

“Missing the Adventure” in International Development

Pradeep A. Dhillon

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

In a much noted response to Martha Nussbaum’s argument for educating ourselves toward becoming people on whom nothing is lost in this world of bewildering moral complexities, Cora Diamond remarks that in her effort “really to see and really to represent” Nussbaum misses — what she, Diamond, calls — the “moral adventure” of those Nussbaum turns to with moral attention.¹ For Diamond, this oversight marks an absence of the recognition of the role of freedom of others in ethics. Ethics for Diamond is an encounter that is transindividual and can occur in the form of gross action, through verbal exchange, to the most subtle of communicative signs and gestures. What is at stake is the freedom we have to engage with others as free others in any moral encounter. As Diamond explains, “It is part of the concept of being a human being that an immense amount of what being human is for us can be present in a look that passes between two people; it is part of the concept that all can be equally denied in a look.”² In other words, in every encounter with others we have the choice either to engage or refuse to engage. In missing the moral adventures of others — refusing to engage and hence being unable to really see their own moral efforts — we run the risk of turning moral thought and action into moralism. That said, Diamond shares with Nussbaum the thought that creative imagination plays a role in our efforts toward deep engagement with others. Drawing on Socrates’s moral choice to the surprise of his friends in the *Crito*, and speaking of the role of the creative imagination in moral thought, Diamond notes, “The idea of possibilities as fixed in advance and built into the situation locates the moral agent’s responsibility and his freedom in quite a different place from where one sees it if one takes the capacity for improvisation as essential in any account of our moral life.”³ Within international development programs, well-intentioned though they often are, the inability — or even refusal — to recognize — which takes creative imagination — the moral adventures of the nations, populations, and individuals who are stake-holders in the process can lead the good donors want to achieve to become more about themselves rather than about those whose lives they seek to better. Liz Jackson’s essay reflects three intersecting arguments in which Diamond’s concerns for the creative recognition of the moral thinking of others is either upheld or not within the context of international development specifically and global studies, more generally. First, in the details of engagement with Melinda Gates’s efforts in family planning and the prevention of the spread of the HIV/AIDS virus in Africa, Jackson notes the many ways in which well-meaning donors, and relevant government agencies, are perplexed by the stubborn resistance of “African fertility” to their efforts despite the reportedly eager acceptance by the target populations of both the programs and the related “gifts” on offer. Jackson rightly concludes, in one of the most perspicuous passages of the essay, that such puzzlement might have quite a bit less to do with the “self-deprecation of the oppressed” and rather more to do with a lack of historical and cultural awareness of the African context within which these

programs are located. That is, philanthropic donors, governmental and non-governmental agents, are missing the moral — and political — adventures of the ultimate stakeholders in the development “game.”⁴ The agents of humanitarian work too often overlook the fact that those they are trying to help have their own motivations, constraints, and values which shape and inform the manner in which they will receive and use the help that is extended to them. Lacking an awareness of the details of the lives, values, and motivations of these distant others, these agencies then locate these nations and populations in their own imaginaries, which in turn inform their policies and actions.

Turning away from a discussion of the concrete manifestation of the inability or outright refusal to really look at the lives of the receivers of aid, and through a focus on the resulting imaginary that informs too much of development work, Jackson presents a critique of the “deficiency” model of development. This model, she rightly points out, assumes that the target populations for development are marked by the trope of “lack” and hence programmatic interventions are designed with the aim of closing the gap between those who “have” the requisite tools — both educational and material — and those who do not. The designing and implementation of these programs without attention to historical and cultural contexts places the philanthropic donors at the moral risk of making their humanitarian efforts be about themselves rather than those they seek to aid. The TOMS shoes project that Jackson offers is certainly an excellent example of the moral risk to donors that often lurks within humanitarian programs.

However, what is also missing is the vast literature on earlier development, such as family planning, programs in contexts other than Africa and the limits and pitfalls presented by an inability to really see the moral and political adventures of those whose lives development agents seek to ameliorate.⁵ Chief among these is Mahmud Mamdani’s classic criticism of family planning programs in India. Published in 1972, in his ethnography *The Myth of Population Control: Family, Class and Caste in an Indian Village*,⁶ Mamdani calls into question not only the moral lack reflected in these deficiency development imaginaries through a refusal to look at humans living lives within specific social and cultural institutions, but also at the in-humanitarianism of the Malthusian assumptions that such efforts to control populations were based on in the first place. Within Africa and elsewhere today, to undertake a development program without any engagement with the existing literature in the field is to refuse to see the scholars and practitioners who have labored long and hard to speak to the very issues these more recent efforts are intended to address. Such refusal to study and learn from both the accomplishments and the failures of others is to resort to a kind of moralism that not only led to the limited success of these earlier programs in the first place, but also signals a refusal to see other actors in the same field as collaborators in a joint enterprise.

This brings me to the third and final argument that Jackson makes in this essay. Jackson wishes to offer the services of philosophy of education to the developers and practitioners of family planning and HIV/AIDS prevention programs specifically,

and to those in the field of international development more generally. She mentions that others in the field — such as anthropologists, for example — are not in a position to undertake the required conceptual analysis. Her desire to put philosophy of education in the service of development work while laudable overlooks the vast and philosophically sophisticated literature that informs the disciplines of anthropology, and development studies, more generally. If she had engaged with this literature, instead of restricting herself to learning from those within her defined sphere of research and practice, she would have found ample existing criticism of the deficiency model — going as far back as 1972, for example — and many attractive and plausible theoretical alternatives on offer; the inflection of human rights in development being one of the more influential of recent theories. Many of those working within these relevant areas of study have served to effect significant epistemological shifts within the humanities and social sciences and also philosophy of education, as for example the anthropologists Paul Rabinow and Renato Rosaldo. In more recent work, Mamdani, for example, has stressed the importance of going beyond the local — while holding on to it — and relying on secondary literature in order to study Africa.⁷ That is, in the recognition of the interconnectedness of the world — which is not an historically late phenomenon — it is no longer useful to speak of this village, or that group, but rather to examine more closely the national and global interstices within which individuals — both donors and recipients of aid — live their lives. Such cross-disciplinary engagement would have also pointed Jackson to development organizations that do take the approach she hopes for in the design and implementation of their programs. We can and should indeed engage these fields but not by taking the position of teacher without first learning from the rich theoretical terrain they cover. In other words, Jackson needs to embark on a moral-theoretical adventure of her own that takes her beyond the walls of the narrow professional identifications of what she takes to be her field to learn from the epistemological and moral adventures of others.

In closing, a brief remark on the place of cultural considerations in development theory and practice. These considerations are certainly crucial as centrally pointed out by Jackson in her essay, and attested to in my brief response here, but sometimes water and food are just water and food and it is not culture but biology that matters. It is a matter of grave misfortune for some — and shame for the rest of us — that there are still places on this planet where the choice is not between whether one likes one’s water from the tap or icy cold — as Jackson’s example for the need for cultural critique suggests — but rather, where the stark choice is between access to water — never mind clean water — or none at all. In sum, I share Jackson’s concern about the realization of the duties we bear to distant strangers. More importantly, I am in agreement with her thesis that we need to be more “finely aware and richly responsible” — to use Martha Nussbaum’s phrase — in how we go about the duty to address the pressing problems faced by too many within our human family.

1. Cora Diamond, “Missing the Adventure: A Response to Martha Nussbaum,” *The Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy, and the Mind* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), 309.

2. Cora Diamond, "Having a Rough Story of What Moral Philosophy Is," *New Literary History* 15, no. 1 (1983): 155–169.
3. Diamond, "Missing the Adventure," 12.
4. For a classic Marxist critique of the politics of economic development, see Paul Baran's *The Political Economy of Growth* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1957).
5. The complexity of conditions suggests that this phrase might be more useful in the discussion than the term "agency."
6. Mahmood Mamdani, *The Myth of Population Control: Family, Caste, and Class in an Indian Village* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972).
7. See, for example, Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).