

it seems unlikely that the total number of IDPs has increased sharply while the number of civil wars and refugees has fallen. It seems more likely that counting of IDPs was worse before a part of the NGO sector mobilized to focus on IDPs and/or that implicit classification rules have shifted. This is not to claim that NGOs are deliberately misrepresenting the situation to make work for themselves—to the contrary, there are certainly millions of IDPs around the world, and there is a strong moral case that they merit humanitarian relief. The point is that a sector of IDP advocates in the rich countries has developed in the last fifteen to twenty years and that it has mobilized to lobby for government money and private donations for this purpose. Some part of the sharp rise in emergency relief has been driven by the development of this sector and others like it.

In concluding, I note one further implication of the broad trends in civil war and humanitarian aid discussed above. At this very “macro” level, the evidence is inconsistent with a strong form of a common criticism of humanitarian aid. This is the idea that humanitarian aid prolongs civil conflict by providing a revenue stream for combatants to “tax.”³¹ If this effect were very strong, we would not expect to see such a large increase in humanitarian aid accompanied by the dramatic decline in the number of ongoing civil wars since the early 1990s. Of course, the effect could still occur in particular cases; a more disaggregated analysis with data similar to that used here might make some headway on this question.

³¹ See, for example, de Waal, *Famine Crimes*, or David Rieff, *A Bed for the Night: Humanitarianism in Crisis* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002).

3

THE IMPERATIVE TO REDUCE SUFFERING

*Charity, Progress, and Emergencies
in the Field of Humanitarian Action*

CRAIG CALHOUN

Three questions haunt humanitarians: Do they seek to improve the human condition, the well-being of all humanity? Or, do they seek to alleviate suffering, impartially, neutrally, and wherever it may occur? Or, do they respond more specifically to “humanitarian emergencies,” seemingly sudden crises in which human conflict creates concentrated human suffering, in which, perhaps, suffering is so extreme as to be dehumanizing?

The questions are “rhetorical” in that they do not require a precise answer, but they are not without consequences. There is no “objective” definition of humanitarian action. And humanitarian action today is motivated and oriented in all these ways. Yet the multiplicity of its sources and goals is sometimes a problem. It not only confuses academic analyses, it makes it harder for practical actors to agree on courses of action and schemes of evaluation. It informs tensions over whether humanitarian action should be fully embedded in a “human rights framework” or kept at a certain distance because of its special practical relationship to conflict and emergencies. It is central to the challenge of devising efficient approaches to action and effective approaches to evaluation in a field that is constituted on the basis of a moral imperative to act directly in response to fundamental values and urgent needs.

Humanitarian response to emergencies is quintessentially cosmopolitan. It is an effort to mitigate the suffering of strangers. It is evidence of the genuine

importance of global civil society and the real influence of international norms on the conduct of states. But it exists because the global order is, if not quite an oxymoron, less strong than it might be. And the strengths of this global order of international relations, corporations and markets, media networks, social movements and diasporas do not stop civil wars, struggles for independence, and armed conflicts in which the combatants are closer to criminal enterprises even when they call themselves liberation fronts or people's militias.

In this context, trying somehow to help has seemed imperative. It is an imperative of sympathy, of Christian witness, of Jewish traditions of responsibility to "the other," of deontic moral principles of the worth of each human life, of consequentialist logics focused on the potential that the emergencies could spread. There are tensions among these different logics of moral imperative, though they are not always explicit. What is most basic, perhaps, and most new is the modern notion that the emergency demands a response, including a response from distant strangers. This goes beyond mere sympathy. But there is a tension between responses rooted in simply providing care and responses linked to broader notions of human progress.

David Rieff and Michael Ignatieff represent these different positions in their arguments over the significance of humanitarian action. Ignatieff would build on the ethical impulses that motivate humanitarian action to develop better approaches to solving the world's problems. Reducing suffering in emergencies should be linked to larger agendas of longer-term reductions in suffering. Rieff would pull humanitarianism back toward its root in ancient ideas of charity, urging more attention to simply and immediately alleviating suffering and less to human improvement. Ignatieff would encourage a cosmopolitan ethics grounded in recognizing the needs of strangers. Rieff would urge a more personal response grounded in human sympathy. Why simply patch up the victims of wars we might avoid? Ignatieff seems to ask. Why imagine we can manage the world? Rieff seems to reply: Let us patch up its victims. And, he suggests, our belief that we can be global managers and architects of the human future may be one reason there are so many victims.¹

Each of these positions, the expansion of a liberal ethics to confront humanitarian emergencies and the insistence on *prepolitical* charity, has significant supporters. But to both, there is also the opposition of self-declared hardheaded pragmatists. What matters, they say, is neither the complex ethics of human progress nor the more primal ethics of charity but the calculations of how best to save the maximal number of lives with the greatest efficiency, or how best to restore "order" to the disorderly scenes of humanitarian emergencies. And the pragmatist might add, order is not merely good for those suffering the murder, rape, and impoverishment of the "emergency" but for neighbors at risk

¹ Among several works by each author, see Michael Ignatieff, *The Lesser Evil: Political Ethics in an Age of Terror* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), and David Rieff, *A Bed for the Night: Humanitarianism in Crisis* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002).

that the emergency will spread, regional powers threatened by destabilization, and the global rich at risk of terrorism or disease. This managerial orientation has grown more prominent, not least among those who finance humanitarian interventions.

There is no law against conceptual confusion—or pragmatic compromise—and many donors and not a few humanitarian agencies simultaneously embrace all three positions. They act (or give money), they say, because of the ethical urgency of suffering. They insist that the money be spent in ways that promote various sorts of human progress, notably human rights agendas. And they try to introduce accountability measures to ensure efficiency and efficacy. Yet the tensions among these positions keep coming out in disputes among agencies and even among academics arguing about the field.

Rieff's argument for a return to helping others simply on the basis of charity is a challenge to modern notions of humanitarianism. Most versions incorporate either an attempt to manage emergencies or an idea of improving the condition of humanity. More generally, the tension between "consequentialist" efforts to link assistance to projects of social transformation and the "minimalist" approach that would limit humanitarian assistance to simple care and protection is implicit in the development of the concept.

The roots of this argument are older than is usually thought, and more deeply embedded in modern social imaginaries. The tension among universal ethical imperatives, projects of human improvement, and calls for more "practical" (and therefore "merely" less expressive) action is endemic to the modern era. In this chapter I begin with a discussion of the meanings of "humanitarianisms" and continues with how the term "emergency" has been imagined and manipulated, especially in the last two decades. Then I explore the distinctions between value rationality and instrumental rationality in the discourse and reality of humanitarian action.

The Shifting Meanings of Humanitarianism

The idea of mitigating the human suffering occasioned by war is an ancient one, merging with the more general idea of charity. So too are norms for the honorable conduct of war.² Likewise, the idea of acting with concern for all humanity and not merely members of one's own community or nation has an ancient pedigree. Cynics and Stoics in the ancient world encouraged the cosmopolitan vision of world citizenship. The notion of effecting general improvements in the human condition also has antecedents in the ancient world, but it

² The notion of honorable conduct in war is distinct from but related to the "just war" tradition, which also has implications for humanitarian action. See Mona Fixdal and Dan Smith, "Humanitarian Intervention and Just War," *Mershon International Studies Review* 42, no. 2 (1998): 283–312.

is more distinctively modern. And it is a combination of these different threads that makes the modern idea of humanitarian intervention.

It is common but somewhat misleading to say that modern humanitarianism should be dated from the founding of the Red Cross in 1863 and the effort it symbolized and organized to provide "neutral" care to those injured in war (whether combatants or civilians). It would be more accurate to see this as one instance of a much broader development of humanitarian orientations and action, coming indeed rather late. As Thomas Haskell writes, "An unprecedented wave of humanitarian reform sentiment swept through the societies of Western Europe, England, and North America in the hundred years following 1750."³ Perhaps the central exemplar is the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century struggle to end the slave trade.

Humanitarianism took root in the modern world not as a response to war or "emergencies" but as part of an effort to remake the world so that it better served the interests of humanity. This reflected a variety of different changes in social order, ethics, and cognition. It reflected the rise of modern industry, the development of modern states, and the early achievements of modern science and technology, all of which encouraged the notion that human action could be mobilized to transform conditions long taken as inevitable.⁴ It reflected a new value on everyday life that enabled people to weigh "the good" in the well-being of ordinary people and not only extraordinary achievements or spiritual values pointing beyond this world.⁵ It reflected a new sense of the interconnection of actions, including actions at a substantial distance from each other, that may have been rooted in capitalism and colonialism but that encouraged not only self-interested responses but also new understandings of responsibility.⁶

Humanitarian reform movements transformed prisons, poor relief, mental hospitals, schools, and the relationship of European powers to "primitive" peoples. Humanitarian ideals merged with the idea of philanthropy to encourage efforts to assimilate immigrants and mitigate the impact of new forms of inequality. In every case the implementation of these ideals was based on a sense among the well-off that they owed some obligation to improve the lot of the less well-off. In nearly every case the understanding of this obligation and the selection of courses of action were self-righteous and in part self-serving—but never simply reducible to self-interest. The overall pattern was, in Max

³ Thomas L. Haskell, "Capitalism and the Origins of the Humanitarian Sensibility," pts. 1 and 2, *American Historical Review* 90, no. 2 (1985): 339–61, and no. 3 (1985): 547–66. See also Shelby T. McCloy, *The Humanitarian Movement in Eighteenth-Century France* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1957).

⁴ For two contrasting treatments, see Robert A. Nisbet, *History of the Idea of Progress* (New York: Basic Books, 1980), and Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven* (New York: Norton, 1991).

⁵ See Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).

⁶ See Haskell, "Capitalism and the Origins of the Humanitarian Sensibility."

Weber's sense, one of rationalization.⁷ It is not so much that the ills were ended as that action in response to them was made orderly and goal directed. We should not be cynical about this, for there were genuine improvements. Michel Foucault notwithstanding, modern prisons are not obviously worse than public hangings or the drawing and quartering of earlier times.⁸ But as Foucault has suggested, humanitarian reform brought with it new forms of managerial orientation and governmentality in which a variety of agencies took on the challenge of producing order.⁹

As Foucault argued, the aims of penal reform were "not to punish less, but to punish better; to punish with an attenuated severity perhaps, but in order to punish with more universality and necessity; to insert the power to punish more deeply into the social body."¹⁰ Similar transitions took place in other dimensions of social life, including charity. This was a central object of attention for nineteenth-century social reformers and social scientists who sought ways to make charity more efficient, effective, and universal. Many of the reformers drew on religious inspiration, but the efforts to administer both charity and punishment better did not focus simply on otherworldly salvation but were aimed crucially at the improvement of the conditions of (and behavior in) this world.

The English word "humanitarian" dates from the early nineteenth century and quickly came into widespread use.¹¹ More or less closely cognate with humanism, it was used at first to refer to those who emphasized Christ's humanity but denied his divinity, and was linked to the notion of a religion of humanity. This fairly quickly gave rise, however, to the dominant usage, which was to refer to those who proposed in one way or another to alleviate human suffering in general and/or advance the human race in general. The "in general" clause is crucial. Humanitarianism might be applied within nations but was distinct from nationalism with its project of improving the conditions of specific peoples. In the general nineteenth-century usage, therefore, humanitarians addressed humanity across racial and national differences.¹² Their projects of advancing the human were closely related to the ideas of civilization, modernization, and, eventually, evolution. France's *mission civilisatrice* was understood

⁷ Max Weber, *Economy and Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, [1920–1922] 1968).

⁸ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Pantheon, 1977).

⁹ See also David Garland, *Punishment and Welfare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

¹⁰ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 82.

¹¹ The earliest citation in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is from 1819 (and expresses displeasure at the neologism). If the word was new in the early nineteenth century, it refers to an orientation with strong Enlightenment roots, but also one inflected by Romanticism.

¹² This of course mirrors a Christian transnationalism stretching back into the era of the Roman Empire and extending in varying degree through the Middle Ages.

as humanitarian, bringing civilization to those suffering from the lack of being French or even European. Colonialism itself was often understood (with no cynicism) as humanitarian. Christian missionaries (working largely within the context of colonialism) pursued humanitarian missions. So did moral reformers who fought to end slavery, and the spread of the sense that slavery was intrinsically illegitimate was linked to the spread of the notion of human beings as in important senses morally equivalent (even if postslavery racism inhibited the realization of this promise). So did others who formed societies for the alleviation of poverty, the improvement of sanitation, and the reform of prisons and schools—whether they worked domestically or internationally.

This was linked to an increasing religious emphasis on the virtues of ordinary life, putting a positive value on family life, for example, in place of a completely otherworldly orientation.¹³ This changed the ways in which human suffering was understood. An ethics of sympathy became more prominent, along with expectations of action to alleviate suffering. Over centuries, religious ministry to the suffering was complemented by medical ministrations, the founding of charitable organizations (giving more institutional form to what had long been understood as a private obligation), and eventually by increased state action to mitigate the conditions that caused suffering.

Even so basic a concept as “humanity” itself reveals this. The category of the human is not self-evident. Neither the distinction of human from nonhuman life nor the unity of the human is constituted similarly in all cultures. The understanding of humanity as a series of equivalent individuals is a historically particular development (and not universal even today). That human beings intrinsically have ethical obligations to one another as such requires both a notion of transcending kinship, nationality, even acquaintance, and a notion of “bare life” dissociable from specific cultures and webs of relationships.¹⁴ These universalistic notions bear the marks not only of a philosophical history of thinking about self and ethics but also of specific religious traditions, of the growth of the modern state with its construction of equivalent subjects, and of the growth of modern markets and contract relations. They also underpin the notions of humanitarian obligations and human rights.

This increasing emphasis on the secular world did not imply irreligion, and indeed it was produced largely as a transformation within religious life and thought. There was, for example, a substantial increase in the extent to which religious vocations called people to medical, educational, and other service to improve conditions in this world (as well as to prayer and contemplation). But at the same time, this did enlarge the scope of moral attention to the secular world. And, of course, the changes in religion were linked to parallel changes

¹³ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*.

¹⁴ Though I wish to emphasize something different about bare life, see Georgi Agamben's provocative account: *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

in science, economy, and state. Among other things, these changes marked a substantial increase in the capacity to act effectively to change this-worldly conditions.

Humanitarianism closely overlapped with the idea of philanthropy. This also was an outgrowth of the idea of charity, but a transformation insofar as it involved humanity in general rather than more specific individuals. To be described as a great philanthropist or a great humanitarian meant much the same thing. One might have worked to build hospitals or ban alcohol or finance Bible translations. It was essential that the beneficiaries of such efforts would be strangers.¹⁵ Charity was transformed as it grew in scale and became a way not only to minister to the locally less fortunate but to respond to poverty and other problems in large-scale national societies and across their borders. A wide range of associations and boards grew in the nineteenth century to manage poor relief, sanitation, hospitals, and other projects. By the twentieth century governments were expected to take on more of these efforts. But at the same time, philanthropy began to take a more professional form as well. Out of the largely local nineteenth-century associations came early enthusiasm for social science.¹⁶ And by the end of the century the notion of a “scientific philanthropy” was advanced by Andrew Carnegie, and in the twentieth century pursued by a variety of foundations. Each of these tended to be based on the accumulation of capital by a single individual or family rather than the pooling of resources characteristic of the earlier associations.

These “private organizations with public purposes” were not only forerunners of later and larger foundations but also of more professional government delivery of social services. Carnegie's idea of “scientific philanthropy” anticipates research on evaluation and effectiveness and new accountability regimes prominent among international donors and philanthropists today. But it was also of a piece with the industrial efficiency studies of Frederick W. Taylor and others in his day. Carnegie wanted to make sure that his money was used with maximal efficiency to maximal effect. It was not enough to give away dimes; building libraries provided the condition for continuing human improvement.¹⁷ Although efficiency and effectiveness have been consistent goals in business (albeit not consistently achieved), the philanthropic sector has been ambivalent about them. They seemed sometimes in tension with a primary orientation to “value rationality” or simply doing that which was good (and which should be judged so in itself, not by an instrumental evaluation).

¹⁵ A point stressed by Michael Ignatieff in *The Needs of Strangers* (New York: Penguin, 1986).

¹⁶ Thomas Haskell, *The Emergence of Professional Social Science: The American Social Science Association and the Nineteenth-Century Crisis of Authority* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977); James Kloppenberg, *Uncertain Victory: Social Democracy and Progressivism in European and American Thought, 1870–1920* (New York: Oxford University Press 1988).

¹⁷ It is worth noting that Carnegie's philanthropy was strongly influenced by his Presbyterian religion.

Both humanitarianism and philanthropy were influenced by the greatest nineteenth-century advance in science, though both also ultimately came to exist in tension with many of its advocates. I refer, of course, to evolutionary theory. Some foundations, such as the Rockefeller Foundation, promoted eugenics as a way to improve humanity. Nearly all humanitarians were influenced by the wave of progressive thought, and many thought evolutionary theory buttressed this. But humanitarianism and philanthropy were also challenged by a number of critics who thought they undermined the process of natural selection. Instead of allowing the survival of the fittest to advance humanity, humanitarians often sought to protect the weakest humans. This, their critics thought, was mere sentimentality. While humanitarians sometimes claimed that helping the suffering was self-justifying, others demanded that they look at consequences—which they held included encouraging too much breeding by less advanced people.

Humanitarianism came in this context to be associated not only with advancing human welfare but with softening the roughness of the human condition and promoting altruism.¹⁸ But this did not mean that there were no calls for better, more scientific (and sometimes businesslike) management of humanitarian affairs. Lester Frank Ward, a polymathic scientist, public servant, and humanitarian of the nineteenth century—and also the leading pioneer of sociology in America—was deeply opposed to equating human progress with the survival of the fittest.¹⁹ Human evolution was not limited to biological evolution, he argued; that human beings could protect the weak was in fact a sign of their evolutionary superiority based on mind and culture. Advancement was based on cooperation and not only on competition. Human beings were able to increase the supply of life's necessities and reduce the impact of life's enemies. And human beings were able to act on a "sentiment of humanity" that uniquely motivated them to act with benevolence toward humanity as a whole. But Ward also called for "better" humanitarianism:

It must be admitted that humanitarian institutions have done far less good than either juridical or ethical institutions. The sentiment [of humanity] is of relatively recent origin. . . . It exists to an appreciable degree in only a minute fraction of the most enlightened populations. It is rarely

¹⁸ The change is not unlike the earlier process by which "humane" came to be distinct from "human." The latter word, with its changed pronunciation and spelling, branched off in the eighteenth century to refer to the mere fact of being human—bare life, if you will—while being humane referred to realizing the best characteristics of humanity, or acting in ways that exhibited the higher capacities of humanity, those that reflected the capacity for culture rather than mere animal nature.

¹⁹ There is some doubt whether Ward's social Darwinist antagonists argued as much from the idea of the survival of the fittest as he alleged. See Robert C. Bannister, "The Survival of the Fittest is our Doctrine: History or Histrionics?" *Journal of the History of Ideas* 31, no. 3, (1970): 377–398.

directed with judgment. . . . The institutions established to support it are for the most part poorly supported, badly managed, and often founded on a total misconception of human nature and of the true mode of attaining the end in view.²⁰

Ward, like many nineteenth-century social reformers, was interested in increasing and improving efforts to promote social welfare, especially among the poor. He sought both greater state action and better administered private charities. These were among the projects that gave rise to social science (Ward was the first president of the American Sociological Society). And the continuity with some of today's debates is evident.

The same sorts of ideas, combining both religious and secular roots, were applied to the hardships of war. While the U.S. Civil War generated considerable humanitarian response, it was in the interstate wars of Europe that the concept gained clearer formulation. Florence Nightingale's heroic efforts in Crimea were widely described as humanitarian. J. Henri Dunant called for the establishment of a permanent system of wartime humanitarian assistance after witnessing the 1859 battle of Solferino. The orientation of each was Christian (Evangelical in Dunant's case, less orthodox in Nightingale's). With others, they stimulated the founding of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in 1863. A year later, the original Geneva Convention was signed in 1864—Dunant spoke warmly of Nightingale's leadership—and it was followed by dozens of treaties specifying rules for the proper conduct of war, including the Hague Convention on the Laws and Customs of War on Land.²¹ World War I led to the production of numerous agreements attempting to govern particularly noxious new military methods. The League of Nations focused on humanitarian concerns, seeing both peacemaking and efforts to mitigate the effects of conflict in this light.²² But it was in the era of the Holocaust and World War II that protecting civilians became most decisively an important object of

²⁰ Lester F. Ward, "Mind as a Social Factor," *Mind* 9, no. 36 (1884): 563–73.

²¹ The Hague conferences of 1899 and 1907 combined the pursuit of peace with an effort to "humanize the hardships incident to war." See James Brown Scott, "The Work of the Second Hague Peace Conference," *The American Journal of International Law* 2, no. 1 (1908): 1–28 (quote at 1) and Board of Editors, "Editorial Comment," *American Journal of International Law* 1, no. 2 (1907): 431–40. That the founding of this journal is coincident with the Second Hague Conference is no accident; the development of the field of international law as a whole was closely linked to efforts to create new agreements and institutions during this period. More specifically, the Hague conferences (and the earlier Brussels Conference of 1874) encouraged the solidification of humanitarian law as an identifiable subfield of international law. See Theodor Meron, "The Humanization of Humanitarian Law," *American Journal of International Law* 94, no. 2 (2000): 239–78, and Jacques Meurant, "Inter Arma Caritas: Evolution and Nature of International Humanitarian Law," *Journal of Peace Research* 24, no. 3 (1987): 237–49.

²² Rachel E. Crowley, "The Humanitarian Activities of the League of Nations," *Journal of the Royal Institute of International Affairs* 6, no. 3 (1927): 153–69.

humanitarian law.²³ Massive population displacements created refugees in need of humanitarian assistance; eventually grasping the scale of the Holocaust produced new ideas of crimes against humanity and genocide. Four new Geneva conventions, signed in 1949, addressed the protection of the victims of war.

This proliferation of agreements and legal arrangements reflected not only the transformation in scale implicit in the movement from older notions of charity to modern philanthropy but also a process of rationalization. In the sense articulated by Max Weber, this involved shifting from an "ethic of ultimate ends" toward an "ethic of responsibility," and a reliance on institutional mechanisms to ensure predictable behavior in place of a reliance on direct response to feelings, personal appeals, or charismatic leadership.²⁴ The simple kindness of strangers evoked by direct confrontation with the suffering of others would henceforth seem too arbitrary and unsystematic—especially when faced with the growing rationalization (and destructiveness) of modern war.

Not only war but civilian suffering was rationalized by the Holocaust. The Nazi effort to rid the Third Reich of Jews, Gypsies, and others was a distant cousin of the eugenics that had flourished more widely in the early twentieth century, and was carried out with bureaucratic systematicity. Rationalization was also central, however, to the global response that sought to develop institutions to limit such atrocities. This came mainly after the war, of course, and was motivated not merely by reason or benevolence but by guilt and shame. But it too sought systematicity from formal procedures.

Such procedures depend on rendering the qualitative specificities of human lives, relationships, and suffering in quantitative terms. The very idea of saving lives, for example, is dependent on counting lives. This is surely important and powerful. It is also a significant departure from the casualties of war, in which lives lost are strategic sacrifices (or from the other side signs of success). The idea of saving lives could only be regarded as definitive when humanitarian law shifted from rules for combat to protection of civilians. Yet, as Hannah Arendt argued, it is a minimal sense of life that is counted in statistics of those lost (or lives saved). The rationalization, like extreme suffering, leaves no room for political speech, but renders human action as distinct from mere animal existence.²⁵

The Emergency Imaginary

During the twentieth century, the term "humanitarian" became more and more associated with efforts to mitigate the civilian consequences of war. In World

²³ The attempt to protect artistic and scientific institutions and historic monuments dates from the same period.

²⁴ Weber, *Economy and Society*.

²⁵ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (London, Faber and Faber, 1963); *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

War I, images of the horrors of war still focused on the suffering of combatants. By World War II, civilian suffering and death loomed larger, not least in the firebombing of Dresden and the use of atomic weapons against Japanese cities. But at least as decisive was the population displacement that began in the 1930s and accelerated during the war. The idea of humanitarian intervention entered routine discussion in the 1930s as Nazi atrocities gained more recognition and as efforts were made to care for and resettle refugees.²⁶ This suggested a new kind of "humanitarian emergency" that reached increasingly beyond war as conventionally understood. After World War II, there were renewed efforts to articulate humanitarian norms and build institutions to enforce them. This began to dominate over the more general usages referring to all manner of ways of advancing the condition of humanity. The partition of India into two countries provided a dramatic example and a compelling argument for the new concern.²⁷ Here, without any war, there was massive displacement, death, and misery.

Refugees were the most visible face of the humanitarian emergency. The Holocaust and World War II had provided the occasion for the creation of new institutions, such as the UN High Commission for Refugees. After the war a series of emergencies, many linked with decolonization and the travails of new states divided partly because of old colonial policies, provided evidence of the continuing need. Almost simultaneous with the India-Pakistan partition was the creation of the state of Israel, attendant war, and the displacement of Palestinians. This resulted in an "emergency" that continues officially to be labeled as such some sixty years later. To be sure, recurrent conflicts and displacements have kept the emergency current, but the case also reveals some of the problematic implications of using the idea of emergencies to try to grasp such problems. It implies sudden, unpredictable events that require immediate action. But many "emergencies" develop over long periods of time and are not merely predictable but are watched for weeks or months or years before they break into public consciousness or onto the agendas of policymakers.

The term "complex humanitarian emergency" gained currency toward the end of the 1980s. It seems to have been coined in Mozambique, where it reflected especially the idea that the UN needed to negotiate simultaneously with the RENAMO movement and the government in order to provide assistance outside the framework of its standard country agreements.²⁸ Mozambique

²⁶ For one call to overcome the notions of sovereignty and noninterference so central to international law, see Ellery C. Stowell, "Humanitarian Intervention," *American Journal of International Law* 33, no. 4 (1939): 733–36.

²⁷ Gidon Gottlieb, "The United Nations and Emergency Humanitarian Assistance in India-Pakistan," *American Journal of International Law* 66, no. 2 (1972): 362–65.

²⁸ Antonio Donini, *The Politics of Mercy: UN Coordination in Afghanistan, Mozambique, and Rwanda*, Occasional Paper (Providence: Brown University, Thomas J. Watson Institute, 1997); UNICEF, "Humanities Principles Training: A Child Rights Protection Approach to Complex Emergencies," <http://coe-dmha.org/unicef/unicef2fs.htm> (1999), (accessed March 26, 2004).

became a success story in providing effective help for refugees and displaced persons. Whether or not this was the precise origin of the term "complex humanitarian emergency," it points to a core theme: the idea that some emergencies have multiple causes, involve multiple local actors, and compel an international response. Wars in which at least some of the combatants are not members of an official state army and conflicts in which the distinction between civilians and combatants is weak are especially productive of complex humanitarian emergencies. And it is atrocities against civilians that make such emergencies especially morally compelling.²⁹ The Sudanese civil war and its related refugee and famine crises provided another ready example at about the same time. So did population displacements and ethnic fighting in the wake of the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Neither can stand like Mozambique as a success story.

A spike in the number of conflict-related emergencies led the United Nations University and the World Institute for Development Economics Research to speak at the end of the 1990s of "the wave of emergencies of the last decade."³⁰ The idea of a wave of emergencies reflects the notion that the global system somehow worked less well during the 1990s, and perhaps, in some ways, that is true amid adjustment to the end of the cold war. For some, the implication is that great-power rivalry was like a dike that held back a great sea of smaller conflicts—though perhaps it would be more accurate to say it organized these in more directly political-military terms than as humanitarian emergencies. But notice that the imagery of a "wave" suggests not friction within the system but surges from outside. The other common image is of a need for early warning, as though the issue were the increasing failure rate of established cybernetic feedback mechanisms. What this obscures is that the wave of emergencies arises precisely as globalization is extended and intensified, not as it deteriorates.

In any case, problems have not abated in the first decade of the twenty-first century. (Though deaths are down slightly, the range of conflict-related emergencies has proliferated.) As of October 2006, Relief Web, which serves primarily international NGOs, the United Nations, and their donors, lists thirty complex emergencies of pressing humanitarian concern, of which twenty-seven

²⁹ Media coverage that makes distant suffering seem more immediate is obviously important. How direct the media influence is on decisions to intervene and other policies is less clear; a variety of organizational and other considerations intervene. Studies are surprisingly sparse. See discussion in Robert I. Rotberg and Thomas G. Weiss, eds., *From Massacres to Genocide: The Media, Humanitarian Crises, and Policy-Making* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1996); Piers Robinson, "The Policy-Media Interaction Model: Measuring Media Power during Humanitarian Crisis," *Journal of Peace Research* 37, no. 5 (2000): 613–33; International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, *World Disasters Report 2005* (Geneva: IFRC, 2005), chap. 6.

³⁰ Jeni Klugman, *Social and Economic Policies to Prevent Complex Humanitarian Emergencies: Lessons from Experience* (Helsinki: United Nations University, World Institute for Development Economics Research, 1999).

are conflict related.³¹ The various factors are summed up by the United Nations, which says that countries face complex emergencies when they confront "armed conflicts affecting large civilian populations through direct violence, forced displacement and food scarcity, resulting in malnutrition, high morbidity and mortality."³² "Complex" here is mostly an indirect way of saying that there are multiple sides in a conflict, not merely victims, and that they are often still fighting. Of course, there is much the definition does not convey, including the fact that this suffering is inflicted mainly on people in the less developed world, though it also poses huge risks for those in the more developed world.

The term "emergency" became a sort of counterpoint to the idea of global order. Things usually worked well, it was implied, but occasionally went wrong. Emergencies were the result, and they posed demands for immediate action. Neither calamities nor population displacements were new, but this way of understanding their human consequences and ethical implications was. Taking hold of these events as emergencies involved a specific way of understanding them—what I have called the "emergency imaginary." This is the complement to growth of humanitarian intervention on a new scale.

Like the spread of thinking in terms of human rights, which shares much the same intellectual ancestry, the spread of humanitarianism is often celebrated as an indication of growing cosmopolitanism and conscience. Of course, it points as much to the ubiquity of tragedy as it does to the response to it.³³ There is a tendency to think that the causes of humanitarian emergencies are old ones, while only the cosmopolitan response to them is novel. But in fact both reflect growing global connections. The humanitarian emergencies of Rwanda, Bosnia, and Sudan are not simply the results of ancient ethnic hatreds, the permanence of poverty, or the potential for evil lurking in human nature (though each of these has arguably played a part). They are results also of geopolitics and shifting patterns in long-distance trade: colonialism, the end of the cold war, and oil. Cosmopolitanism is an ethically attractive part of the globalization package (but part of a package, and not simply an autonomous response).

On the one hand, cosmopolitanism brings out a sense of ethical obligation that is rooted in global interconnections. This is manifested even in

³¹ ReliefWeb: "Complex Emergencies," <http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/dbc.nsf/doc103?OpenForm>, (accessed October 12, 2006). The total of thirty is up from twenty-five in March 2004 and twenty-two in late 2002. The three "non-conflict-related" emergencies are (1) the East African drought that is clearly conflict exacerbated, (2) the "Southern Africa Humanitarian Crisis" in which drought, floods, and both AIDS and malaria are intertwined, and (3) the Democratic People's Republic of Korea crisis in which famine and other problems are clearly matters of international politics if not of open fighting. Relief Web also lists scores of current emergencies produced by natural disasters.

³² Relief Web, *Relief Web: United Nations Appeals*, <http://www.reliefweb.int/appeals/01appeals.html> (2001), (accessed March 26, 2004).

³³ See discussion by a range of authors in Steven Vertovec and Robin Cohen, eds., *Conceiving Cosmopolitanism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), and Daniele Archibugi, ed., *Debating Cosmopolitics* (London: Verso, 2003).

humanitarian vocations, in which many discover their most meaningful orientation to the world. On the other hand, the idea of cosmopolitan politics also reflects a distanced view of the global system, a view from nowhere or an impossible everywhere that encourages misrecognition of the actual social locations from which distant troubles appear as emergencies.³⁴ This is often a complement to a managerial orientation to the global system, as the same emergency imaginary shapes thinking about financial crises and famines. Where there is a discontinuity, there must be intervention to restore linearity and predictable functioning.

The very term “emergency” and the discourse to which it is central naturalize what are in fact products of human action and, specifically, violent conflict. They represent as sudden, unpredictable, and short term what are commonly gradually developing, predictable, and enduring clusters of events and interactions. And they simultaneously locate in particular settings what are in fact crises produced at least partially by global forces and dislocate the standpoint of observation from that of the wealthy global North to a view from nowhere.

Indeed, responding to emergencies—delivering humanitarian assistance—has become one of the characteristic modalities of globalization. It is a central engagement for global NGOs from charities such as CARE to religious organizations such as Catholic Relief Services. Some specialize in emergency relief, and many of these embrace some version of the norm of neutral assistance. Others combine a focus on emergencies and relief with longer-term development activities and/or human rights advocacy. All those I have named are large and what might be termed “mainstream” international organizations. Increasingly important are local institutions in contexts of combat and new international organizations that combine humanitarian assistance with explicit advocacy or religious agendas. These include organizations focused on human rights, on Islam, and on Christianity.

The United Nations is the largest single provider of humanitarian assistance, and while its agencies vary in orientation, most link humanitarian assistance in some degree to other agendas of development or human rights. In 1992 the UN created the Department for Humanitarian Affairs (DHA), which in 1997 was renamed the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). This office has loomed ever larger in the work of the United Nations, partly because of the UN’s increasing reliance on special appeals and voluntary contributions from its member states. The UN’s “core” budget, based on the assessments of member states, accounts for a relatively small fraction of total UN expenditures—especially for the operational agencies such as UNICEF or the World Food Programme. Perceptions of emergencies drive national contributions to the UN as much as they do private contributions to charities. Al-

though there is a consolidated appeal for support, different agencies inevitably compete for donor attention and funds.

Complementing the United Nations are both national agencies for emergency response—commonly carved out of development agencies—and private voluntary organizations. In every case, these operate with a variety of institutional imperatives of their own. Staff members make careers, even if they have chosen this work for altruistic reasons. Managers worry about funds for their organizations as well as the most effective allocations to competing humanitarian tragedies.

In short, emergencies have become normal, both on the TV news and in the budgets and operations of international organizations. I do not mean that these “emergencies” are not real and devastating, for they clearly are, nor even that they do not demand urgent attention. They are not merely mobilizing or fear-inducing tactics in the manner of fascism or the government of George Orwell’s 1984—or, I fear, the color-coded terror alert system of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. But neither are they exceptions to some rule of beneficent, peaceful existence. In 1940, when Walter Benjamin famously wrote “the tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the ‘state of emergency’ in which we live is not the exception but the rule,” he wanted to stress the underlying continuities joining fascism to modernity, against those who would treat it as a deviation and so assure themselves that progress marched on nonetheless.³⁵ Today we see not one large emergency dismissed as an exception, but innumerable smaller ones still treated as exceptions to an imaginary norm but repeated so frequently as to be normalized. Events supposed to be extraordinary have become so recurrent that aid agencies speak of “emergency fatigue.” Refugees? Infectious diseases? Ethnic conflicts? These are all certainly aspects of contemporary emergencies, and yet none could be said to be rare. Indeed, each of these sorts of emergencies is at least partially predictable and specific cases may last for years.

In analyzing technological disasters, Charles Perrow has made a similar point: accidents are normal.³⁶ They are normal not because specific events will cease to be surprising and sometimes disastrous but because it is inevitable that things will sometimes go wrong and the very complexity of certain sociotechnical systems guarantees accidents. Rather than trying to engineer the accident-free system, planners will often get better results by building in the expectation of accidents—minimizing them as best they can—and also building in coping mechanisms and responsive organizational structures. In the same sense, seeing emergencies as normal should point our attention toward planning better for dealing with them as well as toward reducing their frequency.

³⁴ Craig Calhoun, “The Class Consciousness of Frequent Travelers: Toward a Critique of Actually Existing Cosmopolitanism,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 101, no. 4 (2002): 869–97.

³⁵ Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969).

³⁶ Charles Perrow, *Normal Accidents*, rev. ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

Interventions in complex emergencies are not "solutions," because emergencies themselves are not autonomous problems in themselves but the symptoms of other underlying problems.³⁷ At the same time, it would be a mistake to think that humanitarian response should, or could, simply be abandoned in favor of work directly on the underlying problems. This would neglect the moral significance of the ideal of witness and the importance both of ministry to immediate human needs and of calling attention to the political failures that help produce problems.

But this is not to say that all the problems can be fixed, any more than all the emergencies can be managed. To think so is the illusion of a managerial orientation seeking to solve "exceptions" to the global order rather than recognizing both the contradictions and the limits of that global order. The logic of the emergency as exception typically implies that there are more or less local "root causes" to every conflict: ancient ethnic hatreds, abusive dictators, profiteering gunrunners. Searching for such "root problems" in each case may focus attention helpfully on local issues, but it also risks obscuring the extent to which the production of emergencies is a global phenomenon.

In any case, the field of international humanitarian action grew not merely in the development of new organizations and better techniques to address emergencies but in some considerable and warranted skepticism about master plans to end all conflict, poverty, and injustice. On the one side, humanitarian action expressed the moral certainty of value-rational action in its ideals (and the motivations of many to undertake it). But on the other—the side of practice—it commonly embraced "pragmatic fallibilism."³⁸ Humanitarians tried to articulate best practices and criteria of assessment, but they stuck close to the immediate situation at hand. Assistance in dire circumstances was important partly because the underlying problems admitted of no ready solutions.

David Kennedy has called forcefully for assessing the potential downsides to saving strangers: "These darker sides can swamp the benefits of humanitarian work, and well-intentioned people can find themselves unwittingly entrenching the very things they have sought voice to denounce."³⁹ Kennedy has in mind restoring the political quality of choice in contexts where expertise does not offer certainty. But toting up costs and benefits informs not only a more political consciousness but the accountability regimes sought by donor agencies.

At the same time, however, the growth of a field of humanitarian action also reflected twentieth-century doubts about comprehensive plans for improving the human lot. The post-World War II period was understood less than before as part of the advancement to an era of complete peace among nations, less

³⁷ Fiona Terry, *Condemned to Repeat? The Paradox of Humanitarian Action* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002).

³⁸ See Richard Bernstein on the virtues of pragmatic fallibilism in the face of evil: *The Abuse of Evil: The Corruption of Politics and Religion since 9/11* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005).

³⁹ David Kennedy, *The Dark Sides of Virtue: Reassessing International Humanitarianism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), xiii–xiv.

as part of the process of securing more or less universal benevolence among human beings. It was chastened and to a greater extent understood as compensatory action, mitigating the suffering occasioned by human conflicts not easily eradicated. The rise of the complex humanitarian emergency further reinforced the moral imperative felt for immediate action on the basis of suffering. Nonetheless, there were always also calls for assessment of progress. Humanitarianism never lost the association with broader projects of human improvement.

Instrumental or Value-Rational Action?

One of the enduring issues in humanitarian action is how to relate the notion of doing something that is good in itself—providing care to those suffering—to the notion of acting effectively in pursuit of a goal, such as promoting peace or simply saving lives. Following Aristotle, Max Weber distinguished value rationality from instrumental rationality to capture just this sort of distinction.⁴⁰ In the field of humanitarian action, it is reflected by the tension between an ethic of witness and one of direct political action, but also by a tension between the pursuit of moral purity that recruits many to humanitarian action and the complex criteria for assessing its efficacy.

Humanitarian action is typically understood as a project distinct from states and markets—and thus shares much with recent emphases on the virtues of civil society. Yet both humanitarian action and the occasions of human suffering it seeks to mitigate are shaped deeply by their connections to states and markets.

Humanitarian action has become a \$10 billion a year industry. It is served by a humanitarian trade fair inaugurated by the Arab Gulf state of Dubai in 2006.⁴¹ Whatever this may also do for Dubai's public image, it is a business proposition. Agencies and NGOs can check out the best deals in blankets, mosquito nets, medicines, and even body armor. The fair is conveniently located close to Africa and its large share of the global humanitarian trade. The trade fair is congenial to agencies increasingly focused on efficiency, hiring MBAs and logistics consultants, even seeking venture capital.⁴²

At the same time that humanitarian assistance has become an industry, it remains centrally a state project. Funding comes largely from states, either directly or through multilateral organizations such as the European Community Humanitarian Aid Office and various UN agencies. Negotiating access and at least minimal support from states has become a routine necessity for

⁴⁰ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Weber, *Economy and Society*.

⁴¹ The first Dubai Humanitarian Trade Fair took place shortly after the bid of a Dubai company to manage U.S. ports was blocked.

⁴² *Economist*, May 13, 2006, 57.

humanitarian action. In many complex humanitarian emergencies, security is a crucial issue and militaries are critical to delivering assistance. Militaries are also effective logistical organizations, and increasingly they compete with NGOs and civilian agencies for the business of delivering humanitarian assistance. Yet, many humanitarian actors regard states with deep suspicion or as essentially pernicious—institutions of power rather than ethics.

Neither the trade fair nor the application of business approaches to humanitarian assistance is necessarily a bad thing. Nor is it a bad thing for the operational effectiveness of military logistics to be put at the service of distributing food or clothing or medicine. Efficient aid saves more lives. Nor is it a problem that humanitarianism and emergency assistance are becoming increasingly professionalized fields of work—whether for the state or for NGOs and multilateral organizations. But each of these developments raises questions about how to understand humanitarian action as part of the contemporary global order (or disorder). It cannot be understood adequately simply as an ethical response to suffering.

Focusing on the immediate ethical imperative of reducing suffering—and especially, saving lives—has become the key feature that distinguishes humanitarian action from human rights and development. It is what gives the field its boundaries, or at least the rationale for the boundaries it desires but can seldom achieve. It is what underwrites the ideal of humanitarian neutrality and the close relationship of humanitarianism to the emergency. By contrast, human rights and development are agendas for improving the human condition, not simply humane responses to immediate suffering.

It is partly the hope for an ethically pure way of responding to global problems and suffering that drives the prominence of humanitarianism today. It is underwritten in part by the attempt to escape from what seem to be the intractable difficulties of political action and development projects. It is motivated by a sense of urgency that allows putting long-term plans to one side (or leaving them to others in an implicit division of labor). It is embraced by those who see market enthusiasms as cynical masks for greed. And yet it is drawn ineluctably back into politics, development, and markets.

Humanitarian action is thus grounded simultaneously in an individual ethical imperative to save life or alleviate suffering and a social organization designed to improve collective conditions of life. The specificity of the “field” of humanitarian action—its internal hierarchies and struggles as well as its always contested external boundaries—derives from the interface of these two dimensions and not from one alone.

The tension has been present throughout the modern era. It is not a completely new development, though it has come to the fore in recent disputes over the politicization and professionalization of humanitarian action.⁴³ The practical boundaries separating humanitarian action from development are

⁴³ A substantial literature has begun to explore the operational challenges of humanitarian assistance, the question of whether international intervention resolves emergencies or is merely

thin; lives lost to malaria are as surely lost as lives lost to cholera—though the latter is more distinctively a disease of refugee camps. Yet funds are available in response to specific catastrophes and wars, partly because responding to such events seems intrinsically ethically pure—outside of politics, outside of all the wrangling over which policies really produce development. The demarcation of humanitarian action from development is important to securing those funds. And increasingly it is also important to career paths. The distinction of humanitarian action from development and other agendas of human progress is demarcated in terms of charity, a logic of pure giving, an imperative of pure ethical response. Conversely, the distinction of humanitarian action from other arenas of charity is demarcated by the urgency of saving lives compared to the more general possibility of improving them.

The discourse of human rights also had ancient roots and underwent a renewal in the Enlightenment and the social and political reform movements that followed. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it overlapped with humanitarianism without much tension. The Declaration of the Rights of Man, for example, was emphatically humanitarian (as distinct from statements of civil rights in more nationally exclusive forms). But from the late nineteenth century, without any emphatic split with talk of human rights, usage of the notion of humanitarian action came to focus more on “relief” than rights. This drew on the constitutive emphasis of the Red Cross and its cognate organizations (such as the Red Crescent). Humanitarian action, this suggested, should be neutral toward the parties in conflict, partly simply to secure unhindered access to the wounded and the safety of aid workers. However, as we have seen, this did not stop the association of humanitarian relief with peace activism, but it did lay the basis for a distinction that would be both formative and troubled in the second half of the twentieth century. Advocating directly for human rights either was the logical outcome of the same values as humanitarian action or a violation of the norm of neutrality necessary to the very conduct of humanitarian relief.

In the context of the mid-twentieth century, the idea of humanitarian assistance was increasingly distinguished from that of human rights and “progressive” rather than compensatory projects associated more with the later term. This distinction was never airtight, of course, and many used the terms all but interchangeably. But for many actively engaged in humanitarian action, the notion of neutrality was not merely an abstract norm but a condition of safety and access in the midst of armed conflict.

The ICRC continues to emphasize the ideal of neutral assistance. But many others who strive to provide humanitarian assistance see this coming too close

palliative, the challenges of relating humanitarianism to human rights, and the implications of increasingly complex organizations. Other chapters in this book address many of these issues. See also the summary of the recent debates in Michael Barnett, “Humanitarianism Transformed,” *Perspectives on Politics* 3, no. 4 (2005): 723–40.

to accepting suffering as inevitable—because war, like the poor, will always be with us. Indeed, from the very moment of its founding, the ICRC has been criticized for making war more palatable and perhaps more likely. Instead, critics suggest we should be outraged that politics and markets have failed and suffering is the result. Contemporary humanitarian action is thus at least sometimes an implicit criticism of the state of politics, even while it is organized, like much cosmopolitanism, as an ethics instead of a politics.

This is true, for example, of the orientation of many involved in Médecins Sans Frontières. It is among the most prominent of humanitarian organizations, but not typical of the field. MSF was created from a schism within the ICRC in the context of the Biafra-Nigeria war of the late 1960s. MSF continues to share the ICRC's orientation to providing care with neutrality toward the different combatants in struggle. But it was created precisely in resistance to the notion that neutrality meant self-censorship and a refusal to report atrocities. MSF claimed a mission of witness against both specific atrocities and the larger political failures that led to them. Where the Red Cross operated with something of an implicit expectation that conflict is part of the human condition and therefore a need for humanitarian care is permanent, MSF held that care for the victims of conflict had to include advocacy for the reduction of conflict. Although MSF avoided political engagement in armed struggles, its very witness was intended as a political statement about armed struggles.

Yet the issue remains contested. It was part of the substantive question (as distinct from egos and organizational politics) that split the organization when MSF founder Bernard Kouchner and some fifteen others left to found Médecins du Monde (MDM, Doctors of the World) in 1980. The issue then was providing care to Vietnamese boat people. Solidarity with the boat people could not fail to be a political indictment of Vietnam itself; of Hong Kong, which provided only limited refuge; and the range of countries that refused asylum. The issue would return to the fore in conflicts a decade later.

The genocide in Rwanda was a watershed. The international community did not act to prevent massacres despite considerable warnings and reports of the beginnings of the massive attacks on civilians. This failure caused considerable retrospective anxiety and guilt and thereby helped to underwrite the widespread support for military intervention in the former Yugoslavia, though this came after years of confusion, uncertainty, and failure to utilize diplomatic and other peaceful channels effectively.⁴⁴ Whether bombing Serbia was a successful humanitarian intervention or simply war of the sort that humanitarians had long sought to mitigate remains a contested question. Likewise, the Congolese city of Goma symbolizes a deep dilemma for advocates of humanitarian neutrality. A million Hutu refugees fled to Goma in 1994 as a result of

⁴⁴ Among the contemporary indictments, see Mark Duffield and Joe Stork, "Bosnia Is the Classic Case of Using Humanitarian Aid as a Smokescreen to Hide Political Failure," *Middle East Report*, nos. 187–88 (1994): 18–23.

the genocidal attacks in Rwanda. Cholera broke out. The humanitarian crisis was intense. But in 1997, Rwandan government forces stormed the camps, creating additional hardship. And in the midst of this, humanitarian aid workers, including several from MSF, found themselves facing the question of whether neutrality meant providing care for wounded soldiers or militiamen who, once patched up, would return to the work of genocidal slaughter.

Yugoslavia was a turning point in the use of military power to conduct a "humanitarian intervention." Certainly earlier powers—not least, imperial powers—had used humanitarian benefits as justifications for military interventions. But through most of the twentieth century, military action had been the problem humanitarians confronted. It was a remarkable turnabout when the long association of humanitarian action with the peace movement was challenged in the 1990s. If, as David Kennedy has noted, it seemed obvious to a generation that opposition to the Vietnam War was the proper humanitarian stance, by the 1990s armed intervention often seemed almost as obviously right.⁴⁵ MSF was in a minority when it went on record against "military humanitarianism."⁴⁶ Its departed one-time leader Bernard Kouchner was more clearly in the mainstream of the moment when he became the head of the UN's administration in Kosovo.

Moreover, the notion of keeping the humanitarian and the military sharply distinct has come under enormous stress; it is perhaps a lost cause.⁴⁷ In the context of the breakup of Yugoslavia and of the central African wars and genocides, it seemed to many that military interventions were necessary humanitarian responses to certain sorts of emergencies.⁴⁸ Even those who sought to keep

⁴⁵ Kennedy, *Dark Sides of Virtue*.

⁴⁶ The term first appeared in Kurt M. Campbell and Thomas G. Weiss, "Military Humanitarianism," *Survival* 33, no. 5 (1991): 451–65. See also Alex de Waal and Rakiya Omaar, "Can Military Intervention be 'Humanitarian'?" *Middle East Report*, nos. 187–88 (1994): 2–8.

⁴⁷ This is a crucial theme in discussions of "crises of humanitarianism," an important theme, but not the one I focus on here. See Ignatieff, *Lesser Evil*; Kennedy, *Dark Sides of Virtue*; Rieff, *A Bed for the Night*; Stephen John Stedman and Fred Tanner, eds., *Refugee Manipulation: War, Politics, and the Abuse of Human Suffering* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2003); and Terry, *Condemned to Repeat?*

⁴⁸ Arguments for military intervention were by no means confined to left-liberals (or erstwhile left-liberals), but it was novel for left-liberals to be among the most active advocates of military intervention. Arguments were often rooted in a humanitarian agenda, and the Rwandan genocide became a symbol of the implications of failure to act. For many "action" clearly meant military action to stop the genocide after its onset—rather than other kinds of actions initiated much earlier. For various sides in this debate, see Seyom Brown, *The Illusion of Control: Force and Foreign Policy in the 21st Century* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2003); Mark Duffield, *Global Governance and the New Wars* (New York: Zed Books, 2001); Martha Finnemore, *The Purpose of Intervention: Changing Beliefs about the Use of Force* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003); Samantha Power, *A Problem from Hell: America in the Age of Genocide* (New York: Basic Books, 2002); Nicholas J. Wheeler, *Saving Strangers: Humanitarian Intervention in International Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); and Thomas G. Weiss, *Humanitarian Intervention: Ideas in Action* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007). Michael Barnett,

the work of humanitarian assistance "neutral" found this increasingly difficult, partly because they could not avoid working with armies or in zones controlled by one or another party to combat. And at the same time, campaigners for human rights were commonly unsympathetic to arguments that humanitarian assistance required neutrality.

Humanitarian aid organizations found themselves challenged also by the very temptation to use the magnitude of the Rwandan crisis (and a series of other emergencies) as a fund-raising focus. Few were willing to say that there was a limit to what they could do—either because of the political-military context or because of the sheer logistical difficulty of putting additional funds quickly to work. As James Orbinski, president of MSF's International Council, put it in accepting the Nobel Peace Prize awarded to the organization:

There are limits to humanitarianism. No doctor can stop genocide. No humanitarian can stop ethnic cleansing, just as no humanitarian can make war. And no humanitarian can make peace. These are political responsibilities, not humanitarian imperatives. Let me say this very clearly: the humanitarian act is the most apolitical of all acts, but if actions and its morality are taken seriously, it has the most profound of political implications. And the fight against impunity is one of these implications.⁴⁹

Orbinski went on to restate the idea of witness: "Ours is an ethic of refusal. It will not allow any moral political failure or injustice to be sanitized or cleansed of its meaning." The issue remains whether the direct expression of normative values—ideals of peaceful action or care for the suffering—is self-justifying or must be weighed alongside action that can change the conditions the produce conflicts, and atrocities in conflicts.

Complex History, Pressing Questions

Humanitarian action, I have suggested, is informed by at least three longstanding value orientations: to mitigate suffering wherever it occurs, to improve the condition of humanity in general, and to respond to sudden, unexpected, and

Eyewitness to a Genocide: The United Nations and Rwanda (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), addresses the role of the UN in Rwanda. Among the journalistic reports that focused attention on the absence of intervention in Rwanda, see Philip Gourevitch, *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families: Stories on Rwanda* (London: Picador, 1999), and Linda Melvern, *A People Betrayed: The Role of the West in Rwanda's Genocide* (New York: Zed Books, 2000). Alan Kuperman, *The Limits of Intervention: Genocide in Rwanda* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2001), makes the case that successful intervention in Rwanda (after the killing had started) was more or less "logistically" impossible.

⁴⁹ Cited from the MSF Canada website, <http://www.msf.ca/nobel/speech.htm> (accessed October 22, 2006).

morally compelling crises. Though these sometimes reinforce each other and all have supported the growth of the field of humanitarian action, they are not identical and they also come into conflict.

The tension between charity (one form of value-rational action) and the pursuit of progress (based on more instrumental versions of liberal ethics) informs the dispute between David Rieff and Michael Ignatieff cited in the introduction to this chapter, and this is indicative of a tension in the field. Recruitment to work in humanitarian assistance is significantly based on seeing humanitarian action as "value rational," an end in itself and intrinsically self-justifying. But at the same time, humanitarian action has become the province of large-scale organizations, donors with demands for evidence of efficacy and efficiency, and a profession with its own standards of good performance. Against the "value rational" sources that have given much impetus to humanitarianism there is a growing instrumental orientation. Reconciling moral self-justification and instrumental assessment is difficult.

Basic questions have been raised about the viability of existing approaches to humanitarian relief. Does the neutrality pioneered by the Red Cross and insisted on by nearly all actors throughout the twentieth century still work? Or is it compromised practically when humanitarian interventions are carried out under the operational umbrella or even the formal auspices of military forces? Or again, is it compromised ethically when the lives to be saved include those of killers likely to return to participation in ethnic violence and civil wars? And still again, is it compromised politically either when humanitarian agencies take on human rights advocacy as part of their agendas or when they conclude that backing from authorities and powers that be is pivotal to success? Questions have been raised also about the accountability of humanitarian organizations, about whether existing agencies and NGOs are the most efficient vehicles for saving lives, and about how to assess the impacts of interventions.⁵⁰ Many in the field worry about the unintended consequences of ethically well-intentioned actions.⁵¹

These questions are all pressing. They bear immediately on the operations of organizations undertaking humanitarian action and the choices of individuals

⁵⁰ The very notion of responding to emergencies is, however, a challenge to organizational structures (in which emergencies are often addressed separately from primary programs and as "exceptions"), to the development of long-term responses (which can always be postponed), and to improving interventions (since conducting research into their effectiveness and efficiency can seem a distraction from the more urgent tasks).

⁵¹ Kennedy, *Dark Sides of Virtue*. See also Terry, *Condemned to Repeat?*; William Shawcross, *Deliver Us from Evil: Peacekeepers, Warlords, and a World of Endless Conflict* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000); Michael Maren, *The Road to Hell: The Ravaging Effects of Foreign Aid and International Charity* (New York: Free Press, 1997); Alex de Waal, *Famine Crimes: Politics and the Disaster Relief Industry in Africa* (Oxford: James Curry, 1997); Barnett, *Eyewitness to Genocide*; and Peter J. Hoffman and Thomas G. Weiss, *Sword and Salve: Confronting New Wars and Humanitarian Crises* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006).

working in humanitarian emergencies. But the questions also reflect underlying issues in the way humanitarian action is conceptualized and the way it fits into the contemporary world. It is rooted in a self-justifying ethical imperative: to reduce suffering or, even more starkly, to save lives.⁵² Yet it is undertaken in a variety of circumstances that challenge moral clarity, in complex organizations that demand instrumental orientations to action, and on the basis of funding arrangements that carry requirements for accountability, efficiency, and criteria for choosing types and locations of interventions.

The idea of humanitarian action grew in the context of late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century philanthropic reform movements. It reflected religious roots but also a new emphasis on the secular—improving the human condition in this world. Growing twentieth-century attention to the suffering of civilians in the context of war and to refugees and other victims of collateral damage from armed conflict gave humanitarian action more of a “compensatory” cast. The challenges of working amid continued fighting informed an ideal of neutral assistance. This in turn came under challenge as demanding a level of silence before atrocity inconsistent with the goal of an apolitical but publicly salient witness not only to suffering but to evil. Still humanitarianism was associated with the pursuit of peace and, through the idea of human rights, with the notion of longer term progress.

Humanitarian action has been further transformed by the rise of complex humanitarian emergencies. These involve, among other things, armed conflicts in which the distinction between civilians and combatants is less clear and less respected, and usually in which at least one side is not a sovereign state. These emergencies are constructed as part of a broad social imaginary in which they are seen as exceptions to normal social life and global order: sudden, unpredictable, and carrying strong moral imperatives for immediate action.⁵³ This imaginary exaggerates the extent to which the occasions for humanitarian action are outside of and other to the nation-state system and global order. It encourages use of the idea of emergency to organize response to quite long-term displacements of people and other forms of suffering. Yet emergencies are many and often large scale.

⁵² Decision makers in the field of humanitarian action place enormous emphasis on “saving lives.” This, they say, must come ahead even of reducing such traumas as rape. The emphasis on saving life reflects several factors. One is the reduction to “bare life” implicit in attempting to think of lives as such rather than as essentially lived by real persons with their conceptions of human dignity, their cultural understandings, and individual values. Another is the urge to find the ethically purest standard for judgment, that least vulnerable to disputes from a consequentialist logic. And still another is the desire for accountability. Lives saved may be hard to count, but there is at least the illusion of accurate quantitative assessment.

⁵³ I have described this in more detail in “A World of Emergencies: Fear, Intervention, and the Limits of Cosmopolitan Order,” *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* 41, no. 4 (2004): 373–95.

Although the emergency imaginary reinforces the idea of a moral imperative for immediate action (rather than planning and instrumental evaluation), the scale of mobilization involved encourages the development of organizational procedures, professional identity, and all manner of instrumental concerns. The emergency imaginary that operates today reflects both the idea that it is possible and desirable to “manage” global affairs and the idea that many if not all of the conflicts and crises that challenge global order are the result of exceptions to it.

The emergency imaginary reinforces the tendency—already long established—to approach humanitarian action as “value rational,” an end in itself and intrinsically self-justifying. But at the same time, humanitarian action has become the province of large-scale organizations, donors with demands for evidence of efficacy and efficiency, and a profession with its own standards of good performance. Against the “value-rational” sources that have given much impetus to humanitarianism there is not only a growing instrumental orientation, but an erosion of the boundaries of the field of humanitarian action. Militaries, development agencies, and others with different histories and predominant orientations to instrumental rationality challenge long-standing humanitarian organizations.

I have not offered resolutions to these issues but only an attempt to clarify something of the lineages of understanding and practical orientation that have shaped humanitarian action. Being clearer about the values and organizational logics in dispute may make it easier for different actors to understand one another, even if not necessarily to agree.