

Aid and Bias

All men complain of a want of memory, but none of a lack of judgement.

La Rochefoucauld, Maxims, no. 138

1: INTRODUCTION

One of the hardest moral questions facing us today is what I shall call:

The Aid Question: How much money, if any, are individuals living in developed countries morally required to give to aid agencies?¹

I shall simply assume here that it is not immediately clear, prior to careful investigation, what the right answer to this question is. Given this assumption, it seems plausible that each of us ought to give some attention to tackling it. After all, each of us faces the choice of whether or not to give some of our money to aid agencies, and that choice is, to use William James's term, 'forced'.² We must either give some money or not; there is no neutral ground. Given this, and the epistemic possibility, prior to thorough investigation, that it just might be wrong to continue giving nothing, or a negligible amount (which, I assume, is the default option), it appears that we should think carefully about the Aid Question. We must do something, and if we do not take care, we may do wrong.

How does one set about tackling pressing, substantive questions like this one, though? That is a complex and controversial matter. One measure that looks likely to be helpful,

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however, is this. It seems like a good idea to look out for any factors that seem especially likely to bias one's thinking about the matter in hand, and take measures to counteract the influence of any such biases that are found. The warrant for this procedure will be clear: if one does not do so, then the biases in question might lead one astray.

How might one find out what biases to look out for? A variety of sources are available. Commonsense psychology informs us about quite a few of them, and we can find out more through careful observation of ourselves and others, and certain forms of literature. But today we have an additional, and especially rich and reliable source of information about such biases: experimental psychology. For over the last few decades, cognitive and social psychologists have conducted a great deal of research on such matters.³ Given the possibility of being led astray by such biases, then, it would seem to be sensible to familiarise ourselves with this research, and to take any relevant findings into account when tackling tough but pressing moral questions like the Aid Question.

All of this seems relatively uncontroversial. And yet one tends to find only passing references, at most, to such psychological research in the philosophical literature on many substantive moral questions.⁴ Why might this be? If most philosophers believed that an algorithm were available for answering such questions, then that would provide one kind of explanation. One would not need to pay attention to the psychological research, because careful application of the algorithm would guarantee immunity to the biases in question. Few contemporary philosophers, however, continue to believe that such an algorithm exists. Most tend to emphasise the variety of different kinds of morally relevant considerations, and the substantial role that judgement must play in determining answers to substantive moral questions.⁵ Indeed, even those who still advocate one or another

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moral theory in the Grand Style tend to emphasise, nowadays, how large a role such theories leave for judgement.⁶ But where the issues are complex, and judgement is needed, there is plenty of room for the operation of the biases. And when that is so, it seems sensible to consider what biases may be operative, and what means we may have to counteract their influence, particularly when the issue is a pressing one.⁷

In any case, that is the kind of exercise that I pursue here, in relation to the Aid Question in particular. I begin, in the next section, by sketching a number of biases that seem particularly likely to affect our thinking about that question. I then go on, in §3, to review the psychological research on ‘debiasing’ – that is, on attempts to counteract the influence of such biases. In §4, I discuss and illustrate a number of strategies for counteracting the influence of the biases sketched in §2, again with particular reference to the Aid Question. And I finish, in §5, with a brief review.

At the risk of labouring the obvious, let me emphasise the fact that I will not have space here even to mention, let alone to discuss, many of the pressing issues that the research I discuss raises. Much more needs to be said, for example, about each of the biases I have sketched (and many other such biases); about the measures that one might take in an effort to counteract their influence; about how to integrate any such measures into a broader moral methodology; and so on. All I can offer here, then, is a brief initial tour through the area.

Modest though this exercise is, there are strong reasons to undertake it. For one thing, doing so may help to prompt others to take up some of the issues which I do not have space to discuss. For another, the exercise in question – or some descendant of it – may actually prove useful to agents in the real world. I argued above that each of us has a

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pressing, practical reason to consider the Aid Question. If there are indeed biases that are likely to distort our thinking about that question, then conscientious agents will want to know what those biases are, and how one might seek to counteract their influence. As things stand at the moment, however, there is little to guide such agents, short of trawling through all of the psychological research, and considering what relevance it may have to how one should think about the Aid Question, for themselves.⁸ What would be helpful, then, is a reasonably concise methodological guide for those facing the Aid Question, warning them about some of the biases to look out for, and suggesting some techniques for counteracting the influence of such biases. This paper might be seen, *inter alia*, as an attempt at a first draft of such a guide.

Before launching in, however, there are one or two more introductory remarks that I should make. First, let me state clearly certain of the claims that I will simply assume here, rather than argue for. I have already said that I will assume that the Aid Question is at least pressing enough to warrant careful investigation. Another assumption I make is that one does indeed need to rely on one's judgement when tackling complex substantive questions like this one. No algorithm is available. And a third is that the psychological research which I draw on is in good order.⁹

Finally, I had better say something about Peter Unger's work. As some readers will be aware, the approach taken by Unger in *Living High and Letting Die*¹⁰ is similar in certain ways to the one I take here. He too focuses on the Aid Question; he too identifies a number of factors which, he claims, distort our thinking about that question; and he too suggests a number of ways in which we can counteract their influence. I shall not discuss

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Unger's work in detail here, but I shall briefly note three important differences between his approach and mine.

First, Unger's book is concerned with both methodological and substantive matters. He argues for a particular answer to the Aid Question. My aims here, by contrast, are purely methodological. I do not discuss any of the various substantive issues that question raises; even less, do I argue for any particular answer to the Aid Question. Indeed, everything I say here is neutral on all such substantive issues.¹¹

Second, in Unger's work, the suspicion that our thinking about the Aid Question is affected by certain biases is prompted by the claim that we are already tacitly committed to certain substantive, and demanding, views about what morality requires.¹² It is because our intuitive reactions to certain cases (such as the real life case which the Aid Question concerns) fail to square with these substantive views that Unger is led to suppose that those reactions are influenced by such biases. The approach that I discuss here, by contrast, is not based on, and does not presuppose, any such substantive claims. It is based, rather, simply on the psychological evidence that our judgement tends to be biased on a number of specific ways.

And third, while all the biases I discuss have been the subject of rigorous psychological testing, Unger's claims that we are affected by the kinds of factors he discusses are based on informal experiments with his students. Given this, Unger's claims and the claims that I discuss here have quite a different status. It may be reasonable for agents to ignore the potential methodological implications of psychological claims that have not been rigorously tested.¹³ But it is not reasonable to do so in the case of claims that have been

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so tested. The kind of approach that I suggest here, then, appears to be one that any minimally conscientious agent ought to take.

2: FOUR BIASES

In this section, then, I briefly discuss four biases that seem particularly likely to distort our thinking about the Aid Question. Given space limitations, I can of course do little more than give a very quick sketch of each. Much more information – including various important qualifications, nuances, and disagreements – can be found in the books and papers which I cite.¹⁴ Equally obviously, I do not claim that the biases which I discuss here are the only ones which are likely to distort our thinking about the Aid Question. But they will give us enough to worry about for now.

The first of these biases is belief perseverance, the tendency to maintain antecedently held beliefs well beyond any normatively justifiable principle of epistemic conservatism.¹⁵ We tend, for example, to seek out information that is likely to confirm our prior beliefs and to neglect potentially disconfirming evidence; to apply asymmetrical critical standards to supporting and opposing evidence; to interpret ambiguous evidence in ways that support our prior beliefs; to recall evidence that support our beliefs more easily than opposing evidence; and even to manufacture additional ‘evidence’ for beliefs we have come to hold. So strong is this last tendency that we sometimes cling hard to our beliefs even after the evidence that initially led us to form those beliefs has been completely discredited.¹⁶ The potential relevance of this to the Aid Question, where most

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of us, given the culture we have grown up in, are likely to start with the presumption that it is all right not to give any money to aid agencies, will be obvious.

Another bias that is likely to affect our thinking about the Aid Question (epistemic) conformity, the tendency for our own beliefs to be unduly influenced by what we take others to believe.¹⁷ This bias is a relatively familiar one, but the psychological research shows that it may be much more powerful than we tend to suppose, particularly in contexts in which it is difficult to determine what the right thing to do or think is – a condition that is obviously met in relation to the Aid Question.¹⁸ Empirical research on ‘bystander apathy’, for example, appears to show that the failure of other people to go forward to help, in emergency situations, makes individuals doubt their own assessment of the situation, as one requiring intervention.¹⁹ The potential relevance of this to our thinking about the Aid Question will, again, be obvious.

The third bias which I shall mention is the vivid/pallid dimension, the tendency to be much more influenced by vivid, concrete data than by the same data, or even much more probative data, presented in a pallid or abstract way.²⁰ In part, this tendency appears to be due to the fact that vivid information is more likely to be remembered and hence to be disproportionately ‘available’ for future reasoning, but such effects have also been found without a time lag.

We can expect the vivid/pallid dimension to affect our thinking about the Aid Question in a variety of ways. Data we receive about the plight of the distant needy is likely, in general, to be relatively pallid, whereas information about the kind of impact that giving substantially may make on our own lives and those of our loved ones is likely to be highly vivid. This may lead us to underestimate the normative significance of the kinds of

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conditions faced by the distant needy, and to overestimate the normative significance of the consequences of giving for our own lives.

A different way in which the vivid/pallid dimension may distort our thinking about the Aid Question is when we consider how effective aid agencies are at realising their aims. News media often concentrate on striking cases in which such work goes wrong, and vivid, concrete presentation of such cases may affect our assessment of the effectiveness of such agencies much more than more probative, but less vivid, data (if we even go to the trouble of seeking out such data).²¹

The last bias I shall mention here is perhaps the most familiar of all: wishful thinking, the tendency to be differentially inclined to come to believe what we want to be true.²² If we do come to believe that we should give substantially to aid agencies, we will be faced with a stark choice: either to do so, which may involve a considerable amount of sacrifice; or not to do so, which may threaten our moral identity, our self-conception as at least minimally decent people. Neither alternative is likely to be very appealing, and so we are likely to want it to be the case that we are not required to give anything.

Wishful thinking is a very familiar bias, and there is a huge amount of evidence in the psychological literature for our bias in favour of desired conclusions,²³ though there is still considerable disagreement about exactly how it works.²⁴ Certain tendencies, however, are evident. Information consistent with a desired conclusion, for example, tends to be assessed less critically than information inconsistent with such a conclusion. If we find evidence supporting a desired conclusion, moreover, we are apt to rush to embrace that conclusion, while evidence supporting a conflicting conclusion is treated much more circumspectly. In addition, if one argument fails to yield the desired

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conclusion, we are apt to try again by using a different argument, and then another if that argument too fails to ‘work’, and so on.²⁵ And once again, it is easy to see how this kind of process might function in relation to the Aid Question in particular. Indeed, given the range and complexity of the issues, both normative and empirical, which that question raises, there are virtually unlimited resources from which one might construct new arguments against the conclusion that we are required to give.

Although I have listed these biases separately, it is important to realise that they are likely mutually to reinforce each other. Wishful thinking, in particular, appears to trade on the mechanisms underlying other biases.²⁶ And it will easily be imagined, conversely, how those other biases may be stronger when a desired conclusion is at stake. But even leaving wishful thinking aside, one can see how the biases might stack up in a case like that of the Aid Question. The fact that any data that one has about the kinds of conditions the global poor face is likely to be pallid may lead one to underestimate the strength of any reasons one may have to give to aid agencies – or indeed of any reasons one may have even to think seriously about the Aid Question. If, despite this, one does come to take seriously the possibility that one may be required to give, the mechanisms subserving belief perseverance might prejudice one against this conclusion. They might lead one, for example, to seek out evidence that would defeat this conclusion, and to neglect supporting evidence. And if, despite even this, one does come to think that this conclusion is correct, the pressures of conformity may then kick in. Such pressures may lead one to check again, and perhaps to revise one’s verdict, or at least the degree of confidence with which one holds it. And so on.

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The fact that we are subject to such biases, and that they seem likely to distort our thinking about the Aid Question in particular, does not in itself support any conclusion about that question, of course.²⁷ But those facts do give us strong reasons to consider what we can do to counteract the influence of such biases – assuming as always that we have strong reasons to try to find out what the right answer to the Aid Question is, and that there is no algorithm for doing so. It is to this matter that I now turn.

3: DEBIASING

A number of ‘debiasing’ strategies – strategies aimed at counteracting the influence of one or other of the biases – have been tested by psychologists. The results have been extremely mixed.²⁸ For a number of reasons, it is often difficult even to convince people that they are subject to such biases. For one thing, the psychological findings in question conflict with common lay beliefs about how the mind works. And the mechanisms subserving belief perseverance lead us to bolster these prior beliefs themselves, and to play down the conflicting scientific evidence. This is one example of a general problem with debiasing: the same kinds of biases that distort our thinking in general also distort our thinking about the biases themselves.

In addition, the psychological data is likely to conflict with the introspective evidence that we take ourselves to have about how we reason. Unfortunately, this introspective evidence can itself be misleading, or even wholly confabulated. Much of our thinking occurs at a level below conscious awareness: we are aware of the results of our thinking, but not of how we got there.²⁹ Features of our thinking that we are aware of are likely to

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be highly salient to us, but may not be the most causally influential ones. And sometimes, when asked how we got to a certain verdict, we construct post hoc, 'respectable' rationalisations in accordance with our general beliefs about how the mind works, and then suppose that we have observed such processes in our own case.³⁰ Subjects in the psychological experiments on which the findings discussed in the last section were based were often asked, in post-experimental interviews, whether they thought that the factors which the experiments showed influenced their thinking did so. Such suggestions were routinely rejected – often, as Nisbett and Ross say, 'with a tone of annoyance or concern for the experimenter's sanity'.³¹

Furthermore, we tend to have an exaggerated degree of confidence in our own judgement.³² And consequently, even if we acknowledge the influence of the biases in general, we still tend to think that we are an exception to the general rule. We think that our beliefs about our own good judgement are supported by our experience, and ignore the fact that such beliefs are likely to be based on such factors as biased samples, biased retrospection, and the influence of wishful thinking.³³ One of the most striking manifestations of this kind of overconfidence in our own judgement is in cases in which there clearly is a right and wrong verdict, the matter at hand is a very important one, and there are procedures available which have been shown to be more likely to yield the right verdict than reliance on judgement. Even in such cases, people still tend to persist on relying on their own judgement rather than following the procedure.³⁴

For all of these reasons, we may underestimate the influence the biases have on our thinking, both in general, and about the Aid Question specifically. The first step, itself a very hard one to take, is a humble acknowledgment that we are likely to be influenced by

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these biases. But even if we take this step, further problems lie ahead. For one thing, it may be unclear what counteractive measures are likely to be successful. This problem is likely to be less acute in the case of those biases which, as Wilson and Brekke put it in a review of the debiasing literature, 'result from the failure to know or apply an explicit rule of inference'.³⁵ In such cases, one can counteract the relevant bias, in principle at least, simply by learning the rule and when to apply it. And this is borne out in the literature on debiasing, where there has been at least some success in counteracting the effects of biases of this kind.³⁶

Many biases, however, do not simply result from the failure to know or apply an explicit rule of inference. Examples Wilson and Brekke give of such biases include automatic categorisation of social phenomena (which reinforces prejudice and stereotyping), and halo effects (which lead teachers to give higher marks to students they like).³⁷ It is harder to know what counteractive measures might be successful against biases of this kind. 'Don't let your liking or disliking of student x affect your grading of her paper' is not a rule that can be applied in the way that, say, the law of large numbers can be. Indeed, Wilson and Brekke gloomily report that, in the case of certain of these biases, there is simply 'no known strategy that people can adopt . . . to control their responses to the unwanted influence'.³⁸

Unfortunately, the biases that I sketched in the last section fall into the hard category. They do not result from the failure to know or apply explicit rules, and so one cannot counteract them simply by applying such rules. What, then, is one to do?

4: COUNTERACTIVE MEASURES

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Once again, this is a large subject. The first thing I should say about it is that many of the debiasing strategies that have been shown to work, at least to some degree and in certain contexts, are both rather obvious, given the nature of the biases in question, and also part of standard philosophical practice. Thus to list just a few examples, it turns out often to be helpful, unsurprisingly, to generate counter-arguments against beliefs which may be supported by biased thinking;³⁹ to articulate reasons for opposing beliefs;⁴⁰ and to express what leads one to hold such beliefs in question explicitly, rather than letting it remain ‘in the head’.⁴¹

The second point to underline is that there is, as always, much more to say about the kinds of debiasing strategies that might be employed than I can attempt even to summarise to here. Once again, I hope that what I do write will lead others to look at the works that I have cited for more details and ideas. I do, however, have space to sketch and illustrate three kinds of strategies that might be employed.⁴²

The first is as follows. Given that the biases that I sketched in §2 operate by priming unconscious mechanisms that influence our thinking in certain directions, one can attempt to counteract these pressures by taking measures aimed at priming countervailing mechanisms. In other words, one can attempt to counteract the biases by taking steps to elicit thought processes that work in the contrary direction to the particular bias in question.

Some measures falling into this category will be very familiar, particularly in the case of well-known biases like wishful thinking. One of the most commonplace techniques of moral reasoning is that of exchanging places in imagination with those whom one’s

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actions affect. One reason why this technique can be such a powerful one may be that it leads us to prime thought processes contrasting with those that are primed when one thinks about the issue from one's own perspective. Different considerations become salient, different arguments seem compelling. In the case of the Aid Question, in particular, one can ask how this or that justification for not giving would strike someone who will die unless help is forthcoming. One may find that the justification in question looks pretty thin from that perspective.

If prosecuted diligently, then – a passing thought is unlikely to be of much use – this familiar technique may have considerable power. Of course, the other's perspective may be as biased as one's own. And so taking this measure hardly constitutes a sure path to moral truth. But at least one will have set up a bias that works in the contrary direction to the bias that one tends to have when one looks at the issue from one's own perspective. This may alert one to considerations that one had formerly neglected, or lead one to reconsider the force of considerations that one had formerly played down.⁴³

Similarly, one obvious technique for counteracting belief perseverance is to make an industrious attempt to make the case for one or another claim that contrasts with what formerly seemed to one to be correct. Clearly, for such an exercise to be useful in counteracting belief perseverance, one will need to take care in selecting both the contrasting claim, and the case for that claim, in question. If the contrasting claim is barely believable, or the case for that claim is full of holes, then the exercise is likely to be of little use. One should try to find the strongest case one can for a claim that cannot, at least, be immediately ruled out.⁴⁴

Other measures that would fall under the first strategy may, however, be less familiar,

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at least in the philosophical literature. If one's data about the plight of the distant needy are pallid, for example, one can take steps to find more vivid data. One can, for example, seek out detailed, reliable accounts of the kinds of conditions under which many of them live. One can focus on certain concrete cases. And when one comes to weigh the strength of the reason to help them against, say, the impact that doing so would have on one's interests, one can keep such vivid accounts in mind.⁴⁵

There are, then, a variety of ways in which one can pursue the first strategy; the strategy, that is, of eliciting thought processes that work in the contrary direction to the various biases in question. Now let me turn to a second strategy. This consists of two stages. One begins by taking a step back and surveying one's own thinking about the relevant issue (in this case, the Aid Question) with a critical eye, searching for symptoms of the biases. If one finds such symptoms, one then re-examines the substantive issues related to them in a more critical spirit, taking account of the possibility that one's thinking about them so far may have been affected by bias. Of course, the discovery of such symptoms doesn't guarantee that one's thinking has in fact been affected in this way. Such symptoms may have a perfectly innocent explanation. Given the strength and pervasiveness of the biases, however, it seems wise in such circumstances to take account of the possibility of such influence, and to respond accordingly, at least when the issue in question is an important one.

Unfortunately, it is harder to write about this second strategy in a general way. One reason for this is simply that, given that it is one's own thinking that one will be casting a critical eye over, much will depend on the individual case: how much attention one has already given to that question, the kind of attention one has given, the considerations that

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have struck one as being the most salient ones, and so on. And second, given that one will be looking for symptoms of particular biases, pursuing this response adequately will require more detailed information about how those biases operate than I had space to give in §2. But I can at least illustrate one or two ways in which such reflection might go.

Take, then, the case of an agent who acknowledges the strong reason-giving force of the needs of the global poor, but who has a resilient intuition, nonetheless, that it is morally permissible not to do anything to help them. She has considered a number of considerations that might support that intuition, and while none seem to her decisive, one or more of them seems at least significant enough to lead her to withhold judgement. An awareness of the biases might raise her suspicions. She might ask, for example, whether the weight she was previously inclined to give such considerations was due, in part, to a prior intuition that the claim that we should give substantially just can't be right. There must be some mistake somewhere – it's just a matter of finding it. On considering the points made in the previous sections of this paper, however, she might come to suspect that the resilience of that intuition was due, in some measure, to the unacknowledged influence of, say, belief perseverance, or conformity. And if she suspects this, then she might in turn suspect that the weight she is inclined to give those countervailing considerations is due, in part, to the fact they could stand in as apparently reasonable grounds for that intuition, rather than to their real force as reasons. And this might, in turn, prompt a re-examination of those considerations, conducted in a more critical spirit.

Or take the case of an agent who, on some occasion, happens to be vividly presented with certain of the kinds of horror that the global poor face. This experience, let us suppose, leads to a change in her perception of the situation. It comes to seem to her a

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much more urgent matter that such people are aided. As a consequence, considerations which she formerly took to count strongly against the claim that we are required to give to aid agencies now look much weaker. With the passage of time, however, the sense of urgency slips away, and she gradually reverts to her former intuitions about the situation. She comes to think that she must have got ‘rather carried away’ in her initial response to the vivid data in question. Awareness of the vivid/pallid dimension might lead her to think (yet) again. Perhaps her present coolness stems not from the return of a sense of proportion, but from the fact that, given the lack of vivid data, she underestimates the normative significance of the kinds of conditions which the global poor face. Perhaps, her initial response was, after all, an appropriate response to a momentary true perception of that significance. This possibility may lead her to seek out vivid information about the kinds of conditions that the global poor face again, in an effort to ensure that she is not underestimating the normative significance of those conditions.

Or, to take one more case, an agent may find, on surveying her own thinking about the Aid Question in a critical spirit, that she has apparently arbitrarily truncated her enquiry at a certain point. Perhaps she has stopped at the thought that it is the responsibility of governmental or international agencies to tackle world poverty, without going on to ask what individuals are required to do if such agencies are not fulfilling their obligations. Or perhaps she has been content to rule out the claim that we are required to give nearly all of our money to aid agencies, without considering more moderate claims. Or perhaps she is apt to dismiss the claim that we are required to give on the basis of rumours about aid agencies misusing the money they are given, but has not got round to looking for reliable data on this matter. Reviewing her thinking in a critical spirit, she may come to suspect

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that cutting off her enquiry at such points is due, in part, to the influence of wishful thinking. And this may lead her to think more carefully about the issues she had previously neglected. Once again, this further enquiry may be of an ordinary kind, but once again it would be prompted by taking into account the likelihood that one of the biases has influenced her thinking thus far, and of the ways in which it might have done so.

In all of these cases, it is of course an open question what conclusions the kinds of further investigation I have suggested might lead to. The agents in question may find that their initial suspicions were right all along. As always, I remain neutral on all of the substantive issues here. My point here is just that an acknowledgment of the biases, and of how they tend to operate, may help both to support the claim that one should think again, and to direct one to the certain of the particular considerations that may need to be re-examined.

The first two strategies which I have sketched are based on the hope that, by redirecting one's thinking in certain ways, one may be able to correct any distortion caused by the biases. The third strategy which I will briefly discuss here, recalibration, gives up on this hope, and is therefore something of a last resort. Instead of trying to redirect one's thinking in ways that may counteract the influence of the biases, one simply opts for a conclusion which takes account of that influence. One says to oneself, 'I find myself inclined to believe x, but I know that this is likely to be due to the influence of one or more of the biases. Taking this influence into account, y is more plausible'.

Consider again the case of the teacher who is marking an essay by a student whom she dislikes. One may hope that there are measures that she can take to avoid her dislike of

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the student affecting her assessment of the essay. But she may reasonably suspect that such measures may not be entirely successful, or she may simply be disinclined to take them. In that case, she can simply give the essay a higher mark than she is inclined to think it deserves. Similarly, in connection with the Aid Question, if one either doubts that one can effectively counteract the biases, or is simply disinclined to make an industrious effort to do so, one can recalibrate. One can say, for example, 'I'm inclined to think that it is perfectly all right to give nothing. But, for a number of reasons, I probably underestimate the reason-giving force of their needs. So it seems more plausible, all things considered, that I am required to give something to aid agencies.'⁴⁶

Recalibration is likely to be a hit and miss affair. One might either underestimate or overestimate the likely effects of the biases, and consequently recalibrate either too much or too little accordingly.⁴⁷ In the case of the antipathetic student, this would be highly problematic. In such cases, it is important to hit the nail on the head. In the case of the Aid Question, by contrast, it may not be quite so important to do so. This is because it is unlikely to be disastrous if one ends up giving a little more than one is in fact morally required to give. Doing so is likely, at worst, to be supererogatory.⁴⁸ And it seems better to risk erring on the side of the supererogatory, rather than to risk doing wrong, in such cases.⁴⁹

Recalibration, then, is hardly an exact science. But neither are the first and second strategies that I have sketched. In each case, it will be extraordinarily hard for an agent to get the balance right. Doing so will call upon the exercise of the same kinds of qualities – imagination, flexibility, insight, clarity, and so on – as does thinking through the various substantive issues that the Aid Question raises. Success is hardly guaranteed, but given

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the importance of the Aid Question, the lack of an algorithm for solving it, and the strength and pervasiveness of the biases, it seems at least that we should make the attempt.

5: REVIEW

In §1, I suggested that psychological research on biases may have important implications for moral methodology. It seems likely that these biases affect our thinking about moral issues, and a fuller awareness of them might help us to find ways to counteract their influence, and so to improve our moral thinking. And yet, I pointed out, there is little or no reference either to these biases, or to the relevant psychological research, in the philosophical literature on many pressing moral questions.

In this paper, I made a start on repairing this omission in relation to one such question, the Aid Question. In §2, I sketched a number of biases that seem particularly likely to affect our thinking about that question. In §3, I reviewed the psychological research on ‘debiasing’. And in §4, I discussed and illustrated certain strategies for counteracting the influence of the biases sketched in §2 on our thinking about the Aid Question.

As I have repeatedly emphasised, the research discussed in this paper raises many issues which I have not had space to address here. I hope that what I have said is enough, nevertheless, both to help to stimulate others to tackle such issues, and to provide some food for thought for those facing the Aid Question.

Notes

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¹ By ‘aid agencies’ I mean those non-governmental organisations, such as Oxfam, Medecins Sans Frontieres, and CARE, which are working to improve the conditions faced by people living in extreme poverty in developing countries.

² William James, ‘The Will to Believe’, in his The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy (Harvard University Press, 1979 [1910]), pp. 14-15.

³ Accessible general introductions to the kind of research that I have in mind include R. E. Nisbett and L. D. Ross, Human Inference: Strategies and Shortcomings of Social Judgement (Prentice-Hall, 1980); Robyn M. Dawes, Rational Choice in an Uncertain World (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988); Thomas Gilovich, How we Know what isn't so: The Fallibility of Human Reasoning in Everyday Life (New York: Free Press, 1991); and Jonathan Baron, Thinking and Deciding (Cambridge University Press, 1995).

⁴ There has been a little more work at a more theoretical level about the bearing such research might have on wider issues of relevance to ethics. To cite just one example here, a number of philosophers have discussed the bearing that psychological research on the relative importance of character traits and situational factors in explaining human behaviour may have on moral theory. See, for example, J. M. Doris, ‘Persons, Situations, and Virtue Ethics’, Nous 32 (1998), pp. 504-30; and Gilbert Harman, ‘Moral Theory Meets Social Psychology’, Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society 99 (1999), pp. 315-31.

⁵ For discussion of these issues, see, for example, John McDowell, ‘Non-Cognitivism and Rule-Following’, in S. Holtzman and C. Leich (eds), Wittgenstein: To Follow a Rule (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981); Charles Larmore, Patterns of Moral Complexity (Cambridge University Press, 1987), ch. 4; and Harold I. Brown, Rationality (Routledge, 1988), ch. 4.

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⁶ In the case of Kantianism, see, for example, Onora O’Neill, Constructions of Reason (Cambridge University Press, 1989), ch. 9, and Barbara Herman, The Practice of Moral Judgement (Harvard University Press, 1993), ch. 4. In the case of contractualism, see Thomas Scanlon, What We Owe to Each Other (Harvard University Press, 1999), esp. pp. 241-47.

⁷ A number of more banal explanations for the lack of attention that philosophers dealing with substantive moral issues have tended to give to such research also present themselves, of course: lack of familiarity with the research in question; simple preoccupation with other matters; worries about drawing on research in a field in which one lacks expertise; the sheer messiness and indeterminacy of the subject matter; and so on. None of these explanations, however, appears to offer even a potentially good reason for the neglect in question, and so I will not discuss them further here.

⁸ It is, in fact, not uncommon for those philosophers who discuss the Aid Question to suggest that our thinking about that question is likely to be biased in one or another way. But such philosophers tend to offer little or nothing in the way either of empirical support for such claims, or of suggestions as to how one might try to counteract the influence of the biases in question.

⁹ Much of the work I cite comes out of the ‘heuristics and biases’ research program in cognitive psychology associated, above all, with the work of Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman and their associates (see the references in note 3 above). The main challenge to this whole program comes from the work of Gerd Gigerenzer and his colleagues (see, for example, Gerd Gigerenzer et al., Simple Heuristics that Make us Smart (Oxford University Press, 1999), and Gerd Gigerenzer, Adaptive Thinking: Rationality in the Real World (Oxford University Press, 2000)). I do not have space to discuss the challenge in question in detail here. A major part of it appears to consist mainly in emphasising how very useful the ‘heuristics’ that we tend to use generally are, in the everyday contexts in which we normally use them. But this point is, of course, consistent with the claim that such ‘heuristics’ sometimes lead us astray, and, in particular, with the claim that when we have time to reflect, and the question at hand is an important one, it is sensible to take account of the possibility that this may happen. And those claims are sufficient to warrant the kind of approach I take here.

¹⁰ Peter Unger, Living High and Letting Die (Oxford University Press, 1996).

¹¹ I do, however, tackle those substantive issues in Should We Give to Aid Agencies? (Edinburgh

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University Press, forthcoming).

¹² See Living High, esp. p. 12.

¹³ In fact, this will depend on how strong any independent grounds for the claims in question are. In this respect, Unger's psychological claims seem to me to be quite a mixed bag, but in any case I shall not discuss them here.

¹⁴ Space limitations have also forced me to leave out detailed examples of the relevant experiments and references to the primary literature. Such examples and references can, again, be found in all of the pieces I cite.

¹⁵ See, for example, Nisbett and Ross, ch. 8; Baron, ch. 15; and Y. Trope and N. Liberman, 'Social Hypothesis Testing: Cognitive and Motivational Mechanisms', in E. T. Higgins and A. W. Kruglanski, (eds) Social Psychology: Handbook of Basic Principles (New York: Guilford, 1996). Just how epistemically conservative it is normatively appropriate to be is, of course, a matter of dispute. There are tricky issues concerning which epistemic procedures it makes sense to employ in practice, given limitations of time, processing capacity, and so on. A degree of conservatism that would otherwise seem excessive might, given such constraints, be a sensible general strategy (see, for example, Gilbert Harman, Change in View: Principles of Reasoning (MIT Press, 1986), ch. 4). But the experimental data appears to show that, at least in certain circumstances, we are conservative to a degree that exceeds any plausible criterion. And again, when we have time to reflect, and the question is an important one, it seems wise to take a step back and ask whether a tendency that generally serves us well might mislead us in this instance. And both of these conditions are met, of course, in relation to the Aid Question.

¹⁶ On this last point in particular, see, for example, Baron, pp. 285-86.

¹⁷ See, for example, E. Aronson, The Social Animal (W. H. Freedman and Co., 1976), ch.3; and Robert B. Cialdini and Melanie R. Trost, 'Social Influence: Social Norms, Conformity, and Compliance', in Daniel T. Gilbert et al., The Handbook of Social Psychology, Vol. II, 4th Edn. (Mcgraw-Hill, 1998).

¹⁸ On this point in particular, see D. A. Schroeder et al., The Psychology of Helping and Altruism (Mcgraw-Hill, 1995), pp. 31-39.

¹⁹ See B. Latane and J. M. Darley, The Unresponsive Bystander: Why doesn't he Help? (Meredith Corporation, 1970), esp. pp. 88-89.

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²⁰ See, for example, Nisbett and Ross, ch. 3. Shelley Kagan discusses the vivid/pallid dimension in relation to the Aid Question in The Limits of Morality (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), ch. 8. But he focuses on the motivational effects of that dimension, rather than its effects on individuals' assessments of the strength of the reasons they have. It is the latter which is my concern here.

²¹ Nisbett and Ross point out how 'people often engage in a kind of ritualistic offering of the anecdote or case history in order to contradict the implications of abstract information or statistical reasoning' (Nisbett and Ross, p. 61). Robert Cassen makes this point about aid effectiveness in particular in Robert Cassen, Does Aid Work? Report to an Intergovernmental Task Force, 2nd Edn. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), at p. 224.

²² For reviews of the psychological research on wishful thinking – or, more generally, on 'motivated believing' – see, for example, in Trope and Liberman, and A. W. Kruglanski, 'Motivated Social Cognition', in Higgins and Kruglanski.

²³ See, for example, Trope and Liberman, p. 258, for a list of examples with references to the primary literature.

²⁴ For discussion of some of the different theories, see, for example, Trope and Liberman, and Dion Scott-Kakures, 'Motivated Believing: Wishful and Unwelcome', Nous 34 (2000), pp. 348-75.

²⁵ Again, the research on 'bystander apathy' is relevant here. Schroeder and his colleagues write, 'it is as if the bystander initially recognizes the need for assistance, becomes hesitant because of the costs for helping, and then searches for a reasonably justifiable excuse for not helping' (Schroeder et al., pp. 54-55).

²⁶ Indeed, one of the major theories of wishful thinking understands it as functioning wholly or largely through priming other, non-motivational, biasing mechanisms, such as those underlying belief perseverance. For expositions of this theory, see, for example, A. Mele, Irrationality (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 144ff, and Ziva Kunda, 'The Case for Motivated Reasoning', Psychological Bulletin 108 (1990), pp. 480-98. For further discussion, see the references cited in notes 22-24 above.

²⁷ It should also be said that certain biases may distort one's thinking in favour of the view that we are required to give to aid agencies, rather than against it. Desiring strongly that the needy be helped, for example, might bias one in favour of the view that aid agencies tend to be effective. A fuller account would consider further possibilities of this kind. But I have chosen, given limited space, to focus on ways in which

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our thinking may be biased against the view that we should give substantially, because it seems likely that this direction of bias is likely in general to be much stronger.

²⁸ See, for example, B. Fischhoff, 'Debiasing', in Daniel Kahneman et al. (eds), Judgement under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases (Cambridge University Press, 1982); H. R. Arkes, 'Costs and Benefits of Judgement Errors: Implications for Debiasing', Psychological Bulletin 110 (1991), pp. 486-98; and Timothy D. Wilson and Nancy Brekke, 'Mental Contamination and Mental Correction: Unwanted Influences on Judgements and Evaluations', Psychological Bulletin 116 (1994), pp. 117-42.

²⁹ On these issues, see, for example, J. A. Bargh, 'Conditional Automaticity: Varieties of Automatic Influence in Social Perception and Cognition', in J. S. Uleman and J. A. Bargh (eds), Unintended Thought (New York: Guilford Press, 1989).

³⁰ See, for example, Nisbett and Ross, ch. 9.

³¹ Nisbett and Ross, p. 207. Similarly, Latane and Darley write as follows about interviews following experiments which showed that the tendency of people to come to the aid of others in emergency situations is deeply affected by whether other people are present: 'During each of the postexperimental interviews, we asked our subjects whether they thought they had been influenced by the presence of other people. We asked this question every way we knew how: subtly, directly, tactfully, bluntly. Always we got the same answer. Subjects persistently claimed that their behaviour was not influenced by the other people present' (Latané and Darley, p. 124).

³² Moreover, we tend to be particularly overconfident about questions – like the Aid Question – which are very difficult. See Daniel Griffin and Amos Tversky, 'The Weighing up of Evidence and the Determinants of Confidence', Cognitive Psychology 24 (1992), pp. 411-35.

³³ See, for example, Dawes, pp. 110-20.

³⁴ Examples include medical cases and selecting criminals for parole. See, again, Dawes, esp. p. 270.

³⁵ Wilson and Brekke, p. 118.

³⁶ Wilson and Brekke, pp. 118-19.

³⁷ Wilson and Brekke, 119, 142. The distinction Wilson and Brekke actually make is between those biases which result 'from the failure to know or apply an explicit rule of inference . . . and those that result from mental contamination (cases whereby a judgement, emotion, or behaviour is biased by unconscious or

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uncontrollable mental processes)' (ibid.). But this does not seem to me the best way to carve up the relevant space. For one thing, the distinction Wilson and Brekke make is not exclusive. (One might fail to apply an explicit rule of inference that one knows because of the influence, for example, of unconscious processes.) For another, it seems very important to distinguish between unconscious processes (which might be controllable), on the one hand, and uncontrollable ones, on the other. But none of this affects the point that I am making here: that it tends to be particularly hard to know how to counteract the influence of those biases that do not result from failure to know or apply rules.

³⁸ Wilson and Brekke, p. 133.

³⁹ See Wilson and Brekke, p. 133.

⁴⁰ See C. G. Lord et al., 'Considering the Opposite: A Corrective Strategy for Social Judgement', Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 47 (1984), pp. 1231-43.

⁴¹ See Fischhoff, p. 427.

⁴² Once again, let me emphasise that I see these strategies as a supplement to other methods of moral reasoning, rather than as a complete moral methodology in themselves. And I shall say nothing here about these other methods of moral reasoning, or about how the kinds of strategies I discuss might be integrated with them.

⁴³ This exercise (of taking up the other's point of view) may of course be used to serve a number of other functions in moral thinking, apart from the one that I focus on here – that is, as a counteractive measure against wishful thinking. But I will not discuss those other functions here.

⁴⁴ It seems to me somewhat unfortunate in this context that so much of the philosophical debate about the Aid Question has been oriented around the extreme claim that each of us should give nearly all of our money to such agencies. (Arguments for this claim are at least suggested in Peter Singer, 'Famine, Affluence, and Morality', Philosophy and Public Affairs 1 (1972), pp. 229-43, and in Unger.) It is relatively easy to find strong reasons to doubt this claim, and the exercise of doing so can distract one from the task of assessing more moderate claims. And indeed this is what has tended to happen in the philosophical debate, with more attention being given to attacking that extreme claim, or arguments for that claim, than to assessing more moderate claims.

⁴⁵ For more on both the importance, and the difficulty, of this type of measure, see Jamie Mayerfield,

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Suffering and Moral Responsibility (Oxford University Press, 1999), esp. pp. 101-10.

⁴⁶ One might also recalibrate one's opinion about the normative significance of certain considerations that are relevant to the Aid Question, rather than one's answer to that question itself. One may, for example, suspect that one tends to underestimate the normative significance of the kinds of conditions that the distant needy face, and so 'mark up' that significance when thinking about the Aid Question.

⁴⁷ See Wilson and Brekke, pp. 131-33, for discussion of such problems.

⁴⁸ Or at least, doing so is likely at worst to be supererogatory unless one is in fact required to give a great deal.

⁴⁹ There might of course be independent reasons why one should (at least other things equal) prefer to err on the side of the supererogatory in cases like that of the Aid Question. If so, then any such reasons would be further reinforced by the point I am making here.