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Disciplinary Brief

VIRTUE ETHICS VS VIRTUE SIGNALLING IN THE GLOBAL HUMANITARIAN SYSTEM

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The global humanitarian system is a multi-billion-dollar enterprise aimed at expressing universal solidarity and meeting human need. Herdt's Theology Brief on the role of virtues prompted a number of reflections about this system, the various people who donate to it, work for it, and receive goods from it. These raise three key questions, which I hope will spark further dialogue on how consideration of the virtues can deepen our engagement with the moral realities that sit under so much of our work and practice.

The Field: Is Humanitarian Work Oriented to Holistic Flourishing?

Does humanitarian work actually seek to achieve something morally worthwhile? One of Herdt's key points is that the virtues are essential to true human flourishing, by healing our inner conflicts, transforming our affections, equipping us to resist injustice, and directing us to work for institutions that themselves seek to support human flourishing in community. Thus, I take Herdt to be saying that cultivating the virtues enables us to both bring into being and carry out our substantive visions of the good.

What is Global Humanitarianism?

At first blush, the work of humanitarianism (which I define as encompassing both emergency relief and ongoing development) ought to mount this hurdle easily. It is, after all, founded on an explicitly normative premise, that of the humanitarian impulse – the recognition that human suffering is morally bad, and that it is morally good therefore, to relieve it where possible. The most recent State of the Humanitarian System report estimates that international humanitarian (i.e. emergency relief-focused) assistance reached 106 million people around the world in 2021, to the tune of US\$31.1 billion. Over 80% of that is government or institutionally funded, and almost half of that comes from five donors alone (the US, the EU, Germany, the UK, and Japan).

Relief funding aims to alleviate the suffering of those in acute crisis, where their local or national governments are either overwhelmed or unwilling to respond. This includes setting up and managing refugee/displaced peoples camps, providing

food, water, sanitation and hygiene services, and medical help, as well as specialised care for children, and coordination and protection efforts.

There are estimated to be around 5000 organisations with core emergency relief and protection goals, although the majority of relief funding goes to UN agencies such as the World Food Programme (WFP), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). [1] UN agencies, the Red Cross and Crescent movements, and international NGOs (ideally) all work together in a cluster system when responding to disasters and conflicts, drawing on multiple sources of funding and backers.

Relatedly, the broader development sector seeks to improve the wellbeing of people living in developing nations through sustained long-term improvement of social, economic, and political systems, as captured by the Sustainable Development Goals. Like emergency relief, development is mostly government or institutionally funded (around 80%), with the remainder flowing from private sources. Private development includes activities such as Compassion's child sponsorship program, while official development assistance (ODA) tends to focus on larger structural investments and capacity building. In 2022, the world's largest development donors, the governments of the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) gave around US\$204 billion in total aid flows (which includes loans and money spent in their own countries). [2]

In reality, the boundaries between emergency and development aid funding and practice are fuzzy; for example, ODA figures capture both the emergency and development aid funding of OECD governments, and many NGOs utilise both private and official aid flows, for both emergency relief and development programming. All sorts of actors can and do engage in broadly humanitarian work, from multilateral organisations coordinating billions of dollars in funding from states down to small community groups and NGOs using private donations to mobilise ad hoc responses. Likewise, there is an increasingly vast array of activities that these actors are involved in, not just providing emergency medical and food supplies or setting up field hospitals and refugee camps, but also investing in education, financial literacy, small business holdings, or environmental projects such as tree planting and developing regenerative farming practices.

The contemporary humanitarian order draws upon centuries of broader traditions of altruism and compassion, and in no way has a monopoly on the ethics of care. However, as a modern phenomenon, what makes it distinctive is that it is a global system of care that desires to help others beyond borders of local duty; that in doing so, it seeks to express some kind of transcendental significance – to cultivate and express a sense of global solidarity and oneness; and that it is explicitly organised and a part of global governance (Barnett 2011). [3]

Moral Universals and Pragmatic Implementation

Many actors within the system, whether individuals, non-profits or states, commit themselves to some variation of the four fundamental principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence, which are meant to safeguard the legitimacy of humanitarian activity as apolitical and based on need alone. This means its moral claims are distinctly universalist: that all human life is equal in worth, and that the task of saving it should not be swayed by race, place, or creed. However, a key point of disagreement within the humanitarian sector is between those who believe humanitarian work should restrict itself to emergency responses with a goal of merely reducing the load of human suffering versus

those who advocate for more expansive engagement, including seeking to address causes of suffering such as poverty and conflict over the long term.

Given these diverging goals, is it possible to pinpoint a single substantive vision of human flourishing in the humanitarian sector? At one end of the spectrum is a very modest aim: simply to make the hell of human and natural disasters less hellish where possible. It is to keep body and soul together while crisis unfolds. This is ethos of organisations like the Red Cross. At the other end of the spectrum is a much more ambitious task: to transform those hells, if not into heaven, then at least into something capable of sustaining human wellbeing. An organisation like World Vision showcases this where it seeks to speak truth to power, foster strong communities, and link its emergency responses into its longer-term development programming. I think what unites these differing approaches is the underlying conviction that humans should not be left to suffer and die without hope. In this way, the humanitarian field at its best is an embodiment of the theological virtue of hope - hope in a future that is good, even if the present is not. It is also a concrete expression of the virtue of love – to will another’s good and to act towards that end, without consideration of gains to the self.

The Ideal and the Real in Humanitarianism

This is the ideal of humanitarianism, although not always the reality. However, some critics do not feel that the humanitarian endeavour is actually even oriented to this ideal. For example, British sociologist Keith Tester (2010) worries that the UK’s humanitarian commitments are primarily about helping the British public overcome ‘colonial guilt’; some have rejected the system altogether as an ideological weapon of the global North aimed at further dominating the political and economic structures of their former colonies (Chimni 2009). [4] Others have acknowledged the moral worthiness of the humanitarian impulse, but wrestled with the extent to which relief and development activities can be co-opted for ill in difficult and violent situations (such as Anderson 1999). And anyone with exposure to government deliberations over foreign aid policy will be painfully aware of how much the discussion is guided by national interest rather than recipient wellbeing. Thus, perhaps a virtue ethics approach can help us ask hard questions about to what extent humanitarian action embodies its own stated ideals, by continually directing us to measure ourselves not just according to what is right or wrong, but by a more holistic vision of human flourishing that encompasses the wellbeing of all participants in the system.

The People: What Virtues or Vices does the Humanitarian System Promote?

How can the humanitarian system form and deform the character of the people involved in it? What virtues does it promote? What vices might it encourage? The normative nature of humanitarian work means that there are still distinct community expectations that humanitarian workers are ‘in it for the right reasons’, are not unduly motivated by financial gain or self-interest, and that their behaviour in-country is above reproach.

Transgressing Virtues

The strength of these norms can be seen by the outrage generated when they are publicly transgressed. In 2018, the NGO Oxfam underwent an enormous scandal when it was discovered that several of their staff deployed in Haiti had been

using their position and their resources to host parties and hire prostitutes. [5] The revelations prompted a crisis not just for Oxfam, but for the whole sector, precisely because it highlighted the gap between donors' expectations of behaviour, and the lived practices of (some) expatriate workers in the field. Whether their actions were legal or permissible was largely irrelevant; the central condemnation was that the buying of sexual services from the very women and girls the Oxfam staff were ostensibly there to help was not *virtuous*. It demonstrated clear inconsistency between the moral principle of responding to the dignity and value of those women and girls in seeking to aid them in their time of need, and the practice of objectifying them by exploiting that need in order to buy sex from them.

Thus, Herdt's comment that moral rules and principles require people who are actually capable of putting them into practice resonated with me as profoundly relevant to the issues that face relief and development workers. It is clear that it is not enough to know what is good; one must also act in a way consistent with that knowledge.

Virtues in Fraught Situations

Beyond this (and unlike in the Oxfam case), humanitarian workers often find themselves in ethically difficult scenarios, where discerning and carrying out morally virtuous action is genuinely fraught. For example, decision makers are regularly faced with questions about who to help first in a crisis, when to take sides on local issues, under what conditions to trade fairness for access, how to balance respect for autonomy with accountability to donors, how much to ask of their own workforce – physically, emotionally, and spiritually – as well as a myriad of other issues, all with their own dilemmas and trade-offs. Far too often humanitarian workers are faced with what must seem like choices between lesser evils, rather than the freedom to pursue pure goods. Thus, having, as Herdt defines it, a “stable disposition that enables an agent to respond and act well” seems to be an important part of surviving the moral weight of humanitarian work, and an incredibly crucial quality to cultivate in workers.

The Ambiguities of Professionalization

I do wonder if professionalization of the relief and development field is a potential risk factor for losing sight of the importance of this kind of personal integrity of character. While good intentions do not cancel out harmful actions, perhaps virtue ethics can help to tease out the distinction between ‘doing good’ and ‘doing good well’, by acknowledging that the character formation of aid workers is a central part of the institutional responsibility of NGOs. The role of practical wisdom in helping to adjudicate ethically tricky situations I can see being particularly important to cultivate. For example, international NGO workers involved in rebuilding after 2004's Indian Ocean tsunami in Aceh, Indonesia, had to decide how best to address theft and adulteration of building supplies by the very people they were building for. Policies were all very well, but what workers really needed was the practical wisdom to understand the drivers of this behaviour and guide their engagement in solutions that led to community flourishing and peace, not just solving the immediate problem.

The explanation of spiritual disciplines such as repentance, self-examination, and prayer being key for cultivating virtue prompted me to reflect on how well the humanitarian sector is capable of such introspection, and how well it is able to truly learn from its own mistakes. The high turnover, fragmented and fast-paced nature of aid work directly challenges the capacity of individuals and organisations to honestly reflect on their impact, and I suspect ends up cultivating vices such as impatience, arrogance, and the over-emphasis of expertise. Perhaps Christian NGOs have an advantage here, but only

where they are able to deliberately structure in opportunities for the exercise of spiritual disciplines for their staff.

The sector's current obsession with monitoring, evaluation and learning (often known as MEL or MEAL) strikes me as a symptom of this problem. It all too often acts as a justifier of further grants and funding, rather than a truly reflective process. Accurate data on needs, and accountability for resources spent are important goods to pursue, to be sure. But how does the system manage when the good being sought after is not easy to count? A high turnover environment with a tendency to short-term horizons combined with a major reliance on the goodwill of donors encourages humanitarians to be transactional and to focus mainly on outcomes that can be measured and quantified for donor reporting. In my own backyard, Australia's Pacific partners consistently complain that engaging with Australia's aid programming is a frustrating exercise in shallow relationships and short-term thinking, where their local knowledge is ignored, their needs are sidelined, and their priorities are dismissed. [6]

Missed Opportunities for Character Development

Building on this, I wonder how much the modern system, with its focus on funding, structure, and professional expertise, misses opportunities to encourage the formation of virtuous character in recipients as well as in aid workers, and donors. Herdt describes acting virtuously as "functioning well as a human person, with desires, emotions, judgements, and projects harmonising with one another... to have the virtues is to be disposed to act well in relation to other individuals and to one's various communities".

In this sense, virtue ethics as explained here complements broader contemporary Christian teachings on the holistic nature of poverty, and the need to address more than the material elements of deprivation. For example, Corbett and Fikkert (2012), in their bestseller *When Helping Hurts*, outline a definition of poverty as primarily relational, and point to the need for poverty alleviation ministries to recognise and assist restoration of broken relationships with God, with self, with others in community, and with the environment. Herdt's comments on how the virtues are acquired are a needed corrective to the (all too popular) notion that education solves all wrongs. An organisation that teaches financial literacy to vulnerable women, for example, should not expect that this education alone will produce the character fruits of prudence or integrity. There must be opportunity for the participants to grasp for themselves what is good and wise and honest, and to desire to be the kind of person who is defined by such attributes.

The focus on truly holistic human flourishing in the virtue ethics thus might provide a practical set of tools for thinking about empowerment of both the humanitarian worker and the poor through orientation to the good in character and relationships, not merely in transactions focused on material goods or reducing exposure to danger. The virtuous humanitarian worker is one who relates rightly to those they participate with in the work of pursuing good. Their measures of success are not just the numbers of babies rehydrated or wells dug, but the mutual building up of equals in dignity and worth through the world they seek to bring into being together.

Qualms: Can a Focus on Virtues be Harmful?

Might a focus on character actually harm the vulnerable? I can see how, if not correctly applied, this approach may further entrench already existing moral problems in the sector. A focus on the virtues is intrinsically self-centred; that is, it centres

on the self as the moral agent, and the kind of habits and dispositions that create the virtuous self in relation to others. This leaves a virtue ethics approach towards humanitarianism vulnerable to being hijacked by a view of aid as a consumer product for the benefit of the 'ethical consumer', for both donors and workers in the field. It does not begin with the distant vulnerable, but with me, and the habits and actions I should be taking. This all too easily leads to an ethics of aid as consumption, where I can buy or work my way to virtue; those in need of help are reduced to being objects of my charity. This is the mindset rightly criticised in the 'white saviour' complex, where working for a humanitarian agency or donating to an appeal is primarily framed as showcasing the extent to which the donor or worker is a good person.

Beginning with the Vulnerable

My sense is that truly ethical humanitarianism must begin with those who suffer, with their need, and their preciousness in the sight of God. Insofar as much as we are thinking about ourselves at all, it should only be to recognise our duties towards the vulnerable as fellow children of the Creator, and as our neighbour who is in need. And so, a part of me is uneasy about investing time and attention on the donor and aid worker, rather than the human being made in God's image who suffers because of the world's brokenness and who needs restoration. I am also wary of assuming that the giver is in any better of a position.

Moral Responsibility versus Causal Responsibility

From a more structural perspective, this also ties into broader questions about the purpose of both relief and development aid. Are they disinterested charity, expressions of goodwill between those who otherwise have little claim on one another? Or are they about justice? As the human rights agenda has become a larger part of the language of aid work, the question of whether we should be motivated by merely moral responsibility (I should help because I can) or causal responsibility (I should help because it's my fault), has become more central. [7] If humanitarianism is primarily an altruistic activity, the moral character and motivations of those who fund and staff it are arguably centrally important in preserving the purity of that altruism.

However, if we accept the argument that wealthy developed nations and their populations have a duty to address the inequalities caused by their past (and perhaps present) wrongs, then the entire humanitarian project is cast in a different moral light. It becomes about reparations, and what kinds of moral claims the exploited have on the powerful. From this framing, it may be unhelpful to start by thinking about the virtues as an aspect of individual moral disposition; if the moral assumptions of the entire endeavour are off-kilter, then it can never be virtuous to participate. In this way, there are unresolved questions about whether or not humanitarianism is about the pursuit of justice, and if it is, what kind.

Faith, Hope and Love in Humanitarianism?

The power of a consequences-based approach is that it forces us to ask if our actions are actually making the difference we want them to make. The power of deontological approaches (i.e. rooted in an objective standard of right and wrong) is in their fierce safeguarding of the dignity and worth of the otherwise inconsequential. As I reflect on the virtues, I think it is natural to ask, what is the power of thinking about humanitarianism in terms of expressing virtue rather than primarily in

terms of moral rights and wrongs or actions and their consequences? There are no easy answers to the questions I have raised here. However, I entitled this reflection virtue ethics versus virtue signalling because that is what is at stake when considering the moral realities of humanitarianism. Humanitarianism runs on faith, and it is built on hope, but it is meaningless without love. Without the overarching virtue of love to bind giver and receiver, all of the relief and development work in the world is mere virtue signalling, 'a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal'. This, I think, is the ultimate power of virtues talk for this field – to make visible how love must ground all that we do.

References and Further Reading

Anderson, Mary (1999) *Do No Harm: How Aid Can Support Peace - Or War* London: Lynne Rienner Publishers. An older but seminal text in the field that highlighted the 'first, do no harm' obligations for aid.

Barnett, Michael (2011) *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism*, New York: Cornell University Press. An influential global historical account of humanitarianism that shows how emergency relief and longer-term development aid are part of the same impulse and should be understood together.

Corbett, Steve and Brian Fikkert (2012) *When Helping Hurts*, 2nd edn, Chicago: Moody Publishers. An excellent resource on Christian ministry to the poor that centres relationality in its understanding of poverty alleviation.

Moore, Alana (2020) 'International Relations' Critical Turn in the Humanitarian Space: Opportunities for Christian Engagement', *International Journal of Public Theology* 14: 398–414. Further reflections on the opportunities and challenges of competing worldviews in relief and development.

End Notes

- [1] Data available at ALNAP (2022), *The State of the Humanitarian System*. ALNAP Study, London: ALNAP/ODI.
- [2] See OECD.org for latest figures and breakdown of development aid flows.
- [3] This definition of humanitarianism is from the work of the highly influential scholar, Michael Barnett (2011), who explicitly rejects the distinction between emergency humanitarian responses and longer-term development aid.
- [4] Argued in Chimni, B. S. (2009) 'The Birth of a "Discipline": From Refugee to Forced Migration Studies', *Journal of Refugee Studies* 22 (1): 11–29; Tester, Keith (2010) 'Humanitarianism: The Group Charisma of Postcolonial Britain', *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 13 (4): 375–89.
- [5] An outline of this scandal:
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/15/timeline-oxfam-sexual-exploitation-scandal-in-haiti>
- [6] See for example the powerful keynote address given at the 2022 Australasian Aid Conference by Ofakilevuka Guttenbeil-Likiliki, Director of the Women and Children Crisis Centre Tonga (available at <https://devpolicy.crawford.anu.edu.au/annual-australasian-aid-conference/2022/program-and-speakers>).
- [7] The relationship between human rights and humanitarianism is a complicated one, nicely explored from a variety of perspectives by the contributing authors of Barnett (ed) (2020) *Humanitarianism and Human Rights: A World of Difference?* New York: Cambridge University Press.

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