conditions specifically being tied to spending the cash transfer only on measures to achieve higher incomes and female participation as well as lowering school dropout rates – then the spiritual Other would have been ignored. The project as a CCT would have, in Levinasian terms, “totalised” the otherness of the Vietnamese community into a three-fold representation. As such, the project would have been less faithful to a Levinasian ethical understanding, because more of the otherness of the Vietnamese community would have been lost.

The increased physiological well-being and significance reported by the beneficiaries, as a result of being able to purchase coffins and tombs, should thus not be viewed as just an unexpected benefit of the project. Such increased well-being represents an ethical surplus not captured in the cost-benefit analysis of the project. I would venture that the increased female participation in the community and decreased school dropout rates flow in part from such increased well-being which at the very minimum encourages more engagement with others. In other words, the cost-benefit evaluation of the UCT may well have the source of causation back to front. Furthermore, while this UCT delivered an unambiguous positive result in terms of successful outcomes sought by the funders of the project, this might not have been the case. (The case study to follow results in ambiguous outcomes.) In that instance, a Levinasian evaluation of the project, understood as a matter of not losing sight of the Other’s otherness, would still result in an ethical affirmation of the project. This in turn might persuade the funders of the project to refine the outcomes sought and thus not abandon a marginal community.

While the notion of an infinite responsibility towards the Other is not brought to bear on the present case, the problem of how the Other is represented is. However, the problem of representation, or how to represent the ethical demand of the Other, is what leads to an infinite responsibility for the Other: we always have one more responsibility to the Other. In the present case, that responsibility is to the Other represented as a spiritual other. And while the addition of a spiritual representation of the Vietnamese other does not exhaust the alterity of the Vietnamese other, it does represent the alterity of the Vietnamese other in a more nuanced and fuller manner.

2.3.2 A Joint CCT/UCT programme in Malawi

The second aid intervention to be interrogated concerns a joint CCT/UCT programme targeting adolescent girls in the Zomba district of Malawi, designed specifically to test the efficacy of conditionality to achieve certain outcomes – school enrolment, test scores, teenage pregnancy and marriage rates (Baird et al., 2011). The CCT arm of the project was made conditional on school attendance, while the UCT arm saw the cash transfer being divided between the school-age girl and her parents (\$4 to the parents, \$1 to the schoolgirl).⁴

After running the project for two years, the results showed that the CCTs were more cost-effective than UCTs in increasing school enrolment and attendance but had little effect in reducing teenage pregnancy or marriage in that cohort. However, teenage pregnancy and marriage rates were considerably lower (by 27% and 44% respectively) in the UCT arm than the CCT arm. Interestingly, these impacts in the UCT arm resulted almost entirely from those schoolgirls who had dropped out of school after the start of the intervention. The authors of the study postulate that this reduction in marriage and pregnancy rates in the UCT arm “seems consistent with the idea that adolescent girls who drop out of school undergo a rapid transition into adulthood that is also strongly influenced by economic circumstances” (Baird et al., 2011:1748). In other words, the continued income received by the UCT recipient (because the grant is not conditional upon school attendance) allows her to postpone marriage and/or pregnancy because of poverty, even as her dropping out of school would usually increase this risk. The authors report that 25% of the sexually active girls in the study had initiated their sexual relationships because they ‘wanted gifts/money’ or needed ‘his financial assistance’ and therefore that decisions regarding sexual behaviour and marriage amongst adolescent girls are influenced by poverty (ibid.). The authors (p.1740) conclude that their counter-intuitive result of reduced pregnancy and marriage rates in the UCT arm are because “the schooling channel on marriage operates through the dropouts averted by the CCT arm, while the income effect on marriage operates through those who dropped out of school [the UCT arm]” and that “the latter group is substantially larger than the former” in their study.

Discussing the generalisability of their findings, the authors contrast southern and eastern Africa with Bangladesh, where school dropout and marriage rates amongst adolescent girls are also high because of poverty. While UCTs may be better interventions – to reduce teenage pregnancy and marriage in Malawi – CCTs (tied to enrolment) may be better in Bangladesh because of dowry payments made from the bride’s family to the groom’s (2011:1748-9).⁵

Both CCT and UCT arms of the project deliver distributive justice to the beneficiaries, that is, both result in positive outcomes for the recipients. However, unlike the previous case examined, the cost-benefit outcomes are ambiguous in determining whether UCTs or CCTs are ‘better’ aid interventions. One reason for this is that the utility sought by the designers of the joint CCT/UCT programme resists aggregation – an outcome of increased school enrolment cannot be reduced to the same outcome which measures decreased teenage pregnancy and marriage. If we return to the Levinasian framework

presented in this article, the resistance to aggregation arises because the Other seeks to maintain his/her singularity when s/he needs to be made comparable with the third in order to enact justice. Likewise, an outcome of reduced teenage pregnancy rates amongst Malawian schoolgirls cannot be reduced to the same outcome which measures this same metric amongst Bangladeshi schoolgirls. Without recourse to a cost-benefit analysis which shows that CCTs deliver increased school enrolments *and* decreased teenage pregnancy rates, or that UCTs deliver decreased teenage pregnancy rates in *both* Malawi and Bangladesh, how will the designers of future UCT or CCT programmes argue their case in the context of limited funding resources? My argument is that a Levinasian evaluation of the project, understood as a matter of not losing sight of the Other's otherness, would provide the ethical tipping point in favour of a UCT.

I do so by returning to Jordaan's (2009) prescription which, to recall, questions whether the institutional and theoretical designs of the project are tolerable in terms of keeping the Levinasian otherness of the Malawian schoolgirls in sight. Although both the CCT and UCT arm of the project share specific desired outcomes – increased school enrolment and test scores, decreased teenage pregnancy and marriage rates – and thus totalise the otherness of the Malawian schoolgirls into those categories, the CCT arm suppresses the otherness of the Malawian schoolgirls further. The conditionality of school attendance represents the girls as vectors of educational outcomes only, while bracketing out their roles as contributors to the poor household economy. In the CCT arm the schoolgirl measures her contribution primarily in terms of the cash grant her school attendance ensures. The burden to ensure the continuance of the cash grant will weigh disproportionately in any decision that might result in her missing school. A sick parent could place the schoolgirl in the unenviable position of having to choose between nursing and tending her parent or going to school to secure the CCT. The CCT, as designed in the current project, while offering a ladder to climb out of poverty, offers no net to catch the schoolgirl should she fall off that ladder.

The UCT arm, on the other hand, which continues to be paid even if the schoolgirl has dropped out of school, expands the otherness of the schoolgirl by multiplying the choices open to her. Baird et al. (2011:1712) cite studies that demonstrate that “increased age at first marriage can improve the quality of marriage matches and reduce the likelihood of divorce, increase women's decision-making power in the household, reduce their chances of experiencing domestic violence, and improve health care practices amongst pregnant women”. The UCT, by lowering pregnancy rates and delaying marriage, thus increases the likelihood that the Other as happy bride, successful spouse, empowered decision maker and respected wife will be allowed representation and expression. The UCT also mitigates the “rapid transition into adulthood” dropping out of school causes (cited by Baird et al. above), allowing the Other-as-child to develop more sustainably.

Evaluating the case through a Levinasian framework thus permits an ethical evaluation which favours a UCT. Such an evaluation can be seen as one way to move forward from the ethical impasse a utilitarian cost-benefit analysis produces in the present case. A Levinasian framework would mitigate the ethical ambiguity faced by the designers of future UCT and CCT aid programmes structured similarly to the one in the present case.

4. Conclusion

This article offered a critical analysis of UCT and CCT aid programmes and sought to demonstrate how a Levinasian framework might offer normative guidelines to evaluate aid programmes which go beyond just a utilitarian cost-benefit analysis. In so doing, it hopes to contribute to the business ethics and organisational studies literature which aims at, inter alia, providing examples of how a Levinasian understanding of ethics may be brought to bear, albeit imperfectly, on real-world problems. While Levinas seeks only to find the meaning of ethics, he does so, arguably, in order to change our understanding of ethics. Apropos this, Bernasconi (2002:250) argues that “the reorientation of thinking that is Levinas’s goal [...] matters not at all unless it impacts on our approach to concrete situations so that we come to see them as ethical”. I hope to have shown that reorienting our thinking about UCT and CCT aid programmes from a Levinasian perspective will have an impact on how these aid programmes are evaluated.

In considering how the otherness of the Other is not lost sight of when designing aid programmes, a Levinasian framework might improve aid intervention practice insofar as cost-benefit (utilitarian) analyses do not always provide sufficient ethical motivation for their existence, continuation or adaptation. The limitation of this article is that it considers only UCT and CCT aid interventions. Further studies could build on the Levinasian framework developed in this article in order to supplement the (mostly utilitarian) ethical evaluations of other aid programmes.

Cullity (2004) in *The Moral Demands of Affluence* argues that one of the worst things about being poor is the absence of choices. He laments that “threats to life [seem to] exhaust what is bad about extreme poverty [...] it is arguable that threats to life are not even the worst thing about destitution: what matters more is the way it diminishes the quality, rather than merely the duration, of people’s lives” (2004:10). This article started with the adage ‘beggars can’t be choosers’. I have argued that the Other, as beggar, as poor, as elderly spiritual Vietnamese, as precocious Malawian schoolgirl, must always be allowed to choose, if we hope to ensure that the politics of aid remains ethical. A Levinasian ethics achieves this because it recognises that the Other can be a chooser, or rather, that the Other always has been a chooser.

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Endnotes

- 1 Utilitarianism can be distilled into three propositions: (1) Actions are to be judged right or wrong solely by virtue of their consequences. (2) In assessing consequences, the only criterion is the amount of happiness or unhappiness that is created. (3) Each person's happiness counts the same (Rachels, 2007:100). While such a description of utilitarianism is very simplified – it ignores the differences between act and rule utilitarianism, for example – it nonetheless suffices for the purposes of this article insofar as it captures utilitarianism's focus on outcomes and moral calculation.
- 2 In assessing the effectiveness of aid, aid agencies will typically not employ a deontological analysis. As such, this article will steer clear of interrogating Kantianism, as the chief exemplar of deontology, as a means to evaluate the wider ethical implications that follow from UCTs. Nonetheless, we might ask of an aid intervention whether it, honouring Kantianism, respects and furthers the intrinsic worth of the recipients as rational, autonomous human beings, regardless of their economic station. Although Kant and Levinas both regard human dignity as of supreme value, they approach the matter from polar ends – for Kant, dignity follows from my (rational) subjectivity, which is autonomous, whereas for Levinas, dignity follows from my subjectivity which emanates from, and is held hostage to, the other (see the section on the Levinasian other below). Ultimately, Kantianism, like utilitarianism, also, problematically, allows the ethical agent to limit their ethical responsibility towards the Other, and so falls victim to a similar critique as that offered here against utilitarianism.
- 3 In the terminology to be introduced in the following section, we can say marginal utility is a mechanism which assists in reducing the other to the self.
- 4 This reallocation of a portion of the UCT from the parent to the schoolgirl was found to have no significant impact on the desired outcomes of the project (Baird et al., 2011).
- 5 Girls between 15 and 17 years are offered cooking oil on condition that they remain unmarried until they are 18; the amount of oil being determined such that it is greater than the cost of delaying marriage, which comes in the form of increased dowry payments (Buchmann, Field, Glennerster, Nazneen, Pimkina & Sen, 2017).