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**Title: The moral quandary of helping without harm - the promise and problem of assistance.**

**Abstract:** Giving assistance is now a widespread practice that has grown into a virtual industry. Intended to facilitate and mediate between those in desperate need and those with a capacity to assist, it operates at a global level, delivering assistance wherever and whenever the need is most pressing.

However, the practice is experiencing problems. It seems that its instruments and activities can fail to achieve the goal of helping others and may even contribute to harm. Evidence suggests that the practice of assistance is struggling to achieve the ends at which it is aimed. Some have argued that this reflects the absence of clear moral guidelines, and points to an underlying philosophical tension that can arise between acting to assist another and avoiding (or minimising) harm.

This paper clarifies the nature of this problem and examines alternative philosophical accounts of the duty of assistance in the light of this. Two broad categories of responses seem to separate the literature. On the one hand, there are those who seek to secure the foundations of current institutions and practices by specifying more precisely and narrowly what the duty of assistance entails. This perspective is evident within both contemporary deontological and utilitarian approaches. These prescriptions underwrite and reinforce, so to speak, the existing institutional framework.

On the other hand, there are those who seek to critically examine and evaluate at a broader level how we think about ourselves and our connections with others; what all agent's duties to others are, including a duty of assistance; how we come to have this; and what this duty should entail. Philosophers within this category argue that the duty to assist requires significantly more from agents than simply supporting and contributing to the existing institutional framework.

In this paper, I argue that the first approach, seeking to secure this duty through the precise specification of the act-types and actions it requires, may fail to resolve the underlying issues and tensions evident in contemporary practices. I argue instead for wider

consideration of the second approach that seeks to avoid these problems by giving richer accounts of agency and practical reason that this duty requires for its expression.