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## Commentary:

### Eyes wide shut in transnational science and aid

#### **A B S T R A C T**

Responding to the problem of unknowing in the contemporary pursuit of knowledge, my commentary on Wenzel Geissler's article extends its themes to a parallel, overlapping domain of humanitarianism. The provision of medical aid shares the preference of research trials for an egalitarian style and similarly avoids recognizing the very inequities that structure its relations. The humanitarian embrace of exception and moral discourse likewise parallels the manner in which research partnerships elide obligation, emphasizing responsibility in terms of ethical regulation. When actors share a stake in not knowing, it complicates the critical task, requiring something other than simple unveiling. [*science, ethics, humanitarianism, public secrets, inequality*]

**I**n his original and provocative article, Wenzel Geissler broaches the discomfiting topic of how the contemporary pursuit of knowledge can itself involve strategic elision and the delicate art of knowing what “not to know.” Examining collaborative medical research trials in Africa, he suggests they entail a form of public secret in which the ethical frame of “partnership” depends on maintaining a fictive ideal of equality in the face of the very real inequalities of everyday life and work. Thus, critical phenomena commonly experienced in daily interaction prove effectively unmentionable in institutional practice: the hunger of trial subjects, the inadequacies of health care access and ordinary medical supplies, the unofficial use of transport reimbursement as a form of quasi payment to subjects, and material inequalities between national and international research staff and their career prospects. At the same time, performances such as academic conferences and team-building public events explicitly involve all staff as if they were equals. Geissler catalogues episodes in which these unacknowledged truths surface in anecdotal form—moments of embarrassment and complaint, telling sarcasm, and gestures of personal concern. He recognizes sincere efforts by individuals involved to act in an ethical and caring manner. However, their actions do not translate into either formal data or an overt politics of dissent. One of the insights of his argument is that all actors involved have a stake in not knowing as well as limited direct capacity to transform the larger material framing of their mutual endeavor. This pragmatic threshold to action affects public recognition; an issue must lend itself to resolution to qualify as a legitimate problem. When autonomy and partnership are shared virtues, simply exposing and denouncing inequality without the immediate prospect of altering it promises more in the way of frustration than liberation. The problem of unknowing thus complicates conventional moralized politics of anthropological critique.

I first note that aspects of this account resonate with longer strands of both art and analysis. In particular, anxiety over preserving social

codes and avoiding indelicate observations pervades countless works of literary fiction, in which a chip in the veneer of polite convention reveals the fragility of family and community life. One could imagine a contemporary Graham Greene peeling open the world Geissler portrays, relentlessly following a midlevel scientist, say, whose career unravels between temptation, pity, and misunderstanding. Such an account would retain the veil of fiction, of course, itself at times a convention for knowing while not knowing. Even the now-popular genre of memoir maintains a timely distance as it claims fact, thematizing the sort of after-hours commentary that surfaces at bars rather than connecting it to the formal pursuit of knowledge. In this sense, these familiar forms of unveiling remain separated from the daily practice of research.

On a more scholarly front, historians of science have recognized that the truth itself has had a social history, involving social status and moral currencies of trust (Shapin 1994). Who can and who cannot reprise the role of a gentleman may remain a salient question, even under strikingly different conditions. Certainly, conceptions of disinterest carry with them assumptions about the very possibility of material disengagement, always easier when one is equipped with an estate. The “fellowship” of the Royal Society and the “partnership” between contemporary institutions that Geissler describes both rely on quiet agreement about pure intentions. The well-meaning ethical principles that restrict compensation insist on the irrelevance of context as much as on an ideal of equality. Given that scientific and medical professions remain largely hierarchical in structure (if not always style), it should come as no surprise that inequalities grow more painfully obvious the farther one moves from centers of prestige. In settings like Malawi, where the term *resource* serves as an active verb within medical training and clinical practice, interests prove simply unavoidable (Wendland 2010:154). When patients and professionals alike face a constant struggle to get by, medical research offers obvious opportunity.

Here, I amplify several of Geissler’s concerns and extend them beyond the particularities of government-sponsored clinical trials. Biomedical research is not the only transnational endeavor that provides a livelihood of sorts for a wide array of differently positioned actors. The provision of international aid also crosses similar terrain and likewise involves patterns of silence and unknowing. Aid workers too uphold an ideal of equality, even as they struggle with obvious inequities of material condition and opportunity. Their language likewise deploys a screen of acronyms as well as reassuring euphemisms and categories like “challenge” and “stakeholder.” Emphasis rests on common cause and equality, envisioning partnerships, grassroots action, coeval participation, and collaboration (see, e.g., Englund 2011). At the same time, the very flow of funds reveals awkward imbalance: Some can travel and consume

far more easily than others, to the extent they can afford to be volunteers (Redfield 2012). Moreover, everyday experience suggests predictable slippage between the moral motivations of aid organizations and the actual practice of their work. Exceptional events only further expose the gap between international and national personnel, whose lives prove far from equal when it comes to evacuation or the cold calculations of kidnappers (Fassin 2011:236–242). No wonder, then, that aid workers—especially of the expatriate variety—might frequent bars or author confessional blogs from the field. They too wrestle with learning how to both know and not know in just the right measure.

The problem of unknowing in collaboration only expands once beyond a specific shared activity, where divergent worldviews might productively overlap in the absence of close inspection. A recent study sponsored by the Swiss branch of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF)/Doctors Without Borders investigated perceptions about the organization among those it encounters and tries to assist (Abu-Sada 2012). The researchers discovered, among other things, that many of the group’s would-be beneficiaries view the world through religious referents and ascribe motivations in that idiom rather than through the secular framework of aid. Few appear aware that the organization is financially independent—in the sense of largely operating with funds it raises from members of the general public rather than institutional donors, a point of pride for MSF—or distinguish between different NGOs, let alone the group’s different national sections. Indeed, the concept of the “totally free” gift (Abu-Sada 2012:46) proves just as hard to grasp in Cameroon and Iraq as in anthropological theory. Aid work thus inspires suspicion alongside appreciation, something the attribution of religious motives can help alleviate. The earnest efforts of aid workers lead to a gray area similar to that occupied by Geissler’s researchers and patients, in which common ground proves simultaneously vital and elusive. Such discoveries may not seem surprising from the vantage point of social analysis, but they remain episodically important in the world. From the perspective of anthropology, the fact that an NGO like MSF has momentarily realized them, thereby glimpsing something of its own limits, would seem worthy of endorsement. By itself, however, such knowledge hardly resolves issues of epistemological and ontological difference about the causes of human suffering or the motivations for responding to it. Nor does it offer immediate relief from the asymmetries of aid relations, not to mention the larger problem of inequality.

Comparison to the humanitarian end of the aid world underscores two other features of contemporary research partnerships: their mercurial lack of long-term institutional commitment and their prioritization of ethical over political framings of practice. Contemporary humanitarianism operates primarily in the name of emergency, casting itself as a response to suffering under exceptional

circumstances. As such, it offers few meaningful mechanisms of accountability and little promise of permanent obligation, however long relations might last. The figure of the human transcends politics with moral sentiment, even as it distances particular histories through universal claims. Efforts to achieve more engaged and critical forms of humanitarian practice (the heartfelt ambition of MSF) face structural limits not only of mobility but also of fundraising. In economic terms, aid flows through voluntary charity rather than political obligation, a fact that often confronts projects in development and community health as well as those directed toward relief. As Geissler notes, even Paul Farmer and Partners in Health must struggle to balance an egalitarian, rights-based vision with a form of practice that relies on moral suasion for financial support.

Similarly, the partnerships maintained by research organizations emphasize autonomy at the expense of responsibility. Mutual independence may appeal to postcolonial sensibility and national pride, but it also serves to free the more powerful entity from the sort of obligations that classically attend patronage. As Geissler drily puts it, “Hierarchy and dependence are distinctly unpopular ways of rendering difference, partly because of their connotations of colonial hegemony but also because such hierarchies can imply responsibilities and lasting commitments for the dominant party and moral entitlements for its subjects.” This grows clear in the routinized ethical systems of oversight that regulate biomedical research, which assume free subjects and emphasize noncoercion, even as they overlook hunger. Ethical forms of imperialism mix variability and inflexibility, emphasizing formal protection at the expense of comprehensive support (Petryna 2009; Schrag 2010). Working within them, one must balance concerns over “undue inducement” with a need to provide some means of enticement, not to mention temporary sustenance. Ethical regulation extends to social science as well, of course, and Geissler implicates anthropology alongside biomedicine in a similar zone of discomfort. In this regard, the fact that he himself uses pseudonyms for the institutional entities in question (“Government Health Agency” and “National Clinical Research Organization”) reflects more than just a disciplinary tradition of unknowing or a methodological approach that emphasizes generalizability (“drawing on comparative experiences in diverse large field sites in Africa”). It also recalls the legal edge of representation and the value of deniability, a prospect that resonates differentially along vectors of power.

There remains the question of why the language of equality appears so seductive at present as well as the problem of how to better realize its ideals in relation to research. Clearly, liberalism plays a central role in this story—liberalism in the grand historical sense of subject formation around legal autonomy and choice, not simply the market rationalities of neoliberal policy. Surely, Geissler is right also to recognize the powerful legacy of anticolonialism as a

structure of feeling, both for African scientists appreciative of international recognition and for their foreign partners who can imagine equality through difference. Perhaps there are inverse parallels with Michel Foucault’s (1990) analysis of repression and the “speaker’s benefit,” such that here one must unknow rather than transgress to claim liberation. In any event, the article makes it clear that imagining another kind of science requires more than a simple exposé or compelling slogan. Knowing what and how we unknow in ethnographic detail seems a promising start. The stumbling block of “unsatisfied vital needs” generates a wide range of ethical impulses, including humanitarianism and global health. But if it returns us to the open question of responsibility and resists simple closure or settlement, it exposes again the critical juncture between ethics and politics that runs through science. Until a reimagined mode of enacting science moves closer to reality, I can only agree with Geissler that “under given material conditions, collaboration is, and must be recognized as, uncomfortable.”

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