The humanitarians’ tragedy: escapable and inescapable cruelties

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Paradoxically, elements of cruelty are intrinsic to the humanitarian enterprise. This paper focuses on some of these. Escapable cruelties arise from technical failings, but the gradual professionalisation of the field and improvements in relief technologies mean that they have been significantly reduced in comparison to earlier eras. Other cruelties arise from clashes among rights, and the tensions inherent in trying to promote humanity amid the horrors of war. These are inescapable and constitute the ‘humanitarians’ tragedy’. Among them is the individual cruelty of failing to do good at the margin: a clash between the individual’s impulses and ideals and the constraints of operating in constrained circumstances. This is a version of triage. In addition, there is the cruelty of compromising dearly-held principles when faced with other competing or overriding demands. There is also the cruelty whereby humanitarians feed victims’ dreams that there is an alternative reality, which in fact cannot be attained.

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Introduction

This paper examines some paradoxes within the humanitarian enterprise, focusing specifically on the ways in which the impulse to ameliorate suffering leads humanitarian workers and institutions into the unwelcome situation of acting cruelly. While professional standards are increasing, thereby reducing suffering, some cruelties are intrinsic to the humanitarian predicament—hence the humanitarians’ tragedy.

Rather than a litany of woe, tragedy is properly seen as a clash between rights, determined by a world in which human ideals fail to match the realities of the human condition. The humanitarians’ tragedy is both the tragedy of goals that cannot be reconciled among themselves and the inevitable outcome of pursuing ideals amid the most horrific constraints of war and violent social upheaval.

Diverse cruelties lie within the humanitarian predicament. There is the individual cruelty of failing to do good at the margin. There is the cruelty of compromising dearly-held principles. And there is the cruelty of feeding dreams of an alternative but unattainable reality.

The technical proficiency and material resources of the humanitarian enterprise mitigate much needless suffering, but they are never enough to fulfil the rights of victims and survivors. Ironically, global humanitarian resources have never been greater, and technical proficiency has improved. There are still egregious failings in relief programmes but overall effectiveness is immensely better than it was a quarter of a century ago. Humanitarians are much better at saving lives than they used to be—and thereby minimise needless failings of humanitarianism.
The humanitarians’ tragedy is not a tragedy of failure. It can be a failure of achievable goals—the escapable tragedy of failing to apply workable technologies in the right place, at the right time, or in the right way. Rather, it is primarily an inescapable tragedy of clashes among rights and unmet expectations.

**Individual cruelties**

Let us examine first the cruelty of the individual humanitarian. Our exemplar is the expatriate relief volunteer in a disaster-stricken poor country. The impulse for humanity and human rights is a major reason why individual women and men from richer nations become relief workers in poor countries, or study humanitarian issues. The conscience of the humanitarian worker is often driven by universal ideals: human rights are valid always, everywhere, unconstrained by resources and circumstance.

Humanitarianism is also driven by human sympathy, a sense of the suffering intrinsic in the human condition and the obligation to make it less atrocious. It is an effort to snatch a small locus of mercy in the middle of the horrors of organised death and destruction. Part of this is the ‘warrior’s honour’ (Ignatieff, 1998). International humanitarian law, since Henri Dunant tended the wounded after the Battle of Solferino on 24 June 1859, is distinct from human rights in that it accepts the inevitability of war and seeks only to make the means employed less disproportionate to the military necessities of those who command them. Humanitarianism in this sense stems from a dark worldview, resigned to the imperfectability of the human condition. Its guiding principle is to ‘do no harm’ (Anderson, 1999).

The paradigmatic case in which these moral frameworks conflict is the practice of triage by the combat surgeon. The physician divides the wounded into three categories. The first group is the lightly wounded, who will survive even if left untreated for now. The second group consists of those who are injured and will survive and hopefully regain fitness if given immediate medical attention. It is to this group that the physician turns his or her attention. The third group is the soldiers who are so badly wounded that they are unlikely to survive. Effort and resources expended on these individuals reduce the prospects for achieving better results by focusing on the second group.

On entering the profession, the doctor has taken the Hippocratic Oath and is committed to the best interests and rights of the individual patient. Triage, though, compels the healer to decline to treat the badly wounded soldier. Treatment may have a small chance of ensuring that the man or women lives, a good chance of prolonging his or her life, and could certainly make his or her death less painful. But that treatment is denied. The humanitarian physician must look into the eyes of a man or woman in the most desperate need of his or her expertise, and withhold that help. It is an act of cruelty.

Humanitarian workers face routine acts of triage and corresponding acts of cruelty, albeit less dramatic than those of the combat surgeon. In his or her professional
life—let us say working in a clinic in a camp for internally displaced persons (IDPs)—the relief worker is providing resources and expertise to help the condition of some very desperate people. He or she may also be turning people away—the children who are not quite thin enough to meet the criterion for admission. They are needy nonetheless. On returning home in the evening, he or she may encounter destitute beggars on the road, and refuse to give them any small change. The begging mother with her child has her own piece of history of distress. She is a person, in need, against whom the relief worker has no personal grudge or special reason to be indifferent or cruel. However, she is someone who does not receive help, even though the aid worker has it within his or her power to assist her. These are the instances of failing to do good at the margin, the cases of cruelty—each one escapable, but collectively inescapable. The professionalisation and routinisation of decision-making procedures, now often removed to a head office on a different continent, creates an illusion of detachment. It is an illusion.

This predicament generates cognitive dissonance: the clash between the values that constitute an individual’s sense of self, and the actions carried out (Milgram, 1974; Cooper, 2007). Humanitarian workers do not see themselves as cruel and selfish. How do they respond to this slow attrition of minor cruelties (minor, that is, for the agent—they may be less so for the supplicant turned away)? This is not a topic that is much studied, nor indeed one that humanitarian workers are trained to anticipate and cope with. Casual observation suggests that some go into denial, some insist that they have no agency, others become resentful towards those they have spurned and blame them for their own misery, and still others go mad. Sometimes, a team of relief workers copes through a collusive redistribution of responsibilities, with one person playing the role of the generous rule-breaker or maverick, allowing the others to ignore their routine cruelties with good conscience.

Of course, most humanitarians are host-country nationals working with their own compatriots or even their own relatives. Embedded in the stricken society, with social affinities and kinship ties that will outlast the humanitarian programme, they must navigate these dilemmas in ways that retain their standing in the community. For such people, abstract principles are subordinate to their social values and norms. Frequently, their expatriate managers are sensitive to the pressures on them, and realise the social networks of their host-country counterparts are an asset to humanitarian work, not a liability. For example, hiring family members may be the best way of ensuring the loyalty of staff under stressful conditions, and it should not be seen as nepotism or corruption. In other instances, the insensitive application of institutional rules can generate further tensions and complications, damaging staff members as people alongside undermining the efficacy of the organisation.

**Institutional cruelties**

Another of the moral discomforts associated with the Red Cross tradition of humanitarian work is that by making war less inhumane, it can be said to be making it less
intolerable. There is a curious synergy between warrior and humanitarian. In Fiona Terry (2002)’s telling phrase we are ‘condemned to repeat’.

These cruelties were containable when humanitarianism was a liminal activity, when appeals were made to the general public for particular disasters, and when assistance was a question only of mercy and charity. When humanitarian action developed a global aspiration, supported by state finance, concerned with population welfare and universal human rights, the calculus changed. With the shift in scale came a higher ambition, greater scope for tragedy, and different cruelties.

Among the governmental donors to humanitarian programmes, and among the relief agency executives who help to shape the global humanitarian response priorities each year, there is policy triage. Some crises elicit a far greater response than others. We like to believe that the main criterion for a relief response is gravity of need. But that is always a subjective estimate, and is always modulated by other considerations such as danger, difficulty and expense. North Korea and Myanmar are in great need but it is difficult to operate there, while Somalia has still greater need but it is very dangerous for international agencies. In the early 1990s, the comparison between the relatively generous assistance levels for refugees in Macedonia compared to those in Africa prompted a ‘double standards’ critique. If assistance is an act of charity, such a double standards charge does not go far. If receipt of aid is a matter of right, then it is also a matter of equity, and differential treatment matters (Erasmus, 2009).

Another challenging arena is the clash among principles. In what is, perhaps perversely, a sign of progress in the field, there is awareness and discussion of the extent to which different principles can and do come into conflict. Twenty years ago, this subject was simply not discussed. The idea that humanitarian assistance might create problems for the pursuit of peace or justice was rarely raised, save for a few critics of the programmes in Biafra or on the Thai-Cambodia border (De St. Jorre, 1972; Shawcross, 1984). Development and relief agencies found it unproblematic to declare that they stood for ‘justice’, without qualification.

The wide-ranging and often painful debate among humanitarians in the aftermath of the 1994 Rwanda genocide and the refugee programmes in eastern Zaire opened up debate on the clash of principles (African Rights, 1994). Most agreed that in the Rwanda crisis, the humanitarian response overwhelmed efforts to address the political and human rights implications of the genocide. Ten years afterwards, some argued that in Darfur, political agitation for individual or collective punishment of the Sudan government isolated and even imperilled the humanitarian operations there, as well as becoming an obstacle to a peace agreement (Natsios, 2008).

The relationship among peace, justice and humanitarian assistance is theoretically and empirically complex. Lawyers and ethicists have explored, to a limited extent, the theoretical relationships. Peace and justice are both ideals to which we strive, and principles that guide action. The ethical, legal and political formulae needed to reconcile them are difficult and have yet to be grasped, as demonstrated by the anxieties over the activities of the International Criminal Court in situations of
ongoing conflict. The theoretical foundations of humanitarian action, by contrast, are less absolute. Even those who argue that humanitarian assistance should be rights-based rather than humanitarian law-based are ready to recognise that humanitarian practice needs to be designed for its context, and negotiable.

**Escapable cruelties**

Humanitarian action may be imperfectible, but it can be improved. Focused on the shortcomings and ethical dilemmas of particular operations, humanitarian practitioners may miss the bigger sweep of change over a quarter of a century or longer. Relief capacities and technologies are better today.

Before the 1990s, the history of major humanitarian operations can be written in an episodic manner: from Biafra, Bangladesh, the Sahel and Ethiopia (1973) through the Cambodia-Thai border and Ethiopia (1984) to the Armenian earthquake and Operation Lifeline Sudan (de Waal, 1997). Calamities that fell beyond the attention of television and the small number of international relief non-governmental organisations (NGOs) (Burundi, East Timor, Uganda’s Luwero Triangle), in many cases rendered off-limits by the barrier of national sovereignty, received very little international humanitarian attention or none at all. As late as 1992, a United Nations (UN) spokesperson could insist that UN relief operations were impossible in Somalia because the country was at war. Arguably, the greatest success of ‘Sans Frontièreism’ is that there are no longer any such places that are off-limits—even North Korea and Myanmar cannot escape the international humanitarian gaze.

Meanwhile, humanitarian outcomes have improved. During the drought in Ethiopia in 2002–03, the most widespread in living memory, the evidence indicates that elevated death rates in the worst-hit ‘hotspots’ were rapidly brought down, and that there was no excess mortality among the general population (de Waal, Tafesse and Carruth, 2006). The relief response failed to grapple with a chronic livelihoods crisis in Ethiopia and the gradual immiseration of a vast population, but purely in terms of saving lives, the effort was superior to those of earlier decades. Measles vaccination, better emergency water and sanitation, food deliveries to villages, and enhanced infant-feeding technologies, such as the plumpy’nut, all contributed to this (Lautze et al., 2003).

During the emergency in Darfur, the mortality rates in IDP camps were reduced to near-normal levels much more quickly than among refugee populations in earlier decades. The same relief technologies played their part. The assistance programme did not wrestle with the crisis of violence or the political forces driving the disaster, but it saved tens of thousands of lives (CRE/D, 2005).

With greater resources and increased proficiency come elevated expectations. The idea of a right to humanitarian assistance, which would have been a fantasy several decades ago, is now within reach. Insofar as the locus of tragedy has moved, and the question is no longer response as such but the quality of response, this is a sign of progress.
The empirics of humanitarianism

Epidemiologists, anthropologists and some comparative political historians have explored the empirics of humanitarianism, often under the umbrella of programme evaluations. There is a valuable corpus of literature. Ethnography has found a niche within humanitarian studies, not least because a number of practitioners have developed understanding of and empathy with the communities with which they live and work. Good field practice in matters such as livelihoods and community health demands an anthropological sensibility and relief NGOs have produced a rich seam of critique of relief practices from local perspectives.

There is also a role for positivist, quantitative political science. The experience of the last two decades provides a large enough universe of cases that the classic American social science large-n comparative study is feasible. We should be able to investigate how peace, justice and humanitarian assistance correlate, the conditions under which they reinforce or contradict one another, and what other factors determine the outcomes. One would expect that a quantitative approach will rapidly produce results. It is likely that it will kill off some simplistic dogmas and enable researchers to posit new hypotheses about the inter-relationships. Perhaps peace and justice are most likely to come together if there is an intermediate mechanism such as truth-telling and collective reconciliation, or perhaps strong state institutions are necessary if both are to be achieved simultaneously. It is certain too that such an inquiry will reveal new complexities, especially new layers of relationships and hypotheses about the conditions under which certain generalities hold true, or do not.

It is unlikely that the different principles will be fully reconciled, except perhaps under some ambitious precondition such as a mature post-industrial democracy. There will still be a clash of principles, a clash of rights, and an inescapable cruelty. But empirical study including operational research will further upgrade the capacity and quality of relief response, so that more of the escapable cruelties of the humanitarian predicament can be avoided. A smart empirical sociology of the clashes of principles will allow us to better decide when and how to prioritise, combine or sequence our principles. This is a relief technology no less important than vaccination or sanitation.

In politics, humanitarian action is paradigmatically regarded as a state of exception—it takes place beyond politics. In this sense, humanitarianism is seen as a moment at which history is suspended and pure humanity is briefly in focus. This is a necessary fiction for the humanitarian enterprise, but as emergencies become prolonged, it is a pretence that becomes harder to uphold.

Most protracted emergencies occur in fragile or failed states, in which governance is continually negotiated among actors on the basis of military power, social affinity and financial patronage. External actors, including peacekeeping missions and humanitarian programmes, quickly become part of the political fabric. Humanitarian programmes continue for five, 10 or 20 years, not only because the objective needs remain and national institutions are too weak to take on the burden of responding,
but also because the external actor has become so embedded in the structures of patronage that it cannot withdraw without causing a crisis. Therefore, in countries such as Afghanistan, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Haiti, Sierra Leone and Sudan, international humanitarian agencies become a semi-permanent presence, managing major social welfare programmes on a long-term basis (Duffield, 2001; de Waal, 2009).

Among the frustrated elites of these countries, and among some of the critics of militarised humanitarianism, many perceive a neo-colonial impulse behind these large interventions. It looks very much like a latter-day philanthropic empire (Mamdani, 2009). In a sense it is, especially in its local institutional encounters. In most cases, however, the mandate for humanitarian imperium has been acquired by default, driven not by grand designs in the metropolis but more by the incremental logic of trying to address these complex emergencies themselves without appreciating the endpoint of escalating the relief, security and diplomatic engagement. Sir John Robert Seeley, the English essayist and historian, famously said that the British Empire was acquired ‘in a fit of absence of mind’. This humanitarian empire has been acquired in a fit of absence of analysis.

**Conclusion**

Cruelty is intrinsic to the humanitarian predicament. The source of this cruelty lies primarily within the humanitarian mission itself—creating a protected space for humanity against forces of war and traumatic political change, which are more powerful than the countervailing humanitarian impulse. Ironically, as humanitarianism’s power has increased, and it has become integrated into a wider institutionalised normative effort including human rights and peacemaking—a kind of ‘global ethics incorporated’—those cruelties have not diminished, but rather changed. The intellectual work of humanitarian scholars can reduce these cruelties. Already there is a significant march of expertise on topics such as public health and nutrition, which has led to major reductions in needless death. Sustainable livelihoods are another technical-political task.

There is much theoretical and empirical work to be done to align the norms of peace, justice and humanitarianism, and to reconcile these with the strong political, military and economic forces that determine the lives of poor and vulnerable people across the world. While an element of cruelty will remain inescapable in the humanitarian calling, there are many escapable cruelties that can be reduced or eliminated.

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Endnotes

1 This paper is based on the author’s keynote address to the first World Conference on Humanitarian Studies, Groningen, The Netherlands, 4 February 2009.

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