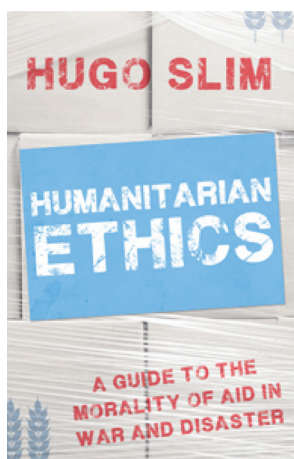


BOOK REVIEW



Humanitarian Ethics: A Guide to the Morality of Aid in War and Disaster

Hugo Slim*

Book review by Fiona Terry, an independent researcher who has completed studies for the International Committee of the Red Cross in Sudan and Afghanistan. She holds a doctorate in international relations from the Australian National University, and is the author of *Condemned to Repeat? The Paradox of Humanitarian Action* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, and London, 2002).

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As the humanitarian enterprise faces some of its toughest challenges in trying to help people suffering from an unprecedented number of simultaneous conflicts and disasters around the world, Hugo Slim's new book *Humanitarian Ethics: A Guide to the Morality of Aid in War and Disaster* takes us on a fascinating journey into the heart of what it is we are trying to do, why we are doing it, and how. His deeply insightful examination of humanitarian ethics unpacks the values behind the humanitarian endeavour, the moral tensions that arise in carrying it out, and the ways in which humanitarian individuals and organizations can think through these issues and strive to act in the most responsible way they can.

At a time when many humanitarian veterans struggle to see their passion and commitment to humanitarian ideals reflected in a newer generation of often career-minded, corporate-thinking aid executives, Slim offers a vital reminder of the sentiments that gave birth to humanitarianism, how these have been formalized and put into practice over the past few decades, and how tendencies

* Published by Hurst & Company, London, 2015.

to expand conceptions of humanitarian action into peacebuilding and the defence of human rights can compromise efforts to uphold the essential goal of saving lives and preserving dignity.

In keeping with his positive persona, Slim's tone throughout the book is one of optimism and encouragement, and he chides authors – including myself – who have emphasized the ethical pitfalls of humanitarian action. “The proper focus of humanitarian ethics should rest on how to be a good humanitarian worker, not on how to avoid being a bad one [T]he call to do good is a much more positive professional motivation than the more censorious call to avoid doing harm”, according to Slim.¹ He manages to sustain an even-handed commentary throughout the book, even when describing some of the most ethically problematic aspects of the aid industry, such as the disparity in treatment of national and international staff in, for example, medical or security evacuation protocols, or in the huge salaries and lavish lifestyle enjoyed by many United Nations (UN) personnel while working for the world's most vulnerable and dispossessed. But while I admire Slim's inspirational approach, I believe that his book should become the indispensable *vade mecum* of every humanitarian agency because such organizations often do not think clearly enough about what they are doing, how they are doing it, and the consequences for the populations they profess to assist as well as for other agencies who share the “humanitarian” label.

The major contribution of this book is to demystify the subject of ethics, to provide a clear and logical explanation of the ethical framework guiding humanitarian action, and to offer insight on how to balance competing principles or values according to the operating context on the ground. Although aid organizations are constantly making ethical decisions in the way that they decide which members of the population to prioritize or how much risk to take, these choices are rarely framed in the language of ethics. So, as Slim points out, for those aid agencies not used to hearing problems raised in these terms – which in my experience is the majority – an “ethical” problem immediately takes on dramatic importance and leads “unnecessarily into a predicament of extreme options” in an agency's thinking.² I have found that even within those organizations that do think about ethics, this is not always done in an informed or structured manner, and humanitarian principles are recited as a mantra and treated as moral absolutes. A tragic example of this occurred in Somalia, where an aid worker refused an offer from the African Union Forces (AMISOM) to take his seriously wounded colleague to the AMISOM hospital because his agency was “independent”. After delays in finding an alternative vehicle in the commotion, the wounded man was taken to a local hospital, where he died in surgery. Slim provides a refreshingly clear and lucid discussion on how to interpret the best meaning of humanitarian principles in a given context and how to balance this

1 *Humanitarian Ethics*, p. 7.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 156.

with ethical practices of deliberation, good judgement and practical wisdom in order to decide on the best course of action.

The book is divided into three parts, which are cleverly woven together to give maximum clarity to the concepts raised. Part 1 explores the ethical foundations of humanitarian action, tracing how some of the great philosophers, such as Aristotle, David Hume, Thomas Aquinas, Paul Ricoeur and Peter Singer, explain the humanitarian impulses of compassion, empathy and a sense of responsibility for the plight of distant strangers. Part 2 then looks at the modern elaboration of humanitarian principles, beginning with the four core principles of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence) and then explaining some of the thirty-three other principles that Slim identifies as influencing the thought and actions of this vast “humanitarian” sector.³

The way Slim has organized the discussion of these principles helps enormously in breaking down some of the misconceptions and stereotypes around them. Humanity and impartiality are identified as the goal of humanitarian action, and Slim goes to considerable lengths to dissect them into their component ideas. He considers, for instance, how we might ensure the “radical equality” proscribed by impartiality, and determine what fairness in the provision of humanitarian aid might be. Neutrality and independence are presented as the “political principles”, thereby firmly establishing their roles as operational postures that facilitate “being inside a conflict without being problematically invested in it”,⁴ rather than as values to honour in themselves. Slim then explores what he terms the “dignity principles” of participation, empowerment and respect that feature in the Code of Conduct for aid agencies in disaster relief, pointing out some of the strengths and weaknesses found in their application in different contexts. Here his discussion on the dignified representation of aid recipients through respectful imagery in fundraising materials and his objection to condescending yet ubiquitous labels such as “beneficiary” strike an important cord. Lastly, he considers sustainability and accountability to be “stewardship principles”, guiding humanitarians to use their resources wisely and assuming responsibility for their actions in the immediate and longer term.

In the same chapter, Slim also identifies some of the structural weaknesses of the humanitarian sector which have compromised efforts to increase the accountability of humanitarian actors, particularly the continued dominance of accountability upwards to donors rather than to the people whom agencies profess to help, and the continued lack of regulation of the humanitarian sector: “no party, whether donor, agency, local authority or recipient community, is under real external scrutiny to see if and how they are making the most of aid and abiding by humanitarian law and principles in its application”.⁵

3 These principles are listed on p. 40, and are divided into four categories according to their main *raison d'être* (“principles in law”; “principles of action”, “principles of dignity, participation and stewardship”, and “principles of effectiveness”).

4 *Humanitarian Ethics*, p. 66.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 107.

Part 3 examines what it means to make ethical decisions on the ground, exploring many of the factors that influence the choices made by individuals and agencies. Chapter 7 tackles the role of reason and emotion in decision-making, and Chapter 8 examines what ethical deliberation might look like. But it is in Chapters 9, 10 and 11 that I think aid workers will find the most interest, as Slim unpacks the basic structure of moral choices from those that are obvious, those that require compromise, those that create a slippery slope, those that involve suspending a moral norm for a wider moral good, and those that constitute a genuine moral dilemma where one must choose between two equally bad options. Chapter 10 then addresses the crucial question of how we assess where moral responsibility lies, which requires consideration of a whole range of factors. These include the level of agency or involvement that an individual or organization had in an act; the intention behind the action; the motives of the actor; the level of knowledge or ignorance at the actor's disposal; the capacity of the actor, for one can only be held responsible for what one can realistically do; the mitigation measures that were engaged to limit the worst effects of the action; and the quality and quantity of deliberation undertaken before deciding on a particular course of action.

In Chapter 11, Slim gives us a stronger glimpse into his moral reasoning as he examines some of the persistent ethical problems that arise in the course of humanitarian operations, applying the ideas and principles developed in earlier chapters to specific problems encountered in various contexts. And it is here that we can most clearly see how two individuals or organizations can face the same moral problems in the same context and yet make very different decisions on how to respond to them, depending on which principles and values they prioritize and what information they choose to include in their ethical deliberation. Slim takes issue with what he considers are exaggerated claims against aid organizations of ethical responsibility for harm inflicted on populations in several morally problematic aid operations, such as the response to the Ethiopian famine in 1984–1985 and war and displacement in Darfur from 2004 to 2011. He rightly points to humanitarians only ever having a secondary responsibility in events caused by political and military actors, and makes a convincing case – drawing on the work of Chiara Lepora and Robert Goodin⁶ – for how the charge of aid agency “complicity” in wrongdoing is exaggerated when we dig deeper into what this notion really means. It is difficult to cite an instance where aid organizations plotted or colluded with political or military actors in oppressing, displacing or otherwise harming a community, and the most they can be charged with are contributing roles in some wrongdoing like, for example, lending legitimacy to some unjust action through participation in it, even if only to mitigate its worst effects. Moreover, as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) knows only too well, it is sometimes necessary to be associated with wrongdoing in some way in order to achieve a

6 Chiara Lepora and Robert E. Goodin, *On Complicity and Compromise*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2013.

greater humanitarian good: drinking beer with Interahamwe killers manning checkpoints during the Rwandan genocide allowed ICRC delegates to get ambulances carrying wounded Tutsis through to the hospital.

But where Slim is less convincing is in his treatment of cases where aid might be doing more harm than good, where it is actually turned against those it is intended to assist. He acknowledges that Médecins Sans Frontières' (MSF) Rony Brauman might be right in principle that in certain cases abstention or withdrawal may be preferable to action, but says that this "is a hard principle to enact without genuine consent from the affected population".⁷ So in the case of the Rwandan refugee camps in which aid was used by perpetrators of genocide to control the population and finance their military preparations for an attack on Rwanda, he argues that the responsibility of humanitarian agencies was one of mitigation only: "to find the best way to minimize the worst effects of aid theft and taxes, while still continuing to meet their primary responsibility to save lives and protect people".⁸

Two important elements seem to be overlooked in this analysis. The first is to question whether humanitarian aid was indispensable to the survival of these refugees, a point first raised by Alex de Waal in his work on Sudan.⁹ Aid agencies have a vested interest in pitching humanitarian assistance as the difference between life and death, but there is increasing acknowledgement in research findings of the important yet often overlooked role of local communities in their own survival. These refugees were not kept behind barbed wire, and indeed many of them left the camps and returned to Rwanda in the first months of the aid operation. Moreover, humanitarian organizations failed in any efforts to protect these refugees, either from their leaders whilst in the camps or from the brutal attack that dismantled the camps in late 1996, as Slim suggests was one of their two primary responsibilities. This violence was not only predictable but had actually been threatened by Rwandan president Paul Kagame several months before it took place. I feel that aid organizations needed to recalibrate their moral priorities under such circumstances.

The second issue follows from the first: what level of responsibility do aid recipients hold for their own predicament and survival? Empowerment of local communities is a strong value explored in this book, but should not their own agency be taken more into account in deliberating what to do when aid is clearly part of the problem? This question extends beyond the Rwandan case and is highly pertinent to Somalia today. MSF made the very difficult decision to close its projects in Somalia in 2013 as a result of numerous violent attacks on its members over twenty-two years of continuous operations in the war-torn country, the latest of which occurred with either the active involvement or tacit

7 *Humanitarian Ethics*, p. 204.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 186.

9 De Waal argues that relief is generally merely a footnote to the story of how people survive famine. Alex de Waal, *Famine Crimes: Politics and the Disaster Relief Industry in Africa*, Africa Rights and International African Institute in association with James Currey and Indiana University Press, Oxford and Bloomington, IN, 1997, p. 1.

acceptance of Somali communities – even those directly benefiting from MSF’s medical services. Without respect for the most fundamental idea that “we help you and you don’t harm us”, MSF felt that it was impossible to continue. After nearly two years of absence, however, and a serious deterioration in the state of the health sector, MSF is investigating ways to return at the strong behest of Somali leaders and communities, and of other aid agencies. But imbuing Somali leaders with a sense of responsibility for the safety of humanitarian workers and proper use of resources remains a major challenge. After all, the head of an important Somali NGO that was found by a UN internal investigation¹⁰ to have fraudulently claimed or was unable to substantiate spending of nearly 80% of \$2.9 million allocated to emergency food and water during the 2011 famine is today a senior adviser to the president of one of Somalia’s regional administrations. Somalis are aware of these accusations, yet no one seems prepared to hold him to account for depriving his compatriots of millions of dollars of emergency aid.

It is precisely in providing practitioners and students with tools with which to think through these real-life moral problems from various angles that Slim’s book is a remarkable contribution to the humanitarian sector. Although Slim is sympathetic to the desires of some aid agencies to stretch the bounds of humanitarian action and do more to address the causes of suffering, he is clear that the responsibility of humanitarian action is first and foremost to alleviate it:

There is no greater goal beyond the person in humanitarian action: not peace, not democracy, not religious conversion; not socialism; not political Islam; and not military victory... the defining goal of humanitarian action is to save and protect individual lives so that they have an opportunity to flourish. It is not to determine how they should flourish and to organise that flourishing.¹¹

The post-2002 aid operation in Afghanistan clearly illustrated that those agencies who steered their action towards determining how Afghans should flourish undermined the neutrality of humanitarian action and found themselves unable to fulfil their primary purpose of helping those in need, regardless of the side of the conflict on which they were found.¹² It is a similar story in Somalia today, with those aid agencies perceived to be supporting one side rejected by the other to the detriment of all those in need. Aid agencies need to heed the messages conveyed in Slim’s book and forge a more coherent and consistent approach to their efforts to help people in these challenging times. If aid agencies do not make a clear choice about whether their aid should be neutral, impartial and

10 Confidential UN investigations into three Somali NGOs were leaked to Fox News and published in January 2015. See George Russell, “Millions in UN Somalia Aid Diverted; Hints that Some Went to Terrorists”, *Fox News*, 20 January 2015, available at: www.foxnews.com/world/2015/01/20/millions-in-un-somalia-aid-diverted-hints-that-some-went-to-terrorists/ (last accessed in June 2015).

11 *Humanitarian Ethics*, above note 1, p. 47.

12 See Fiona Terry, “The International Committee of the Red Cross in Afghanistan: Reasserting the Neutrality of Humanitarian Action”, *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 93, No. 881, 2011, pp. 173–188.

independent, belligerents may well make the choice for them, considering them to be enemies and treating them accordingly.

Humanitarian Ethics should be read and reread by everyone involved in humanitarian action in headquarters, in field capitals and on the ground. It does not provide answers to ethical quandaries, but rather, and more importantly, provides the tools necessary to think through what an ethically sound response to quandaries might be for individuals and organizations. It also restores meaning to many notions that have been reduced to mere slogans by the humanitarian enterprise. My only regret is that there were not more case studies unpacked from a variety of angles – the book introduces an abundance of examples, but usually to illustrate a specific point raised rather than from a holistic perspective. Perhaps such cases could be the subject of Volume 2?

