

Books and Reviews

The philosophical and religious dimension of humanitarian action

Reflections on two philosophical essays

Luc Ferry, *L'Homme-Dieu ou le sens de la vie*, an essay, Éditions Bernard Grasset, Paris, 1996, 250 pp.

Alain Finkielkraut, *L'Humanité perdue, Essai sur le XX^e siècle*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1996, 174 pp.

Humanitarian activities, humanitarian assistance, humanitarian ethics, humanitarian strategy, humanitarian diplomacy, even humanitarian disaster (which is a nonsense)... All these concepts, nowadays often grouped together under the term "humanitarian action", have generated much literature in recent years. Legal experts, politicians, physicians, journalists, members of non-governmental organizations, theoreticians and practitioners have used critical analysis or first-hand accounts of specific cases to get a better grasp of humanitarian action so as to discover its underlying meaning, its strengths and limitations, and identify its present trends. The *Review* has reported on a number of these studies.¹

The humanitarian phenomenon is a developing one; judging by the discussions it provokes within the churches and by the conferences and

¹ See its reviews of: Rony Brauman, *Le dilemme humanitaire. Entretien avec Philippe Petit*, in *IRRC*, No. 312, May-June 1996, pp. 399-402; *Dérives humanitaires, États d'urgence et droit d'ingérence*, *IRRC*, No. 305, March-April 1995, pp. 233-236; Michèle Mercier, *Crimes sans châtement. L'action humanitaire en ex-Yougoslavie (1991-1993)*, in *IRRC*, No. 301, July-August 1994, pp. 401-403; Bernard Kouchner, *Le malheur des autres*, and Xavier Emmanuelli, *Les prédateurs de l'action humanitaire*, in *IRRC*, No. 288, May-June 1992, pp. 316-318; Jean-Christophe Rufin, *Le piège - Quand l'aide humanitaire remplace la guerre*, in *IRRC*, No. 257, March-April 1987, pp. 233-235; Bernard Kouchner, *Charité-Business — l'argent et le rêve*, in *IRRC*, No. 254, September-October 1986, pp. 303-306.

philosophical works devoted to it, it appears to have recently acquired a philosophical and religious dimension.

Is it not well on the way to becoming mankind's new religion? Is not the humanitarian idea supplanting the precepts of traditional religions and becoming the new law of universal love? Has it not become the ultimate way of finding a purpose in life? Or is it perhaps the redeeming feature of a century that produced the horrors of concentration camps? In short, by exemplifying the spiritual adventure of the late 20th century and turning into a religious ethic, will humanitarian action bear out the prediction attributed to André Malraux that either the 21st century will be a religious one, or it will not exist at all?

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In his latest book, entitled "L'Homme-Dieu ou le sens de la vie", Luc Ferry, author of many prominent works on philosophy and current chairman of the Programmes Committee at the French Ministry of National Education, attempts to answer these fundamental questions. His argument is based on the three following considerations:

- The relative decline of religion in the Christian Western world and the disappearance of ideologies which preserved the sense of things sacred within the community have obscured the question of the meaning of life, especially in an age marked by the pursuit of profit, wealth, fame and material well-being.
- The gains made by secularism and democracy, a legacy of the Age of Enlightenment, and the influence of thinkers such as Nietzsche and Weber have led to a gradual breakaway from religion (especially from its dogma and edicts) and to the creation of a moral code on a human scale, one "where people do not need religion to make them honest and charitable, and where they do not need to believe in God so as to do their duty".²*
- Nevertheless the author acknowledges that, like the traditional Christian religions, this lay morality does not fulfil the need for transcen-

² Ferry, p. 39.

* All quotations are ICRC translations.

dence and ideals superior to life, as evidenced by the existence of other forms of spirituality, re-emergence of cults and sects, rediscovery of Buddhism, etc.

How does Ferry use the above points to interpret this call for a higher authority that some media have called a “thirst for God”?³

In his view, man cannot live without transcendence if he wishes to give some meaning to the experiences of life, to suffering, death, love, good and evil. But that transcendence — and this is where the novelty lies — no longer comes from an all-powerful God, nor is it deduced from a revelation. It comes from man himself. Modern humanism gives rise to a genuine spirituality that is rooted in man’s nature. From this affirmation Ferry develops the modern question of the meaning of life, using a two-fold approach.

The first, which he calls “humanization of the divine”, shows that over centuries the content of the Christian revelation has become humanized. The secular movement has gained considerable ground in the democratic countries of Europe, and Catholics in particular increasingly subject the Pope’s edicts to critical scrutiny, calling for a religion closer to man. While preserving the sense of transcendence, Christians increasingly reject traditional dogma in favour of the ideology of human rights.

This thesis is contested by Pope John Paul II who in his encyclical *The Splendour of Truth*⁴ reaffirms the impossibility of doubting the existence of the ultimate religious basis of moral standards, and proclaims that truth is not established by human beings but by divine law. Accepting freedom of conscience as the sole criterion of truth would be tantamount to denying that divine revelation possesses a specific moral content, one that is permanently and universally valid.

Ferry recognizes that the Pope’s position is legitimate but cannot agree with it because of the prohibitions contained both in the encyclical and in the teachings of the Catholic Church. He believes that freedom of conscience, even for someone of Christian faith, cannot be reconciled with what is forbidden. Modern ethics can no longer accept the doctrine of duty. Christianity no longer has a monopoly on respect for the human being,

³ “Soif de Dieu” is the title of *Le Nouvel Observateur*’s recent report on the subject, Special Report, No. 28, n.d. (1996).

⁴ “Veritatis Splendor” (The Splendour of Truth), 1993.

on concern for one's fellows, for their dignity and suffering. Does one even need to be a believer in order to adopt the human rights philosophy? Consequently, Christian ethics might be viewed simply as a measure of religious belief enhancing the ideology of human rights.

The author feels closer to the German theologian Eugen Drewermann, who in his attempt to reinterpret the Gospels⁵ tries to humanize the divine by reconciling religion with psychoanalysis and humanism with spirituality — in a word, by bringing religion nearer to man.

Ferry finds a similar development in the treatment of the problem of evil. The traditional Church affirms that the devil really exists. Rousseau and other lay thinkers counter this with their belief in human responsibility, while the humanities of our time secularize evil, holding that it does not exist as such but is the product of a system or context or social class, or of the family, and can be determined by genes and hormones! Does this mean that human beings are no longer responsible for evil? This is a particularly difficult question — can we simply dismiss as the victim of a system someone who deliberately tortures another or orders a village to be razed to the ground? According to Ferry, if we accept that man is no longer responsible for the evil he commits, then how can we set off humanitarian activities in the broad sense of the term against actions that we consider inhumane? “If man is relieved of responsibility for doing evil, shouldn't he also be relieved of responsibility for doing good?” Is this the dilemma of free will? The author does not settle the age-old controversy about the mystery of evil; he merely considers that moral good is inseparable from the possibility of evil, and that man can try to humanize evil even if he is aware that mankind will never get rid of it.

How can evil be resisted? Can lay ethics muster strength enough to fight it? Ferry opts for “making human ways divine”, an approach which uses the humanitarian ideal to justify and strengthen man's commitment to doing good.

To illustrate the second part of his argument, Ferry stresses the thirst for ethics that characterizes our times and manifests itself in the proliferation of humanitarian organizations and their unceasing fight for human rights and against racism and social exclusion. The ethics behind these organizations always entail the idea of sacrifice, but Ferry shows that lay ethics strengthen the idea of duty in the sense that self-sacrifice is no

⁵ Eugen Drewermann, *Dein Name ist wie der Geschmack des Lebens*, Herder, Freiburg im Breisgau/Basel, 2nd ed., 1992.

longer made for God or country or any ideology, but is "freely accepted and felt to be an inner need."⁶ Devotion finds its sole source in the individual, and sacrifice, which is proof of one's concern for others, acts as an essential counterpoise to concern for one's own self. In support of his argument the author shows that over centuries the concept of love has changed. Once limited to the concept of divine love, it has now become humanized so far as to reconcile selfishness and altruism. Having been influenced by democratic ideas, which affirm that there is no intrinsic difference between human beings, man cannot remain indifferent to the misfortunes of others.

In Ferry's view, therefore, humanitarian activities bear witness to a new aspiration, one that is quite distinct from traditional forms of charity and which expresses the need for solidarity with the entire human race, especially since the identity and integrity of modern man are increasingly under threat. Not only because genocide is so much more frequent, conflicts more numerous and violence on the increase, says the author, but also because of the serious threat of genetic manipulation which could transform the human species. This is why humanitarian action, in which believers and atheists alike take part, has become the primary moral concern of our time.

Alain Finkielkraut, world-renowned philosopher, shares this view. Surveying the 20th century in his book *L'Humanité perdue*, he sees humanitarian action as one way of making amends for the misdeeds of a century that allowed concentration camps and made the very idea of humanity a murderous one.⁷

Remarkably, both Ferry and Finkielkraut mention Henry Dunant and the foundation of the Red Cross, the first recognized major example of lay humanitarian endeavour. Both stress the exceptional scope of the Red Cross ideal and regard as especially important the idea that all victims should be treated with impartiality. Human beings, especially when in distress, are the focus of a new religion, that of humane conduct.

Both authors also agree in indicating the obstacles to universal application of the principles of humanity, impartiality and neutrality. How can this be achieved when every day the gap between the ideal and the facts

⁶ Ferry, p. 122.

⁷ We have focused in particular on Chapter 5, "La réparation humanitaire".

widens visibly? Too many disasters breed indifference, and the overabundance of information increases it.

Ferry quotes examples to show that charitable activities given extensive media coverage have become the most visible symptom of a society greedy for entertainment, one that it is good form to criticize in political and even in humanitarian circles. Nevertheless, he regards media coverage of humanitarian activities as a good thing rather than a bad one, if only because it provides information and spurs public opinion into action.

Another widespread criticism is that humanitarian action appeals to the emotions rather than the intellect, to the heart rather than the mind. "Could humanitarian action be a mild form of fascism?"⁸

Ferry believes that it is precisely because the idea of humanitarian action is derived from the Declaration of the Rights of Man, which is universal in scope, that it should consider only victims in the abstract, without any connection with their roots in the community. By secularizing charity, humanitarian action extends it beyond traditional areas of solidarity.

The international operation in Somalia is evidence of this; there were no shared community ties between the people of the Western world and the population of Somalia. The operation was carried out as a result of pressure exerted by public opinion, shocked by what it saw, and in spite of all the delays and mistakes of the military, it managed to save hundreds of thousands of lives.

Finkielkraut, like Ferry, stresses that humanitarian workers today do not differentiate between one wounded person and another. They follow their immediate instinct, which comes from the heart. "From now on the heart prevails over history and emotion resumes its proper place."⁹

If humanitarian workers are duty-bound to help victims without making any distinction between them, should they also maintain strict neutrality in their relations with persons responsible for conflicts and violence? Finkielkraut points out an ambiguity in international humanitarian law which imposes restrictions on national sovereignty but depends on the goodwill of States for its application. He also recalls that in 1942

⁸ Ferry, p. 195.

⁹ Finkielkraut, p. 126.

the ICRC chose to say nothing about Nazi concentration camps so as not to jeopardize its help to prisoners of war. He contrasts the attitude of the ICRC with that of the French doctors working in Biafra in 1968, who decided to speak out and followed the example of Solferino by proclaiming in a charter that for humanitarian workers only the interest of the victims mattered, and that they could therefore voluntarily break all the rules when these were being applied to the detriment of fellow human beings. Finkelkraut considers that the Biafra doctors were still respecting neutrality (sic) when they proclaimed that they were duty-bound, and had a right, to come to the aid of all victims, whatever the ideology of their oppressors. He adds, however, that today it is no longer possible to condone appallingly inhumane acts perpetrated for reasons of State, nor to accept evil in the name of the superior interests of mankind. To quote Lévinas, "Justifying my neighbour's suffering is the source of all immorality."¹⁰

This is the crux of a decades-old debate — can one help people while condemning their conduct? Can one infringe the principle of neutrality and still be credible? Does this not lead back to the eternal confusion between impartiality and neutrality?

Ferry also points out that humanitarian action is criticized as being a means of diverting citizens from issues that really need to be addressed, and that by combating the effects rather than the causes of crises it may well prolong privations. In the field, States use it as an excuse for inaction, as in Bosnia-Herzegovina. State humanitarianism, which is ineffective, undermines and discredits private humanitarian efforts. Intervention on humanitarian grounds may be in keeping with universally applied humanitarian principles, but in every conflict situation it entails the risk of a return to colonialism, and any intervention it claims to justify is the result of arbitrary decisions.

While not openly taking sides for or against the right of intervention on humanitarian grounds, Ferry is against doing away with humanitarian diplomacy and going back to old-style diplomacy. It would not be true to claim that in Bosnia, for example, European States would have intervened more forcefully had there been no humanitarian activities under way, and that it was because of these that they said nothing for so long.

¹⁰ Lévinas, "La souffrance inutile", in *Entre nous, Essais sur le Penser-à-l'autre*, Grasset, 1991, p. 116, quoted by Finkelkraut, pp. 125-126.

Ferry recognizes that in the end the great difficulty lies in sorting out the relations between politics and humanitarian action. Combining them would be absurd, and in practice do harm; self-serving initiatives by governments would endanger private organizations and this is why, he stresses, "the Red Cross has until now upheld the principle of neutrality."¹¹ Keeping them completely separate would relegate politics to the practice of cynicism, and morality to the private sector. The two have to be linked in some way, however, because "although humanitarian action is not a matter of politics, in a democratic system politics cannot disregard humanitarian matters."¹² Political leaders must therefore take into consideration the fact that humanitarian action is the only answer to the evil ingrained in human nature: "Fighting evil and other people's misfortunes, and for that purpose going at the risk of one's life to far-off lands where human folly has at least the merit of providing a temporary escape from the monotony of everyday life — isn't that the quintessence of humanitarian Utopia, in spite of all that has been said against it?"¹³

Like Rony Brauman¹⁴, Ferry believes that humanitarian workers are the last privileged few of modern times, because they have managed to give their lives a purpose.

Ferry obviously believes that human beings are sacred, that they have somehow been made divine, and in his conclusion he therefore elevates the humanitarian ideal into a religion of man-God. He lays down the premises of a "transcendental" humanism, a lay spirituality taking the place of traditional religions and hard-line materialism. Man made sacred is the starting point and the ultimate goal of a humanistic approach that sees love, especially the love of one's fellow human beings, as the true meaning of life.

Finkielkraut does not share Ferry's idealistic vision. Humanitarian workers caring for the sick and wounded are not interested in who these are, what they represent or why they are being persecuted. All that matters is saving lives. Solidarity thus turns into mothering on a huge scale, but humanitarian action is absent from the upheavals and tensions that precede

¹¹ Ferry, p. 201.

¹² Ferry, p. 202.

¹³ Ferry, p. 203.

¹⁴ Rony Brauman, *Le dilemme humanitaire. Entretien avec Philippe Petit*, Éditions Textuel, Paris, 1996, quoted by Ferry, p. 205.

disasters. In this respect, Finkelkraut believes humanitarian action to be simplistic.

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If we were to cast a critical glance at these two books, we would first of all note that this search for the meaning of life, for a moral frame of reference, and this ferment of ideas about humanitarian ideals, are essentially Western phenomena. The real victims of the "disenchantment with the world" are, says Max Weber, to be found mainly in the Christian Western world, particularly among European Catholics. As Jean Daniel says, "neither the Muslims in the Western world, nor the Turks, Moroccans or migrants, nor the Jews anywhere, nor even the majority of American Protestants, appear to be in desperate search of their lost frames of reference."¹⁵ Things should be put in perspective, and generalizations should be avoided.

Humanitarian action that Ferry sees elevated to the status of a new religion is exclusively a lay movement — this is an express condition of its universality — and is completely neutral. But it is also a concept that turns love into something sacred, and in this it is close to Christian love. Ferry himself recognizes that modern humanism draws its strength from the ideal of Christian love. This "revamped" humanistic approach therefore does not reject altogether the ideals which have been promoted by the great religions of the world for thousands of years. Is not Ferry's humanitarian ideal in fact the Christian ideal rid of its dogmas, prohibitions and constraints, and therefore easier to propagate because it is more readily accessible? The question remains whether a lay spirituality based on human rights can command unanimous approval, given the interpretations, deviations and dysfunctions to which human rights are subject. And how would other cultures and religions regard the Christian values of solidarity and brotherhood *once these were divested of their religious dimension?*

Both Finkelkraut and Ferry praise humanitarian organizations for denouncing scandals and rehabilitating victims, but what bothers Finkelkraut is that humanitarian action confines itself to caring for victims and takes no interest in the causes and effects of scourges. Ac-

¹⁵ Jean Daniel, "Le seul bagage qui vaille ...", *Le Nouvel Observateur*, *op. cit.* (footnote 3).

ording to him, the humanitarian effort needs bloodshed to prompt it into action, it feeds on human distress — a phenomenon which he describes as a sentimental reaction to distress¹⁶. This statement seems far too sweeping and even inaccurate. Ferry, for his part, fully understands that humanitarian assistance cannot be limited to emergency situations, that it should also try to alleviate the causes of suffering and to repair the harm done, and at any rate find others to take over and ensure the rehabilitation of the victims and the subsequent development of their communities.

Many governmental and non-governmental international organizations — International Red Cross included — have been pursuing this line of action for decades now; as we know, many preventive mechanisms have been introduced before, during and after conflicts, with varying degrees of success. On the other hand, coordination between the organizations concerned, between decision-makers and those taking action, has often yielded favourable results.

All these are valid arguments, but do not suffice to settle the problem of relations between politics and humanitarian action. Finkelkraut tries to explain what he means by the simplistic approach of the latter. In his view, humanitarian initiatives relieve politicians of responsibility by allowing them to “engage in narcissistic first aid instead of resolving the difficult issue of how to help (...) to make the world a place fit to live in for these beings, all alike and yet all different, who comprise mankind.”¹⁷

But who is to blame? Political leaders, who because of their weaknesses and mistakes have unloaded their responsibilities onto the humanitarian sector, indirectly causing its great expansion, with the help of the media? Or the humanitarian organizations, which can at best patch things up, mainly for lack of funds? Some people, however, look upon these organizations as the last hope of solving the great problems of our times. How can political and humanitarian affairs be “linked together”, as Ferry so imperiously recommends? Which of the two, the public sector or the private one, is better equipped to take the initiative in humanitarian matters?

There is no answer to any of those questions, all of them of crucial importance to the future of humanitarian action. The influential ideologies are no more, and the balance between the great Powers has disappeared;

¹⁶ Finkelkraut, p. 134.

¹⁷ Finkelkraut, p. 136.

this perhaps explains the shortcomings of the international community. But how can one reasonably believe that humanitarian action, now ennobled as the religion of love, can by itself reconcile antagonists, overcome wilful omissions, banish doubt, ease people's anguish, and crush evil?

For the time being, in Kundera's words, "Man proceeds in the fog."¹⁸

Both of these outstanding essays raise fundamental questions about the nature and the future of humanitarian action. Ferry's utopian conclusions and Finkelkraut's pessimistic ones leave many questions unanswered, and some of their assertions are not wholly convincing. Both authors, however, must be given credit for putting forward arguments that go far beyond anything offered on this vast subject up until now. Their opinions and questions are a powerful incentive for us to continue reflecting on the meaning of life, the problem of evil and the future of the humanitarian ideal; they also serve as a reminder that we should not slacken our efforts to adapt humanitarian action to the challenges facing us on the threshold of a new millennium.

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Mario Bettati, *Le droit d'ingérence. Mutation de l'ordre international*, Éditions Odile Jacob, Paris, 1996, 384 pp.

Alain Pellet (éd.), *Droit d'ingérence ou devoir d'assistance humanitaire?*, Problèmes politiques et sociaux, Nos. 758-759, December 1995, La Documentation française, Paris, 136 pp.

Advocates of the "right of intervention" see evidence of the success of their proposals in the adoption by the United Nations General Assembly of resolutions 43/131 (1988) and 45/100 (1990) on "humanitarian assistance to victims of natural disasters and similar emergency situations".

¹⁸ Milan Kundera, *Testaments Betrayed*, Faber & Faber, London, 1996, p. 240, quoted by Finkelkraut, p. 134.