

**The London School of Economics and Political
Science**

*The Politics of Humanity:
Humanitarianism and International
Political Theory*

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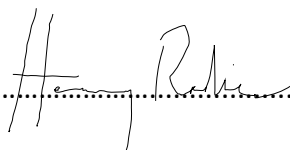
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Abstract

This thesis brings the concept of humanitarianism sharply into focus within the discourse of international political theory. Existing literature examines humanitarianism obliquely, via debates on military humanitarian intervention or human rights, resulting in an impoverished account of a vital idea. Meanwhile, a vibrant discussion among professional humanitarians has recently questioned the nature of their endeavour, along lines that clearly fit the remit of international political theory. Bringing together these two discussions in the course of its critical analysis, the thesis argues that humanitarianism should be conceptualised as a political context in which we articulate, negotiate and defend our understandings of common humanity. Central to this politics are the ways in which we react to and conceptualise human suffering, through humanitarian crises that are often "crises of humanity". In sparking concern and mobilising responses to suffering, the affective underpinnings of the humanitarian impulse create a complex and shifting backdrop to extensions of solidarity and humanitarian action. At the heart of this action is the idea of rescue, a crucial "presumptive occasion" of our moral life. But an important part of humanitarian action consists in the efforts to institutionalise the humanitarian impulse. In this sense human rights and projects of global justice represent important crystallisations of humanitarian concern, yet neither can fully capture the more contingent workings of the humanitarian impulse. What emerges is an understanding of humanitarianism as a broad discussion, central to the identity of contemporary liberal international political theory, but with a scope best gleaned not from cosmopolitan accounts, but from a more fluid internationalist tradition of thought. The thesis concludes that the importance of this theoretical approach will be borne out by the complex and far-reaching practical challenges that humanitarianism is set to confront over coming decades, not least the "crisis of humanity" threatened by climate change.

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List of Acronyms

ALNAP	Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action
HFP	Humanitarian Futures Programme
HPG	Humanitarian Policy Group of the Overseas Development Institute
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IDS	Institute of Development Studies
IFRC	International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
IGO	Inter-Governmental Organisation
IHL	International Humanitarian Law
IOM	International Organization for Migration
IPCC	Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change
MSF	Médecins Sans Frontières
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NICE	National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence
OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
ODI	Overseas Development Institute
R2P	Responsibility to Protect
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNRWA	United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East

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1. Introduction: Humanitarianism in Crisis and the Promise of International Political Theory

As part of a major rebranding exercise undertaken in early 2008, Oxfam, a leading British non-governmental organisation (NGO) launched a striking new slogan: “Be Humankind”.¹ The exhortation neatly captures the three most significant meanings of “humanity”: the “quality of being humane”, implying kindness and benevolence; the “condition, quality, or fact of being human”; and “[human] beings collectively”.² This thesis explores the ways in which we search for and contest the meaning of humanity, in all three of the aforementioned senses of the term, through the idea of humanitarianism. It does this by bringing together two debates that are intimately involved, if not always self-consciously, in these negotiations.

Firstly, it examines the debates among professional humanitarians about the nature of their calling, drawing on the dilemmas and paradoxes that characterise contemporary humanitarian action. A decade into the twenty-first century, the “humanitarian impulse” has been institutionalised at international level to an unprecedented degree, across inter-governmental organisations (IGOs), non-governmental organisations, complex bodies of International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and International Human Rights Law. Yet many consider that humanitarianism is in the throes of a multifaceted crisis of identity. This sense of crisis is most strongly felt among those who now pass whole careers in its employ and can plausibly be termed professional humanitarians. Their unease feeds on a double sense of doubt. They doubt whether, for all the prominence of humanitarianism and human rights within contemporary political discourse, the contemporary world

¹ Darren Davidson, “Oxfam Urges Consumers to 'Be Humankind'”, *brandrepublic.com* (18 April 2008). Available at <http://www.brandrepublic.com/News/803123/Oxfam-urges-consumers-be-humankind/>; accessed on 05 July 2010. Oxfam, *Be Humankind*, TV advert (2008). Available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eQK6ODxDfDY&feature=player_embedded; accessed on 05 July 2010.

² Oxford English Dictionary, “Humanity”, *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (Draft Revision June 2010). Available at <http://dictionary.oed.com>; accessed on 05 July 2010.

is in any meaningful sense a more humane place to be than that which preceded it. They also doubt, quite simply, whether all their practical endeavours are doing much good. They are finding it harder and harder to answer a simple question: what is humanitarianism?

Secondly, in response to this important question, it juxtaposes these debates with the rich discussions in contemporary international political theory on the appropriate content and scope of human solidarity. Charles Beitz, a central figure in the resurgence of international political theory, once wrote that: “We need a political theory of human rights because the international *practice* of human rights is problematic”.³ In this thesis, I want to make a similar case for an international political theory account of humanitarianism: we need one because the international practice of humanitarianism is problematic, and because, I argue, the paradoxes and possibilities of humanitarianism really come into focus when we look at them through the lens of international political theory. Beyond the discussions taking place in the context of professional humanitarian practice, I argue that we need to train this lens both on individual acts of solidarity or rescue, and on wider discussions about the political traction of ideas of a common humanity. The task of international political theory here is to explore humanitarianism “as a personal characteristic, as a relation between individuals, and as a political phenomenon”, to

³ Charles R. Beitz, "Human Rights and the Law of Peoples", in *The Ethics of Assistance: Morality and the Distant Needy*, ed. Deen K. Chatterjee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 193. Italics in original. In a recent work on human rights, Beitz recognises the limitations, which are equally important to the present study of humanitarianism, of an ambition to form a single unified theory of human rights: “the aspirations of a theory of human rights should be in one way modest. To think of human rights as I have suggested is to accept that we should understand their nature and requirements as responses to contingent historical circumstances. So it is probably a mistake to expect to discover a basis for human rights in one or a few clear moral ideas, to formulate a canonical list of rights, or to devise a single authoritative means for bringing them to bear on practical choices. What a theory of human rights might rather hope to accomplish is to clarify the uses to which they may be put in the discourse of global political life and to identify and give structure to the considerations it would be appropriate to take into account, in light of these uses, in deliberating about their content and application. It would seek to interpret the normative discipline implicit in the practice. Such a theory would not, so to speak, stand outside the practice; it would be continuous with it.” Charles R. Beitz, *The Idea of Human Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 212.

borrow Judith Shklar's account of how political theory should explore such a concept.⁴

The thesis argues that such humanitarian debates are really discussions about how best to honour our human identity, one among our many different identities, through the elaboration of human solidarity, and follows Kwame Anthony Appiah in observing that:

if we're going to deal with identity, it's reasonable to ask how large a part these identities should play in our political lives, whether we take politics in the narrow sense of our dealings with the state, or, more broadly, as our dealings, in social life, with one another.⁵

The thesis thus examines the "politics of humanity" in this broadest sense of the term, without neglecting the particular problems that arise from an international political context still largely structured by states.

In this introductory chapter, I first situate my starting point in the experiences and dilemmas of professional humanitarians, against other plausible alternatives, as the most productive way to make sense of the concept of humanitarianism. I then set out the reasons why professional humanitarianism is currently understood as in crisis, and set out the contours of this crisis according to ongoing discussions about its principles, politics and scope. I then question why contemporary international political theory has yet fully to engage with this vital set of issues, before setting out its potential to bring home the importance of a better understanding of the "politics of humanity".

⁴ In her case the particular concept at stake was injustice, which will be examined in Chapter 5. Judith N. Shklar, *The Faces of Injustice* (London: Yale University Press, 1990), 50.

⁵ Kwame Anthony Appiah, "The Politics of Identity", *Daedalus* 135, no. 4 (2006): 17. Appiah usefully elaborates as follows: "I count seven different ways in which I've said that you might speak of 'identity politics.' (1) There are political conflicts about who's in and who's out. (2) Politicians can mobilize identities. (3) States can treat people of distinct identities differently. (4) People can pursue a politics of recognition. (5) There can be a social micropolitics enforcing norms of identification. (6) There are inherently political identities like party identifications. And (7) social groups can mobilize to respond collectively to all of the above." Appiah, "The Politics of Identity": 22. For two particularly elegant accounts of the politics of identity, see Amin Maalouf, *Les Identités Meurtrières* (Paris: Grasset, 1998). Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* (London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006).

I Locating Humanitarianism: Plausible Protagonists

The question of what sphere of activity, and which group of actors, should ground an empirically-informed theoretical study of humanitarianism is by no means a straightforward one. There are many plausible locations of humanitarianism in contemporary international politics. This section will illustrate and briefly discuss the possibilities, before arguing for a consistent starting point in professional humanitarianism that allows us to build linkages to other understandings and institutionalisations of humanitarianism, and set these relationships in the context of contemporary debates in international political theory.

When it first entered into common usage, “humanitarian” was frequently used in a derogatory sense, synonymous with the equally contemptuous “humanity-monger” or “humanity-man”, sentimental busybodies all. Today, in common parlance, humanitarian has much more positive connotations. What it connotes is not always so clear, though, beyond a broad commitment to human welfare. David P. Forsythe, a veteran observer of international humanitarianism, recently defined it simply as “the transnational concern to help persons in exceptional distress”.⁶ Here dictionary definitions advance us little. For example the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it as follows:

Concern for human welfare as a primary or pre-eminent moral good; action, or the disposition to act, on the basis of this concern rather than for pragmatic or strategic reasons. Chiefly *depreciative* in early use, with the implication of excessive sentimentality towards criminals and the poor.⁷

⁶ David P. Forsythe, “Contemporary Humanitarianism: The Global and the Local”, in *Humanitarianism and Suffering: The Mobilization of Empathy*, ed. Richard Ashby Wilson and Richard D. Brown (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 59.

⁷ Oxford English Dictionary, “Humanitarianism”, *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (Draft Revision March 2010). Available at <http://dictionary.oed.com>; accessed on 15 July 2010. Italics in original.

When the great Russian cellist Mstislav Rostropovich died in 2007, obituary writers paid tribute to him both as a musician and a “humanitarian”, as indeed they had done on the passing of his Catalan mentor, Pablo Casals.⁸ Both men defended, within and beyond their artistic lives, a claim to a common humanity which they saw as having been violated by the ideological clashes of their time. For Casals, our common humanity had been threatened by totalitarians of the Right, for Rostropovich, totalitarians of the Left. For both, the label “humanitarian”, in its common usage, seems appropriate, seems to capture some truth, however slippery, about the possibilities of human solidarity.

Neither man appears to have much in common with the stereotype of today’s professional humanitarian aid workers, clad in white T-shirts that match the logos of their shiny white Toyota SUVs. For them, the meaning of humanitarianism is much more precise, relating to a specific set of objectives and procedures, the articulation of which now often echoes contemporary, thickly-hyphenated, jargon-filled business-speak. In response to human suffering they offer a host of technical fixes and medical treatments, designed to palliate or fend off final moments: life-support, rather than a vision of the good life. They jealously defend the operating principles of a humanitarianism that serves specific ends, not a diffuse sense of goodwill to all. Perhaps, then, we merely have an instance of a term with multiple usages, both deserving of separate analysis. Yet in generating the means to serve their ends, professional humanitarians often find themselves relying on just such a sense of vague, generalised goodwill, and attempt to mine its resources. “Be Humankind”, indeed.

This appeal to human kindness, to the “kindness of strangers” as Blanche Dubois has it, raises another point of tension.⁹ Oxfam are requesting that we give out of charity to provide services which for Oxfam, as for many of its supporters, should precisely not be the object of charity, but rather of entitlement, or justice. Humanitarian NGOs are not only learning to speak the language of business, but

⁸ The Times, “Mstislav Rostropovich”, *The Times* (28 April 2007). Available at <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/obituaries/article1717247.ece>; accessed on 12 July 2010.

⁹ Tennessee Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire* (London: Penguin, 2009).

also, and rather more importantly, that of human rights. Many would like to bring about a situation wherein large-scale mortality from preventable diseases, such as malaria, would represent a violation of human rights. So what to make of the fact that, for many of the world's poorest people, their best chance of avoiding such a fate may depend on the goodwill of the world's richest man, Bill Gates? Like it or not, Gates' personal fortune, channelled through his philanthropic foundation, seems quite likely to save more lives than the most well-intentioned volunteer-based NGO ever could.¹⁰ Are the philanthropic enablers of humanitarian action, such as the so-called "venture philanthropists", not, then, equally plausible starting points for a study of how we express our humanity?¹¹ If not at the level of the Gates and Carnegies of the world, then at the level of those who respond with donations or direct debit mandates to the entreaties of "chuggers", the so-called "charity muggers" who patrol local high streets?

Nor, arguably, should we forget the scientists devoting their career to developing a malaria vaccine.¹² If the on-the-ground aid worker's technical professionalism does not count against a plausible characterisation as humanitarian, why should it in the backroom laboratories?

Or what of the political enablers of humanitarian action? Should Bernard Kouchner, co-founder of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), be excluded from

¹⁰ See *Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation*. Available at <http://www.gatesfoundation.org/Pages/home.aspx>; accessed on 12 July 2010. For some interesting background see Andy Beckett, "Inside the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation", *guardian.co.uk* (13 July 2010). Available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/jul/12/bill-and-melinda-gates-foundation>; accessed on 13 July 2010.

¹¹ For an overview of current trends in philanthropy see Hudson Institute, *The Index of Global Philanthropy and Remittances 2010* (Washington, D.C.: Hudson Institute, 2010). Available at http://www.hudson.org/files/pdf_upload/Index_of_Global_Philanthropy_and_Remittances_2010.pdf; accessed on 13 July 2010.

¹² See *Malaria Vaccine Initiative*. Available at <http://www.malariavaccine.org/>; accessed on 12 July 2010.

consideration because he has undertaken a political career?¹³ Or Tony Blair, now the namesake of many 10 year-old Kosovars?¹⁴

A core concern of this thesis is to provide an account of humanitarianism broad enough to situate all of the possibilities briefly outlined above. The danger of such a project, though, is clearly to retreat into banal commonalities. Breadth of outcome should not come at the expense of depth of analysis. Therefore, the thesis will draw primarily on the experiences of professional humanitarians working in the sphere of institutionalised humanitarianism, especially as it pertains to the negotiation of its international political context.

Admittedly, locating “institutionalised humanitarianism” is itself a problematic endeavour. Institutionalising the “humanitarian impulse”, in order to avoid entirely contingent acts of rescue, has always occupied a variety of different conceptual spaces. It has taken the form of sets of guiding principles, such as the fundamental principles of the Red Cross; of law, such as IHL; of dedicated agencies, such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).¹⁵ Antonio Donini considers that “[the] concept of humanitarianism is fraught with ambiguities. It connotes three separate but overlapping realities: an ideology, a movement and a profession.”¹⁶

Even a straightforward historical account of all the ways in which the humanitarian impulse has been realised and institutionalised could itself easily fill a whole thesis. Since such is not the purpose of this one, the approach here will be to bring in different practical embodiments of the humanitarian impulse as and when

¹³ For commentary on Kouchner’s trajectory see Tim Allen and David Styan, “A Right to Interfere? Bernard Kouchner and the New Humanitarianism”, *Journal of International Development* 12, no. 6 (2000). Michael Ignatieff, *Empire Lite: Nation-Building in Bosnia, Kosovo and Afghanistan* (London: Penguin, 2003), 45-75. Bernard Kouchner, *Le Premier Qui Dit La Vérité... Entretiens Avec Eric Favereau* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2002). Bernard Kouchner, *Les Guerriers De La Paix: Du Kosovo À L’Iraq* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 2004).

¹⁴ The preferred local version appears to be “Tonibler” or “Toni”. Ben Chu, “Named after Tony in the Land Where Blair Is King”, *The Independent* (10 July 2010). Available at <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/named-after-tony-in-the-land-where-blair-is-king-2023127.html>; accessed on 12 July 2010.

¹⁵ For a definitive account of the UNHCR, see Gil Loescher, *The UNHCR and World Politics: A Perilous Path* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

¹⁶ Antonio Donini, “The Far Side: The Meta Functions of Humanitarianism in a Globalised World”, *Disasters* 34, no. s2 (2010): 220.

it is appropriate to the development of the argument, with the realm of professional humanitarianism, that is, the sphere of aid and relief work that explicitly labels itself “humanitarian”, as the constant touchstone in terms of relating to actually-existing humanitarianism.¹⁷ But a brief summary of this unwritten thesis seems appropriate, as the argument presented here will range widely, and an indication of where it plausibly might go will lay down some useful markers for what follows, especially when it comes to the later chapters which explore such conceptual spaces of institutionalised humanitarianism as human rights, global justice, and ultimately liberalism itself.

Such a work would firstly have to consider the creation of actors designed to carry out humanitarian action. Ian Smillie and Larry Minear identify five types of humanitarian actors: “United Nations institutions, government aid agencies, international nongovernmental organisations (NGOs), members of the Red Cross and Red Crescent movement, and local NGOs and other civil society institutions based in countries facing emergencies”.¹⁸ This list represents the classical core of professional humanitarianism, which will be the starting point for the thesis. But it is at best a partial list. The role of individuals, acting individually or in concert on an ad hoc basis is vitally important, while Chapters 5 and, especially, 6 will explore the role of states themselves, beyond their aid departments and incorporating their military capacity. We would also want to consider the role of actors within pre-existing humanitarian projects: a soldier fulfilling his obligations under IHL, or a judge adjudicating on a war crimes trial.

Indeed, legal embodiments of the humanitarian impulse would have to be an important part of a longer account. Here we would need to look at the

¹⁷ This broadly corresponds to “the cluster of enterprises referred to as ‘international humanitarian assistance’”, identified by Ramsbotham and Woodhouse, alongside international humanitarian law and international human rights law, as one of the three main manifestations of humanitarian concern since 1945. They also recommend approaching the question of the meaning of “humanitarian” obliquely, through an analysis of how practitioners understand it Oliver Ramsbotham and Tom Woodhouse, *Humanitarian Intervention in Contemporary Conflict: A Reconceptualization* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), 9-10.

¹⁸ Ian Smillie and Larry Minear, *The Charity of Nations: Humanitarian Action in a Calculating World* (Bloomfield: Kumarian Press, 2004), 11.

development of bodies of International Humanitarian Law, Refugee Law, International Human Rights Law, International Criminal Law, and at specific pieces of Public International Law, such as the Genocide Convention.

We would also have to consider more loosely defined practices. Most obviously here we would explore professional humanitarianism, international human rights advocacy and international development assistance. But a strong argument could also be made for the relevance of military humanitarian intervention, conflict resolution, peacekeeping, or statebuilding.

Finally, cutting across these categories are overarching concepts and vocabularies to ground and justify these institutional realisations: universal human rights, development, global social justice, perhaps the emerging notion of a “Responsibility to Protect” (R2P).

This thesis undertakes the groundwork necessary to justify all of the above as part of the humanitarian conversation and the “politics of humanity”. Inevitably, it is impossible to do justice to all of the possibilities, all of the particular crystallisations of the humanitarian impulse, cited above in a work of this scale. Therefore, the following approach is adopted as a solid basis for a rigorous and revealing conceptual analysis:

(1) Build the discussion from the dilemmas and paradoxes of humanitarian action as they appear in concentrated form in the experiences of professional humanitarians, through subjecting the literature on the humanitarian identity crisis, summarised in the next section, to critical analysis. This comes with the caveat that the actions of professional humanitarians should be seen as embedded in wider social understandings and identities that enable their actions, as will be seen especially throughout the thesis.

(2) Broaden the discussion out to other putative formulations of or alternatives to humanitarian action, such as human rights and global social justice, because they are posited by professional humanitarians as possible resolutions to the dilemmas that emerge from the analysis, and they provide a way to flesh out the normative questions at stake.

(3) Explore these areas through the contemporary normative debates on them in international political theory, as every point of contention raised in the thesis speaks to these debates, and the context of international political theory is the suitable one to explore the issues raised by the particular blend of ethics and politics that characterises humanitarian action. In section III below, I explain why this juxtaposition has not been done before. Though much weight is put on the experiences of practitioners, the lived experience of humanitarianism, the thesis endorses the view of Peter J. Hoffman and Thomas G. Weiss that “[the] survival and success of humanitarianism rests on moving beyond a divide that presents practitioners as guardians and scholars as gadflies. In war zones the price of humanitarian failure has always been paid in blood.”¹⁹ As such, it is hoped that the conceptual work here may contribute to dispelling some of the fog of war.

(4) To illustrate the argument, draw on practical examples from the core sites of crisis of recent humanitarianism, such the Rwandan Genocide or Srebrenica. But also illustrate the argument with a selection of examples from empirical cases and problems that speak to one of the core dilemmas of humanitarianism: that its justification in terms of a concern for humanity has implications far broader than that which it is willing to accept as falling within the remit of humanitarian responsibility. Especially important here are events or problems that do not fit the conventional understanding of professional humanitarian action, but the exclusion of which would render impossible any plausible definitional attempt. In particular, I will return frequently to three cases.

Firstly, British abolitionism in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century.²⁰ Martha Finnemore argues that “[the] abolition of slavery and the slave trade in the nineteenth century were essential to the universalization of ‘humanity’”.²¹ As such, the British campaign that led to substantial British political

¹⁹ Peter J. Hoffman and Thomas G. Weiss, "Humanitarianism and Practitioners: Social Science Matters", in *Humanitarianism in Question: Politics, Power, Ethics*, ed. Michael Barnett and Thomas G. Weiss (London: Cornell University Press, 2008), 285.

²⁰ This story is particularly well told in Adam Hochschild, *Bury the Chains: The British Struggle to Abolish Slavery* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2005).

²¹ Martha Finnemore, *The Purpose of Intervention: Changing Beliefs About the Use of Force* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003).

and military action to ban the Atlantic slave trade is a particularly useful case. Secondly, the acts of rescuers of Jews during the Holocaust.²² The Holocaust is frequently seen as a foundational episode in the understanding of how we can fail to honour our common humanity and the cornerstone of post-Second World War moral universalism.²³ We will see that the exceptional actions of Rescuers come close to a quintessence of humanitarian action, yet do not “fit” current accounts of what humanitarian action supposedly consists of. Thirdly, the challenge of climate change, which not only threatens to massively increase the frequency and intensity of humanitarian crises of different kinds, but also arguably represents a watershed “crisis of humanity”, challenging in a profound way the political agency and responsibility of humanity as a category, and the possibilities of human solidarity.²⁴

Having set out in broad terms the starting point of the thesis, I will now briefly set out the key elements of the humanitarian identity crisis, showing that it raises profound normative questions about the politics of our common humanity.

II The Humanitarian Identity Crisis

For professional humanitarians, as indeed for many observers, the two decades since the end of the Cold War have been a disorientating period. In 1999, Thomas Weiss published an influential dissection of an emerging “humanitarian identity crisis” in *Ethics & International Affairs*.²⁵ 1999 was a crucial, yet bittersweet year in the recent history of humanitarianism. The French medical humanitarian NGO

²² Henceforth the capitalised noun refers to this particular group.

²³ On the process underlying this, see Jeffrey C. Alexander, "On the Social Construction of Moral Universals: The 'Holocaust' from War Crime to Trauma Drama", 5, no. 1 (2002).

²⁴ See for example UNDP, *Fighting Climate Change: Human Solidarity in a Divided World*, Human Development Report 2007/2008 (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007). Available at <http://hdr.undp.org/en/reports/global/hdr2007-2008/>; accessed on 20 June 2010.

²⁵ Thomas G. Weiss, "Principles, Politics, and Humanitarian Action", *Ethics & International Affairs* 13, no. 1 (1999). See also the thoughtful responses to Weiss' analysis. David Rieff, "Moral Imperatives and Political Realities", *Ethics & International Affairs* 13, no. 1 (1999). Cornelio Sommaruga, "Humanity: Our Priority Now and Always", *Ethics & International Affairs* 13, no. 1 (1999). Joelle Tanguy and Fiona Terry, "Humanitarian Responsibility and Committed Action", *Ethics & International Affairs* 13, no. 1 (1999).

Médecins Sans Frontières won the Nobel Peace Prize, and in accepting it on behalf of the organisation, its president James Orbinski delivered one of the most powerful humanitarian credos.²⁶ But 1999 was also the year of NATO's intervention in Kosovo, which would later be judged legitimate, but not legal by an independent commission, and divided the professional humanitarian community.²⁷ For some, it represented the triumph of pragmatic engagement with international politics, for others the corruption and co-option of humanitarianism by politics. This brought into focus debates on humanitarianism and its relationship to humanitarian intervention that had been brewing since a series of crises in Somalia, Bosnia and Rwanda in the first half of the 1990s. A paper written in the aftermath of these crises by Alex de Waal and Rakiya Omaar, criticising the failures of relief-led approaches to humanitarianism to resolve the problems they dealt with, is widely identified, including by Weiss, as the starting point of the literature of humanitarianism in crisis.²⁸

A decade on from Weiss' seminal intervention, there has been no sign of resolution in the humanitarian identity crisis, not least because the aftermath of 9/11 and the Bush administration's War on Terror significantly upped the stakes of the 1990s debates. During this period, a rich literature has developed, which now affords us the luxury of being able to set out an empirically-grounded account of the debates without requiring a vast quantity of new fieldwork. In other words, we do not need to go and ask humanitarians what they think, as they have, in many cases, already told us. Furthermore, they have told us in terms particularly suited to the kind of normative analysis characteristic of an international political theory

²⁶ The speech is analysed in detail in Chapters 2 and 6. James Orbinski, "Nobel Lecture" (10 December 1999). Available at http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1999/msf-lecture.html; accessed on 15 November 2008.

²⁷ Independent International Commission on Kosovo, *The Kosovo Report: Conflict, International Response, Lessons Learned* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

²⁸ Alex de Waal and Rakiya Omaar, *Humanitarianism Unbound? Current Dilemmas Facing Multi-Mandate Relief Operations in Political Emergencies*, Discussion Paper No. 5 (London: African Rights, 1994). Available at http://repository.forcedmigration.org/show_metadata.jsp?pid=fmo:5303; accessed on 15 July 2010.

perspective, terms redolent of the tensions between and conceptual problems associated with notions of sovereignty, rights and justice.²⁹

The past decades have witnessed the crystallisation of what we might term a literature of humanitarianism in crisis. This critical, indeed often self-critical literature has emerged from a number of sources. We can now begin to assemble a coherent picture of it. Memoirs and studies by professional aid workers such as MSF's Rony Brauman, James Orbinski, Fiona Terry and Oxfam's Tony Vaux are central texts.³⁰ They provide an interesting counterpoint to the autobiographies and biographies of figures from within the UN system like Sadako Ogata, Jan Egeland and Sergio Viera de Mello.³¹ Most of these works are very much alive to the ethical and political dilemmas of the humanitarian calling, presenting a valuable source of material for the academic study of humanitarianism.³² Closely related to these is the reportage work of a number of sometimes critical friends of professional humanitarianism such as William Shawcross, Michael Ignatieff and Caroline

²⁹ Chris Brown, *Sovereignty, Rights and Justice: International Political Theory Today* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002).

³⁰ Three of the four mentioned here are from MSF. This is not coincidental, as the organisation has always represented a conscious reflection on the nature of humanitarian action, and has, in contrast to some other NGOs, devoted both space and resources to both internal and public reflection on the issues discussed in this thesis. Rony Brauman, "From Philanthropy to Humanitarianism: Remarks and an Interview", *South Atlantic Quarterly* 103, no. 2-3 (2004). Rony Brauman, *Penser Dans L'urgence: Parcours Critique D'un Humanitaire* (Paris: Seuil, 2006). Fiona Terry, *Condemned to Repeat? The Paradox of Humanitarian Action* (London: Cornell University Press, 2002). Tony Vaux, *The Selfish Altruist: Relief Work in Famine and War* (Sterling: Earthscan, 2001). See also the account of a former Vice-President of MSF and now President of Action Against Hunger. Jean-Christophe Rufin, *Le Piège Humanitaire, Suivi De Humanitaire Et Politique Depuis La Chute Du Mur* (Paris: Editions Jean-Claude Lattès, 1986). For a useful survey of MSF, see Dan Bortolotti, *Hope in Hell: Inside the World of Doctors without Borders* (Buffalo: Firefly Books, 2004).

³¹ Jan Egeland, *A Billion Lives: An Eyewitness Report from the Frontlines of Humanity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008). Sadako Ogata, *The Turbulent Decade: Confronting the Refugee Crises of the 1990s* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005). Samantha Power, *Chasing the Flame: One Man's Fight to Save the World* (London: Penguin, 2008).

³² This is in contrast to the slightly more hagiographic tone of similar works from the early 1990s. See for example Maggie Black, *A Cause for Our Times: Oxfam, the First 50 Years* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992). Wallace J. Campbell, *The History of CARE: A Personal Account* (New York: Praeger, 1990).

Moorehead.³³ But perhaps most important is the outstanding contribution of David Rieff, whose *A Bed for the Night* captures many of the tensions and paradoxes at stake.³⁴

These contributions are being enriched by creative cross-disciplinary academic work with a strongly applied focus by scholars such as Alex de Waal, David Keen and Stephen Hopgood.³⁵ The coming-of-age of this kind of work is exemplified by a recent collection edited by Michael Barnett and Thomas G. Weiss, perhaps the most important contribution to the academic study of humanitarianism, which provides an interesting comparison with an earlier collection, setting out some of the problems at stake, by Jonathan Moore.³⁶ Weiss himself is perhaps one of the most important figures in the academic study of humanitarianism, having written, co-written and edited a series of influential articles and books, in dialogue with interlocutors from politics, practice and academia, often within the pages of *Ethics*

³³ Michael Ignatieff, *The Warrior's Honor: Ethnic War and the Modern Conscience* (London: Vintage, 1999). Caroline Moorehead, *Dunant's Dream: War, Switzerland and the History of the Red Cross* (London: Harper Collins, 1999). Caroline Moorehead, *Human Cargo: A Journey among Refugees* (London: Vintage, 2006). William Shawcross, *The Quality of Mercy: Cambodia, Holocaust and Modern Conscience* (Glasgow: Fontana, 1985). William Shawcross, *Deliver Us from Evil: Peacekeepers, Warlords and a World of Endless Conflict* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).

³⁴ David Rieff, *A Bed for the Night: Humanitarianism in Crisis* (London: Vintage, 2002). David Rieff, *At the Point of a Gun: Democratic Dreams and Armed Intervention* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006). For an interesting reading of *A Bed for the Night* see Jenny Edkins, "Humanitarianism, Humanity, Human", *Journal of Human Rights* 2, no. 2 (2003).

³⁵ Alex de Waal, *Famine Crimes: Politics and the Disaster Relief Industry in Africa* (Oxford: J. Currey, 1997). Stephen Hopgood, *Keepers of the Flame: Understanding Amnesty International* (London: Cornell University Press, 2006). David Keen, *Complex Emergencies* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008).

³⁶ Michael Barnett and Thomas G. Weiss, eds., *Humanitarianism in Question: Politics, Power, Ethics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008). Jonathan Moore, ed., *Hard Choices: Moral Dilemmas in Humanitarian Intervention* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998). Henry Radice, "Review of Michael Barnett and Thomas G. Weiss (Eds), *Humanitarianism in Question: Politics, Power, Ethics*", *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 38, no. 3 (2010). See also the practitioner accounts in Fabrice Weissman, ed., *In the Shadow Of "Just Wars": Violence, Politics and Humanitarian Action* (London: Hurst & Company, 2004). A recent collection of Barnett's essays is also invaluable. Michael Barnett, *The International Humanitarian Order* (London: Routledge, 2010).

& *International Affairs*.³⁷ Other important voices in this expanding discussion include Hugo Slim and Larry Minear, who have both also straddled the worlds of academia, practice and policy.³⁸ Some writers identify an emerging new field of humanitarian studies.³⁹

Assembled together in this way, this literature throws up a number of important questions, which might be organized around three key, inter-connected themes, already present in Weiss' 1999 article: (1) the principles that define and

³⁷ Alain Destexhe, "Holding Humanitarianism Hostage: The Politics of Rescue", *Ethics & International Affairs* 11, no. 1 (1997). David R. Mapel, "When Is It Right to Rescue? A Response to Pasic and Weiss", *Ethics & International Affairs* 11, no. 1 (1997). Andrew Natsios, "NGOs and the Humanitarian Impulse: Some Have It Right", *Ethics & International Affairs* 11, no. 1 (1997). Amir Pasic and Thomas G. Weiss, "The Politics of Rescue: Yugoslavia's Wars and the Humanitarian Impulse", *Ethics & International Affairs* 11 (1997). Rieff, "Moral Imperatives and Political Realities". Sommaruga, "Humanity". Joelle Tanguy and Fiona Terry, "Humanitarian Responsibility and Committed Action: Response To "Principles, Politics, and Humanitarian Action"", 13, no. 1 (1999). Weiss, "Principles, Politics, and Humanitarian Action". Thomas G. Weiss, *Humanitarian Intervention: Ideas in Action* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007). Thomas G. Weiss and Jarat Chopra, "Sovereignty under Siege: From Intervention to Humanitarian Space", in *Beyond Westphalia? State Sovereignty and International Intervention*, ed. Gene M. Lyons and Michael Mastanduno (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995).

³⁸ Larry Minear, *The Humanitarian Enterprise: Dilemmas and Discoveries* (Bloomfield: Kumarian Press, 2002). Hugo Slim, "Sharing a Universal Ethic: The Principle of Humanity in War", *International Journal of Human Rights* 2, no. 4 (1998). Hugo Slim, "Humanitarianism and the Holocaust: Lessons from the ICRC's Policy Towards the Jews", *The International Journal of Human Rights* 5, no. 1 (2001). Hugo Slim, "Not Philanthropy but Rights: The Proper Politicisation of Humanitarian Philosophy", *The International Journal of Human Rights* 6, no. 2 (2002). Hugo Slim, *Killing Civilians: Method, Madness and Morality in War* (London: Hurst & Company, 2007). Smillie and Minear, *The Charity of Nations*.

³⁹ "Humanitarian studies examine how humanitarian crises evolve, how they affect people, institutions and societies, and the responses that they trigger." Dorothea Hilhorst, Dennis Dijkzeul and Joost Herman, "Editorial: Social Dynamics of Humanitarian Action", *Disasters* 34, no. s2 (2010): 127. Other key institutional contexts for these discussions include the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) of the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), the Humanitarian Futures Programme at King's College, London and the Feinstein International Center at Tufts University. *Feinstein International Center*. Available at <https://wikis.uit.tufts.edu/confluence/display/FIC/Feinstein+International+Center>; accessed on 20 August 2010. *Humanitarian Futures Programme*. Available at <http://www.humanitarianfutures.org>; accessed on 03 August 2010. *Humanitarian Policy Group*. Available at <http://www.odi.org.uk/work/programmes/humanitarian-policy-group/>; accessed on 20 August 2010. For a defence of the quality of debate among humanitarians, and an interesting view of how debate within humanitarianism is being accelerated and enriched by the fast-moving changes in information technology, see HPG, "Aid Workers - More Than Just 'Cowboys'", *AlertNet* (18 August 2010). Available at <http://alertnet.org/db/blogs/56091/2010/07/18-150513-1.htm>; accessed on 20 August 2010.

guide humanitarianism, which sometimes sit in tension with the dilemmas professional humanitarians encounter on the ground; (2) the relationship between humanitarianism and politics in all its forms; (3) the boundaries and scope of humanitarianism as a concept.⁴⁰ In the rest of this section, I will briefly summarise the problems of contemporary humanitarianism according to this schema, before arguing in the next section that an international political theory focus allows us to bring these dilemmas to life, for they inevitably lead to a bigger question, particularly well suited to the resurgent perspective of international political theory: what is humanitarianism?⁴¹ As humanitarians work through the contours of humanitarian identity, they reveal both a political struggle to safeguard and ring-fence their own legitimacy, but also much about the ways in which our human identity is politicised and enacted in contemporary international politics. Because humanitarian identity is so intertwined with ideas about human identity, they are constantly faced with a tension described by Hugo Slim. "Laughter is a universal good. What would the world be like if only clowns were allowed to be funny and make people laugh? This would be a terrible world that confined humour to a professional class and restricted a universal human desire and capacity."⁴² This is the constant dilemma of the humanitarian identity crisis: how to simultaneously preserve and spread their sense of humanity.

⁴⁰ In this classification, I follow the summary by Barnett and Weiss who identify a "contemporary debate over the purposes, principles and politics of humanitarianism." Michael Barnett and Thomas G. Weiss, "Humanitarianism: A Brief History of the Present", in *Humanitarianism in Question: Politics, Power, Ethics*, ed. Michael Barnett and Thomas G. Weiss (London: Cornell University Press, 2008), 3-5. Weiss, "Principles, Politics, and Humanitarian Action".

⁴¹ One of the overarching arguments of an outstanding essay by Stephen Hopgood is that questions about the identity of humanitarianism necessarily take us back to this bigger question. Stephen Hopgood, "Saying "No" To Wal-Mart? Money and Morality in Professional Humanitarianism", in *Humanitarianism in Question: Politics, Power, Ethics*, ed. Michael Barnett and Thomas G. Weiss (London: Cornell University Press, 2008).

⁴² Hugo Slim, "Humanitarianism with Borders? NGOs, Belligerent Military Forces and Humanitarian Action" (ICVA Conference on NGOs in a Changing World Order: Dilemmas and Challenges, Geneva, 14 February 2003).

1. Humanitarian Principles

Attempts to define humanitarianism tend to contain two elements: they indicate the kind of action at stake, such as the provision of relief in war zones or in the aftermath of natural disasters, or, in a more general sense, the alleviation of extreme suffering. They then enunciate the principles that should condition the undertaking of such action. As we shall see, it is often ambiguous as to whether the principles being enunciated are ethical principles of general resonance, applied ethical principles, or simply operating principles. Furthermore, it will be argued that the persistent ambiguity stems from two different interpretations of how best to ring-fence and protect humanitarianism as a privileged endeavour. A focus on the universal ethical applicability of humanitarian principles presents the promise of a privileged moral claim or authority, while a rigorous set of operating principles suggests the possibility of a clear and unambiguous practical purpose. This is the first core tension of humanitarianism, one that will run through the thesis and is arguably ultimately irresolvable, due to the constant dual grounding of humanitarianism in the worlds of practice and ethics, and the necessity of negotiating that through politics.

The most famous, and dominant set of humanitarian principles is that of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), an institution that still retains an unsurpassed degree of moral authority within professional humanitarianism.⁴³ These have been evolving since the publication of Henry Dunant's seminal *A Memory of Solferino*.⁴⁴ One of the first descriptions of Red Cross principles by Gustave Moynier, then president of the ICRC, in 1875, stresses four: foresight, solidarity (among Red Cross societies), centralisation (within each country) and

⁴³ On the politics of moral authority, see Stephen Hopgood, "Moral Authority, Modernity and the Politics of the Sacred", *European Journal of International Relations* 15, no. 2 (2009).

⁴⁴ Henry Dunant, *A Memory of Solferino* (Geneva: ICRC, 1986). Available at [http://www.icrc.org/Web/Eng/siteeng0.nsf/htmlall/p0361/\\$File/ICRC_002_0361_MEMORY_OF_SOLFERINO.PDF](http://www.icrc.org/Web/Eng/siteeng0.nsf/htmlall/p0361/$File/ICRC_002_0361_MEMORY_OF_SOLFERINO.PDF); accessed on 22 June 2010. This version of the text is unpaginated, as I will indicate in subsequent footnotes when quoting directly from it.

mutuality (close to the current understanding of impartiality).⁴⁵ These were clearly working principles, reflecting the struggle to get the movement on its feet. In 1921, the Statutes of the ICRC were revised to focus on four fundamental principles: impartiality, independence (political, economic and religious), universality of the Red Cross Movement, and equality of Red Cross members.⁴⁶ Then, from 1946 onwards, they were systematically revised and expanded, becoming progressively more institutionalised until their official proclamation in Vienna in 1965. Though representing the view of one particular organisation, they have a canonical status within humanitarianism, for they are the ones being either endorsed or contested in contemporary struggles for the soul of humanitarianism, including within the ICRC itself. Furthermore, many writers and practitioners seem to find themselves returning to the ICRC account of humanitarianism. The Dunantist tradition still exerts a powerful hold over the consciences of many professional humanitarians. For instance, at the end of his life, a leading French humanitarian from MSF, François Jean, confided to David Rieff that “he felt closer and closer to the ICRC’s approach”.⁴⁷

The most authoritative explanatory voice on their meaning and content is that of Jean Pictet, a major figure within the organisation, who produced a major analysis of Red Cross principles in 1955.⁴⁸ The definitive list contains seven fundamental principles: humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity, universality. It is now almost conventional to assert the primary importance of the first four. Without doubt, they are the most discussed. In the words of Barnett and Weiss, they are “the core”.⁴⁹ Nicholas Leader considers that “the principles of humanitarian action show a remarkable degree of continuity”, around this central core.⁵⁰ But it is interesting to note that part of the unease

⁴⁵ IFRC, "Origin of the Fundamental Principles". Available at <http://www.ifrc.org/what/values/principles/origin.asp>; accessed on 05 July 2010.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Rieff, *A Bed for the Night*, 331.

⁴⁸ IFRC, "Origin of the Fundamental Principles".

⁴⁹ Barnett and Weiss, "Humanitarianism", 3.

⁵⁰ Nicholas Leader, "Proliferating Principles, or How to Sup with the Devil without Getting Eaten", *International Journal of Human Rights* 2, no. 4 (1998): 22.

discernable within the literature of humanitarianism in crisis could plausibly be linked to the persistent influence of the last three.⁵¹ For example, the principle of voluntary service sits in tension with the increasingly professionalised practice of humanitarianism. As such, I will give the official Red Cross definition of each principle, briefly discuss them, and present the issues that arise from them and that permeate the rest of the thesis.⁵²

Humanity

The Red Cross, born of a desire to bring assistance without discrimination to the wounded on the battlefield, endeavours – in its international and national capacity – to prevent and alleviate human suffering wherever it may be found. Its purpose is to protect life and health and to ensure respect for the human being. It promotes mutual understanding, friendship, co-operation and lasting peace amongst all peoples.⁵³

Ramsbotham and Woodhouse consider the principle of humanity to be the “heart of humanitarianism”.⁵⁴ Indeed, it is widely recognised as such. For Pictet:

In the doctrine of the Red Cross, the principle of humanity, from which all the other principles flow, obviously has to stand in first place. As the basis of the institution, it provides at the same time its ideal, its motivation and its objective. It is indeed the prime mover for the whole movement, the spark

⁵¹ Ramsbotham and Woodhouse make a slightly different selection of a core: humanity, impartiality, neutrality, universality. They omit independence, voluntary service and unity on the grounds that “they apply more narrowly to the inner integrity of the movement itself”. This is precisely why it is interesting to examine their implications for the humanitarian identity crisis. Ramsbotham and Woodhouse, *Humanitarian Intervention in Contemporary Conflict*, 14.

⁵² In doing so, I am borrowing the approach of Ramsbotham and Woodhouse, who take also take the principles in turn. Rather than assert and describe their content, though, I present them as sites of contestation and debate. *Ibid.*, 14-18. I will use Pictet’s 1979 commentary on the principles, the interpretation the ICRC foreground on their website. Jean Pictet, *The Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross: Commentary* (1979). Available at <http://www.icrc.org/Web/Eng/siteeng0.nsf/htmlall/fundamental-principles-commentary-010179>; accessed on 05 July 2010. The text is unpaginated, as I will indicate in subsequent footnotes when quoting directly from it. See also IFRC, “Origin of the Fundamental Principles”.

⁵³ Pictet, *The Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross*, unpaginated text.

⁵⁴ Ramsbotham and Woodhouse, *Humanitarian Intervention in Contemporary Conflict*, 15.

which ignites the powder, the line of force for all its action. If the Red Cross were to have only one principle, it would be this one.⁵⁵

Tony Vaux sees it as “the fundamental moral value of humanitarianism”, taking precedence over all the others, and defining it more concisely as “concern for the person in need”.⁵⁶ However one looks at it, the principle of humanity clearly represents a potentially open-ended solidaristic commitment. Its scope goes far beyond the traditional activities of professional humanitarianism, and in defining it, we are constantly faced with slippage across the three senses of humanity evoked in the introduction of this chapter. One way of reading the following principles is simply as a way to describe how best to honour the principle of humanity. Another, not necessarily opposed one, is as a way of closing down that open-ended scope through specification. Many of the tensions professional humanitarians face, I will argue, emerge from the need to justify their specific principles, which takes them back to the principle of humanity with the uncontrollability of its open-endedness. Furthermore, as I will argue in Chapter 2, how to make sense of “human suffering” is by no means straightforward.

Ramsbotham and Woodhouse see the principle of humanity as recognising “the common humanity that lies beneath political divisions even in war”.⁵⁷ This idea of an essential underlying humanity is also the focus of many of the critiques of humanitarian action, which caution that in stripping away all politics, all that is left is a depoliticised “bare life”.⁵⁸ Another common theme of critiques is how slippery appeals to common humanity can be, and how the claim of acting “in the name of humanity” can rapidly become an alibi for unaccountable acts and abuses of power. Humanity is the ultimate legitimising principle. To quote Henry Kissinger (perhaps an unlikely source of humanitarian wisdom): “[legitimizing] principles triumph by

⁵⁵ Pictet, *The Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross*, unpaginated text.

⁵⁶ Vaux, *The Selfish Altruist*, 5.

⁵⁷ Ramsbotham and Woodhouse, *Humanitarian Intervention in Contemporary Conflict*, 15.

⁵⁸ Jenny Edkins, *Whose Hunger? Concepts of Famine, Practices of Aid* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000). For the original discussion of “bare life”, see Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

being taken for granted.”⁵⁹ We tend to assume our own humanity, both as a quality and as a disposition, and are thus easily seduced by appeals that flatter it, as we will see in Chapter 3. Moreover, it is always easier to see another’s humanity as lacking, rather than one’s own. Here, the ways in which the principle of humanity has become taken for granted, not least debates within liberal international political theory, will be explored, as well as those where we seek to impose our own conception of humanity on others.

Impartiality

It makes no discrimination as to nationality, race, religious beliefs, class or political opinions. It endeavours only to relieve suffering, giving priority to the most urgent cases of distress.⁶⁰

For Pictet, the next principle, impartiality, is already implied in the first. Vaux agrees. “Impartiality is an essential quality of humanity because it means that we do not distinguish between persons. In other words, we are fair.”⁶¹ On the face of it, this principle is a logical concomitant of the principle of humanity. If we are serious about a common humanity, we must be impartial and non-discriminatory about where suffering is most urgent. Impartiality is a clear point of linkage into liberal political and international political theory. Impartiality has appeared in various guises from Adam Smith’s impartial spectator to Brian Barry’s conception of justice as impartiality.⁶² As Richard Shapcott points out, there is a clear link here between the central place of impartiality in humanitarian practice and the importance of an external, impartial point of judgement in cosmopolitan theorising.⁶³ But a number of difficulties emerge here. For humanitarians, being impartial requires making a judgement about whose suffering is worse, most urgent, perhaps even most unjust.

⁵⁹ From *A World Restored*, cited in Finnemore, *The Purpose of Intervention*, 85.

⁶⁰ Pictet, *The Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross*, unpaginated text.

⁶¹ Vaux, *The Selfish Altruist*, 5.

⁶² Brian Barry, *Justice as Impartiality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996). Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

⁶³ Richard Shapcott, *International Ethics: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), 129.

It is not clear that a hierarchy of suffering is the best way to honour our sense of humanity. Furthermore, as we will see in Chapters 3 and 5, the building blocks of our moral concern, both at psychological and political levels, are not situated at an impartial position. For instance, there may be a trade-off between maximising solidarity in the short term, and impartially assessing the justice of a given situation over a longer time-frame.⁶⁴

Neutrality

In order to continue to enjoy the confidence of all, the Red Cross may not take sides in hostilities or engage at any time in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature.⁶⁵

Hugo Slim playfully remarks that in the *Inferno*, Dante reserves a special torment for those who have been neutral, committing the sin of moral indecision and vacillation. They are destined forever to rush after an aimlessly whirling banner while being attacked by swarms of hornets. He drily notes that this is not, after all, so far removed from the everyday experiences of many aid workers.⁶⁶ Neutrality has been the most obviously controversial humanitarian principle. The most vivid illustration of its limitations was the strict neutrality, and silence, maintained by the ICRC in relation to Nazi concentration camps during the Second World War. The decision not to speak out, in order to enable to ICRC to pursue its core wartime functions, has haunted the organisation, and arguably the whole humanitarian sector, ever since.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ For an interesting discussion of the some of the tensions and limits of impartiality, see Bronwyn Leebaw, "The Politics of Impartial Activism: Humanitarianism and Human Rights", *Perspectives on Politics* 5, no. 2 (2007).

⁶⁵ Pictet, *The Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross*, unpaginated text.

⁶⁶ Hugo Slim, "Relief Agencies and Moral Standing in War: Principles of Humanity, Neutrality, Impartiality and Solidarity", *Development in Practice* 7, no. 4 (1997): 342.

⁶⁷ See Jean-Claude Favez, *The Red Cross and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). Moorehead, *Dunant's Dream*. Slim, "Humanitarianism and the Holocaust: Lessons from the ICRC's Policy Towards the Jews". Questions about strict neutrality and confidentiality have continued to arise, for instance in the context of ICRC visits to detention facilities such as Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay.

A quarter of a century later, it was on the question of maintaining strict neutrality and belligerent consent that a group of French Red Cross doctors split from the organisation during the Biafran crisis, leading to the formation of MSF. The highly influential MSF critique, still very much within the Dunantist tradition, nevertheless reserves the right not to remain neutral and to speak out, if bearing witness is the appropriate response to a situation.⁶⁸ During the Biafran crisis, Oxfam and other NGOs, fearing a genocide, also abandoned neutrality and organised airlifts of supplies. Jumping forward, neutrality has clearly been a critical principle in terms of recent debates on military humanitarian intervention, as they can obviously never be neutral. But with the benefit of hindsight, fears of a genocide in Biafra were not borne out and the more cautious ICRC approach may have been more justified. Its defenders argue that it remains effective as an operating principle, as an enabler of access and guarantor of non-belligerent status, and that humanitarianism still has more to lose than to gain from abandoning it.⁶⁹

But in a broader sense, David Kennedy notes that within the practice of war “the formal status of neutrality has eroded”.⁷⁰ In the context of complex emergencies, neutrality can appear particularly difficult to operationalise.⁷¹ In situations such as genocides, it is non-existent. The question then arises of whether humanitarianism should seek to collaborate with powerful states to put a stop to the killing.

⁶⁸ On MSF and neutrality see Fiona Terry, *The Principle of Neutrality: Is It Relevant to MSF?* (MSF, 2000). Available at <http://www.msf.fr/drive/2000-12-01-Terry.pdf>; accessed on 13 August 2010.

⁶⁹ For summaries of recent debates, with particular focus on the ICRC, see Larry Minear, “The Theory and Practice of Neutrality: Some Thoughts on the Tensions”, *International Review of the Red Cross*, no. 833 (1999). Barbara Ann Rieffer-Flanagan, “Is Neutral Humanitarianism Dead? Red Cross Neutrality: Walking the Tightrope of Neutral Humanitarianism”, *Human Rights Quarterly* 31, no. 4 (2009).

⁷⁰ David Kennedy, *Of War and Law* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 9.

⁷¹ Shapcott, *International Ethics*.

Independence

The Red Cross is independent. The National Societies, while auxiliaries in the humanitarian services of their Governments and subject to the laws of their respective countries, must always maintain their autonomy so that they may be able at all times to act in accordance with Red Cross principles.⁷²

As will become clear during the course of the argument, true independence has always been something of a chimera for humanitarians, but the struggle for independence, especially from states, is at the heart of professional humanitarians' attempts to define themselves.⁷³ This is partly because it is always easier to define oneself against another, but mainly because humanitarians fear becoming instrumentalised. Famously, many humanitarians were deeply disturbed by Colin Powell's unashamed cooption of their moral authority in the context of the war in Afghanistan:

As I speak, just as surely as our diplomats and military, American NGOs are out there serving and sacrificing on the front lines of freedom I am serious about making sure we have the best relationship with the NGOs who are such a force multiplier for us, such an important part of our combat team. [We are] all committed to the same, singular purpose to help every man and woman in the world who is in need, who is hungry, who is without hope, to help every one of them fill a belly, get a roof over their heads, educate their children, have hope.⁷⁴

The anxiety here is that, in the absence of strict independence, neutrality and impartiality are unsustainable, and that anyone will be able to co-opt humanitarian moral authority for their "combat team" so long as they claim to act in the name of humanity. They fear that their "humanitarian space" is shrinking.

⁷² Pictet, *The Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross*, unpaginated text.

⁷³ This will be further explored in Chapter 6.

⁷⁴ Nicolas de Torrente, "Humanitarian Action under Attack: Reflections on the Iraq War ", *Harvard Human Rights Journal* 17 (2004): 9.

Voluntary service

The Red Cross is a voluntary relief organization not prompted in any manner by desire for gain.⁷⁵

The principle of voluntary service raises particularly interesting issues. Rarely mentioned explicitly in discussions about humanitarianism, my contention here is that anxiety over this principle is at the very heart of the current identity crisis of humanitarianism.⁷⁶ As Pictet notes in his commentary, Dunant himself judged that good will was preferable to paid help in the carrying out of humanitarian work.⁷⁷ Though for reasons of clarity I will employ the term professional humanitarianism throughout this thesis, to contrast with more diffuse actions and wider social dispositions, many humanitarians would still balk at the term. Avoiding paid help has become increasingly unviable as humanitarianism has become institutionalised, though it remains problematic when it comes to, for instance, pay discrepancies between local and international staff. How can an endeavour like humanitarianism discriminate against local employees? Yet either solution presents problems: if it lowers the pay and worsens the conditions of internationals in line with local conditions, they would lose some of the institutionalised humanitarian gains of their home countries, if they come from liberal democracies, which they are presumably precisely trying to spread. If they raise the salaries for local staff to international level, they can create a distorting brain drain effect.

Simultaneously, as Hopgood points out, to sustain itself as a professional enterprise, humanitarianism is forced to commodify its moral authority, to sell itself to achieve its ends, to engage in ruthless competition for lucrative contracts.⁷⁸ At this point, ring-fencing its distinctive, privileged claim to moral authority becomes more difficult, and it becomes even more important to try to preserve the essence of the voluntary service principle, doing the right thing for the right reason, hence the relentless debates about right motive and right intent that have characterised,

⁷⁵ Pictet, *The Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross*, unpaginated text.

⁷⁶ An important exception here is Hopgood, "Saying "No" To Wal-Mart?"

⁷⁷ Pictet, *The Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross*, unpaginated text.

⁷⁸ Hopgood, "Saying "No" To Wal-Mart?" 99.

in particular, debates on humanitarian intervention, but have also been latent in discussions about the necessity of independence, that is, of excluding actors with suspicious or mixed motives. It also explains the frequent reification of altruism, to the point where humanitarianism often becomes synonymous with altruism.⁷⁹ I will attempt to debunk this category error in Chapter 3.

The other tension that emerges is that between charitable, discretionary action, and action that merely respects, say, a piece of binding humanitarian legislation. This is linked to debates on charity versus justice, which I will introduce below. The relevant point here is the paradox that much humanitarian action is described as the pursuit of justice, and thus presumably of establishing non-discretionary duties, yet only charitable acts become classified as humanitarian. Professional humanitarians are still often smitten with the idea of themselves as Good Samaritans.⁸⁰ But humanitarianism cannot, on this account, bank any moral gains, and locks itself in to always being an “emblem of failure”, in David Rieff’s words.⁸¹

Unity

There can be only one Red Cross Society in any one country. It must be open to all. It must carry on its humanitarian work throughout its territory.⁸²

The issues arising from the principle of unity build on those surrounding voluntary service. Pictet writes that:

For practical reasons, which are nonetheless imperative, the Red Cross Society must be the only one of its kind in the territory of each nation, for this is essential to the efficacy of its work. We can well imagine the confusion which would prevail in a country if several associations, all

⁷⁹ Vaux, *The Selfish Altruist*.

⁸⁰ Weiss, "Principles, Politics, and Humanitarian Action": 14.

⁸¹ Rieff, *A Bed for the Night*, 304.

⁸² Pictet, *The Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross*, unpaginated text.

proclaiming the same principles, were to advertise that they were carrying out the same tasks independently!⁸³

Though unity, in this sense, has been achieved within the Red Cross movement, it has long been forsaken in the wider sector of professional humanitarianism. Different issue-areas often see a multitude of organisations competing with each other for donations, funding and contracts, and rushing to be the first to plant the flag. As Pictet predicted, this has often resulted in confusion and in ineffectiveness, with organisations feeling they need a presence in X or Y crisis, rather than genuinely meeting a need.⁸⁴ Some of the measures employed to self-regulate will be discussed in Chapter 5. But the more profound issue here is that if many professional humanitarians feel they need an unquestionable, homogenous identity to legitimise their action, such an identity is clearly in tension with the need to compete and distinguish oneself from other organisations.

Universality

The Red Cross is a world-wide institution in which all Societies have equal status and share equal responsibilities and duties in helping each other.⁸⁵

The question of universality brings us full circle, back to the issues raised by the principle of humanity. Though ostensibly just referring to the organisation of the Red Cross, Pictet's commentary relates this to universality of purpose. For Pictet, humanity and impartiality imply universality, and an egalitarian universality at that.⁸⁶ But we face the question of whether universality precedes the principle of humanity, or whether the principle of humanity precisely emerges from the lack of agreement on universal respect for human dignity, or even on the content of such a

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Randolph C. Kent, "International Humanitarian Crises: Two Decades before and Two Decades Beyond", *International Affairs* 80, no. 5 (2004): 862.

⁸⁵ Pictet, *The Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross*, unpaginated text.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

concept. It raises the question of how those issues are negotiated and therefore, the issue of politics.

2. Humanitarianism and Politics

Professional humanitarians have long been uneasy with the idea that they are implicated in politics. Partly this relates to the negative connotation “politics” is often seen to have, a zone of compromise and negotiation, which might be necessary and valuable, but contrasts sharply with other spheres of activity that are understood as without compromise. To give one example, Daniel Barenboim is fond of making the distinction between success in music, which requires a determination not to compromise, and success in politics, which precisely rewards those skilled in cutting deals. Many would like to identify a similar distinction between humanitarianism and politics. Barenboim recently described the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra, a musical collaboration between young Arab and Israeli musicians founded by Barenboim in collaboration with Edward Said, as “a humanitarian idea”. He then made clear that: “[we] don’t see ourselves as a political project”.⁸⁷ Putting aside the unlikelihood of any project involving Edward Said being apolitical, this seems both an implausible and an unnecessary characterisation. Surely the point is to demonstrate that a better kind of politics, collaboration, is possible, in contrast with the politics of mutual distrust and violence.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ Daniel Barenboim, "On the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra", in *Everything Is Connected: The Power of Music* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2008), 181.

⁸⁸ The idea that musical success brooks no compromise is also somewhat dubious, especially when it comes to classical music, in which all kinds of adjustments and compromises take place between composer and interpreter, conductor and orchestra, as indeed was well-illustrated by Edward Said in his writings on music. For a fascinating collection of these, see Edward W. Said, *Music at the Limits: Three Decades of Essays and Articles on Music* (London: Bloomsbury, 2008).

In recent years, many professional humanitarians have been more willing to acknowledge the political dimension of what they do.⁸⁹ Janice Stein likens this recognition to humanitarians “growing up” and argues that:

Humanitarians, belatedly and with difficulty, are acknowledging that they have been speaking prose, and have been doing so for a long time. To pretend otherwise, to struggle to maintain the fiction that their work is apolitical, is to do a disservice to those they seek to help.⁹⁰

The true contours of humanitarian politics, understood as a “politics of humanity”, will gradually take shape as the argument of this thesis proceeds. It is a strong contention of the thesis that a truly apolitical humanitarianism is both impossible and undesirable. But within the sphere of professional humanitarianism, explicit debates on the relationship between humanitarianism and politics have been a particularly salient feature of the humanitarian identity crisis.

Thomas Weiss posed in his 1999 piece the important question of how the intersection between politics and humanitarian action best “can be managed to ensure more humanized politics and more effective humanitarian action”.⁹¹ He distinguished firstly between classicists, of which the ICRC is the archetypal example, who see a constant necessity for humanitarian action to be insulated from politics, and political humanitarians, including himself, who see the association between humanitarian action and politics as both inevitable and desirable.⁹² Within political humanitarianism, he outlined three trends: minimalists, who aim to “do no harm”, maximalists, who see humanitarianism as a means to more transformative ends, such as ending conflict, and solidarists, “who choose sides and abandon neutrality and impartiality as well as reject consent as a prerequisite for

⁸⁹ See for instance Mark Duffield, Joanna Macrae and Devon Curtis, "Editorial: Politics and Humanitarian Aid", *Disasters* 25, no. 4 (2001): 269. Kouchner, *Les Guerriers De La Paix*, 484.

⁹⁰ Janice Gross Stein, "Humanitarianism as Political Fusion", *Perspectives on Politics* 3, no. 4 (2005): 741.

⁹¹ Implicit in Weiss' formulation, and explicit here, is the fact that we are dealing with international politics. Weiss, "Principles, Politics, and Humanitarian Action": 22.

⁹² *Ibid.*: 2.

intervention”.⁹³ This categorisation is not uncontroversial. For example, he includes MSF as an example of solidarity, but MSF certainly would not see themselves as abandoning impartiality. On the contrary, a concern to act impartially precisely drives their qualification of neutrality, outlined in the previous section.

The approach here is to consider all humanitarianisms as embodying versions of politics. Classicists clearly see their apolitical nature in terms of their commitment to neutrality and impartiality, but Laura Suski makes the point that if “the principles of neutrality and impartiality are the only measurements of the (a)political nature of humanitarianism, we are certainly employing a limited view of the political”.⁹⁴ I will take seriously, throughout the thesis, the merits of a politics of appearing apolitical in different contexts, but ultimately I endorse a more expansive view of the political, as set out in the introduction to the chapter. As such, I will not adopt this, or any other classification, that describes approaches in terms of “their degree of political involvement”.⁹⁵ It makes sense for Weiss, as for him the key types of politics are “the competition among states”, “the struggle for power and influence within donor and crisis states”, and “efforts to agree upon desirable international public policies within governmental, intergovernmental, and nongovernmental arenas”.⁹⁶ But this thesis will employ, for instance in Chapters 2 and 3, much broader understandings of social life as a political context. The question of politics is not one of degree, but of kind.

What Weiss’ classification does help us identify, however, is what humanitarians see as the core political issues, and these are important for our purposes. The first of these, implicit in the preceding discussion, is how humanitarians understand the status of the principles introduced in the previous section. That is, which they consider to be ethical principles and which operating principles, and how to construct a politics that turns that view into a workable package. Secondly, the concern of minimalist political humanitarians, of which Mary

⁹³ Ibid.: 3.

⁹⁴ Laura Suski, “Children, Suffering and the Humanitarian Appeal”, in *Humanitarianism and Suffering: The Mobilization of Empathy*, ed. Richard Ashby Wilson and Richard D. Brown (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 217.

⁹⁵ Weiss, “Principles, Politics, and Humanitarian Action”: 4.

⁹⁶ Ibid.: 11.

Anderson is the best example, to “do no harm”, represents a discussion of the political consequences of humanitarian action, including harmful consequences, and the problems of responsibility for those.⁹⁷ Thirdly, the transformative concerns of maximalists point to the biggest debate of all: what is the scope of humanitarianism?

3. The Scope of Humanitarianism

Craig Calhoun argues that professional humanitarians are haunted by three questions, pertaining to the scope of their endeavour:

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?⁹⁸

This sets out some useful initial parameters about the practical scope of humanitarianism. Linked to this is the perennial question of whether humanitarianism, in addressing all or any of these practical directions, should be addressing the root causes of the suffering in question, or merely dealing with the consequences. For example, Roberto Belloni states clearly his view on the subject. “Humanitarianism is not about prevention, but damage control.”⁹⁹ But looking back through the history of professional humanitarianism, it rapidly becomes evident that such a clear-cut view has never been taken, even by that bastion of classical humanitarianism, the ICRC. In its attempts to “humanise” war, the ICRC has always

⁹⁷ Mary B. Anderson, *Do No Harm: How Aid Can Support Peace - or War* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1999).

⁹⁸ Craig Calhoun, "The Imperative to Reduce Suffering: Charity, Progress, and Emergencies in the Field of Humanitarian Action", in *Humanitarianism in Question: Politics, Power, Ethics*, ed. Michael Barnett and Thomas G. Weiss (London: Cornell University Press, 2008), 73.

⁹⁹ Roberto Belloni, "The Trouble with Humanitarianism", *Review of International Studies* 33, no. 3 (2007): 457.

effectively adopted a preventive mode. It is hard to identify any humanitarian actor that does not in some way incorporate preventive aspects into their action. Nevertheless, there are tensions within professional humanitarianism about whether their main focus should be root causes, or immediate consequences of suffering. At a deep level, these relate to whether the emphasis is on the possibility of human perfectibility, or on a sceptical view of how much suffering can be averted. For example, Ignatieff argues that the 1949 Geneva Conventions “accept war as a normal anthropological ritual – the only way that certain human disputes can be resolved. They seek only to ensure that warriors conform to certain basic principles of humanity”.¹⁰⁰

Linked to these discussions are the kinds and contexts of suffering that humanitarians see as most relevant, as suggested by Calhoun’s third item. Is suffering to be ring-fenced in “emergencies” or understood in a more diffuse and disparate manner, and what normative framework should be established to articulate it as a matter for concern. This will emerge clearly in the examination of how professional humanitarians conceptualise human suffering in Chapter 2, and again in their debates on whether to align themselves with the project of enshrining and defending universal human rights, or to dedicate themselves to the pursuit of global justice (see Chapter 5).

Indeed the question of justice is one of the constant touchstones of debates about the scope of humanitarianism. The position of Alain Destexhe is a case in point. “Humanitarian action is noble when coupled with political action and justice. Without them, it is doomed to failure and ... a conscience-salving gimmick.”¹⁰¹ Yet much professional humanitarian action takes place in contexts and timescales within which it may be difficult to articulate, let alone achieve, justice. One key question is, should humanitarians seek an alternative nobility in virtues such as charity? This putative dichotomy will be examined in Chapter 5. But whether professional humanitarians see themselves as serving the demands of justice or charity, the content of their action also implies a debate about scope. At the heart

¹⁰⁰ Ignatieff, *The Warrior's Honor*, 119.

¹⁰¹ Cited in Weiss, "Principles, Politics, and Humanitarian Action": 15.

of it are practices of rescue, as will be set out in Chapter 4. But what rescue means is as ambiguous as the question of what is being saved. Does it entail providing “a bed for the night” or a roadmap to a fulfilled and happy life?

Furthermore, however professional humanitarians understand rescue, they face questions about the boundaries of the acceptable with regards to the means they employ. Important here are questions about the legitimacy of using violence in the exercise of humanitarian action (see Chapters 4 and 5). But arguably more significant is the question of how to situate different kinds of agents within or outside the scope of humanitarianism. The question of how individuals experience the humanitarian impulse will be examined in Chapter 3. How the humanitarian impulse is best enacted in a world of states, and whether the scope of humanitarianism needs to be seen as inclusive of international politics, is the topic of Chapter 6.

All these debates raise a series of normative questions that cannot be fully understood within debates among professional humanitarians, who can at times employ slightly instrumentalised, impoverished accounts of ideas like human rights and global justice, and present sometimes limited accounts of the normative aspects of international politics, or indeed, the notion of common humanity at the core of their concerns and ours. Therefore, it makes sense to look to an area of theorising which has rather a lot to say about these issues.

III Why Is There No International Political Theory of Humanitarianism?

In this section I argue that when it comes to contemporary international political theory, humanitarianism is frequently discussed but little understood.¹⁰² The set of problems and dilemmas introduced above could plausibly be the focus for a detailed study from a variety of different disciplinary perspectives, including international law, development studies, sociology and anthropology. Indeed, a

¹⁰² The title is of course a play on Martin Wight, “Why Is There No International Theory?” in *Diplomatic Investigations: Essays in the Theory of International Politics*, ed. Herbert Butterfield and Martin Wight (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1966).

detailed engagement with many particular aspects of the humanitarian endeavour necessitates the use of one or more of these perspectives. The contention of this thesis is that a particularly productive way to engage with this question is to treat it as a problem in international political theory, because more than any other perspective, it reveals the fundamental interdependence between the ethical and the political dimensions of humanitarianism. Examining humanitarianism and international political theory together enables us to explore the vital problems raised by this essential concept for our international moral lives, while shining a light on some of the less-examined corners of a rich body of work. By doing so, concepts such as solidarity and humanity, key to the moral life, are enriched.

Nicholas Rengger defines international political theory loosely as a field that “consists in ethical, historical and philosophical reflection on the manner and matter of international politics”.¹⁰³ The resurgence of international political theory is now well into its third decade. Initially spurred by key texts such as Michael Walzer’s *Just and Unjust Wars* (originally published in 1977) and Charles Beitz’s *Political Theory and International Relations* (1979), it has greatly enriched our understanding of the ethical character of international politics.¹⁰⁴ The discourse of international political theory provides a fertile context in which to discuss our international and global interactions as issues in applied political philosophy. A focus on international political theory allows us, say, to read Thomas Pogge and Paul Collier as interlocutors in a coherent debate on global poverty in a way that would perhaps not otherwise be possible, given their divergent disciplinary backgrounds in philosophy and economics.¹⁰⁵ Furthermore, it demonstrates that issues that might previously have been seen as simply political are almost always inextricably intertwined with complex ethical debates. Doing international political

¹⁰³ Nicholas Rengger, "Reading Charles Beitz: Twenty-Five Years of *Political Theory and International Relations*", *Review of International Studies* 31, no. 2 (2005): 361.

¹⁰⁴ Charles R. Beitz, *Political Theory and International Relations*, 2nd ed. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999). Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations*, 3rd ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

¹⁰⁵ Paul Collier, *The Bottom Billion: Why the Poorest Countries Are Failing and What Can Be Done About It* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). Thomas Pogge, *World Poverty and Human Rights: Cosmopolitan Responsibilities and Reforms*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Polity, 2008).

theory represents an acknowledgement that, for many international or global problems, it makes little sense to separate out the ethical from the political.

However, the discourse of international political theory, in so far as it can be summarised, can display a tendency to privilege certain core issues at the expense of other foci which might productively be examined as revealing and central concerns for international political theorists. A key claim that I want to advance here is that humanitarianism is just such a concern. Central to this claim is the proposition that international political theory as a self-conscious discourse has instrumentalised and therefore impoverished the study of humanitarianism, reducing it to a relatively narrow debate on the specific and controversial practice of military humanitarian intervention, instead of focusing on the vital debates outlined in the previous section.

There is a danger, here, incidentally, in that part of the point of doing international political theory is precisely to bring together relevant bodies of thought in response to problems in our international moral life, in ways that the authors who form the substantive content of the resulting international political theory debate had not perhaps anticipated. So to criticise a lack of conscious engagement with humanitarianism as a distinct focus is not necessarily a valid criticism for an international political theorist to make, it merely directs him or her to do the job of identifying an international political theory debate about humanitarianism. That is one of the key tasks of this work, and I pointed in the previous section to some key sources for that. But the point here is that within recent international political theory, humanitarianism has ostensibly been a rather prominent concern. Here, I want briefly to demonstrate how, within key debates in international political theory, humanitarianism, while prominent, has largely been instrumentalised as part of ongoing discussions about sovereignty, rights and justice, in a way that is potentially unhelpful as a starting point for our task. As such, a conscious move away from the manner in which the discourse of international political theory has explicitly treated humanitarianism is necessary, before the contributions of leading international political theorists, in terms of their implicit

engagement with humanitarianism in a much broader sense, can be brought back later in the thesis.

1. International Political Theory's Core Concerns

Chris Brown has plausibly described contemporary international political theory as revolving around three core concerns: sovereignty, rights and justice.¹⁰⁶ While his characterisation is not meant to be exhaustive, the ease with which the key contributions to international political theory of figures like Walzer, Beitz or John Rawls can be articulated in response to these concerns is significant. Arguably, the rich examination of these three concerns has come at the expense of a substantive engagement with humanitarianism as such.

Most explicit discussions of humanitarianism within international political theory take place in the context of debates on the specific practice of humanitarian intervention, to the extent that "humanitarianism" and "humanitarian intervention" are sometimes used interchangeably.¹⁰⁷ Humanitarian intervention has been a defining trope of post-Cold War international political theory discussions, spawning a vast literature which continues to expand and embraces new debates such as that on the doctrine of the "Responsibility to Protect". The relevant understanding of the term humanitarian intervention has been defined by J. L. Holzgrefe as

the threat or use of force across state borders by a state (or group of states) aimed at preventing or ending widespread and grave violations of the fundamental human rights of individuals other than its own citizens, without the permission of the state within whose territory force is applied.¹⁰⁸

This widely cited definition accurately summarises the kind of humanitarian intervention at stake for key authors such as Michael Walzer or Nicholas Wheeler. It

¹⁰⁶ Brown, *Sovereignty, Rights and Justice*.

¹⁰⁷ See for example the chapter on humanitarian intervention in Simon Caney, *Justice Beyond Borders: A Global Political Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 226-262.

¹⁰⁸ J. L. Holzgrefe, "The Humanitarian Intervention Debate", in *Humanitarian Intervention: Ethical, Legal and Political Dilemmas*, ed. J. L. Holzgrefe and Robert O. Keohane (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 19.

is also clear that this particular practice within humanitarianism is the dominant focus for international political theorists in so far as they explicitly engage with humanitarianism.

Holzgrefe's definition highlights four separate assumptions that render the explicit international political theory discourse on humanitarianism at best incomplete. First, the key agents of humanitarianism are assumed to be states. Second, violent means are at least potentially legitimate. Third, human rights violations form the problem to which humanitarian intervention is potentially the answer. Fourth, a violation of sovereignty in the name of the defence of human rights is at stake. I will briefly unpack all four.

The role of the state within humanitarianism is a complex one, and will be examined in greater depth in Chapter 6. But there is clearly a mismatch between the focus within the humanitarian intervention debates on what the state can or cannot deliver for humanitarianism and the view of many professional humanitarians that operational independence from states is a necessary characteristic of humanitarian action. This view often holds that humanitarianism precisely implies a lack of self-interest. Therefore, because states are self-interested actors, they cannot act on behalf of humanitarianism. This line of argument makes strange bedfellows of some of the more idealistic professional humanitarians and realist scholars of international relations. Chris Brown notes the intellectual contortions this leads to within international political theory. "Humanitarian intervention is generally seen as a non-realist, even anti-realist, notion, but the idea that there is, or might be, a separate category of state behaviour that can be characterized as 'humanitarian' owes its existence to the dominance of realist assumptions about international behaviour."¹⁰⁹

The means assumed to be at stake are also precisely the most problematic, when viewed from the perspective of say, a humanitarian aid worker. The use of violence may be called for in response to a particular problem, but cannot be seen as forming part of any humanitarian practice. It is often remarked that most professional humanitarians are not pacifists, yet many still assert that even a just

¹⁰⁹ Brown, *Sovereignty, Rights and Justice*, 136.

war can never be a humanitarian war, for the concept is simply an oxymoron in humanitarian terms. This issue will be examined in more depth in Chapter 4. But for now it raises the question of whether humanitarian intervention as understood by, say, a Nicholas Wheeler, is simply too different to be conceptually reconciled with the humanitarianism of the ICRC. Alex Bellamy captures the issue nicely. "Read through the Red Cross' understanding of humanitarian principles, not one act of armed 'humanitarian' intervention discussed by pluralists and solidarists could earn the label 'humanitarian'."¹¹⁰

Arguably the key to this is whether they are both concerned with dealing with the same problem. To some extent they are. The justification for humanitarian intervention is often seen as being the egregious violation of human rights, something that is of course of central concern to many professional humanitarians, even if they sometimes see themselves as somewhat distinct from the promotion and protection of human rights. What Chapter 5 will attempt to do is reject a rigorous distinction between the spheres of humanitarianism and human rights, while arguing that by describing the "humanitarian" uniquely as that which comes into being in response to human rights violations, international political theory often neglects the way the social construction of human rights itself relies on pre-existing humanitarian commitments. The assumption that humanitarianism depends on human rights, which often leads to arguments that humanitarianism should ground itself in human rights, is in this sense misleading. Furthermore, it risks obscuring the important role of self-help in rights-struggles.

It is however, understandable, for in examining humanitarian intervention, international political theorists are often actually merely probing the clash between their core concerns of sovereignty, rights and justice. Their starting point is not humanitarianism as such, but rather the circumstances in which sovereignty may or may not be breached in the name of rights, and how this relates to theories of (international or global) justice. This is clearly true of English School writers such as Wheeler, who notes that "[the] reason for focusing on the subject of humanitarian

¹¹⁰ Alex J. Bellamy, "Humanitarian Responsibilities and Interventionist Claims in International Society", *Review of International Studies* 29, no. 3 (2003): 340.

intervention is that it poses the conflict between order and justice in international relations in its starkest form".¹¹¹ While the English School has delivered some of the key works of interest to international political theorists about humanitarian intervention, such as Wheeler's *Saving Strangers*, there is a definite sense in which it rarely escapes its initial focus on the circumstances in which the norm of non-intervention might justifiably be overridden.¹¹² English School considerations of humanitarianism still broadly take place on the terms laid out by Hedley Bull over thirty years ago in his examination of the question of order versus justice.¹¹³ This, as Alex Bellamy astutely notes, leads us to a situation in which "humanitarianism is viewed through the lens of intervention rather than as a self-contained concept or group of practices".¹¹⁴ This creates a fundamental bias in what we think of as "humanitarian". "The key characteristic, therefore, is not the scale or nature of human suffering but whether that suffering requires outside intervention to alleviate it."¹¹⁵ Bellamy notes that "[despite] the fact that the term 'humanitarian' is used so often, English School writers barely consider what it actually means".¹¹⁶ Yet their work is often central to that of international political theorists, such as Simon Caney, in their considerations of humanitarian intervention.¹¹⁷ In the part of international political theory which draws more explicitly on political theory, much of the discussion on humanitarian intervention draws on the debate spurred by Walzer's *Just and Unjust Wars*. This debate also considers the issue as one of a clash between sovereignty and rights, with arguments focusing on the moral basis for

¹¹¹ Nicholas J. Wheeler, "Pluralist or Solidarist Conceptions of International Society: Bull and Vincent on Humanitarian Intervention", *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 21, no. 3 (1992): 463.

¹¹² Nicholas J. Wheeler, *Saving Strangers: Humanitarian Intervention in International Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

¹¹³ Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), 77-98.

¹¹⁴ Bellamy, "Humanitarian Responsibilities and Interventionist Claims in International Society": 335.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*: 340. For a partial exception, see Nicholas J. Wheeler, "Agency, Humanitarianism and Intervention", *International Political Science Review* 18, no. 1 (1997).

¹¹⁷ Though of course he would prefer the title of "global political theorist". Caney, *Justice Beyond Borders*.

sovereignty and the norm of non-intervention on the one hand, and universal human rights on the other.¹¹⁸

In this context, much analytical work is concerned with setting out the demands of justice at an international or global level. Humanitarian intervention is one point of discussion here, but a great deal of work is concerned with the scope of distributive justice. Much work done here at an ideal theory level assumes a strong contrast between duties of justice and “mere” humanitarianism. On a practical level, things look rather more complicated. Moreover, since humanitarians frequently see themselves as acting in the name of justice, there are clearly unresolved issues here, which will be examined in Chapter 5. Added to this is the focus on developing theories of responsibility. This is clearly an integral part of any serious theory of justice or rights, but inevitably light cast in one direction tends to leave others in shade. Arguably one of those areas of shade is the idea of solidarity.

2. The Neglect of Solidarity

This thesis is not trying to develop a theory of humanitarian duties or responsibilities, assigned to particular agents. Rather, it is interested in the parameters and content of a broader conversation, inclusive of those topics. That conversation is about the problem of human solidarity and how we describe our common human identity. Solidarity is rarely analysed in a sustained way in contemporary international political theory, though it is currently becoming more prominent in cosmopolitan scholarship, arguably as a reaction to the difficulty of

¹¹⁸ A particularly important discussion, which set the tone for much subsequent debate, took place in *Philosophy & Public Affairs*. Charles R. Beitz, "Nonintervention and Communal Integrity", *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 9, no. 4 (1980). Gerald Doppelt, "Walzer's Theory of Morality in International Relations", *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 8, no. 1 (1978). Gerald Doppelt, "Statism without Foundations", *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 9, no. 4 (1980). David Luban, "Just War and Human Rights", *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 9, no. 2 (1980). David Luban, "The Romance of the Nation-State", *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 9, no. 4 (1980). Michael Walzer, "The Moral Standing of States: A Response to Four Critics", *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 9, no. 3 (1980).

establishing cosmopolitan responsibilities in practice.¹¹⁹ David A. Hollinger links identity and solidarity, arguing that “[to] share an identity with other people is to feel in solidarity with them”.¹²⁰ He defines solidarity as “an experience of willed affiliation”.¹²¹ Humanitarianism is thus a kind of solidarity, related to the identity of humanity. Hollinger explains:

Feminism is a solidarity, but womanhood is not. Judaism is a solidarity, but having a Jewish ancestor – even a Jewish mother, to allude to one of the classic criteria for being counted as a Jew – is not. The Chinese American community is a solidarity for many Americans of Chinese ancestry, but not every American of Chinese ancestry is equally invested in it and some may be altogether indifferent to it. We will miss the character and scope of the problem of solidarity if we conflate solidarity with the mere possession of a set of traits or antecedents or confinements. On the other hand, the problem of solidarity is real when there is at least some opportunity for choice, when people can exercise some influence over just what ‘we’ they help to constitute.¹²²

Beitz writes that: “[political] theory arises from a perception of the possibility of choice in political affairs”.¹²³ It is solidarity that lies at the heart of humanitarian action, and humanitarianism is often described as an instance of solidarity by those engaged in it. For example, as James Orbinski writes:

Solidarity implies a willingness to confront the causes and conditions of suffering that persist in destroying dignity and to demand a minimum respect for human life. Solidarity also means recognizing the dignity and autonomy of others, and asserting the right of others to make choices about their destiny. Humanitarianism is about the struggle to create the space to be fully human.¹²⁴

¹¹⁹ Journal of Social Philosophy, "Special Issue on Solidarity", *Journal of Social Philosophy* 38, no. 1 (2007).

¹²⁰ David A. Hollinger, "From Identity to Solidarity", *Daedalus* 135, no. 4 (2006): 23.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*: 24.

¹²² *Ibid.*: 25.

¹²³ Beitz, *Political Theory and International Relations*, 4-5.

¹²⁴ James Orbinski, *An Imperfect Offering: Dispatches from the Medical Frontline* (London: Rider, 2009), 8.

This struggle takes place in relation to a different set of choices. Referring to Rwanda in 1994, Orbinski tells us: “[the] genocide was life as we *can* choose to live it.”¹²⁵ We will see in Chapter 2 how the “struggle to create the space to be fully human”, to expand the possibility of humanity, often takes place in response to explicit attempts to close down that space, in choices made to act with inhumanity.

But the element of identity means that the discussion of choices does not capture everything. At the root of solidarity is identity, and the ways we feel, emotionally experience, understand and act on our human identity are not always just a matter of considered choices. This relates back to Walzer’s notion that “[the] central issue for political theory is not the constitution of the self but the connection of constituted selves, the pattern of social relations. Liberalism is best understood as a theory of relationship, which has voluntary association at its center and which understands voluntariness as the right of rupture or withdrawal.”¹²⁶ This account is complicated by considering the role of the “human” in our selves. How we make sense of the “human” in our selves, and how we produce relationships of human solidarity, in a broadly liberal sense, is, then, the central question of the thesis.

3. A Brief Defence of a Liberal Humanitarian Framework

Our heroes here could be seen as somewhat unlikely, from the point of view of a thesis that remains, at heart, a liberal defence of humanitarianism. Like all really compelling heroes, they are all seen as flawed, and none provides us with wholly satisfactory answers. Rather, the gains that ensue from the crucial questions they ask drive the argument forward until, it is hoped, it stands full-square on its own two feet (to adopt a shamelessly anthropocentric metaphor for dignified posture). As I noted above in Section II, the voices drawn on from the practice and analysis of

¹²⁵ Ibid., 10. Italics in original.

¹²⁶ Michael Walzer, “The Communitarian Critique of Liberalism”, in *Thinking Politically: Essays in Political Theory*, ed. David Miller (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2007), 111.

professional humanitarians are among those who have been most honest about the lazy assumptions and contradictions of their practice. Similarly, the political philosophers most central to the argument, Richard Rorty, Michael Walzer, Amartya Sen, and Judith Shklar have all, in different ways, been instrumental in undermining some of the assumptions of the dominant strands of thought in liberal political philosophy, or at least moving beyond stale dichotomies. Rorty has argued that a liberal humanitarian perspective is strengthened, rather than weakened, when not distracted by the pursuit of a true human essence, or the pursuit of an attainable political community of humanity. Walzer, by engaging in what Jon Elster disparaged as “a phenomenology of the moral life”, has illustrated the extent to which we walk the earth not as liberal abstractions but as living, breathing people with complex bundles of visceral and ambiguous commitments, some of which, he hopes, will be or become liberal.¹²⁷ Sen, throughout his work, has demonstrated how apparently benign abstractions, when they shift from means to ends, can hamper the achievement of the very goals they were initially designed to foster. The “rational fool” and the starving rights-holder are both victims of such perspectives.¹²⁸ His warning of the dangers of pursuing transcendental ideals will, in particular, influence the argument made in Chapter 5.¹²⁹ Shklar has pointed to the subtle differences in perspective that come from paying attention to negative concepts like cruelty and injustice, rather than jumping straight into definitive articulations of justice.

Importantly, though, these figures remain deeply committed to a liberal humanitarian worldview. They are all internal, rather than external critics, to this intellectual practice. To some extent this takes on board Michael Walzer’s argument about the extra perspective that internal criticism affords.¹³⁰ But somewhat against this, we might remember a neat anecdote related by Martha Nussbaum, who, in the context of a rural education project for girls, asked an educated urban woman

¹²⁷ Cited in Brown, *Sovereignty, Rights and Justice*, 94.

¹²⁸ The phrase comes from Amartya Sen, “Rational Fools: A Critique of the Behavioral Foundations of Economic Theory”, *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 6, no. 4 (1977).

¹²⁹ Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice* (London: Allen Lane, 2009).

¹³⁰ Michael Walzer, *The Company of Critics: Social Criticism and Political Commitment in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

(so herself something of an outsider to the local community) how she would respond to the charge that a foreigner could never understand the perspective of someone in another nation. After some thought she answered: "I have the greatest difficulty understanding my own sister".¹³¹ The point here is that we should not reify the position of the internal outsider as being neither too far nor too close from the problems at stake, a perfect "Goldilocks" position as it were. There is never a perfect distance from which to understand others. Rather, I wish to emphasise something else. This is, that for all their criticism of the practices and bodies of thought with which they engage, for their recognition of the various contingencies that affect the liberal humanitarian outlook, they all retain a visceral commitment to a purpose that can sometimes be taken for granted to the extent of disappearing: the definition and defence of a shared humanity. It is the connectedness and commitment to that liberal humanitarian outlook that allows them to contribute so richly to the argument presented in this thesis. Such figures are of crucial importance if the aim is not, say, simply to deconstruct *ad infinitum* (and occasionally also *ad nauseam*).

This last point is of particular importance, for many of the most interesting insights on the excesses of humanitarianism have been made by more radical and critical scholars of various persuasions.¹³² I will briefly give an example from a writer whose work reveals much and who will be used in this thesis, to make the point, rather than devote large portions of the argument to a critique of a critique. On the final page of Jenny Edkins' insightful book on famine, *Whose Hunger?*, she writes: "[the] practical political aim of this book is neither to understand famine nor to provide a solution. These two logocentric approaches both abstract and depoliticize." Having argued that "there are no technical solutions" she goes on to say that "[the] search for technical answers is itself political and supports the powerful, not the suffering. It is the buttress for forms of governance that reduce

¹³¹ Martha C. Nussbaum, "Compassion & Terror", *Daedalus* 132, no. 1 (2003): 26.

¹³² See in particular David Campbell, "Why Fight: Humanitarianism, Principles, and Post-Structuralism", *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 27, no. 3 (1998).

life to calculability”.¹³³ Edkins arrives at this point by drawing on continental philosophy with unquestionable rigour. But there is a strong sense in which the acceptance of this kind of philosophical worldview ultimately involves a leap of faith that it provides the best route towards supporting “the suffering”, a goal that seems still to underpin the final sentence. That is a worldview that ultimately, this thesis does not share. Moreover, the initial “practical political aim” of this thesis is rather different, if not diametrically opposed to Edkins’. To take an extremely relevant example, she argues that Sen’s work on famine fails to go far enough in acknowledging the problem of seeing famine in a technical sense as a “failure”.¹³⁴

Famine as failure, as disaster, produces victims. Victims need welfare provision or aid, not a political voice. Vulnerable or at-risk households are produced as subjects on whom data can be collected. They are then controlled by administrative mechanisms of food distribution or food aid. This process depoliticizes famine and constitutes it as a site for intervention and control.¹³⁵

As we will see in the course of the thesis, this raises legitimate concerns. But it is unsatisfactory for one fundamental reason. There are a number of false choices presented here: why not welfare provision *and* a political voice? Indeed closer to the core of Sen’s work than the generalisability of Sen’s account of famine, which Edkins disputes, lies precisely that: a concern that a political voice, a presence in public deliberation, will be the crucial enabling factor for the most marginalised people. It may not be a solvable “failure”, but that does not mean that we cannot legitimately see starvation as a failure of an ambition to curtail suffering, and a comprehensible injustice. David Rieff has written that in fact, “even at its best,

¹³³ Edkins, *Whose Hunger?*, 159. My concern here is that this kind of stance unnecessarily undermines the possibility of critical international theories yielding practical insights, a possibility that remains central to, say, the work of Andrew Linklater, whose work is referred to in chapters 2 and 3, or to the kind of research agenda set out in Mark Hoffman, "Agency, Identity and Intervention", in *Political Theory, International Relations and the Ethics of Intervention*, ed. Ian Forbes and Mark Hoffman (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1993). In the specific context of humanitarianism, the critical insights of figures like Alex de Waal retain a strongly applied focus.

¹³⁴ Edkins, *Whose Hunger?*, 53.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 54.

humanitarian action is always an emblem of failure”.¹³⁶ The “practical political aim” of this thesis is to enable us, in the words of Samuel Beckett, to “fail better”, by understanding more about how we negotiate the “politics of humanity”. The first step, here, is to understand more about how professional humanitarians conceptualise and make sense of human suffering, the visceral subject matter of their endeavour. That is the topic of the next chapter. In concluding this one, I will briefly set out how the argument will unfold over the course of the thesis.

IV Summary of the Argument

Chapter 2 begins by examining the concept of “humanitarian crisis” or “emergency”. A crucial concern of professional humanitarians is that this concept should not become an alibi for political failures. Yet already here, we discover a reluctance to embrace the political dimension of professional humanitarians’ own rejection of the suffering they encounter. The contours of this rejection are then examined. Particular attention is paid to the rejection of cruelty, which is fleshed out in the context of the work of liberal political philosophers such as Judith Shklar and Richard Rorty, for whom cruelty is the worst thing we do to each other. In examining the cruelty of those who inflict suffering, we also raise the question of the tendency to contrast this with the innocence of those who suffer. I then examine how the categories of humanity and inhumanity shift in relation to each other, and focus on acts that explicitly try to dehumanise the other. Through the analysis of this chapter, two crucial concepts emerge. The idea of “crisis of humanity” captures the manner in which moments of rupture in the category of common humanity lie at the heart of humanitarian concern, while in responding to suffering, humanitarians have to negotiate, through a “politics of humanity”, the boundary between the human and the inhuman. In doing so, they come to define their own understanding of humanity.

¹³⁶ Rieff, *A Bed for the Night*, 304.

Chapter 3 deepens and broadens the analysis, exploring how humanitarian concern might spread beyond the sphere of already-committed professional humanitarians. It unpacks the idea of a humanitarian impulse, emphasising the importance of the emotional capacities that underpin it, in particular empathy. It then explores the countervailing emotional and psychological obstacles that often stand in the way of humanitarian action. These present a challenge to those who would stir the humanitarian impulse through humanitarian campaigns. As such, the chapter goes on to examine the mediation of suffering, the context in which we might enact a “sentimental education”, and the importance of taking politics seriously in anchoring humanitarian concern in our identities and in generating humanitarian action in response. The final section of the chapter argues that, given this account, critics of humanitarian action who emphasise its selectivity, as well as professional humanitarians who assert the possibility of an impartial stance, somewhat miss the point about how the kind of solidarity characteristic of humanitarian action comes into being.

Chapter 4 focuses on the idea of rescue, arguing that this is a concept at the heart of humanitarianism, not least because of extraordinary examples of humanitarian action in response to “crises of humanity”, such as the Rescuers who saved Jews during the Holocaust. Yet a focus on rescue puts into sharp relief the ambiguities and contingencies of humanitarian action. How to understand and conceptualise the humanity of those being saved is a deeply problematic endeavour, as tensions emerge between bodily rescue and acts that risk neglecting bodies in favour of more intangible conceptualisations. Moreover, rescue often refers as much to the ways in which we attempt to save our sense of self. This again prompts irresolvable tensions. Action is more likely when it is understood as vital to preserving the integrity of our identity, yet the action that results often involves an imposition of that identity, and its presumptions, on others. The play of motives, intentions and consequences in humanitarian action is then examined. It emerges that there is a forceful case for a consequentialist focus on saving lives. But the wider social context in which such an end can be willed should not be neglected. Furthermore the process of different motivations coalescing into agreed-upon

intentions to act is vital to understanding how the “politics of humanity” functions. Finally, the chapter broaches the troubling ability of humanitarian action to cause harm, in its attempt to respond to harms caused. It argues that an injunction to “do no harm” evades the difficult questions and the genuine tensions inherent in the paradoxical notion of “humanitarian violence”. It suggests that Michael Walzer’s notion of the “moral politician” provides a more plausible way forward than that suggested by a humanitarian Hippocratic Oath.

Chapter 5 then explores three possible ways to pin down the “politics of humanity”, attempts to resolve, or at least temper, the contingencies of humanitarian action and its capacity to do harm. First, it explores professional humanitarians’ attempts to deal with the problem internally, to try and remedy their unaccountability through projects such as codes of conduct. Though sometimes yielding qualitative improvements in humanitarian action, I argue that these are unlikely to render humanitarians accountable to those they aspire to help. As such, a much more ambitious project of empowering the suffering is explored. Universal human rights, already a vocabulary that permeates humanitarian discourse, has been suggested as an overarching grounding for humanitarian action. Yet, the analysis demonstrates that humanitarianism remains the broader conceptual category, that human rights still leave open the possibility that more contingent acts of humanitarian rescue might become necessary. This is brought out through a brief engagement with the paradoxes and tensions of the idea of military humanitarian intervention, and related debates such as that on R2P. Finally, the chapter discusses the potential of theories of justice to provide grounding and direction to humanitarian action. In particular, I discuss the twin potential of projects of global social justice to deal with the root causes of much suffering, and to avoid the contingencies of charity. However, I argue that these claims present us with false choices in practice. Moreover, I question, drawing on the work of Amartya Sen, the value of transcendental ideals in rendering the world less unjust. Judith Shklar’s injunction to take injustice seriously reveals the possibility of multiple, shifting injustices that evade definitive resolution or a definitive account of justice. As such, it emerges that while humanitarians cannot evade the

contingencies of their endeavour, they can, by taking injustice seriously, create useful framings to politicise their empathetic responses to suffering.

In doing so, the question arises of what conceptual and, especially, political space humanitarianism ultimately occupies. Chapter 6 first examines the notion of “humanitarian space”, identifying behind it an undesirable attempt to ring-fence humanitarian identity and an impossible struggle for complete independence from other political actors, most importantly states. The chapter defends the legitimacy of the state as a collective actor within the “politics of humanity”, arguing that the state, at its best, can come to crystallise and enact many expressions of human solidarity. I draw on Peter Lawler’s concept of the “good state” and his suggestion to revive an internationalist tradition in international political theory, rather than seeing cosmopolitan theories as the only framework to take a more expansive human solidarity forward. I illustrate this potential by engaging in depth with the internationalism of Michael Walzer, showing that he provides us with a plausible account within which to situate the contingent workings of the humanitarian impulse, to crystallise humanitarian gains and to reach out at moments of “crisis of humanity”.

I conclude the analysis of the thesis by suggesting that, taking into account both the excesses of humanitarianism and the inevitability, if we still wish to honour our common humanity, of engaging in a “politics of humanity”, we should be sensitive to a “democratic impulse” in conducting that politics, one that acknowledges the presumptions of humanitarian action, but is sensitive to the fallibility of those presumptions and the validity of alternate experiences of humanity. Finally, I demonstrate that the account given in the thesis of humanitarianism and its “politics of humanity” offers the potential of real analytical value-added in the context of the major “crisis of humanity” threatened by anthropogenic climate change, a problem that promises to challenge our resources of human solidarity most profoundly in the decades to come.

2. Humanitarianism and Human Suffering

There are no humanitarian solutions to humanitarian problems.¹

Sadako Ogata's oft-repeated caution goes to the heart of the crisis of humanitarianism, suggesting as it does a profound mismatch between what humanitarians are able to do and what they would like to do. Many of the subsequent chapters explore this tension, challenging in the process our understanding of what "fits" and defines the category of humanitarianism. But to jump straight into this discussion would be to miss a crucial starting point. Ogata's quote implies that we know what a humanitarian problem is, that we know what one looks like, and that, presumably, we could describe this. It presumes to know the purpose of humanitarianism.

Indeed, to some extent this is true: while we might (and do) disagree on the causes and responsibilities attaching to fatally malnourished children, few would disagree that a thousand starving children constitute a problem, broadly describable as a problem of human suffering. There might be disagreement over whether it represents a problem of justice, or "merely" of humanity. But the identification of human suffering, and its qualification as wrong, seems, in this case, relatively uncontroversial. Perhaps, then, we could simply draw up a list of types of human suffering and misery and use that to ground our understanding of humanitarianism.

This immediately raises a problem. Referring to recent anthropological and sociological work on the subject, Barnett and Weiss remind us that "suffering is an inherently subjective category".² Kleinman and Kleinman caution us against "essentializing, naturalizing, or sentimentalizing suffering. There is no single way to suffer; there is no timeless or spaceless universal shape to suffering."³ More

¹ Ogata, *The Turbulent Decade*, 25.

² Barnett and Weiss, "Humanitarianism", 5, fn. 7.

³ Arthur Kleinman and Joan Kleinman, "The Appeal of Experience; the Dismay of Images: Cultural Appropriations of Suffering in Our Times", *Daedalus* 125, no. 1 (1996): 2.

broadly, though, the purpose of this work is not to formulate a particular, definitive and impregnable argument against those who would argue that a thousand starving children pose the rest of us no problem at all. Rather, it is to identify humanitarianism as the discussion within which we make such arguments and attempt to act upon them. Using “humanitarian” merely as an adjective, whether attached to “problem”, “emergency” or “solution”, implies the satisfactory resolution of such arguments, of an acceptable and agreed-upon list of sufferings and potential responses. In the absence of such a resolution, which would presumably require a transcendental authority, “humanitarian” risks becoming hollowed out as a descriptor, at the mercy of such lazy phrases as “humanitarian suffering”.⁴

The task of this chapter, then, is not to provide a definitive list of “bad things”, of particular types of suffering that might *a priori* ground an account of humanitarianism and define a singular core problem for humanitarianism. Instead, it aims to explore the broad framings through which suffering might plausibly be understood and operationalised as a cause for concern within the particular context of humanitarian discussions. Following chapters will look at how concern can lead to action. This one examines that which is of concern. To this end, it will chart a path from the ostensibly practical, technical concepts of “emergency” and “crisis” to more abstract categorisations, such as deliberate harm and cruelty. It will make the argument that the problem of humanitarianism is the notion of humanity itself, and that our understanding of humanity comes into focus, unfortunately, largely through experiences of “inhumanity”, in particular during “crises of humanity”. This in turn implies a political understanding of humanity, forces putative humanitarians to the recognition that they are engaged in a high-stakes “politics of humanity”.

⁴ Jonathan Moore, "Introduction", in *Hard Choices: Moral Dilemmas in Humanitarian Intervention*, ed. Jonathan Moore (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), 2. The phrase was also recently used by British Shadow Foreign Secretary David Miliband. David Miliband, "Shadow Foreign Secretary's Statement on Gaza" (2010). Available at <http://www2.labour.org.uk/shadow-foreign-secretarys-statement-on-gaza>; accessed on 12 August 2010.

I From “Humanitarian Crisis” to “Crisis of Humanity”

Typically, the trigger for humanitarian action, or at least humanitarian concern, is described as an “emergency” or a “crisis”.⁵ The idea of emergency serves to indicate human suffering that has become worthy of concern and action at the level of humankind. It implies both a threshold breached and a sense of urgency. The concept has come under attack. For instance, Alex Bellamy notes that we often work with a “partial and restrictive conception of ‘humanitarian emergency’ that provides human suffering with temporal and spatial borders”.⁶ Yet the vocabulary of emergency has much intuitive appeal, for it does express quite effectively the radical and rapid change in circumstances that can, for instance, lead to a flooded village with villagers clinging to rooftops and trees. The recent floods in Pakistan, or the earthquake that devastated Haiti in early 2010 are cases in point, and the vocabulary of emergency seems eminently appropriate here. Perhaps Bellamy’s point might simply spur us to be more careful about our application of the term, to incorporate developmentalist concerns and slow-onset disasters.

But a deeper unease persists within the literature. David Rieff writes of “what we rather antiseptically and misleadingly call the humanitarian emergencies that scar our times”.⁷ There is a widespread sense that the vector through which humanitarianism incorporates suffering simultaneously sanitizes and depoliticises it.⁸ This section discusses how the identity of humanitarianism is linked to understandings of humanitarian emergency or crisis. The key problem is eloquently expressed by Rony Brauman, long a leading figure within MSF:

The simple fact that the genocide in Rwanda or massacres of civil populations and a strategy of terror in Bosnia could be labeled as “humanitarian crises” is sadly eloquent ... The UN as well as governments, the press, and the NGOs are constantly using this formula, which leads me

⁵ I use the terms interchangeably.

⁶ Bellamy, “Humanitarian Responsibilities and Interventionist Claims in International Society”: 329.

⁷ Rieff, *A Bed for the Night*, 2.

⁸ This is, for instance, one of the core concerns of Edkins, *Whose Hunger?*

to wonder if Auschwitz would be considered a “humanitarian crisis” were it to happen today.⁹

Elsewhere, Brauman has made clear his concern that the humanitarian crisis might become the perfect crime: one with only victims.¹⁰ In that case, humanitarianism itself risks becoming the alibi. Perhaps controversially, I want to argue here that although Brauman is entirely right to make this point from the perspective of humanitarianism as a practical endeavour, his comment obscures the wider sense of humanitarianism as a vital discussion in which Auschwitz can, indeed should be articulated as a humanitarian crisis in the sense of a “crisis of humanity”, a moment when the very category of common humanity is menaced. It is precisely in response to such moments of crisis that we come to articulate the markers that divide the human from the inhuman, and set out the terms on which our “politics of humanity” is to be negotiated.¹¹

Bauman’s position within the practice of humanitarianism gives him good reason to voice the concern that to describe Auschwitz as a “humanitarian crisis” could be deeply dangerous and irresponsible: it is not a problem that professional humanitarians can possibly solve, and so to describe it as a humanitarian crisis lets those responsible off the hook. As we saw in the previous chapter, professional humanitarians function according to a specific sense of what constitutes humanitarian action, such as the neutral and impartial provision of relief. The danger, sensed by Brauman, is that if we simultaneously articulate a vision of what humanitarian action is, and describe a problem that cannot possibly be solved by such action as humanitarian, we are creating a dangerous cognitive dissonance within international public discourse. Because Auschwitz cannot be stopped by relief workers it is dangerous to describe it as a humanitarian problem, or indeed as

⁹ Brauman, "From Philanthropy to Humanitarianism": 411.

¹⁰ Brauman, *Penser Dans L'urgence*, 234.

¹¹ I was able briefly to put the kernel of this argument to Brauman himself at a recent seminar at the Humanitarian and Conflict Response Institute at the University of Manchester (24 November 2009). While not having a fully articulated response to it, he appeared to consider it a valid and challenging position.

a problem primarily for humanitarians.¹² Brauman's point is an important one, and warns us against the overzealous deployment of humanitarian rhetoric.

Certainly, there are strong arguments for a more limited deployment of the idea of humanitarian crisis, corresponding to what might be a more rigorous usage in Brauman's terms. Indeed, this is how humanitarianism as a practice has developed. For instance, we might think of Henry Dunant's engagement with the context of the battlefield, and the *hors de combat* soldiers left to die in agony.¹³ What Dunant saw here was a space where it might be possible to bring a measure of humanity and alleviate suffering (without, incidentally, having to do battle himself to defend that space). The *hors de combat* soldier was located in a space effectively abandoned by other actors. In this context, humanitarians could define both an independent humanitarian space, and a recognisable type of humanitarian emergency, consistent with what humanitarians could realistically aspire to achieve. The humanitarian emergency became, not the institution of war as such, but rather one of the consequences of war that humanitarians could engage with: battlefield wounded.

The pattern is similar when it comes to meeting the needs of refugees, another sphere in which the Red Cross movement has been a crucial actor. And again, there is a great deal of coherence in the idea that we can best identify and engage with this problem if we are prepared to define the human suffering at stake in quite a narrow way. If several million people cross a border at the same time, they will present a set of basic physical needs in terms of food, water, sanitation and medication. They need these things if they are to continue to live. Local and international humanitarian organisations may well be able to provide these things, while they most likely will not be able to organise the safe return of all the refugees to wherever they wish to return to.

As such, the vocabulary of emergency, as deployed in such contexts, does create a space in which to, for example, gather funds to acquire the means to keep the people alive, and to engage in the action to do so. The deployment of the

¹² In this understanding of humanitarianism, relief workers are effectively the only possible kind of humanitarians.

¹³ Dunant, *A Memory of Solferino*.

vocabulary of emergency may not describe everything “bad” about the situation, for instance that the people in question might have been ethnically cleansed from their homes. But it might enable the practical work of keeping them alive. In a natural disaster (to the extent that there is ever a “natural” determination of how much human suffering a disaster will produce) this case seems even stronger.

Moreover, for all the criticisms that have been levelled at the way the vocabulary of emergency is deployed in articulating a crisis situation, few would argue that in these kinds of context there is simply no crisis, no practical problem, no hungry or injured people.¹⁴ For instance, a brief visit to the ReliefWeb practitioner hub run by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) yields a vast array of detailed information about current disasters and emergencies and the needs associated with them, together with costed appeals detailing practical proposals to meet these needs.¹⁵ The UN system may or may not provide the best route for those needs to be met. But it would be extremely hard to maintain that the assessments of numbers of people at risk of malnutrition are purely fictional, or entirely strategic.¹⁶

Here it is important to acknowledge the point made by Jenny Edkins, among others, that concepts such as hunger and malnutrition can vary in their meaning, and that this variation is often highly political.¹⁷ But there are limits to this kind of critique. The first is very simply that of the biological death of bodies.¹⁸ But it also seems that there is a broader level at which we can meaningfully talk about, for

¹⁴ The critiques of emergency here tend to be more along the lines of the following themes, which will intervene later in this work: (1) the concept obscures the longer term causes and responsibilities associated with the problem; (2) it depoliticises the agents involved; (3) it obscures other potential sources of alleviation (such as coping strategies among the affected); (4) it obscures other equally or more urgent problems; (5) the response that emergencies engender do more harm than good.

¹⁵ *ReliefWeb*. Available at <http://www.reliefweb.int/>; accessed on 13 August 2010.

¹⁶ Though, anticipating the argument of following chapters somewhat, the response may be highly strategic. The best funded crises are not necessarily those with the highest needs.

¹⁷ Edkins, *Whose Hunger?*

¹⁸ Even if there are some limited circumstances in which the exact point of biological death is difficult to decide, this thesis shares the view of Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum (who both experienced criticisms of such “binary” thinking, amusingly related by the latter) that it is best simply to consider “death as opposed to life”. Martha C. Nussbaum, “Human Capabilities, Female Human Beings”, in *Global Justice: Seminal Essays*, ed. Thomas Pogge and Darrel Moellendorf (St. Paul: Paragon House, 2008), 497-498.

example, the idea of radical, involuntary shifts in people's ability to nourish themselves or their families. There is clearly a danger of only identifying and treating symptoms rather than causes, and of ignoring political choices (e.g. the choice of hunger over subordination). But provided it is not the only question asked, the question of where in the world, according to some criteria of vulnerability, are located the most vulnerable people, regardless of their circumstances, is an important one to ask, at least as a starting point for any discussion of what human solidarity, kindness or care might entail or require.

This line of thinking leads to a fairly classical understanding of humanitarian emergency by asking a series of similar, fairly technical questions, such as: what are the human consequences of wars? What are the health problems typically associated with refugee camps in tropical climates? These questions, whether implicit or explicit, specify the kind of emergency situation at stake. In response to these, professional humanitarianism has formulated its principles for attempting to alleviate this suffering according to this mode of evaluation of what the problem is. This leads to formulations such as the fundamental principles of the Red Cross, the Red Cross Code of Conduct, or the Sphere Project.¹⁹ It follows that a responsible usage of the phrase humanitarian crisis or emergency is one where the possibilities of a humanitarian response match the delimitation of suffering encapsulated therein.

A key concern of this perspective is to avoid humanitarianism becoming the cover for a bloodbath of "well-fed dead".²⁰ In the case of such an event, it warns us that the "well-fed dead" will not be served by describing their plight primarily as a humanitarian one. Their situation may well present components relevant to a

¹⁹ The broader context of these projects is discussed in Chapter 5. IFRC, *The Code of Conduct: Principles of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Response Programmes*. Available at <http://www.ifrc.org/PUBLICAT/conduct/code.asp>; accessed on 21 June 2010. The Sphere Project, *Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response* (Geneva: The Sphere Project, 2004). Available at http://www.sphereproject.org/component/option,com_docman/task,cat_view/gid,17/Itemid,203/lang,english/; accessed on 21 June 2010.

²⁰ The New York Times, "Editorial: The Well-Fed Dead in Bosnia", *The New York Times* (15 July 1992). Available at <http://www.nytimes.com/1992/07/15/opinion/the-well-fed-dead-in-bosnia.html>; accessed on 31 July 2010.

response by professional humanitarians, but that does not mean that it is adequately described by the humanitarian actions that may occur. Importantly, this may ignore or diminish their status as victims of crimes. In brief, the value-added of humanitarianism as an idea is best achieved by a humble and limited usage of the term.

This sense of the danger of “humanitarian” acquiring an overly euphemistic sheen is increasingly a concern. Recently, David Keen rejected the title “complex humanitarian emergencies” for his book on the subject of complex emergencies because “the word ‘humanitarian’ carries certain dangers. One is the implication that the solution lies with humanitarian relief (rather than with tackling underlying human rights abuses, for example).”²¹ Fiona Terry expresses anxiety about the other part of the label. “Using terms like ‘complex emergency’ and reiterating how much more complicated, dangerous, and ubiquitous disasters are today than they were in the past also help to excuse by transferring blame to the nature of crises themselves.”²² As she and Joelle Tanguy put it: “Most ‘humanitarian crises’ are fundamentally political crises with humanitarian consequences. All the ambiguities of intervention lie in this essential link.”²³ Here we see a logical desire to use “humanitarian” in a rigorous manner, attaching it to emergencies only in so far as these are framed in a manner consistent with the possibilities at hand, but without losing sight of how the situation came about. In his Nobel lecture, James Orbinski expands on this theme in a passage worth quoting at length:

And 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 1992 crimes against humanity in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The 1994 genocide in Rwanda. The 1997 massacres in Zaire. The 1999 actual attacks on civilians in Chechnya. These cannot be masked by terms like “Complex Humanitarian Emergency”, or “Internal Security Crisis”. Or by any other such euphemism – as though they are some random, politically undetermined event. Language is determinant.

²¹ The quote continues: “Another is that the word may prejudice the motives of interveners as altruistic (when they may be much more complicated).” The status of altruism is discussed in the next chapter. Keen, *Complex Emergencies*, 1.

²² Terry, *Condemned to Repeat?*, 226.

²³ Tanguy and Terry, “Humanitarian Responsibility and Committed Action: Response To “Principles, Politics, and Humanitarian Action””: 33.

It frames the problem and defines response, rights and therefore responsibilities. It defines whether a medical or humanitarian response is adequate. And it defines whether a political response is inadequate. No one calls a rape a complex gynecologic [sic] emergency. A rape is a rape, just as a genocide is a genocide. And both are a crime. For MSF, this is the humanitarian act: to seek to relieve suffering, to seek to restore autonomy, to witness to the truth of injustice, and to insist on political responsibility.²⁴

The overall thrust of Orbinski's quote is that humanitarianism should not be deployed politically to turn a political problem of crime and injustice, such as a rape, into a technical problem, such as a "complex gynaecological emergency". The point is eloquently put, with the latter formulation alone exposing much of the absurdity of the way the rhetoric of humanitarian emergency can be deployed. Yet while the argument underscores the limitations of humanitarian responses, it simultaneously asserts the authority of a humanitarian voice grounded in its technical engagement with human suffering. The paradox that Orbinski dodges is that as a doctor, in terms of the practical measures he can take, a rape is actually a "complex gynaecological emergency", when it comes to the practical relief of its consequences. Orbinski is able to name a rape because of his knowledge of the medical consequences of rape as a "complex gynaecological emergency". Humanitarian action is thus clearly conceived as both treating symptoms and naming causes. Indeed, the naming of a rape, or a genocide, becomes a quintessentially humanitarian act precisely through the rejection of the humanitarian act being pinned down exclusively in terms of the treatment of "complex gynaecological emergencies".

It turns out, then, that for Orbinski humanitarianism has to deal with socially and politically embedded suffering if it is not to fall into the same empty language as those it sets itself against. Though Orbinski differentiates between the humanitarian and the political, restoring autonomy, bearing witness, and insisting on political responsibility are all in some sense political acts. This reveals the key tension many humanitarians feel. They want to be able to make unanswerable assertions about suffering, to find a space outside politics where that suffering cannot be relativised, diminished or questioned. Yet, finding their capacities to be

²⁴ Orbinski, "Nobel Lecture".

inadequate in the face of suffering, they simultaneously want to shape politics in order to combat the causes of that suffering more effectively. Clearly, shaping politics is a political act, but so too is naming a genocide, and finding ways to win the argument against those who will inevitably deny it.²⁵ Janice Stein confirms this. "Bearing witness is, at its essence, a deeply political act that shapes the reality of those who tell the story."²⁶ Furthermore, restoring autonomy carries with it the burden of defending the conception of autonomy at stake. Defining humanitarian framings of suffering against politics, as an apolitical act, thus appears untenable.

While Orbinski's view is just about compatible with Ogata's "no humanitarian solutions to humanitarian problems", he is effectively implicating humanitarianism in the political negotiation of potential solutions. Of course, another option would simply be to retreat back to the vocabulary of "complex gynaecological emergency" and build a set of operating principles (which might well include not pointing fingers and rocking the boat) that fit the technical problem of relieving the suffering caused by such emergencies everywhere, in order to maximise the chances of relieving the most suffering in the long term. But this position is also profoundly troubling, as it seems to leave humanitarianism with nothing to fall back on to justify the value of saving lives except those operating principles.

Moreover, returning to the idea that humanitarianism has developed as a practice with a strong sense of the possible. Orbinski is opening a space to frame and engage with suffering where practical measures to relieve it may not be possible, or may be of negligible use, such as in the midst of a genocide. In such a context, he wishes to assert the possibility of a humanitarian act of speaking out, fitting his concept of "an ethic of refusal", which is also really, when played out in practice, a politics of refusal, a negotiation of the boundaries of the acceptable across different social and political contexts. In this he sees the continuing possibility of humanitarianism, if not through practical acts of humanitarian relief, then through a different kind of humanitarian action: testimony and calling for

²⁵ See for example Mahmood Mamdani, "The Politics of Naming: Genocide, Civil War, Insurgency", *London Review of Books* 29, no. 5 (2007).

²⁶ Stein, "Humanitarianism as Political Fusion": 741.

political responsibility. In such contexts, it is human solidarity that demands a project of defining the unacceptable. Humanitarianism then becomes the discussion about the ways in which we might characterise the limits of what can be tolerated as acceptable, and about the political responsibility associated with that.

This prompts two observations. First, this critique of the conventional understanding of humanitarian emergency makes the concept almost entirely unsustainable. In emphasising the importance of identifying the human agency and political responsibility behind human suffering, we would have to identify suffering entirely devoid of human causes to plausibly characterise it as a humanitarian emergency in the classical, apolitical sense. As Sen and others have shown, there is rarely much natural about the human consequences of even apparently natural disasters.²⁷ If we were to apply Orbinski's logic to even such a diffuse problem as climate change, which promises to deliver a myriad of "humanitarian problems", the key humanitarian act would be, not just to deal with those problems as they arise, but rather to insist on the political responsibility for mitigating and alleviating the effects of climate change. This is really a case for abandoning the idea of "humanitarian emergency" altogether.

However, going against this somewhat, the practical utility of the vocabulary of humanitarian emergency, summarised earlier, may still retain much that is useful. Symptoms still demand treatment, and the more technical sense of humanitarian emergency, with its technical account of suffering and its operating principles, may allow access and a fast engagement with the problem, even if it is ultimately an unsatisfactory basis for fully describing or solving it. This remains an important qualification, especially since processes of justice with which Orbinski clearly wishes to engage may well not take place on a timescale compatible with saving lives.²⁸

²⁷ Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983). See also Oxfam, *Rethinking Disasters: Why Death and Destruction Is Not Nature's Fault but Human Failure* (New Delhi: Oxfam International, 2008). Available at http://www.oxfam.org.uk/resources/policy/conflict_disasters/oxfam_india_rethinking_disasters.html; accessed on 13 August 2010.

²⁸ The role of justice in humanitarianism is discussed in Chapter 5.

The second observation, which will be crucial for what follows, is that Orbinski and Brauman together summarise a strong case for jettisoning the concepts of “humanitarian emergency” and “humanitarian crisis” as adequately describing the most horrific instances of human suffering. Yet in making this case, the reason such moments in the history of humanity, such moments as Srebrenica or Auschwitz, make for such powerful examples is that there is widespread agreement that they represent unacceptable and unjustifiable human suffering. Indeed, in his recent memoir, *An Imperfect Offering*, Orbinski links his own humanitarian awakening to a childhood encounter with a Holocaust survivor.²⁹ They define the parameters of an ethic or politics of refusal. They represent, then, the very framings of suffering that have inspired humanitarians from Thomas Clarkson and Henry Dunant onwards, and clearly lie at the core of professional humanitarians’ self-understanding.

As such, it begins to make more conceptual sense to consider Auschwitz as a “humanitarian crisis”, in the sense of a “crisis of humanity”. Indeed, it is a core concern of this thesis to argue that the idea of “humanitarian crisis” becomes more coherent if understood in terms of “crises of humanity”, namely those moments when the central notion of a common humanity, which all humanitarians believe in and defend, comes under threat. This is not to say that there need be a single, definitive account of what common humanity is or entails. It is merely to note that humanitarians necessarily articulate and defend a notion of common humanity, which can then be understood as under threat in particular circumstances. The kind of suffering at stake then is perhaps best characterised not by its precise bodily or psychological manifestations, but instead by the notion of its unacceptability and unjustifiability. In fact, surely concern about “humanitarian crises”, understood technically, and the sense that human solidarity demands a response, comes from that simultaneous, or even prior, discussion about what is unacceptable. The unacceptable could well then be defined by such “crises of humanity”.

²⁹ Orbinski, *An Imperfect Offering*, 21-25.

II Cruelty and Innocence

The theme of unacceptable suffering has been taken up by Rieff, who argues that humanitarianism “defines itself largely in negative terms”, and cites Brauman as stating simply that “humanitarianism asks the question, What is a human being? and answers, ‘One who is not made to suffer’”.³⁰ The work of philosophers such as Jonathan Glover underscores the daunting implications of this after a century of unprecedented innovation in the means of causing suffering.³¹ The question of how to conceptualise our markers of the unacceptable in this respect is one that has received recurring attention within political philosophy. In the rest of the chapter, I will examine several strands that speak to professional humanitarians’ attempts to define what humanitarianism constitutes itself against. Since the conception of humanitarianism being elaborated is not one defined in terms of a singular ethic or practice, the emphasis is on concepts that seem to have a certain amount of transhistorical resonance, even as they change and are redefined over time, in response to the innovations mentioned above.

Our starting point will be cruelty. As an introduction to this discussion, it is worth citing a passage from Orbinski’s memoir, in which he describes his encounter with one particular woman whom he treats amidst the chaos of a hospital overwhelmed with new arrivals:

She was slightly older than middle aged. She had been raped. Semen mixed with blood clung to her thighs. She had been attacked with machetes, her entire body systematically mutilated. Her ears had been cut off. Her face had been so carefully disfigured that a pattern was obvious in the slashes. Both Achilles tendons had been cut. Both breasts had been sliced off. Her attackers didn’t want to kill her; they wanted her to bleed to death. They knew just how much to cut to make her bleed slowly ... I felt a wave of nausea as I looked again at the pattern someone had cut in her face. I turned from her and vomited for the first and only time during the genocide ...³²

³⁰ Rieff, *A Bed for the Night*, 93.

³¹ Jonathan Glover, *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

³² Orbinski, *An Imperfect Offering*, 227. Orbinski also drew on this encounter in his Nobel speech. Orbinski, “Nobel Lecture”.

There is something so distinctive about the deliberate and careful infliction of suffering described by Orbinski, and indeed in the extraordinary physical reaction of nausea in an experienced humanitarian medical worker, that the reaction against cruelty must surely be seen as central to any understanding of humanitarian concern. Who could dare deny that such cruelty is unacceptable?

All too clearly, cruelty is a concept that cannot be described once and for all, for the only limit on cruelty seems to be the human imagination. As such, cruelty makes sense more as a type of human behaviour than as a particular list of possible acts. Moreover, it speaks to the recurrent horror in the literature on humanitarianism at the ways humans can think up to make each other suffer. The humane disposition of the humanitarian is nourished largely by the suffering deliberately meted out by other humans. Within that, the element of deliberation, of deliberate, intentional harm seems to hold particular importance in the humanitarian imaginary.

We can identify two strands to the reaction to cruelty relevant to a discussion of humanitarianism and its conceptualisations of humanity and humaneness. The first is the conceptualisation, across or within societies, of a previously accepted mode of behaviour as cruel. A famous example is Voltaire's engagement with the Calas affair, part of the process that led to the abandonment of judicial torture in pre-Revolutionary France. Though Voltaire was initially exercised by the religious bigotry at the heart of the case rather than the practice of torture itself, his argument shifted to emphasise the cruelty of the practice.³³

The second strand is the "discovery of cruelty", when wider groups discover or experience previously undreamt of ways that particular individuals or groups have found of being cruel to each other. This can feed into the first strand. For

³³ Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), 70-76. The case apparently prompted Voltaire's first use of the term "human right". Hunt also poses an interesting question: "If natural compassion makes everyone detest the cruelty of judicial torture, as Voltaire said later, then why was this not obvious before the 1760s, even to him? Evidently some kind of blinder had operated to inhibit the operation of empathy before then." Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights*, 81. The operation of empathy is examined in the next chapter.

instance, the discovery of particular practices within slavery, such as the Middle Passage, by the public at large served to delegitimise the wider practice as a whole, and contributed to the reconceptualisation of slavery itself as cruelty.³⁴

The reaction to cruelty has greatly influenced the development of modern humanitarianism. Of course, it has characterised efforts to “humanise” war, and we might recall Abraham Lincoln’s injunction that “military necessity does not admit of cruelty”.³⁵ Jean Pictet in his seminal commentary on the fundamental principles of the Red Cross, comes surprisingly close to acknowledging a hierarchy of suffering in terms of its human causes, noting that “The most odious form of suffering is that which man inflicts deliberately”. For him, the reaction to cruelty nourishes the principle of humanity. He goes on to cite Montaigne: “I bitterly hate cruelty as the worst of all vices”.³⁶ As an aside, it is interesting to note that Montaigne, who was intensely suspicious of what we might term trans-cultural generalisations, seems to have felt that this concept functioned at an appropriate level of generality.

This tradition has two particularly important manifestations in contemporary political philosophy. Judith Shklar, very much placing herself in the tradition of Montaigne, argues that cruelty has been neglected by philosophy, yet has profound implications. Catherine Lu notes the potential of Shklar’s starting point, which articulates itself not in terms of utopian human perfectibility and necessary moral progress but rather in that which we should avoid.³⁷ For Shklar: “[putting] cruelty *first* is, however, a matter very different from mere humaneness. To hate cruelty more than any other evil involves a radical rejection of both religious and political conventions.”³⁸

This radicalism inspires the liberalism of Richard Rorty. Rorty takes as the *leitmotif* of his liberalism the idea that cruelty is the worst thing we do. It is a particularly humanitarian understanding of liberalism, set out in his writings on the

³⁴ The process behind this is discussed in the next chapter.

³⁵ Cited in Philippe Sands, *Torture Team: Uncovering War Crimes in the Land of the Free*, Updated ed. (London: Penguin, 2009), 3.

³⁶ Pictet, *The Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross*, unpaginated text.

³⁷ Catherine Lu, “The One and Many Faces of Cosmopolitanism”, *Journal of Political Philosophy* 8, no. 2 (2000): 254.

³⁸ Judith N. Shklar, *Ordinary Vices* (London: Belknap Press, 1984), 8. Italics in original.

possibilities of human solidarity and on human rights.³⁹ Although he explicitly rejects pinning any definitive account to any kind of concept of intrinsic human nature, Rorty sees the changing dance across time and space between our cruel infliction of suffering and our aversion to pain as a key site for our understandings of what might constitute social progress.⁴⁰

Rorty does not explicitly engage with humanitarianism as such, but his account of liberalism as the view that cruelty is the worst thing we do, and his description of a “human rights culture”, arguably speak to our discussion of humanitarianism rather more clearly than to conventional debates on liberalism or human rights as such.⁴¹ Rorty’s focus on the concept of a solidarity fuelled by a hatred of cruelty fits the character of the social interactions at stake here, and is particularly valuable for reviving the often neglected idea of “solidarity”. Indeed we might want to modify the Shklar/Rorty formulation to identify humanitarians as those who put cruelty first. Christopher Coker explicitly characterises Rorty’s work as a “humanitarian project” based “on a rejection of metaphysics”.⁴²

A key issue, however, is this rejection of metaphysics, and the presumption of Rorty’s work to be ungroundable. Norman Geras, another important writer on our reactions to suffering, has cast doubt on Rorty’s success in avoiding an implicit account of human nature.⁴³ Perhaps Geras is right that we can never fully become liberal ironists. But it is not clear how important this qualification really is. If we see

³⁹ Most importantly in Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). Richard Rorty, "Human Rights, Rationality and Sentimentality", in *Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers Volume 3* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

⁴⁰ Though they are engaged in very different projects, there is an interesting parallel here with Andrew Linklater’s recent work on a transhistorical category of “harm”. Andrew Linklater, "The Harm Principle and Global Ethics", *Global Society* 20, no. 3 (2006).

⁴¹ Richard Ashby Wilson and Richard D. Brown correctly identify that, in writing about human rights, Rorty’s “observations apply more convincingly to humanitarianism”. Richard Ashby Wilson and Richard D. Brown, "Introduction", in *Humanitarianism and Suffering: The Mobilization of Empathy*, ed. Richard Ashby Wilson and Richard D. Brown (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 21.

⁴² Christopher Coker, *Humane Warfare* (London: Routledge, 2001), 133.

⁴³ This critique is presented in Norman Geras, *Solidarity in the Conversation of Humankind: The Ungroundable Liberalism of Richard Rorty* (London: Verso, 1995). Geras’ key statement on the reaction to suffering is Norman Geras, *The Contract of Mutual Indifference: Political Philosophy after the Holocaust* (London: Verso, 1998).

Rorty's move as primarily methodological for our purposes, it becomes rather productive. Seeing key markers of humanitarianism, such as a hatred of cruelty, as ironic in the Rortean sense that their content can never be linked to a definitive, groundable account, allows us to view humanitarianism as a discussion in which different understandings of what is cruel can be negotiated. It is important to note that many of the participants, and many of their views will most likely be profoundly unironic. But as our understanding of humanitarianism is composed by a changing set of such views, the category makes sense as an ironic construct, if we prefer not to await final adjudication on which of those unironically-held beliefs of what is cruel is transcendently true. All the more so if we suspect that such adjudication may be both impossible and undesirable. As a more general comment on Rorty's work, Bernard Williams suggested that: "once one goes *far enough* in recognizing contingency, the problem to which irony is supposed to provide the answer does not arise at all".⁴⁴ The recognition of contingency can be seen, in Williams' view, as a liberation from an illusory, "scientific" search for political and ethical absolutes, devoid of any contingent historical perspective.⁴⁵

If we can get rid of that illusion, we shall see that there is no inherent conflict among three activities: first, the first-order activities of acting and arguing within the framework of our ideas; second, the philosophical activity of reflecting on those ideas at a more general level and trying to make better sense of them; and third, the historical activity of understanding where they came from. The activities are in various ways continuous with one another. This helps to define both intelligence in political action (because of the connection of the first with the second and the third), and also realism in political philosophy (because of the connection of the second with the first and the third.) If there is a difficulty in combining the third of these activities with the first two, it is the difficulty of thinking about two things at once, not a problem in consistently taking both of them seriously.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Bernard Williams, "Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline", *Philosophy* 75, no. 4 (2000): 490. Italics in original.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*: 491. Both professional humanitarians' reluctance to embrace contingency, and the limitations of the pursuit of ethical and political absolutes, will be at the heart of Chapter 5.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

Building on this, we can recognise the potential of discussions about humanitarianism, and about core concepts within them, such as cruelty, to thrive on the recognition of contingency if they are fully to play their part in the “human conversation”, to borrow Williams’ happy phrase.⁴⁷

It should be noted here that cruelty does not exhaust the possibilities of framings that might spur humanitarian concern. The focus on cruelty may have its own distorting effect, leading us to neglect scenarios in which, if cruelty is present at all, it is much more diffuse. Cruelty does not necessarily lead to humanitarian responses. On the contrary, it may simply lead to disgust for the perpetrators, leading us to see them as “animals”. Cruelty is not a *sine qua non* of humanitarian action, nor a guarantor of it. But the focus on conceptualising suffering in terms of what should not be may have an extra advantage, and here we might consider the reaction of the woman described earlier by James Orbinski:

The woman was one among many, among hundreds. She knew there were so many more. Again she reached to touch my forearm. She didn’t hold it this time. She nodded, looking at me. “Allez, allez . . . Ummera, ummera-sha,” she said in a slow whisper. “Go, go. Courage, courage, my friend.” It was the clearest voice I have ever heard.⁴⁸

This quote illustrates an important and neglected point in the discussion of humanitarianism. A conventional approach to normative theorising on the question of common humanity is to look for and describe a core of human dignity that should be protected from harm. But in this passage, what strikes us is the extreme courage and dignity shown by the woman in the face of extreme cruelty and unimaginable suffering. If she had not demonstrated that inner strength, the cruelty of that attack would surely be unacceptable to the humanitarian to exactly the same degree. To base an understanding of humanitarianism on the issue of preservation or loss of dignified behaviour by the victim appears abhorrent. Yet arguably it is implicit in many discussions of humanitarianism. Seeing the cue for humanitarianism, and for humanitarian impulses, in the negative articulation suggested in this section,

⁴⁷ Ibid.: 485.

⁴⁸ Orbinski, *An Imperfect Offering*, 227.

appears to open up the possibility of not judging the victim. If a common humanity is to be valued, it seems more coherent to conceptualise humanitarian concern in terms of attacks upon that common humanity, rather than as suggestions that the attack might have been successful.

However, in explicitly or implicitly reacting against cruelty, professional humanitarians have encountered another dilemma which, somewhat against their wishes, puts them in the position of judging the victim. This is the implicit requirement that victims suffer innocently. Stephen Hopgood argues that even Amnesty traditionally based its approach “around the archetype of the suffering innocent, the POC or Prisoner of Conscience”.⁴⁹ For Rieff: “To accept people’s humanity and respect their dignity as individuals should not entail spinning fairy tales about their innate innocence.” Rieff goes on to remark acidly that “the one thing tyrants and aid workers have in common is their liking for being posed next to children”.⁵⁰ Tony Vaux argues that:

In effect, aid agencies have preserved the concept of the ‘deserving poor’. The idea is that people deserve our help because they are innocent victims. But this is not always true. And if it is not, are we supposed to withhold aid?⁵¹

The quasi-religious notion of innocence poses a serious problem for humanitarianism, especially when juxtaposed with a hatred of cruelty as a framing through which to conceptualise suffering. The previous section argued that a technical, medicalised description of suffering limits the extent to which professional humanitarians, for instance, can access and describe the wider justification for their practice. But in stepping back, in naming rapes, genocides and cruelty, they necessarily bring notions of guilt and innocence into the discussion. These are notions that the technicalised version of humanitarianism was precisely designed to dodge through concepts of neutrality and impartiality.

⁴⁹ Hopgood, “Moral Authority, Modernity and the Politics of the Sacred”: 240.

⁵⁰ Rieff, *A Bed for the Night*, 25.

⁵¹ Vaux, *The Selfish Altruist*, 8.

In the refugee camps in Zaire and Tanzania to which Hutus, including many *génocidaires*, fled in the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide, this dilemma, and this tension between ways of understanding suffering was brought home.⁵² These camps represented, in the traditional sense of the term, a very clear humanitarian emergency, with cholera epidemics, food and water shortages, etc. As such the human suffering at stake spoke to the humanitarian version of the Hippocratic oath, to relieve suffering, defined in terms of basic needs, impartially wherever it may occur.

But for some agencies, including MSF-France, the hypocrisy of the situation became unsustainable, as they realised that they were nourishing the instigators of one of the cruellest crises of humanity of the twentieth century. Moreover, these perpetrators saw the camps as bases in which to regroup. In this instance, then, for the agencies that withdrew from the camps, their understanding of humanitarianism in terms of refusal and rejection of cruelty, as powerful as that can be in yielding overarching justifications for humanitarianism as a whole, forced them to walk away from actual human suffering and implicitly judge some of the victims of that suffering. Fiona Terry notes that the experience of the post-Rwandan genocide refugee camps in Tanzania “pushed all of us in MSF to reflect deeply upon what humanitarian action represents, and at what point it loses its sense and becomes a technical function in the service of evil”.⁵³ The implication is that defining humanitarianism in terms of its technical ability to save lives can lead to deeply perverse outcomes, in which humanitarians can become similar to doctors who keep torture victims alive to be tortured again.⁵⁴ This is central to what she sees as the paradox of humanitarian action: “it can contradict its fundamental purpose by prolonging the suffering it intends to alleviate”.⁵⁵

This is not a new dilemma, for professional humanitarians have long had to patch up villains of every description as part of their calling. However, it is relatively new to humanitarianism’s search for definition. There is a strong case against an

⁵² For an excellent account, see Terry, *Condemned to Repeat?*

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 244.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

understanding of suffering as totally detached from its human causes. But the focus on the human agency behind human suffering necessarily implies a judgement about guilt and innocence. This is not an argument against treating the suffering of the guilty, for humanitarianism would risk forfeiting its grounding in the idea of a common humanity if it were to do so, but rather it suggests that humanitarianism finds it difficult, in hating cruelty, not to create dichotomies of guilt and innocence.

For Shklar, however, to do so is to misunderstand how radical an emphasis on cruelty can be. For her, putting cruelty first makes judging or even blaming victims superfluous:

It is, however, not only undignified to idealize political victims; it is also very dangerous. One of our political actualities is that the victims of political torture and injustice are often no better than their tormentors. They are only waiting to change places with the latter. Of course, if one puts cruelty first this makes no difference. It does not matter whether the victim of torture is a decent man or a villain. No one deserves to be subjected to the appalling instruments of cruelty.⁵⁶

This suggests a way out for humanitarians, though the question becomes more complicated when they are put in a position of telling stories about the victims to spur humanitarian concern, as will be examined in the next chapter.

Arguably, though, humanitarians are going further than simply rejecting cruelty, they are also, in justifying themselves in terms of humanity, negotiating the ways in which common humanity contrasts with inhumanity.

III Dehumanisation and Inhumanity

In *The Warrior's Honor*, Michael Ignatieff writes that "[there] are human and inhuman warriors, just and unjust wars, forms of killing that dishonor us all. The Red Cross has become the keeper of these distinctions; they are the sentinels between the human and the inhuman."⁵⁷ As often, Ignatieff phrases the matter nicely here.

⁵⁶ Shklar, *Ordinary Vices*, 18-19.

⁵⁷ Ignatieff, *The Warrior's Honor*, 161.

But he tells us little about dynamic character of the distinction between human and inhuman, or of the processes which shape each of the concepts. Within discussions about humanitarianism, many of the Red Cross movement's more controversial, neutralist positions, for instance on the Biafra crisis, have been rehabilitated in recent years. Yet one particular instance of failure is persistently mentioned, namely the failure of the Red Cross to engage in a satisfactory way with the extraordinary human suffering of the Nazi Holocaust. Concerning this episode, Rony Bauman argues that the Red Cross was "guilty of not having taken into account the fact that the very notion of humanity already had been abolished".⁵⁸

The idea of inhumanity, containing both the acknowledgement of humanity and its negation, goes further than cruelty in capturing something vital about the suffering that, for humanitarians, no human should experience. One clear manifestation of inhumanity in the literal sense of a deliberate negation of the unity of humanity, is persecution through the process of dehumanisation. Otto, a rescuer of Jews during the Holocaust, reflected to Kristen Monroe on a discussion he had with a Nazi guard who had told him, in relation to the killing of Jews: "You know, they were not human anymore." Otto went on to note:

*That was the key: dehumanization. You first call your victim names and take away his dignity. You restrict his nourishment, and he loses his physical beauty and sometimes some of his moral values. You take away soap and water and then say the Jew stinks. Then you take their human dignity further away by putting them in situations where they even will do such things which are criminal. Then you take food away. When they lose their beauty and health and so on, they are *not* human anymore. When he's reduced to a skin-coloured skeleton, you have taken away his humanity. It is much easier to kill non-humans than humans.*⁵⁹

This process of dehumanisation, so characteristic of the Nazi Holocaust has, of course, been described by many others, most eloquently perhaps by Primo Levi.⁶⁰ At the risk of not doing justice to an important debate on the commensurability of

⁵⁸ Brauman, "From Philanthropy to Humanitarianism": 403-404.

⁵⁹ Kristen Renwick Monroe, *The Hand of Compassion: Portraits of Moral Choice During the Holocaust* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 88. Italics in original.

⁶⁰ Primo Levi, *If This Is a Man (with The Truce)* (London: Everyman's Library, 2000).

the Holocaust with other crimes against humanity, we find this process of dehumanisation repeated in Cambodia, Bosnia, Rwanda and countless other theatres of atrocity. Its purpose is to dissolve the existence of a common humanity by attempting to “animalise” certain humans. This mode of inhumanity tries to push certain humans across the human/non-human divide. It contrasts human animals with non-human animals, yet reserves a particularly virulent hatred for the dehumanized victim that is rarely exhibited towards other animals. It is thus a somewhat paradoxical illusion, for the very process relies on a prior identification of common humanity. It is these humans in particular who are non-human. And this rhetorical displacement can only be inflicted upon humans, by humans.

The idea of a sentimental education put forward in Rorty’s writing, of teaching humanity through the telling of “sad and sentimental stories”, here presents its dark side: the social psychological process it describes arguably also fits the process of dehumanisation, which has its own stories to tell. Thomas Laqueur makes exactly this point:

Consider, for example, the words “they are not human, they are animals,” perhaps the most common formula for why one does not need to, indeed should not, extend the moral franchise to another person or group. It is supported not by an argument for a switch of species being – Rorty is right that such arguments are largely irrelevant – but by a “sad and sentimental tale,” that is meant to make the hearer treat someone as radically other.⁶¹

Once that initial step has been taken, it is easier to take it further, to make claims such as “these people who you may have known as neighbours are not like you. In fact they are animals. Worse than that, they are vermin who should be eliminated. If not, they will harm you and your family.” We have countless examples of this dehumanising sentimental education at work, from the anti-Semitic rhetoric of Nazi Germany to the hate-speak of Radio-Télévision Libre des Mille Collines during the Rwandan Genocide. Dehumanisation explicitly challenges the integrity of a category of common humanity, even if it paradoxically may draw on assumed commonalities

⁶¹ Thomas W. Laqueur, “Mourning, Pity, and the Work of Narrative in the Making Of “Humanity””, in *Humanitarianism and Suffering: The Mobilization of Empathy*, ed. Richard Ashby Wilson and Richard D. Brown (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 35-36.

to function. It also contains its own account of human nature, of what we might be willing to do to each other by way of cruelty. It is worth remembering that Inhumanity is necessarily a human category.

The suffering engendered from an explicit attempt to cast a human out of the category of human is almost axiomatically inhuman in terms of a humanitarian concern with the integrity of the category of human. Other attacks, however, may be less obvious, and pose their own risks for the putative humanitarian. Rorty identifies three modes of dehumanisation. The first is the distinction between human and animal described above. But this distinction plays out not only between perpetrator and victim, but also between observer and perpetrator. Rorty's second type of dehumanisation is the infantilisation of the other, allowing that they might be human, but are childlike, not capable of making mature choices. This theme adds another gloss to the question of humanitarianism's uneasy accommodation with the question of innocence. His third type is simply limiting the ways one can count as human, by taking "human" as synonym, for instance, of "man".⁶² Here Rorty links to the feminist work of scholars such as Catherine MacKinnon who challenge all, including humanitarians with the question of "are women human?"⁶³

This schema is probably not exhaustive. But it raises another complicating factor for understanding humanitarianism as a simple reaction against dehumanising cruelty. The history of humanitarianism shows that it has often, in constituting itself against one of these forms of dehumanisation, simultaneously engaged in dehumanising processes of different kinds. For instance, one of the key chapters in the history of humanitarianism is, of course, the abolition of the slave trade, the reaction against the trade, and ultimately slavery itself, as a cruel practice that treated humans like animals.⁶⁴ But it is impossible to detach the humanitarian discussions about the evils of slavery from inter-related discussions about the

⁶² Rorty, "Human Rights, Rationality and Sentimentality", 168-169.

⁶³ Catherine MacKinnon, *Are Women Human? And Other International Dialogues* (London: Belknap Press, 2006). Rorty, "Human Rights, Rationality and Sentimentality", 169.

⁶⁴ With reference to the post-Second World War refugee crisis, Peter Nyers notes Hannah Arendt's observation that the language used by many humanitarian organisations closely resembled that used by societies for the prevention of cruelty to animals. Peter Nyers, *Rethinking Refugees: Beyond States of Emergency* (London: Routledge, 2006), 85.

benefits of colonialism. Craig Calhoun notes that more generally, "Colonialism itself was often understood (with no cynicism) as humanitarianism."⁶⁵ This kind of attitude was deeply embedded in liberal humanitarian thought, and figures like J.S. Mill, while arguing against one set of dehumanising practices, simultaneously advocated others, such as treating colonial subjects as children to be educated. Neta Crawford notes that contemporary "advocates of humanitarian intervention pose justifications that recall the civilizing mission of colonialism".⁶⁶ More recently, Jeremy Moses argues that Bush and Blair drew on humanitarian discourse to effectively establish "an inside and outside of a global 'human' identity".⁶⁷

What is going on here? In the previous section, I argued that putative humanitarians come to the discussion with a variety of different ideas of what cruelty, dehumanisation and inhumanity might entail. These ideas are confronted with new ways of being cruel and inhuman. The argument I have put forward so far is that the concept of humanity at stake for humanitarianism is negotiated through this negative process. But this leaves an incomplete picture, for it neglects the way putative humanitarians come to the discussion with a paradigmatic humanity in mind. This prior conception of humanity is also being negotiated, both in terms of widening its catchment area and of rescuing those threatened with expulsion. For example, some Christian abolitionists were primarily concerned with saving their own souls, but they also wanted to create "proper" humans, i.e. Christians, out of the slaves.

Rhetorically those engaging in dehumanising discourses often claim to be doing so precisely in the name of a defence, a purification of the category of humanity.⁶⁸ Indeed, for Rorty the category of human is precisely problematic because we always envisage humanity as "like us". For him, we are more likely to engage in acts of solidarity if we expand that "like us", rather than grounding an idea of the "human". He sees the possibility of a human rights culture to react

⁶⁵ Calhoun, "The Imperative to Reduce Suffering", 78.

⁶⁶ Neta C. Crawford, *Argument and Change in World Politics: Ethics, Decolonization, and Humanitarian Intervention* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 400.

⁶⁷ Jeremy Moses, "Liberal Internationalist Discourse and the Use of Force: Blair, Bush and Beyond", *International Politics* 47, no. 1 (2010): 30.

⁶⁸ Rorty, "Human Rights, Rationality and Sentimentality", 168.

against cruelty in the expansion of existing particularist, indeed parochial, identifications.⁶⁹

Consider, first, those Danes and those Italians. Did they say, about their Jewish neighbors, that they deserved to be saved because they were fellow human beings? Perhaps sometimes they did, but surely they would usually, if queried, have used more parochial terms to explain why they were taking risks to protect a given Jew – for example, that this particular Jew was a fellow Milanese, or a fellow Jutlander, or a fellow member of the same union or profession, or a fellow bocce player, or a fellow parent of small children. Then consider those Belgians: Surely there were some people whom they *would* have taken risks to protect in similar circumstances, people whom they *did* identify with, under some description or other. But Jews rarely fell under those descriptions.⁷⁰

Here Rorty is telling an empirical story, which does not quite exhaust the possibilities of solidarity according to the empirical evidence, as Geras, using examples of rescue by the “Righteous Among the Nations”, has demonstrated.⁷¹ In fact, many Rescuers of Jews seem to have had a much less parochial, more expansive sense of what “like us” might entail, in many cases so expansive as precisely to see humanity as the crucial shared identity. Indeed, Kristen Monroe’s important work on Rescuers, which draws on psychological literature on the categorisation of others, notes the particular psychological salience among many rescuers of a category of “human”.⁷² The path from concern to action, and the emotive mechanisms that underlie it, will be examined further in the next chapter. For now, the important point is that we should take on board Rorty’s insights into how the categories of “human” and “inhuman” can function in terms of narratives of dehumanisation and, for want of a better term, rehumanisation. Humanity is the key category within and against which humanitarians conceptualise suffering. We

⁶⁹ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*. Rorty, "Human Rights, Rationality and Sentimentality".

⁷⁰ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, 190-191. Italics in original.

⁷¹ Geras, *Solidarity in the Conversation of Humankind*, 7-46. See also Wheeler, "Agency, Humanitarianism and Intervention": 22-23.

⁷² Monroe, *The Hand of Compassion*. See also her earlier work, Kristen Renwick Monroe, *The Heart of Altruism: Perceptions of a Common Humanity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

can agree with Brauman that humanitarians are those who believe that humans are not made to suffer, but we need to recognise the contingencies inherent in every term of that phrase.

Therefore, we should envisage humanitarianism as a discussion within which the category of “human” is not only defended, but more importantly negotiated and understood. This negotiation takes place through human suffering that we consider cruel and inhuman. But we also bring to bear on the discussion prior conceptions of humanity that may contain their own cruelties and sources of inhumanity. Framings of suffering become the arguments put forward in a “politics of humanity”, a politics through which we negotiate and defend our sense of the “human” and its place in our political landscape, even if, as Amir Pasic and Thomas G. Weiss remind us, humanity “is not a category for which we have prepared our political concepts”.⁷³ Putative humanitarians are engaged in a high stakes game against those who wish to narrow the category of the human, but can also fall prey to valid charges of narrowing or ring-fencing that category themselves. More troubling, in negotiating the meaning of “humanity”, humanitarians are, in effect, negotiating the humanity of others. In doing so, they can slip into a deeply possessive relationship. For instance, Alex de Waal refers to the danger of “the humanitarians’ moral ownership of other people’s suffering” engendering “the legitimacy of their intrusion into other societies”.⁷⁴

Related to this is a danger inherent in this necessary politics of humanity: the production of hierarchies of suffering, based on its causes. This is the flipside of the danger of articulating perfect crimes with only victims, as warned against by Brauman. Taking things to the other extreme, we can come to devote ourselves exclusively to identifying dragons to slay, and miss the more diffuse forms of suffering, that though unjust (see Chapter 5) may not present the drama of obviously cruel action, or a clear agent to whom to attribute guilt and blame. We may come to idealise our own moral agency (as good) as well as the moral agency of the perpetrator (as evil). In the absence of a “bad guy” to hunt down, or an easily

⁷³ Pasic and Weiss, “The Politics of Rescue”: 126.

⁷⁴ de Waal, *Famine Crimes*, 216.

understandable causal pattern, such as characterises complex emergencies or apparently intractable civil conflicts, we neglect suffering such as the grinding everyday poverty in which a huge percentage of the world's population lives. This can be deeply counterproductive in the case of slow-onset disasters, and complex phenomena such as climate change.⁷⁵ This points humanitarians back to more dispassionate, technical assessments. The challenge, then becomes neither to reify the causes or consequences of suffering, as both risk doing injustice to those humanitarians aspire to help. As will be seen, this is an extremely difficult and complex challenge. Either way, humanitarians are locked in to the play of what Craig Calhoun terms "the emergency imaginary", and the struggle to define what is normal and abnormal both in terms of human suffering and of political order, and what merits and legitimises intervention.⁷⁶ Nicholas Onuf traces the history of this struggle back to the early nineteenth century, and notes the tendency for suffering to become secondary to one's own programmatic concerns.⁷⁷

I put forward this starting context for debates about humanitarianism as a necessary alternative to twin tendencies to reduce them entirely to either philosophical or practice-based discussions, because, as this chapter has shown, neither framing suffering as a practical matter of saving lives nor as a philosophical hatred of cruelty can ever fully resolve the issues at stake. The suggestion here is that the distinctiveness of humanitarianism is not to be found in a definitive account of human suffering, but rather on how it operationalises that suffering as a politics of humanity.

Conclusion

This chapter has begun to fill out the category of humanitarianism in one important respect, charting how suffering enters the discussion. Framings such as emergency

⁷⁵ I will argue in the concluding chapter that climate change precisely needs to be seen as a crisis of humanity, in the sense put forward in this chapter.

⁷⁶ Calhoun, "The Imperative to Reduce Suffering", 82-89.

⁷⁷ Nicholas Onuf, "Humanitarian Intervention: The Early Years", *Florida Journal of International Law* 16, no. 4 (2004): 785.

or crisis have serious practical benefits, but leave unanswered a wider set of questions about why they are justified, and the limits of acceptable suffering. We may have to step back to identify our changing, but nevertheless visceral, understandings of what is unacceptable in terms of cruelty and inhumanity. Through that process, we fill out our understanding of what is human. Humanitarianism in that sense represents the discussion about how to enlarge that category. But to engage in that is to engage in a “politics of humanity”, negotiating the content and political salience of the category of “human”, as well as the response to attacks on the integrity of the human (which may even come from within). The following chapters will thus chart how this politics emerges and is negotiated.

3. Mobilising the Humanitarian Impulse

Any conception of humanitarianism is, at least in part, constituted by visceral reactions to the suffering of others. Mediated or unmediated, these reactions sometimes lead to a willingness to act. This section explores the enabling context for such visceral reactions to develop into such a willingness, building on the insights of the previous chapter, which highlighted how those convinced of the importance of humanitarianism can be portrayed as engaged in an ethical and political struggle to define and protect the category of common humanity, in a highly contingent process frequently driven by those whose imaginations allow them to plumb new depths of cruelty. The content of common humanity was seen to be necessarily political, contingent and contestable. To engage in humanitarianism is to engage in a politics of humanity.

But some of the clarity of the previous chapter came from its grounding in the experiences of professional humanitarians with robust credentials, notably leading figures in Médecins Sans Frontières. It would be a mistake to understand the “politics of humanity” simply in terms of these figures, virtual ideal-types of humanitarian conviction, if not necessarily perfect guides to action. Though their understanding of common humanity may ultimately be contestable, their reactions are powerfully visceral, while also reflecting robust lived experiences of other people’s extreme suffering, leading to situations where a humanitarian encounter of one sort or another is already, if not entirely pre-determined, then at least extremely likely. Their ability to experience and reflect upon this situation depends on wider and more diffuse networks of support, on processes that mobilise humanitarian concern and the will to act. Cornelio Sommaruga, ex-President of the ICRC, once called for a permanent state of “humanitarian mobilization”.¹

But strongly prescriptive accounts that merely set out strong moral obligations to act in response to human suffering, whether professional humanitarian talk of a “humanitarian imperative” or cosmopolitan duties of global

¹ Sommaruga, "Humanity": 23.

justice, often ignore the conditions that make such action possible or likely, at both individual and collective level. Where such rules play a part, it is at the very least because they are deeply embedded in individuals' or communities' identities and sense of self, rather than because they are possessed of an irresistible power of persuasion. Otto, the Rescuer we encountered in the previous chapter, noted that "[the] hand of compassion was faster than the calculus of reason".²

The previous chapter introduced Richard Rorty's influential work on the mechanics of such persuasion, through a process of sentimental education. His question is essentially the classic pragmatist one: what works? His own answer is that it depends on portraying others as "like us" through the telling of "sad and sentimental stories". While for Rorty, that "like us" is unlikely to function at the level of humanity as a whole, empirical work done on the Rescuers (admittedly a possibly exceptional group of people) suggested that the identity of common humanity was remarkably salient for them. But Rorty's move is still a useful one. Political theorists often focus on discussions about right motives, at the expense of an account of what actually motivates us to act – or, in the absence of a definitive account – what seems to motivate us to act. The question of how important "right" motives are will be addressed in the next chapter. For now, what concerns us is essentially an empirical question. What mechanisms are effective in stimulating humanitarian concern, and transforming that concern into action, or at least a willingness to act?

As it stands, the picture we can paint is only as clear as our understanding of the human mind, which is to say, still relatively obscure (although fairly rapid progress is afoot). But some plausible directions lie elsewhere, in the discussions about empathy, sympathy, compassion and pity that have been ongoing for centuries. Adam Smith's version of practical reasoning certainly took these issues seriously. More recently, neuroscientists have revived the study of the emotions as a central plank of reasoning and consciousness.³ One of the many dilemmas facing professional humanitarians is that of how to negotiate this patchwork of emotions,

² Monroe, *The Hand of Compassion*, 91.

³ Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights*, 110.

importantly for themselves and for leading policymakers, but also on a much wider scale, among the individuals and communities whose small expressions of concern, donations of time or money and applications of political pressure, form the enabling context for any kind of humanitarian action. If they want to stimulate humanitarian concern and action, what emotions do they need to engage? This question is complicated by the fact that not all of these pull in the same direction: the appeal to pity is somewhat different to the appeal to empathy, and we cannot assume that the preferred appeal will necessarily be the most effective.

In an influential article, Neta Crawford suggested that “research on emotion may lead to a fundamental reconceptualization of agents and agency in world politics”.⁴ In understanding the “politics of humanity”, it is important to see how humanitarian agency is linked to emotional underpinnings, not least because, as Michael Walzer warns us, to neglect the passions that nourish politics is to risk setting out an implausible and impoverished account of politics.⁵ This chapter will explore these issues, assessing in turn debates on the role of sympathy and empathy within humanitarianism, the lessons of bystanders, issues around the mediation and communication of human suffering and the perils of the “spectatorship of suffering”, and the issue of selectivity and impartiality.

I The Humanitarian Impulse as Emotional Capacity

The conventional shorthand used to express the way in which suffering triggers humanitarian concern is the idea of a “humanitarian impulse”.⁶ The phrase is rarely unpacked, but often employed, a recognition perhaps that reason alone may not account for humanitarianism, but the barest recognition in work that frequently

⁴ Neta C. Crawford, “The Passion of World Politics: Propositions on Emotion and Emotional Relationships”, *International Security* 24, no. 4 (2000): 156.

⁵ Michael Walzer, *Politics and Passion: Toward a More Egalitarian Liberalism* (London: Yale University Press, 2004).

⁶ The earliest relevant instance of the phrase I have been able to find is in Francis S.L. Lyons, *Internationalism in Europe, 1815-1914* (Leyden: Sythoff, 1963), 263. Alex de Waal refers to an “impulse for humanity and human rights”. Alex de Waal, “The Humanitarians’ Tragedy: Escapable and Inescapable Cruelties”, *Disasters* 34, no. s2 (2010): 131.

attempts to escape the contingencies of emotion. The phrase endures because it captures several important themes that lie at the heart of our topic, and which were both brought home in the previous chapter: the sense of urgency and the unpredictable, unreliable contingency that accompany “crises of humanity”. It would be unwise to make this (a necessarily parochial) semantic point, but a few dictionary definitions of “impulse” give a good sense of the dynamics at play here: “Incitement or stimulus to action arising from a state of mind or feeling; an instance of this... Sudden or involuntary inclination to act, without premeditation; an instance of this... Force or influence exerted on the mind by an external stimulus; an instance of this; (a) suggestion, incitement, instigation.”⁷

What these themes preclude, however, is the existence of a definitive singular humanitarian impulse that has a stable, transhistorical content and resonance. Indeed, the idea of impulse might seem a rather strange way to capture an enduring human capacity that might form the bedrock of a widening and deepening of humanitarian concern. But there seems to be something persistent about it. For instance, Roberto Belloni maintains that “a humanitarian impulse has always existed in all major world religions in the form of compassion or solidarity towards those who are in need”.⁸ Like the rejection of inhumanity explored in the previous chapter, the idea of a humanitarian impulse seems a useful way to capture a shifting but recognisable trope of human behaviour. Moreover it leads us to question what lies behind and enables such an impulse, and the manner in which another’s suffering is received and transformed into concern rather than indifference, and then perhaps ultimately into a willingness to act. This thesis uses the idea of humanitarian impulse in the singular, as useful shorthand, but it needs to be emphasised that it assumes a plural, malleable character, rejecting the notion of a definitive, authentic and retrievable experience. This section examines how the humanitarian impulse sits on a spectrum of emotional responses that range from empathy to pity.

⁷ Lesley Brown, ed., *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 1329.

⁸ Belloni, "The Trouble with Humanitarianism": 452.

So how is humanitarian concern experienced? What emotional capacities underpin the possibility of humanitarian impulses? The previous chapter noted the psychological salience among those most willing to engage in humanitarian action of perceived bonds of common humanity. But the question remains of the experiential underpinning of such a bond. Recent normative work in international political theory has increasingly recognized the importance of establishing such plausible empirical bases to carry forward the negotiation and expansion of our spheres of moral concern. For instance, Andrew Linklater recognises that “[it] is preferable to rest the case for cosmopolitanism on socio-psychological commitments to empathy and sympathy, which are among the universal prerequisites of social life”.⁹ I will argue later in this work that it is a mistake to place humanitarian commitments entirely within the cosmopolitan camp, as cosmopolitanism is not a necessary component of a humanitarian commitment. But the majority of cosmopolitan theorists writing in international political theory certainly present humanitarian commitments as an integral part of their outlook, and there is a great deal of overlap for our purposes in terms of the work being done on the character of our fluctuating and plural solidarities. It is certainly significant that cosmopolitans such as Linklater accept that the ways in which humans actually experience and form social relationships need to be at the heart of normative theorizing, and that it is not sufficient to merely dazzle with a series of logically aligned propositions that any “reasonable” person should accept.

This is all the more vital when it comes to the grisly subject matter of humanitarianism, which all too often makes a mockery of prior notions of reasonableness. Surely few would argue that, when people have shown themselves willing, at the extreme, to risk their lives for others, reason and deliberation are not at the core of their actual motivations. Indeed, there is now empirical work to back that up.¹⁰ That is not to say that such processes are not important elements in the humanitarian conversation. But it is not clear at all that rational argument and

⁹ Andrew Linklater, "Distant Suffering and Cosmopolitan Obligations", *International Politics* 44, no. 1 (2007): 221.

¹⁰ It is for instance a consistent characteristic of the Rescuer testimonies collected in Monroe, *The Hand of Compassion*.

reason trump all else in leading to humanitarian action. Rorty in particular cautions that the flawed “idea that reason is ‘stronger’ than sentiment, that only an insistence on the unconditionality of moral obligation has the power to change human beings for the better, is very persistent”.¹¹ Indeed, much writing on humanitarianism focuses on the area of unconditional duty, yet references to the “humanitarian impulse” are at least partial acknowledgements that reason alone is often insufficient to motivate us to act. If we are to follow Rorty’s warning, to understand how people heed calls to action, we need to examine the affective content of our humanitarian impulses. That is, we should turn to the bonds of sympathy, empathy, compassion and pity that constitute the social texture of humanitarianism.

There has been a revival of interest in these bonds in recent years, which draws largely on two key figures of the Scottish Enlightenment: David Hume and Adam Smith. For instance, to develop his own concept of a “sentimental education”, Rorty draws (via Annette Baier) on Hume’s understanding of sympathy. Smith’s *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, and the account of sympathy it contains, has become increasingly important in the work of Amartya Sen on our responses to injustice (see Chapter 5), and lies at the heart of Luc Boltanski’s important work on the mediation of suffering, which will be returned to later in this chapter.¹² But perhaps most interesting at this point in the argument is the work done by Nancy Sherman on the “moral attitudes that undergird a commitment to humanitarian intervention” and on the moral psychology that underpins the humanitarian impulse.¹³ She draws on both Hume and, especially, Smith to emphasise the central place within humanitarianism of empathy. Empathy is currently the focus of much

¹¹ Rorty, “Human Rights, Rationality and Sentimentality”, 181.

¹² Luc Boltanski, *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media and Politics*, trans. Graham Burchell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). Sen, *The Idea of Justice*.

¹³ Nancy Sherman, “Empathy, Respect, and Humanitarian Intervention”, *Ethics & International Affairs* 12 (1998): 103. Sherman uses the phrase “humanitarian impulse”. Sherman, “Empathy, Respect, and Humanitarian Intervention”: 119. Sherman makes a similar argument, with a different emphasis in Nancy Sherman, “Empathy and Imagination”, *Midwest Studies In Philosophy* 22, no. 1 (1998). See also Suski, “Children, Suffering and the Humanitarian Appeal”, 210.

study across the social and natural sciences.¹⁴ As Lynn Hunt notes, empathy is a concept broadly equivalent to the Enlightenment understanding of sympathy, a term that has in modern usage crept closer to our understanding of pity.¹⁵

Sherman demonstrates that, though we may describe our humanitarian commitments in terms of, say, a Kantian notion of respect, “[if] respect for human dignity is a part of the humanitarian posture, then it must be thickened with, and made operational through, empathy”.¹⁶ Sherman is prepared to pin down the agenda of humanitarianism, rather than allowing fully for the negotiations and contestations that necessarily constitute the idea of human dignity, and can even emerge from the sentimental experience of humanitarianism. But her account of the mechanisms of empathy nevertheless convincingly shows how developments in psychological research bear out Adam Smith’s version of sympathy. Smith famously emphasised the importance of our ability to “trade places in fancy”.¹⁷

By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him, and thence form some idea of his sensations ... His agonies, when they are thus brought home to ourselves, when we have adopted and made them our own, begin at last to affect us, and then tremble and shudder at the thought of what he feels.¹⁸

His account comes close to the modern understanding of empathy as the cognitive ability to imagine oneself into another’s situation. This ability performs a vital role in absorbing and making sense of others’ suffering. As Sherman puts it:

Empathy and protoempathy are ways we transcend the self and achieve a kind of social intelligence or understanding. If, as research suggests, empathetic capacities are also important contributors to altruistic behavior,

¹⁴ For a recent overview see Jeremy Rifkin, *The Empathic Civilization: The Race to Global Consciousness in a World in Crisis* (New York: Penguin, 2009).

¹⁵ Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights*, 64-65.

¹⁶ Sherman, "Empathy, Respect, and Humanitarian Intervention": 109.

¹⁷ Cited in *Ibid.*: 110.

¹⁸ Cited in Laqueur, "Mourning, Pity, and the Work of Narrative in the Making Of "Humanity"", 48.

then we would expect to find them buttressing a theory of political humanitarianism.¹⁹

If humanity comes into focus in large part through encounters with human suffering, then an empathetic encounter with suffering is the most plausible basis for, on the one hand, understanding suffering, and on the other, conceptualising common humanity as something genuinely shared: your experience of being human is potentially mine, and mine potentially yours, however unlikely this may be in practice. This raises the issue of how much weight that last question of likelihood carries. That is, does it place a limit on the possibility of an empathetic reaction characterising the humanitarian impulse?

The problem of practical likelihood relates to the question of pity, which can also, if more problematically, underlie and enable humanitarian impulses. I might recognise the suffering of another as appalling and feel deeply sorry for them, but not really envisage or imagine that suffering as my own. Luc Boltanski argues that humanitarianism is in large part characterised by what he calls a “politics of pity”. “The politics of pity regards the unfortunate together *en masse*, even if ... it is necessary to single out particular misfortunes from the mass in order to inspire pity.”²⁰ Pity leads to a somewhat different kind of humanitarian impulse, in which we feel sorry for the other but do not really recognize ourselves in their suffering. Boltanski draws on Arendt to argue that this has been a characteristic of a certain kind of humanitarian impulse at least since the French Revolution. For Arendt:

Pity, because it is not stricken in the flesh and keeps its sentimental distance, can succeed where compassion always will fail; it can reach out to the multitude and therefore, like solidarity, enter the market-place. But pity, in contrast to solidarity, does not look upon both fortune and misfortune, the strong and the weak, with an equal eye; without the presence of misfortune, pity could not exist, and it therefore has just as much vested interest in the existence of the weak. Moreover, by virtue of being a sentiment, pity can be enjoyed for its own sake, and this will almost

¹⁹ Sherman, "Empathy, Respect, and Humanitarian Intervention": 104.

²⁰ Boltanski, *Distant Suffering*, 4. Italics in original.

automatically lead to a glorification of its cause, which is the suffering of others.²¹

Through this kind of humanitarian concern, we come to define ourselves as those who do not suffer, in contrast to the objects of that concern, who do. A humanitarian impulse defined by pity necessarily sets in train a very different kind of relationship, one clearly less egalitarian and solidaristic than a response born from empathy. Boltanski expresses a preference for a “politics of justice”. Yet pity cannot be excluded entirely from a plausible account of potential humanitarian reactions, as it can still operate within a context of defending a notion of common humanity. This relates to the humanitarian perspectives explored in the previous chapter, which clearly expand the category of common humanity, but in doing so impose hierarchies based on narratives of infantilisation or sexism, for instance. We will see in subsequent chapters that feeling sorry for someone without identifying with their suffering plays a major part in some of the excesses of humanitarian action. If the identification and experience of shared humanity lies at the heart of humanitarianism, then clearly an empathetic reaction to suffering is more consistent with a coherent humanitarianism than a reaction of pity.

Yet a non-negotiable requirement of full empathy equally seems unfeasibly daunting, and goes against the grain of humanitarianism as a largely practical endeavour, as much characterised by action as by the concern that fuels it. It is not clear that it is necessarily problematic if pity can raise the funds to send into the field a professional humanitarian, perhaps one fuelled by a strongly empathetic connection to the suffering he or she will encounter there. It is worth noting that in his discussion of the principle of humanity, Jean Pictet chooses to emphasise the role of pity, which “is one of the driving forces of charity. It is a spontaneous movement, an instantaneous affective reaction to the suffering of others”.²² Perhaps, then, the affective basis that is seen as sufficient for humanitarian action is linked to the desired scope of humanitarian action. For an act of charity, pity might be sufficient, while for a more sustained act, such as an act of justice, empathy

²¹ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (London: Penguin, 1990), 88-89.

²² Pictet, *The Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross*, unpaginated text.

would seem a better starting point, enabling as it can devices like Smith's impartial spectator.

A spectrum of affective responses leading from pity to empathy seems highly plausible as the basis of our humanitarian impulses. In one of his lesser known articles, Charles Taylor provides us with an interesting account of sympathy, understood in a broad sense that encompasses the relevant range of this spectrum.²³ For Taylor, we really are dealing with a primitive, immediate and unthinking impulse here, and he draws on an account of a Rescuer during the Holocaust to illustrate this. He argues that sympathy, being moved by the suffering of others, is powerfully constitutive of what it is to be human, and the possibility of sympathetic responses is explanatorily basic in how we come to understand our humanity.

This is not to say, however, that this provides us with a reliable, foundational building block. The capacity to experience the humanitarian impulse is in turn enabled or hindered by other factors. Sherman argues that though empathy may be something that most of us develop in childhood and beyond to some extent, it needs to be cultivated if it is to help us respond to threats to human dignity with which we cannot easily identify.²⁴

Scenes of the helpless and so obviously innocent, of starving and orphaned children, may transcend parochial borders; we may understand the dramatic script without much explicit rehearsal. The simulation, or act of empathetic imagination, may be fairly automatic, fairly procedural. We may experience a sense of "there but for fortune," a response that underscores our shared humanity.

In other cases, threats to human dignity may be harder to simulate. We may have to find mediating steps that bridge an alien world and our own so that identificatory mechanisms can be established. So, some have argued, the threat of rape many women live in fear of, or the prospect of female genital mutilation, may require a sensitivity to women's vulnerabilities that many men may not easily come by without education and consciousness-raising.²⁵

²³ Charles Taylor, "Sympathy", *Journal of Ethics* 3, no. 1 (1999).

²⁴ See also Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights*, 39.

²⁵ Sherman, "Empathy, Respect, and Humanitarian Intervention": 113.

The challenge here is similar to that acknowledged in Martha Nussbaum's influential plea for a cosmopolitan education to make the lives of distant strangers less pallid in comparison to the colourful consolations of patriotism.²⁶ How to cultivate a capacity for empathy that can potentially link us to any human and their suffering? For Kwame Anthony Appiah, the answer lies in building out from an identity that is already shared, such as the Christian identity that links American Christians to Christians in Southern Sudan, or writers worldwide through PEN International: "engagement with strangers is always going to be engagement with particular strangers; and the warmth that comes from shared identity will often be available".²⁷ This is not dissimilar to Rorty's sense that we empathise and sympathise with people "like us". What is not so clear, as I argued in the previous chapter, is that our sense of shared identity is necessarily particularistic, in the sense that many rescuers of Jews in the Second World War felt that the relevant shared identity was humanity (though perhaps a particular conception of humanity). If there is to some extent a dynamic of expanding our borders of empathy according to a pattern of concentric circles, we must acknowledge that for some, albeit perhaps a small minority of so-called "moral exemplars", the particular identity at stake might be one of, if not universal resonance, at least universal scope.

Andrew Linklater complicates the question further, asking "whether the extension of human solidarity depends not only on emotional identification and compassion but also on feelings of guilt or shame when harm is caused or when little is done to alleviate misery. The conjecture is that shame and guilt along with compassion must become 'cosmopolitan emotions'".²⁸ Judith Lichtenberg draws on recent work in experimental psychology to suggest that shame (more so than guilt), can be particularly effective in motivating people to act out of a concern that their

²⁶ Martha C. Nussbaum, "Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism", in *For Love of Country?*, ed. Joshua Cohen (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002).

²⁷ Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), 98.

²⁸ Linklater, "Distant Suffering and Cosmopolitan Obligations": 27.

self-image will be compromised if they do not.²⁹ This is arguably to do with the fact that, as Stan Cohen argues, shame, unlike guilt, is a “social emotion”, appealing “to a sense of community and moral interdependence rather than personal responsibility”.³⁰ But, Lichtenberg argues that this sense of shame is easily internalised, and can therefore even function when the actor in question is unobserved.³¹ For Lichtenberg, shame is one of the crucial elements in her argument, in relation to aid, that “if we want people to give more, we must raise the general level of giving in a society”.³² Martha Nussbaum, though in general concerned with the negative effects of shaming, also notes the potential of certain kinds of shame to spur people towards valuable activity.³³

This opens out the discussion of empathy to something much more public, a “cultural practice” as Lynn Hunt has it, and clearly relevant to the issue of how to spark and deepen humanitarian concern.³⁴ Though at the core of empathy and pity are cognitive processes experienced on a personal basis, Nancy Sherman reminds us that “our private imaginations are fed by public images and narratives”.³⁵ The activation of pity and empathy depend on struggles over knowledge and ignorance of suffering and how to communicate these.

II Knowing and Ignoring Suffering

Reflecting on the phenomenon of German adhesion to Nazism, Primo Levi perceptively highlighted the “way the typical German citizen won and defended his

²⁹ Judith Lichtenberg, “Absence and the Unfond Heart: Why People Are Less Giving Than They Might Be”, in *The Ethics of Assistance: Morality and the Distant Needy*, ed. Deen K. Chatterjee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 90-91.

³⁰ Stanley Cohen, *States of Denial: Knowing About Atrocities and Suffering* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), 216.

³¹ Lichtenberg, “Absence and the Unfond Heart”, 90-91.

³² *Ibid.*, 88.

³³ Martha C. Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 347.

³⁴ Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights*, 29.

³⁵ Sherman, “Empathy, Respect, and Humanitarian Intervention”: 114.

ignorance".³⁶ At the heart of the battle to engage the human capacity for empathy is a public and private negotiation of the knowledge and ignorance of others' suffering.³⁷ In her thoughtful study *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag reminds us that: "[to] designate a hell is not, of course, to tell us anything about how to extract people from that hell, how to moderate hell's flames". She continues:

Still, it seems a good in itself to acknowledge, to have enlarged, one's sense of how much suffering caused by human wickedness there is in the world we share with others. Someone who is perennially surprised that depravity exists, who continues to feel disillusioned (even incredulous) when confronted with evidence of what humans are capable of inflicting in the way of gruesome, hands-on cruelties upon other humans, has not reached moral or psychological adulthood.

No one after a certain age has the right to this kind of innocence, of superficiality, to this degree of ignorance, or amnesia.³⁸

Anyone who has spent any time reading about the human ravages of the twentieth century will be familiar with, and sympathetic to, the indignation expressed by Sontag. "One reads the newspaper these days shaking", as Michael Walzer puts it.³⁹ But implicit in much of the literature on humanitarianism is the notion that to spread the full word about just how badly humans can treat each other, and thereby to lift the veils of denial, is the first step towards a more humane world. There seems to be a requirement that we should all somehow take the full measure of human suffering as a necessary, if not sufficient, precondition for engaging in suitable action.

This is of course not the whole story, as a central plank of the humanitarian traditions that emphasise the importance of bearing witness, for instance Quakerism or the secular humanitarianism of MSF, is the idea that truth and

³⁶ Cited in Boltanski, *Distant Suffering*, ix.

³⁷ For an outstanding account see Cohen, *States of Denial*.

³⁸ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2003), 102.

³⁹ Michael Walzer, "The Politics of Rescue", *Social Research* 62, no. 1 (1995): 65.

knowledge have value not only instrumentally but also intrinsically.⁴⁰ Interestingly, David Rieff, close to the MSF understanding of humanitarianism, tells us that an “inchoate idea about witness, in the Quaker sense of the term, was what set me on my journeys to all those ground zeros.”⁴¹

But if action remains at the heart of the humanitarian purpose, knowledge of human suffering and crises of humanity cannot ever be an unalloyed good. It necessarily requires filtration and mediation. Stan Cohen suggests that a surfeit of empathy can be overwhelming and paralyzing.⁴² Michael Ignatieff is blunter: “There are strict limits to human empathy.”⁴³ To quote Primo Levi again: “if we had to and were able to suffer the sufferings of everyone, we could not live. Perhaps the dreadful gift of pity for the many is granted only to saints.”⁴⁴ Judith Lichtenberg agrees:

people have only so much psychological room to feel others’ pain. It’s not at all clear that we would want to make people more sensitive in this way if we could. The suffering most people encounter among those in their inner circle - through death, disease, and innumerable varieties of evil, stupidity, and ill-fortune - is quite enough.⁴⁵

The risks involved in a surfeit of others’ suffering are backed up by studies of professional humanitarianism. John Norris’ recent portrait of aid workers, *The Disaster Gypsies* acknowledges that many of them are “disaster junkies”, but overall the picture of the corrosive effect of wandering lives largely defined by others’

⁴⁰ See for example the website *Quaker Witness in Africa*. Available at <http://quakerafrika.blogspot.com/>; accessed on 13 August 2010.

⁴¹ Rieff, *A Bed for the Night*, 17.

⁴² Cohen, *States of Denial*, 72.

⁴³ Michael Ignatieff, “The Stories We Tell: Television and Humanitarian Aid”, in *Hard Choices: Moral Dilemmas in Humanitarian Intervention*, ed. Jonathan Moore (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), 287.

⁴⁴ Cited in Geras, *The Contract of Mutual Indifference*, 36. Thomas Laqueur also a slightly different version of this passage. Laqueur, “Mourning, Pity, and the Work of Narrative in the Making Of “Humanity””, 46. We might also usefully recall George Orwell’s sceptical remark on sainthood. “Saints should always be judged guilty until they are proved innocent”. George Orwell, “Reflections on Gandhi”, in *Collected Essays* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1949), 451.

⁴⁵ Lichtenberg, “Absence and the Unfond Heart”, 88.

suffering is bleak: a tale of people “burned out and listless as they hunched over at hotel bars”.⁴⁶ The key point here is that for concern for suffering to remain nourished, the possibility of not suffering has to remain imaginable. This is arguably another of humanitarianism’s paradoxes. In attempting to identify, alleviate, and hopefully eradicate the most extreme forms of human suffering, it risks describing common humanity wholly in relation to human suffering, because of the core dynamic of defining itself against suffering.

Clearly a high degree of ignorance or naivety about suffering is unlikely to be conducive to plausible action to alleviate that suffering. But is there not an initial danger too in potentially ranking all human activity according to how focused it is upon extreme forms of human suffering, and of experiencing our humanity entirely through the pain of others and our response to it? This might seem an exaggeration, but in fact such tendencies dangerously contribute to the myth of the humanitarian as perfect, pure altruist, a figure just as unlikely as the famed rational, utility-maximising economic man. Tony Vaux’s own memoir is characterised by a quasi-religious yearning as he discusses “‘minimizing’ the self and increasing awareness of the ‘other’”.⁴⁷ The title of his book, *The Selfish Altruist*, is alive to the paradoxical nature of humanitarian concern, but its pages still contain phrases like “human bias affects the purity of our altruism”, which implies a measuring of oneself against a transcendental ideal.⁴⁸ We will examine in Chapter 5 Amartya Sen’s caution that transcendental ideals of justice do not necessarily provide the best guide to action.⁴⁹ Arguably his point has a wider resonance that is useful to consider here: should humanitarians really measure themselves against saints? And does such a move not contain its own selfishness and narcissism? A requirement of pure altruism is ultimately entirely paralysing to any proposed humanitarian project, for it abstracts away from the lived experience of human life that necessarily provides the resources of empathy. It is also inegalitarian, if your experience of human

⁴⁶ John Norris, *The Disaster Gypsies: Humanitarian Workers in the World’s Deadliest Conflicts* (Westport: Praeger Security International, 2007), 99-100.

⁴⁷ Vaux, *The Selfish Altruist*, 7.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁴⁹ Sen, *The Idea of Justice*.

suffering bears no relationship to my understanding of my own humanity, it is ultimately a denial of the possibility of a common humanity.

Moreover, with respect to the kind of ethical requirements put forward by cosmopolitans like Peter Singer, there are many possible reasons for rejecting the kind of consequentialism that would put every human activity, whether opera-going or famine relief, into the same felicific calculus.⁵⁰ But surely one is that opera-going embodies some of the possibilities of a common humanity not only defined in terms of torture, murder, starvation, misery and survival.⁵¹ Such a vision of common humanity and its requirements may well be both impractical and undesirable, for without consolations and pleasures. It neglects the important fact that such consolations and pleasures can be crucial to nourishing our sense of humanity and thereby creating the resources to care for each other.

The second reason why knowledge of suffering needs to be handled with care is the well-documented danger of prompting affective reactions quite different to humanitarian concern. A close relation of pity, through the distinction it makes between those who suffer and those who do not, is *Schadenfreude*. *Schadenfreude* is not something on which contemporary international political theory likes to dwell. The idea that some may take, if not pleasure, then at least comfort in the suffering of another is nevertheless an important consideration here. Even Vaux, a dedicated and experienced aid worker, sees the possibility of a mild version of this in himself: "I was like the person who watches TV and reassures himself with images of starving people, before reaching for a pizza from the fridge".⁵²

Entangled with the spectrum of affective reactions leading from pity to empathy is one that ranges from indifference to *Schadenfreude* to sadism, and that runs through many nuances, from shameful denial to voyeuristic pleasure. Sontag documents some of these excesses in her work.⁵³ In fact, as Karen Halttunen demonstrates, humanitarianism has been frequently associated with what she

⁵⁰ See Peter Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality", *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 1, no. 3 (1972).

⁵¹ Even if these themes lie at the heart of so many opera plots.

⁵² Vaux, *The Selfish Altruist*, 94.

⁵³ Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*.

terms a “pornography of pain” since its inception.⁵⁴ The eagerness of crowds to attend punishments and executions is a long-standing phenomenon.⁵⁵ The line between that which shocks and that which excites is often a fine one, or simply depends on the character of the viewer. Vaux cautions that “that the motive of pity so easily interacts with the motive for cruelty, and the desire to help so easily becomes the desire for power”.⁵⁶ As we will see, this places any agent who might wish to stimulate empathy in something of a conundrum, as they can never control the terms on which the suffering they convey will be received.

But what of Levi’s ignorance “won and defended”? The role of the bystander is arguably the most troubling to those who would probe the affective content of humanitarian impulses. How can they be so vividly absent? The bystander has been the subject of much scrutiny since the Holocaust, and there are a plethora of plausible explanations for why such a stance is not only possible, but often likely. David Rieff writes that: “[the] moral test of being an onlooker at other people’s tragedies is one that few of us are likely to pass reliably.”⁵⁷ Norman Geras’ elegant book *The Contract of Mutual Indifference* is a stark study of how bystander attitudes might come to be generalised.⁵⁸ His account takes the form of an implicit contract. He argues that it is all too easy for us to constitute our social relationships on a basis of not helping each other, of not extending solidarity. If we do not assist others in emergencies, we cannot expect them to feel duty-bound to come to our assistance.⁵⁹ He shows the troubling ease with which we can become bystanders, wrapped in a cocoon of denial.

⁵⁴ Karen Halttunen, “Humanitarianism and the Pornography of Pain in Anglo-American Culture”, *The American Historical Review* 100, no. 2 (1995). See also Mario Klarer, “Humanitarian Pornography: John Gabriel Stedman’s Narrative of a Five Years Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam (1796)”, *New Literary History* 36, no. 4 (2005). Rakiya Omaar and Alex de Waal, “Disaster Pornography from Somalia”, *Los Angeles Times* (10 December 1992). Available at http://articles.latimes.com/1992-12-10/local/me-2208_1_somalia-disaster-pornography; accessed on 11 June 2010.

⁵⁵ See the section on “The Public Spectacle of Pain” in Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights*, 92-98.

⁵⁶ Vaux, *The Selfish Altruist*, 95.

⁵⁷ Rieff, *A Bed for the Night*, 3.

⁵⁸ Geras, *The Contract of Mutual Indifference*.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 28.

Stan Cohen focuses on the many modes and layers of denial that characterise our engagement with the suffering around us in everyday life, and that can be amplified in the case of distant suffering.⁶⁰ He unpacks the complex workings of denial in great detail, from the individual psychological to the collective social level. While social shame was suggested as a motivating factor above, there can exist powerful social mechanisms to counteract that and enhance denial, including collective modes and acts of normalisation, self-defence, collusion and rhetorical adjustment.

During the campaign to abolish the Atlantic slave trade, overcoming the mechanisms of denial was often a lengthy process, both at personal and collective level. It took John Newton, an ex-trader turned Evangelical preacher, almost thirty four years to make the psychological journey and publish his *Thoughts Upon the African Slave Trade* in which he set out the trade's cruelties.⁶¹

Furthermore, as, Cohen points out, knowledge of suffering is likely to lose some of its urgency when it has to be mediated.⁶² Mediation increases perhaps the biggest barrier to enabling humanitarian impulses, which is simply abstraction. For Judith Lichtenberg, "[other] people's suffering is almost always abstract."⁶³ We recall Adam Smith's reminder that a man who lost his little finger could not sleep a wink, whereas, "provided he never saw them, he will snore with the most profound security over the ruin of a hundred millions of his brethren, and the destruction of that immense multitude seems plainly an object less interesting to him, than this paltry misfortune of his own".⁶⁴

This abstraction can have a double effect not only of limiting our engagement with the suffering of distant strangers, but also of serving as an excuse not to really engage with any human suffering. A love of humanity does not always

⁶⁰ Cohen, *States of Denial*, 51-75.

⁶¹ Hochschild, *Bury the Chains*, 130-131. John Newton, *The Journal of a Slave Trader (John Newton) 1750-1754: With, Newton's Thoughts Upon the African Slave Trade*, ed. Bernard Martin and Mark Spurrell (London: Epworth Press, 1962).

⁶² Cohen, *States of Denial*, 73.

⁶³ Lichtenberg, "Absence and the Unfond Heart", 82.

⁶⁴ Cited in Thomas W. Laqueur, "Mourning, Pity, and the Work of Narrative in the Making of 'Humanity'", in *Humanitarianism and Suffering: The Mobilization of Empathy*, ed. Richard Ashby Wilson and Richard D. Brown (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 46.

necessarily translate into concern for actually-existing humans. We can use a limited engagement with humanitarian concerns as an alibi to avoid concrete human suffering. Thomas Laqueur reminds us that:

The very term “humanitarianism” has long been suspect precisely because sentiments for humanity generally did not translate easily into care for humanity at hand: Dickens’ Mrs. Jellyby in *Bleak House*, who worried about children in Africa but neglected her own, is the paradigmatic fictional case. It is, and was, far easier to be moved than to be moved to action far easier to see clearly at a distance than near by.⁶⁵

One might add that, had Mrs. Jellyby spent more time looking after her children, she would not necessarily have been acting in a less “humanitarian” way. Rather, her humanitarianism would have been more coherent had it been able to relate her concern for distant strangers to a practical, positive vision and experience of caring humanity.

Arguably then, there are three potential humanitarian mistakes here: caring for distant strangers to the complete exclusion of suffering neighbours, caring for suffering neighbours to the complete exclusion of distant strangers, and coming to view humanity as an essentially suffering entity. The challenge for professional humanitarians is how to overcome these obstacles, to make the suffering they engage with concrete and create an enabling context for their and other actors’ political action.

III Stirring the Humanitarian Impulse

How to mobilise and appeal to humanitarian impulses of empathy or pity in such a way as to prompt action, let alone “appropriate” action, has always been a controversial and difficult subject. There have always been tensions within humanitarianism between sensationalism and sobriety, between appeals to “baser” instincts, such as not losing face and keeping up with the Joneses, and to “nobler”

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 33.

visions of justice. Appealing to the humanitarian impulse usually now involves complex processes of mediation. As Lilie Chouliaraki points out, “mediation does not simply act on a pre-existing public, but constitutes this public as a body of action in the process of narrating and portraying distant suffering”.⁶⁶ In doing so it can fall prey to the dangers of merely creating participants in a “spectatorship of suffering”. I will discuss the issues that arise in the context of two important and interrelated modes of appeal to action: images of suffering and personal narratives.

Many of the parameters of the humanitarian appeal were set during the pioneering phase of humanitarian campaigning. Arguably, they have not changed that much over the ensuing two centuries. Where today we may wear plastic bracelets to indicate support for campaigns against global poverty, abolitionists could indicate their allegiances with one of Josiah Wedgwood’s famous seals featuring a chained, kneeling African and the legend “Am I Not a Man and a Brother?” The image spread, in an early example of “viral” marketing, to adorn books, leaflets, snuffboxes and cufflinks.⁶⁷ The image directly challenged the viewer to identify the slave as a fellow human, forcing an explicit rather than implicit exclusion from that category should he or she reject the appeal.

Even more iconic was Thomas Clarkson’s diagram of a slave ship, the *Brookes*, a revolutionary image first published in that revolutionary year, 1789. It showed cross-sections of each level of a typical slave ship, with 482 slaves in the unimaginably cramped positions, body to body in tight rows, in which they would have made the journey across the Atlantic. This image, though sensational, was also sober, for Clarkson and his colleagues were careful not to exaggerate in its composition. For example, the number of slaves carried was at the bottom end of the range the ship was actually recorded as having carried.⁶⁸ For Thomas Laqueur, the key to such an image is that it renews our vision, it demands that we “see the middle passage for what it was: something other than an exercise in the mere

⁶⁶ Lilie Chouliaraki, *The Spectatorship of Suffering* (London: Sage, 2006), 199.

⁶⁷ Hochschild, *Bury the Chains*, 128-129.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 155. Today, some NGOs like Amnesty are especially careful not to exaggerate or sensationalise their subject matter.

transport of goods".⁶⁹ Such images were central to the re-imagining and redefining of people's conceptualisation of slaves as human beings (though not necessarily as equals), and generated a significant and persistent aesthetic trend denouncing the evils of the slave trade. Indeed, half a century later, Turner famously chose the subject of a slave ship, with slavers throwing the dead and dying overboard as a vengeful typhoon approaches, for his Royal Academy Exhibition picture of 1840.⁷⁰ The theme had clearly acquired a powerful resonance in British public life. Turner himself was prompted to paint the picture by the publication in 1839 of a number of high-profile books on the horrors of slavery, including the second edition of Thomas Clarkson's *History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the Slave Trade*, and a book on *The African Slave Trade* by Thomas F. Buxton, serialised in *The Times*.⁷¹

Today, though, we live in a much more crowded and complex media culture. In the early 1990s, there was much talk of the "CNN effect" bringing the world's suffering even more vividly into our living rooms, in real time, and creating a global public, who would spur their political leaders to action. But this proved somewhat premature, with the "bodybag effect" showing that the "CNN effect", to the extent that it functioned at all, was a double edged sword. In the case of military humanitarian interventions, calls to "do something" could rapidly become calls to pull troops out.⁷² Rapidly, talk turned to predictions of "compassion fatigue".⁷³

A more nuanced debate on the role of visual imagery has since emerged, but it reveals a dauntingly complex environment for any professional humanitarian

⁶⁹ Laqueur, "Mourning, Pity, and the Work of Narrative in the Making of 'Humanity'", 40. Italics in original.

⁷⁰ Ruskin thought this picture represented Turner's greatest single claim to immortality. John Ruskin, *Modern Painters, Volume I* (New York & Chicago: National Library Association, 1873), 383.

⁷¹ Thomas Fowell Buxton, *The African Slave Trade* (London: John Murray, 1839). Thomas Clarkson, *The History of the Rise, Progress and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave-Trade, by the British Parliament* (London: John W. Parker, 1839). James Hamilton, *Turner: The Late Seascapes* (London: Yale University Press, 2003), 47.

⁷² Lawrence Freedman, "Victims and Victors: Reflections on the Kosovo War", *Review of International Studies* 26, no. 3 (2000): 337-341. See also Piers Robinson, "The Cnn Effect: Can the News Media Drive Foreign Policy?" *Review of International Studies* 25, no. 2 (1999).

⁷³ Susan D. Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sell Disease, Famine, War and Death* (London: Routledge, 1999).

aiming to mobilise humanitarian action and overcome indifference to suffering, above and beyond the problems discussed in the previous section. Furthermore, it raises questions about how to spread humanitarian identity without sacrificing its integrity. These arise both in terms of how humanitarians formulate and promulgate their message, and the media environment in which it is transmitted.

Though deterministic readings of technology, like the “CNN effect” or “compassion fatigue” theses, are no doubt rather overblown, there is little doubt that the characteristics of the media play an important part here. Clearly, contemporary media is often seduced by sensationalist readings of events, and events need to be sensational to make the news. Kevin Rozario cautions us not to create a dichotomy between a good humanitarianism and a bad media, arguing that the identity of modern humanitarianism is in many ways itself the product of a sensationalistic mass culture.⁷⁴ Michael Ignatieff considers that the lure of a good clear story line, with a clear demarcation between good and evil, innocence and guilt, is hard to resist, as are the distortions of over-sentimentalisation.⁷⁵ This creates a dangerous terrain for professional humanitarians to navigate, especially if they are attempting to present their own “sentimental education”.

For Ignatieff, who focuses on the role of television in particular, another distortion is to reproduce the problem of the technical understanding of humanitarian crises, examined in the previous chapter, in which the humanitarian consequences are presented with great pathos, at the expense of political understanding, such as happened during the Ethiopian famine in 1984, with Michael Buerk’s famous “biblical” report, in which the famine victims seemed to be prey to a timeless tragedy.⁷⁶ In an examination of visual culture more generally, David Campbell argues that the visual representation of key sites like Darfur do not simply mirror what is going on, but rather “both manifests and enables power relations

⁷⁴ Kevin Rozario, ““Delicious Horrors”: Mass Culture, the Red Cross, and the Appeal of Modern American Humanitarianism”, *American Quarterly* 55, no. 3 (2003).

⁷⁵ Ignatieff, “The Stories We Tell”, 292-293.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 293-294. For a detailed critique, see Edkins, *Whose Hunger?*, 2-9. See also David Campbell, “Ethiopia and the Recurring Famine: Same Story, Same Pictures?” *Imaging Famine blog* (23 May 2010). Available at <http://www.imaging-famine.org/blog/index.php/2010/05/ethiopia-1984-2008/>; accessed on 11 June 2010.

through which spatial distances between self/other, civilized/barbaric, North/South, developed/underdeveloped are produced and maintained".⁷⁷

A third key characteristic noted by Ignatieff is the constant use of synecdoche, taking the part for the whole, and the focus on particular individuals to tell the story. He concedes that synecdoche "has the virtues of making the abstractions of exile, expulsion, starvation, and other forms of suffering into an experience sufficiently concrete and real to make empathy possible".⁷⁸ But he then points out that:

The identification that synecdoche creates is intense but shallow. We feel for a particular victim, without understanding why or how he or she has come to be a victim; and empathy without understanding is bound to fritter away when the next plausible victim makes his or her appearance on our screen or when we learn something that apparently contradicts the image of a simple innocence that the structure of synecdoche invited us to expect.⁷⁹

Here we rejoin the problem explored in the previous chapter, of the innocence of the victims in question. Though putting cruelty first, for instance, may enable professional humanitarians to overcome the need to believe in the innocence of victims, it is not so easy when appealing to the humanitarian impulse of others. The issue of synecdoche also links into important debates about the ethics of representation within professional humanitarianism. They are concerned about the extent to which humanitarian appeals nourish the voyeuristic tendencies of some, as evoked above. They also wonder whether images of suffering, designed to promote the defence of common humanity and human dignity, should prioritise a respectful portrayal of the people involved, and if so, what that might entail. The Red Cross Code of Conduct states that: "In our information, publicity and advertising activities, we shall recognise disaster victims as dignified humans, not hopeless objects".⁸⁰ Arguably, this is where different strands of the humanitarian

⁷⁷ David Campbell, "Geopolitics and Visuality: Sighting the Darfur Conflict", *Political Geography* 26, no. 4 (2007): 380.

⁷⁸ Ignatieff, "The Stories We Tell", 294.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 295.

⁸⁰ IFRC, *The Code of Conduct*.

conversation collide. Is it really possible to engage people's concern with, say, the suffering of women in Congo, and not promote to some extent a negative vision of "the African"?⁸¹

Laura Suski argues that "[the] emotional pull of humanitarian appeals is always dependent upon the worthiness of those suffering, and constructions of the morality of sufferers shift in different historical and social contexts."⁸² Her work alights in particular on the place of children, and their suffering, at the heart of the humanitarian appeal. Arguably, the child heightens all the dilemmas inherent in our understanding of common humanity, and responses to the wounding of that common humanity, and its representation and mediation. There is no doubt about the power of images of children. Christopher Coker concurs: "[it] is above all the scenes on television of the plight of children that prompt western audiences to demand that their governments intervene in the civil wars which plague the planet. Children have become a litmus test by which we judge not only the inhumanity of others, but our own ability to feel the pain of our fellow human beings."⁸³

Kate Manzo has analysed how it is difficult entirely to reconcile NGOs uses of imagery fully with the various expressions of good intent present in the different

⁸¹ It is worth considering, though, whether we risk asking too much of representations, that is, that they do the work of moral engagement for us. David Campbell notes an interesting recent project, in which an aid worker, Duncan McNichol, staged photographs of particular Malawians he encountered, first looking their best, and then wearing the traditional torn clothes and mournful looks of humanitarian appeals. Campbell notes that the contrast makes us think, but does not really escape the problem of images stereotyping a situation. David Campbell, "How Photography Can Construct Poverty", *Imaging Famine blog* (23 June 2010). Available at <http://www.imaging-famine.org/blog/index.php/2010/06/how-photography-can-construct-poverty/>; accessed on 27 July 2010. Duncan McNichol, "Perspectives of Poverty", *Water Wellness* (28 April 2010). Available at <http://waterwellness.ca/2010/04/28/perspectives-of-poverty/>; accessed on 27 July 2010.

⁸² Suski, "Children, Suffering and the Humanitarian Appeal", 210.

⁸³ He goes on to point out that: "[the] paradox, of course, is that civilian fatalities have climbed from 5 per cent of war-related deaths at the turn of the twentieth century to more than 90 per cent today. Over the past decade armed conflict has killed more children than did two world wars. It has killed two million children, disabled five million more, and left twelve million homeless, more than a million orphaned or separated from their parents, and some ten million psychologically traumatised." Coker, *Humane Warfare*.

codes of conduct such as the Sphere Projects *Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response*.⁸⁴ She concludes that

the iconography of childhood also works for NGOs in the same way that missionary iconography worked in the colonial age. It reinforces an impression of both institutional efficacy and the power to act in *loco parentis* by tapping into cultural associations of childhood with dependence, innocence, and the need for protection and care.⁸⁵

On this account, images of children serve to infantilise whole populations and can contribute to a dehumanising humanitarianism. Child sponsorship programmes blend two powerful narratives: childhood innocence and personal testimony.⁸⁶ Despite these problems, Wilson and Brown “note that individual victims' narratives seem to be a necessary component in the mobilization of empathy, and in the formation of global political constituencies to end the suffering of others.”⁸⁷ Arguably, the power of individual narratives maintains its force within the world of professional humanitarianism itself. In his study of Amnesty International, Stephen Hopgood refers to one staffer who had been able to accustom himself to the daily encounter with horrific images of violence, but who still felt powerfully disturbed by personal testimonies, because they highlighted that at stake was a “real person”.⁸⁸

Though by no means a silver bullet, giving space to fuller accounts of people’s lives, in appealing on their behalf, might go some way towards avoiding the dehumanising potential of humanitarian appeals. The first point is preserving and presenting people’s names. Denis Kennedy notes how frequently this is

⁸⁴ Such codes are discussed in Chapter 5. Sphere Project, *Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response*.

⁸⁵ Kate Manzo, "Imaging Humanitarianism: NGO Identity and the Iconography of Childhood", *Antipode* 40, no. 4 (2008): 652. Italics in original.

⁸⁶ For a discussion of child sponsorship programmes, see Suski, "Children, Suffering and the Humanitarian Appeal", 212-216.

⁸⁷ Wilson and Brown, "Introduction", 20.

⁸⁸ Hopgood, *Keepers of the Flame*, 43.

omitted, even in discussions about the problems of representation.⁸⁹ Thomas Laqueur points out that historically, “[naming] is part of the story of how the normative claim that everyone has a life to live came to command cultural resonance.”⁹⁰ Caroline Moorehead’s *Human Cargo* is another example of work that gives the refugees whose lives it draws on their due.⁹¹

Indeed, in the eighteenth century, sustained engagement in novels with particular characters was important in enabling a human rights culture to develop, according to Lynn Hunt: “Human rights could only flourish when people learned to think of others as their equals, as like them in some fundamental fashion. They learned this equality, at least in part, by experiencing identification with ordinary characters who seemed dramatically present and familiar, even if ultimately fictional.”⁹²

This does not overcome the recurring problem of how to convey richer accounts in a fragmented and complex media environment, though Denis Kennedy places some hope in the internet’s ability to support more creative ways of doing this.⁹³ At least, it promises the possibility of voices being heard through means other than the kind of journalism wryly referred to in the title of Edward Behr’s memoir *Anyone Here Been Raped and Speaks English?*⁹⁴

⁸⁹ Denis Kennedy, "Selling the Distant Other: Humanitarianism and Imagery - Ethical Dilemmas of Humanitarian Action", *Journal of Humanitarian Assistance* (28 February 2009). Available at <http://jha.ac/2009/02/28/selling-the-distant-other-humanitarianism-and-imagery%E2%80%94ethical-dilemmas-of-humanitarian-action/>; accessed on 21 June 2010. I recall being uneasy at the absence of names in an exhibition of portraits of refugees by Sebastiao Salgado, perhaps the most successful current “humanitarian” photojournalist, at the Barbican a few years ago, and was interested to discover that this was his standard practice, according to Susan Sontag. Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 70. Stan Cohen also expresses distaste for what he sees as Salgado’s “wholly aesthetic response to suffering”. Cohen, *States of Denial*, 299. For a thoughtful defence, and interesting meditation on the role of aesthetic responses to suffering, see David Campbell, "Salgado and the Sahel: Documentary Photography and the Imaging of Famine", in *Rituals of Mediation: International Politics and Social Meaning*, ed. François Debrix and Cynthia Weber (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003). On Salgado and the representation of refugees, see Nyers, *Rethinking Refugees*, 18-22.

⁹⁰ Laqueur, "Mourning, Pity, and the Work of Narrative in the Making Of "Humanity"", 53.

⁹¹ Moorehead, *Human Cargo*.

⁹² Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights*, 58.

⁹³ Kennedy, "Selling the Distant Other".

⁹⁴ Edward Behr, *Anyone Here Been Raped and Speaks English?* (London: Penguin, 1992).

But we still face the problem of moving from emotional reaction to political action, or rather of creating politicised emotions. Suski suggests that “[an] emotion can be labelled political when it incites an *active* response to suffering.”⁹⁵ For Luc Boltanski:

the consolidation of the humanitarian movement depends, at least in part, on its ability to clarify and make explicit the connection, which is often realised in practice by its members, between distant causes and the traditions, sensibilities and even interests of those who organise support for these causes.⁹⁶

The example of British abolitionism reminds us of some useful considerations of how images of slavery, such as those mentioned at the beginning of this section, can be drawn on to create a broader political will to act. Chaim Kaufmann and Robert Pape show that over a sixty year period from 1807 to 1867, the British state undertook what was “the most expensive international moral effort in modern world history” at a cost of 1.8 percent per annum of national income and 5,000 British lives, figures that dwarf the current British international development aid budget, say, or indeed the number of US soldiers whose deaths prompted the United States to withdraw from Somalia after “Black Hawk Down”.⁹⁷

Kaufmann and Pape acknowledge that the abolitionists were driven to some extent by a basic moral universalism. “Once Britons recognized Africans as fellow human beings, their dignity could not be completely denied.”⁹⁸ But they make the case for that recognition of basic dignity and the reaction to it being nested in much thicker, particular moral identities, which were nevertheless broadened through abolitionist campaigning to include a wider sense of common humanity.

[The] reasons why so many British abolitionists were willing to accept very high costs to correct injustices thousands of miles away were not based on

⁹⁵ Suski, “Children, Suffering and the Humanitarian Appeal”, 217. Italics in original.

⁹⁶ Boltanski, *Distant Suffering*, xiv.

⁹⁷ Chaim D. Kaufmann and Robert A. Pape, “Explaining Costly International Moral Action: Britain’s Sixty-Year Campaign against the Atlantic Slave Trade”, *International Organization* 53, no. 4 (1999): 631-637.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*: 644.

their acceptance of obligations to a universal moral community, but rather on their parochial identities as Protestant Dissenters, members of the middle class, and their national identity as Englishmen. They saw slavery, together with the overlapping complex of the planters, the aristocracy that controlled British political life, and the hierarchy of the established Church as a single body of corruption, immorality, and arbitrary power that threatened the souls of all Englishmen and had to be defeated in order to redeem the nation. Anti-slavery overseas was one component of a program for redemption at home.⁹⁹

This returns us to the necessary contingencies of the humanitarian impulse, where the object of concern receives recognition by virtue of her/his status as human, but the manifestation of the humanitarian imperative takes place within a complex and contingent setting of thicker solidarities and politics. For Kaufmann and Pape: “although universalist logic was sufficient to persuade Englishmen to regard slavery as immoral, this did not translate into a willingness to take action.”¹⁰⁰

The political campaign that followed, which enabled an unprecedented commitment of blood and treasure, illustrates some of the advantages of a sustained engagement with the state and therefore with politics. The key period in this campaign was that between the foundation, in 1787, of the London Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, and the 1807 Act of Parliament. What Kaufmann and Pape bring out is the importance of the domestic political context in committing the British state to abolishing the slave trade, especially the important place the abolitionists occupied within the coalition dynamics of the time. At various times throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, the appeal of or to abolitionism was decisive in determining electoral success for both Tories and Whigs.¹⁰¹

The suggestion here, which will be returned to in Chapter 6 at more length, is that for humanitarians, in attempting to create greater solidarity deriving from recognitions of a common humanity, politics, whether at the level of the mediating environment they speak through, or in the conventional sense of constituency

⁹⁹ Ibid.: 644-645.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.: 645.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.: 645, 649-657.

building and election fighting, is not a problem to be solved, but a constitutive context of the possibility of humanitarianism itself.

Of course, given the complexities discussed above, reliably stirring humanitarian political action remains a highly contingent process. Discussing the possible reactions of Euripides' contemporaries to his play *The Trojan Women*, Martha Nussbaum neatly sets out the unreliability of the causal chain from aesthetic to affective to human to political realms:

Did compassion really enable those Greeks to comprehend the real humanity of others, or did it stop short, allowing them to reaffirm the essential Greekness of everything that's human? Of course compassion required making the Trojans somehow familiar, so that Greeks could see their own vulnerability in them, and feel terror and pity, as for their own relations. But it's easy for the familiarization to go too far: they are just us, and we the ones who suffer humanly. Not those other ones, over there in Melos.¹⁰²

IV Selectivity and Impartiality

Before the following chapters' focus on the characteristics of humanitarian action, it is worth pausing briefly to consider the humanitarian action that does not happen. A major objection to relying on the kind of process outlined above is the issue of selectivity, inconsistency and partiality, when it comes to the mobilisation of empathy and the carrying out of humanitarian action. Indeed, empathy is all very well, but we need to ask ourselves whose pain is being felt. This links back to the centrality of notions of impartiality to professional humanitarians' self-perception. Here I will mainly be addressing the extent to which it is possible to generate solidarity impartially. But it should also be noted that working out what impartiality means often implies an account of fairness or justice, as will be unpacked in Chapter 5.

On this view, empathy hides a multitude of sins. Critics of humanitarianism who emphasise the selectivity of humanitarian action either consider the issue to

¹⁰² Nussbaum, "Compassion & Terror": 11.

undermine the whole enterprise, or see a deep need for rule-corrected solidarity. The issue of selectivity is also a major concern throughout the world of professional humanitarianism, feeding on the multiple layers of imperfection and complexity that characterise it, not least those explored in the previous section. Indeed, at every level of humanitarian engagement, charges of selectivity are a preferred way of attacking its coherence.

Ian Smillie and Larry Minear argue that at the heart of the lively debate over the moral necessity of humanitarian action lies “the unevenness of the response to emergencies, with human need going largely unaddressed in some crises while being inundated with attention and resources in others”. They go on to say that the “humanitarian imperative is difficult to take seriously when its application is so tattered”.¹⁰³ Jan Egeland, the former head of OCHA, notes in his recent memoir that the successful fund-raising response to the 2004 tsunami “represents an astonishing \$7,100 for every affected person, as opposed to only three dollars per head actually spent on someone affected by floods in Bangladesh in 2004.”¹⁰⁴ Less extreme, but still noteworthy, is the varying level of funding different crises receive, as set out in real-time by OCHA in their comprehensive online funding summaries.¹⁰⁵ These disparities underscore the extent to which the professional humanitarian sector is at the mercy of the wider social context in which humanitarian concerns are expressed and support for action formulated. The fact that even in highly controlled and institutionalised contexts, professional humanitarianism is not at full liberty to determine its own priorities according to the principles it sets itself. Instead, it has to negotiate the more fickle and contingent play of empathetic responses.

Some professional humanitarian actors resist this. Famously, in the aftermath of the 2004 Tsunami, MSF quickly shut down its appeal as it had more

¹⁰³ Smillie and Minear, *The Charity of Nations*, 1.

¹⁰⁴ Egeland, *A Billion Lives*, 131.

¹⁰⁵ OCHA, "Appeals & Funding", *ReliefWeb*. Available at <http://ocha.unog.ch/fts/pageloader.aspx>; accessed on 18 June 2010. *The Guardian* recently reported, for instance, that the World Food Programme's efforts to deliver food aid in Niger are hampered by substantial funding shortfalls. The Guardian, "Editorial: Food Crisis in the Sahel: Unlearned Lessons", *The Guardian* (03 August 2010). Available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/aug/03/eastern-sahel-food-crisis-aid>; accessed on 03 August 2010.

money than it could usefully spend.¹⁰⁶ For Brauman, since “[mass] solidarity is not based on reasoning alone” (as I outlined above) the role of aid organisations is especially important in bringing lucidity into decision making.¹⁰⁷ They become, then a kind of solidarity filter. Terry links this to the importance of independence in humanitarian action, of course at the heart of both the ICRC and the MSF approaches. She recognises though that in practice the independence that would allow for true impartiality is much less practical for many other actors with different funding structures. For example, she notes that “UNHCR is particularly affected by funding discrepancies between those refugee emergencies that are perceived to hold important stakes for major donor governments and those that are not”.¹⁰⁸ But arguably even those agencies cannot indefinitely remove themselves from partialist tendencies, as beyond the short term solidarity has to be mobilised anew.

The debate centres on the extent to which action that makes a moral claim is undermined by selective application. The argument I will make here is that this debate is essentially misconceived in the case of humanitarianism, because of the dynamic outlined in this and the previous chapter.

The charge is that selectivity is a major, possibly defining feature of contemporary humanitarianism, and that it undermines even the initial plausibility of action. Arguably this focus reflects a belief that, rather than cruelty being the worst thing we do, hypocrisy is. Indeed, Shklar, while recognising the dangers of hypocrisy, considers that “To put hypocrisy first entangles us finally in too much moral cruelty, exposes us too easily to misanthropy, and unbalances our politics.”¹⁰⁹ With regard to the, admittedly problematic, practice of military humanitarian intervention, Chris Brown defends a certain degree of inconsistency in decision-making, against the likes of Noam Chomsky, for whom hypocrisy clearly is the worst

¹⁰⁶ Peter Redfield, "Sacrifice, Triage, and Global Humanitarianism", in *Humanitarianism in Question: Politics, Power, Ethics*, ed. Michael Barnett and Thomas G. Weiss (London: Cornell University Press, 2008), 211.

¹⁰⁷ Rony Brauman, "Global Media and the Myths of Humanitarian Relief: The Case of the 2004 Tsunami", in *Humanitarianism and Suffering: The Mobilization of Empathy*, ed. Richard Ashby Wilson and Richard D. Brown (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 109.

¹⁰⁸ Terry, *Condemned to Repeat?*, 23-24.

¹⁰⁹ Shklar, *Ordinary Vices*, 86.

thing we do (especially the hypocrisy of liberals).¹¹⁰ For Brown, it is important to recognise that not all situations lend themselves to the establishment of rules, and that meaningful moral agency requires that we acknowledge the importance of practical judgement, especially when faced with situations of extreme complexity.¹¹¹ He argues that the greatest humanitarian failures, such as the absence of any kind of meaningful intervention to stop the 1994 Rwandan genocide, are above all failures of judgement and of political will.

Of course, humanitarianism encompasses discussions about the first resort, about what rules and processes should be put in place to avoid situations of extreme human suffering, but if those discussions, or those processes fail, humanitarianism also implies a response of last resort. The very failure of the former implies to a great extent the contingency of the latter, and the importance of practical judgement on the one hand, and the formation of political will, as pointed to in the previous section, on the other.¹¹²

A related discussion is the requirement of altruism on behalf of humanitarian actors, whether individuals, organisations or states. Again, for Brown, this is to miss the point that a moral universe in which actions are either wholly altruistic or wholly selfish represents Manichean wishful thinking, rather than a plausible picture of the moral life.¹¹³ To return to the second section of this chapter, it hampers us with unbearably heavy saintly requirement. In line with the third section, it also disregards the important ways in which we can come to see our identities and interests in a more expansive way and how, to mobilise the

¹¹⁰ For two different versions of this tendency, see David Chandler, *From Kosovo to Kabul and Beyond: Human Rights and International Intervention*, 2nd ed. (London: Pluto, 2006). Noam Chomsky, *The New Military Humanism: Lessons from Kosovo* (London: Pluto, 1999).

¹¹¹ Chris Brown, "Selective Humanitarianism: In Defence of Inconsistency", in *Ethics and Foreign Intervention*, ed. Deen K. Chatterjee and Don E. Scheid (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

¹¹² For a summary of the problems of rules versus judgement in the context of humanitarian intervention, see Anthony F. Lang, Jr., "Humanitarian Intervention", in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Ethics and International Relations*, ed. Patrick Hayden (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 141-143.

¹¹³ Brown, "Selective Humanitarianism", 46. For further discussion of motives, intentions and consequences in humanitarian action, see the next chapter.

humanitarian impulse effectively, meaningful links to the self-perception of individuals and groups need to be created (and that is not an impartial process).

Yet altruism still features heavily in the aspirations of professional humanitarians, who worry that emotional engagement and an impartial assessment of others' needs sit in tension. This points to a profound paradox at the heart of professional humanitarians' understanding of the principle of humanity: to honour it seems to require that it be exercised impartially, yet it is nourished by the partial play of empathy and emotional engagement with particular instances of suffering. Tony Vaux acknowledges the point:

At the heart of humanity are not only conflicts of selfishness and altruism, but the paradox of being emotional enough to feel concern while not being so emotional that we limit that concern unfairly. We need both attachment and detachment. And it is particularly tempting to feel 'concern for the person in need' rather more strongly in the case of those whom we like, and to attack those whom we do not like even if their ideas and objectives are similar to our own.¹¹⁴

His account reminds us of the position of a doctor, who constantly needs to combine professional detachment with the nourishing power of a commitment to healing people. And if we take the example of professional medicine, we see that an apparently impartial concept like "greatest need" is actually very hard to define in abstract, and has to be negotiated, often controversially, as we see in Britain with every controversy over guidelines issued by the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE), through a political discussion, in which not everyone can necessarily find satisfaction.¹¹⁵ This brings us to the concept of triage, which is evoked in different guises in the humanitarian context.¹¹⁶ The problem of selectivity

¹¹⁴ Vaux, *The Selfish Altruist*, 70.

¹¹⁵ There are interesting parallels between the work of an organisation like NICE, the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence, and the guidelines and accountability mechanisms, such as the Sphere Project, that professional humanitarians have created and which will be examined in Chapter 6.

¹¹⁶ See for instance Redfield, "Sacrifice, Triage, and Global Humanitarianism". Patrick Reed, *Triage: Dr. James Orbinski's Humanitarian Dilemma*, Documentary Film (CanWest Global Television Network et al., 2007).

will almost always rear its head again in practical contexts. The dilemma was already recognised by Dunant:

Then you find yourself asking: "Why go to the right, when there are all these men on the left who will die without a word of kindness or comfort, without so much as a glass of water to quench their burning thirst?"¹¹⁷

The way that the principle of impartiality has evolved is to establish that the quenching of thirst should not be hampered by the colour of one's skin, say, or one's religion. However, deciding which kind of suffering represents the greatest need, inevitably reintroduces a hierarchy of suffering, in the absence of an unlimited supply of material and moral resources. It is not clear that different kinds of suffering are commensurable. Indeed, it may do a disservice to the principle of humanity to try to argue that they are.

Tony Vaux argues that "[we] need a rule of impartiality precisely because we are not impartial."¹¹⁸ But it is not at all clear that a world richer in humanitarianism would necessarily ever, in practice, be a more truly impartial world. Indeed, it is very unclear on what basis the calculation of "more" or "less" would be established. Richard Rorty notes: "[free] universities, a free press, incorruptible judges, and unbribable police officers do not come cheap".¹¹⁹ These measures arguably represent past humanitarian gains, and it would clearly be absurd on humanitarian grounds to neglect them. It would not make the world a "more humanitarian" place to abolish the human rights protections from which, for instance, Europeans benefit. Yet equally clearly, if we were to decide "greatest need" impartially, the resources poured into this would not be justifiable. Indeed, Rorty is profoundly sceptical that that our ambition to widen the ambit of solidarity to all humankind can ever be achieved, for all the gains he undoubtedly thinks can be achieved through the spread of a human rights culture through a sentimental education.

¹¹⁷ Dunant, *A Memory of Solferino*, unpaginated text.

¹¹⁸ Vaux, *The Selfish Altruist*, 162.

¹¹⁹ Richard Rorty, "Who Are We? Moral Universalism and Economic Triage", in *Global Ethics: Seminal Essays*, ed. Thomas Pogge and Keith Horton (St. Paul: Paragon House, 2008), 318.

Once again the trope of triage comes up as a way to suggest that our solidarity is related to our sense of the possible.¹²⁰

Perhaps impartiality is, in the end, a transcendental ideal that, while serving as a useful corrective to excesses of partiality, does not provide us with a full account of how to make decisions. Moreover, as we will see in the next chapter, the contexts in which the humanitarian impulse is called upon is frequently one within which tragic choices are a likely feature of any decision to act, or a conscious decision not to act.¹²¹

Furthermore, and on a more positive note, humanitarianism could only be truly impartially conceived and enacted if it were the only important and valuable kind of solidarity. As we will see in the rest of the thesis, if the point even needs to be argued, this is not the case. But more importantly, humanitarianism is never a solidarity floating free, but rather is always related to and enabled by other forms of solidarity. For instance, feminism is clearly a solidarity that has done much to establish the importance of considering women as fully human. A feminist solidarity and a humanitarian one need not necessarily always pull in the same direction. Yet the bringing about, through all kinds of action, of a more humanitarian world, can never just be about being kind impartially, it also requires dedicated feminists to devote their lives to establishing fully the status of being a woman, and a sensitivity to the particular vulnerabilities experienced by women, as a meaningful and robust voice in the discussion over our common humanity. It may well be that the most effective way of enriching the category of common humanity is through the exercise of that kind of partiality. The task of humanitarianism is in large part, whatever one's approach to it, about expanding the reach and content of human solidarity.¹²² It seems deeply perverse in doing so to neglect existing possibilities of solidarity, which by definition are likely to be partial or particular in nature. To be suspicious about the fickle and contingent workings of our humanitarian impulses

¹²⁰ Ibid., 321.

¹²¹ Chris Brown, "Tragedy, 'Tragic Choices' and Contemporary International Political Theory", *International Relations* 21, no. 1 (2007).

¹²² For an argument about how changing norms of military humanitarian intervention over the past two centuries have been driven by expanding notions of common humanity see Finnemore, *The Purpose of Intervention*, 52-84.

seems appropriate. But they remain at the heart of the possibility of humanitarian action (broadly understood). The problem that we cannot empathise with everyone will not go away, and does not make processes of empathetic interaction any less important for envisaging a world in which more humanitarian action takes place.

The size of the category of humanity is an important consideration, but so is the quality of our human relationships. The danger is of being equally indifferent to all - equal opportunities egotists. The contrasting danger is to reify altruism as the quintessence of humanity. This leads to a dichotomised morality, in which a lack of understanding of the complexity of ourselves as humans is likely to hinder a complex understanding of the threads of any common human

Conclusion

"The politics of empathy are fickle", writes Adam Hochschild¹²³ It is this recognition that prompts humanitarians to seek a more stable politics, such as a politics of rights or justice, as we will see in Chapter 5. Yet the selective play of empathy, in enabling the sense of a shared human identity and therefore the possibility of human solidarity, cannot simply be dismissed because of its contingent character. This chapter has made clear that there is no neutral affective terrain that can process humanitarian concern in a non-contingent manner. It has suggested that the line between successful and abusive ways of mobilising humanitarian empathy is rather thin. The next chapter will examine what happens when there is a will to act. But by way of coda to this chapter, and lest the exposition of the contingencies of empathy are seen as themselves representing a kind of inhumanity, we might recall W.H. Auden's lines from the poem "Musée des Beaux Arts":

About suffering they were never wrong,
The Old Masters: how well they understood
Its human position; how it takes place
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully

¹²³ Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (London: Pan Macmillan, 2002), 282.

along;
How, when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting
For the miraculous birth, there always must be
Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating
On a pond at the edge of the wood:
They never forgot
That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course
Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot
Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer's horse
Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.¹²⁴

¹²⁴ W. H. Auden, *Poems Selected by John Fuller* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), 29. Here only the torturer seems truly guilty, and his horse truly innocent. For an interesting reading of Dunant's *A Memory of Solferino*, which concludes by highlighting Dunant's narrative device of horses that, more merciful than men, try to pick their way their way through the prostrate victims with a kind of humanitarian impartiality, see Joseph R. Slaughter, "Humanitarian Reading", in *Humanitarianism and Suffering: The Mobilization of Empathy*, ed. Richard Ashby Wilson and Richard D. Brown (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 106.

4. Humanitarian Action as Rescue

Whoever saves one life, it is as if he saved the entire world.¹

We had to burn the village in order to save it.²

If humanitarianism brings into focus the desire to defend a common humanity, it is, as the first, Talmudic saying indicates, intimately bound to acts of rescue, of saving lives. Indeed, a single act of rescue can take on immense symbolic importance in the defence of the idea at least of a common humanity. For, as saving “the entire world” or permanently deferring the death of a single individual are impossibilities, the rescue of certain individuals remains at least a tangible possibility, and consequently defines the texture of humanitarian action. Moreover, while it should be clear from previous chapters that it would be erroneous to attempt to define humanitarianism once and for all in terms of a specific set of permissible actions, some notion of saving human lives necessarily remains central to the kind of action at stake, when we set out and negotiate what humanitarian concern entails.

This is driven home by the pervasiveness of the language of rescue across the diverse contexts in which humanitarianism is discussed, one of the few constants across the multiplicity of understandings of what humanitarianism is and means. Obvious examples from the realm of practice include two long-standing humanitarian organisations: the International Rescue Committee and Save the Children. The most significant International Relations monograph on humanitarian intervention is entitled *Saving Strangers*, while in Political Theory Michael Walzer’s most important intervention on the subject is an article on “The Politics of Rescue”.³ In fact, much of contemporary normative theorising relies on an implicit act of rescue. Peter Singer’s famous drowning child has now been rescued on numerous occasions, only to be thrown back to its doom again by battalions of eager political

¹ Martin Gilbert, *The Righteous: The Unsung Heroes of the Holocaust* (London: Transworld, 2002), xiv.

² American soldier in Vietnam, cited in Rieff, *A Bed for the Night*, 258.

³ Walzer, “The Politics of Rescue”. Wheeler, *Saving Strangers*.

philosophers, the “Shallow Pond theorists” in Kwame Anthony Appiah’s amusing phrase.⁴

Perhaps another common thread is that for many of these writers and organisations, what rescue means is fairly straightforward. It is usually some variant of pulling the child out of the pond, and popping them back onto dry land. Yet it is interesting to note that the language of rescue is used more cautiously within the literature of humanitarianism in crisis.⁵ In part, this reflects the recognition that saving a human body is not self-evidently exactly the same thing as saving a human being, as we do not understand our humanity solely in relation to our bodies. It also reflects awareness of the lives that have not been saved, and a suspicion that, for all their good intentions, the most meaningful thing that humanitarian practitioners are rescuing is their sense of self. David Rieff notes the tendency many of us share to cling on to humanitarianism as a “saving idea”.⁶ He is wary of the self-serving delusions of the American soldier cited above, similar to the famous order of the Abbot of Cîteaux, Arnald-Almric during the Albigensian Crusade. “Kill them all; God will look after His own”.⁷

Certainly, the notion of rescue, as applied to humanitarian action, is replete with tensions and paradoxes. But for all that, it remains a vital concept in describing the contours of humanitarianism. In part, this is because the paradoxes of rescue are also the paradoxes of humanitarianism, as I will attempt to demonstrate throughout this chapter. But it is also because, as Chapter 2 suggested, humanitarianism largely comes into being as a reaction to (and a conversation about) inhumanity. In the discussion of what constitutes inhumanity, examples such as the Holocaust, or the practice of slavery, loom large, and carry much symbolic weight. Chapter 3 showed just how problematic the path from the articulation of concern to the willingness to act can be, with many bystanders falling by the

⁴ Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism*, 173. Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality".

⁵ See notably Pasic and Weiss, "The Politics of Rescue".

⁶ Rieff, *A Bed for the Night*, 91.

⁷ The second phrase, and indeed the precise attribution, may be apocryphal, but there is little doubt that the first part, “Kill them all”, represents the instructions of the Crusaders at the sacking of Béziers. Zoé Oldenbourg, *Massacre at Montségur* (London: Phoenix Press, 2000), 116.

wayside. But in the face of even the most crushing acts of inhumanity, some people, sometimes, do act. It is important to bring those actions into our understanding of humanitarianism if we are to generate a sense of what humanitarian action can be, beyond an impoverished list of operating principles and procedures. In this sense, some acts of rescue, such as those undertaken by the “Righteous among the Nations”, come as close as is possible to summarising the possibilities and characteristics of humanitarian action. Yet in much contemporary writing on humanitarianism, figures such as the Righteous simply do not appear. Perhaps they do not fit textbook definitions of humanitarian action, but bringing in such figures to the discussion of humanitarianism can greatly enrich our understanding of the importance of rescue, but also of its limitations. Rescue cannot exhaust our understanding of the acts required by humanitarianism, but it deserves a sustained focus as an indispensable starting point.

The chapter proceeds in four, closely inter-related parts. I begin by discussing different meanings of rescue as they apply to the rescued, which prompt us to examine the conceptions of rescue held by their potential rescuers. In the relationship that emerges between the two, I assess the interplay between motives, intentions and outcomes, which leads on to the question of harm, legitimate means and the use of violence in the service of acts of rescue. The moment of rescue emerges as one of radical inequality and presumption. The implicit recognition of this often leads us to formulate projects of rescue-in-advance. But the question remains of whether the need for ad hoc, reactive rescue, with all its contingencies, can ever be obviated.

I The Objects of Rescue: The Rescued

In certain circumstances, the meaning of rescue, and its place within our understanding of humanitarianism, can appear to be rather clear. In a warzone, a doctor can stem the flow of blood that would otherwise have been fatal to a soldier. At a feeding station, a child can be brought back from the brink of

starvation. Many compromises may have been necessary to get to that point. Wider injustices may well have led to the threat to life, or indeed to the fact that rescue is an option for some but not others. But for those particular people, on that particular day, the meaning of rescue can be clear and visceral: live or die. Though Chapter 2 argued that a conception of humanitarian crisis as merely a certain quantity of bodies on the brink of death can never sufficiently describe what is at stake in the conduct of humanitarian politics, it was conceded that the sense of humanitarian crisis as a threat to bodily survival remains an important practical basis for conceptualising humanitarian action. It follows that we should take seriously the idea that the heart of humanitarian action lies simply in the saving of human bodies.

This characterisation of the object of humanitarian rescue presents serious advantages. We know roughly how many calories a human body needs to survive another day, how much blood a body can lose before it expires, what medicine might cure or manage a fatal disease. This leads to conceptions of life-saving as that which, very simply, keeps human bodies alive, to be assessed and responded through scientific and technical expertise. Hence the highly specialist discussions published, for example, in the journal *Disasters*, and the authority of the voices of technical humanitarian organisations, for instance those with particular medical expertise.⁸ A view is taken about what bodies need to stay alive, and then a discussion is had about how best to enable that. The skills of doctors, nutritionists etc. can then be brought to bear on the problem. As we saw in Chapter 3, the path to matching up a person in need with a person in a position to help them is by no means a simple one. But prior to this problem is a bigger risk to conceptualising humanitarian action solely in terms of bodily life-saving.

The issue here is the way that the terms of rescue can come to determine an individual's humanity, and impose upon her a definition of her own identity so narrow that it becomes a straightjacket. If, to save a human being (or perhaps even a wider project of common humanity), it becomes sufficient to save a human body,

⁸ *Disasters*. Available at <http://www.wiley.com/bw/journal.asp?ref=0361-3666>; accessed on 18 June 2010.

can that not carry the danger of reducing the humanity of the rescued to a set of biological properties, to a kind of “bare life”, to borrow Agamben’s phrase?⁹ At times, one gets the impression that for Agamben and his followers, this leads to the extreme position that a refugee camp cannot in any meaningful way be distinguished from a concentration camp.¹⁰ They are both “sites of hierarchical power”, to borrow Geras’s phrase, and such sites are, for those of a biopolitical bent, the key loci of modernity and of modern social life.¹¹ Against this, we might recall Primo Levi’s admonition against this brand of indiscriminating conflation: “There’s no gas chamber at Fiat”.¹² That is, all sites of hierarchical power do not necessarily imply a slippery slope towards extreme abuse. A more nuanced analysis is in order.

Nevertheless, two important themes for this chapter emerge from this point. The first is that it should remind us that the moment of rescue is necessarily one of radical inequality between rescuer and rescued.¹³ At best this can strain the ability of each to identify with the other.¹⁴ At worst this can indeed lead to us rescuing for the other a very different idea of common humanity from that which we claim for ourselves. But in many respects, the play of this power disparity is much more nuanced. I shall return to this dimension of the problem in subsequent sections. The second theme is that human bodies can never be sufficient descriptions of human beings, at least within the context of humanitarianism,

⁹ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*. See also Nyers, *Rethinking Refugees*, 36-41 and 84-85.

¹⁰ Admittedly, the world’s first concentration camp during the Boer War began life as a “refugee camp”. And we are all too familiar with massacres within the boundaries of refugee camps, or “safe” areas.

¹¹ I should note that Geras is not referring to Agamben. But Geras’ phrase and Levi’s riposte capture the issues perfectly. Geras, *The Contract of Mutual Indifference*, 100.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Mary B. Anderson, “Aid: A Mixed Blessing”, *Development in Practice* 10, no. 3 (2000). At a recent seminar, Rony Brauman also stressed the asymmetry present in any humanitarian gesture between those who give and those who receive, even when equality is foremost in the minds of those acting. Rony Brauman, “1989-2009: What Has Changed?” (“Who are the Humanitarians Now?” Seminar, Humanitarian and Conflict Response Institute, University of Manchester, 24 November 2009).

¹⁴ Mary B. Anderson, “You Save My Life Today, but for What Tomorrow?’ Some Dilemmas of Humanitarian Aid”, in *Hard Choices: Moral Dilemmas in Humanitarian Intervention*, ed. Jonathan Moore (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), 151.

wherein common humanity necessarily asserts itself as weightier than merely common biology.

This is the crux of the matter when it comes to understanding what humanitarianism is rescuing, or saving, the sense that a human being is not just a human body and that, in consequence, we can never arrive at a satisfactory account of humanitarian action if we work only from the perspective of bodily need. It may seem that the rescue of human bodies is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the rescue of a human being. But even that need not necessarily be the case. Certainly the claims of a humanitarian perspective that consistently ignored present bodily suffering would most likely soon ring hollow. But acts of memorialisation of dead individuals or lost communities can quite plausibly be understood as humanitarian acts.¹⁵ This can function both by addressing injustices committed by those who would erase people from history, but also by constructing a narrative that aims to prevent future injustices. For example, the enormous body of literature on the Holocaust does this in several ways: it aims to recover some of the detail and complexity of the human lives that were annihilated, but also to remind us of those acts of courage in the face of inhumanity that led to acts of rescue, or of attempted rescue. For some, as for the Goya of *The Disasters of War*, horror cannot fit into any message of hope. It simply is.¹⁶ But the wishful, indignant call of “never again” is, among other things, an instance of humanitarianism using the process of memorialisation of those rescued and unrescued to obviate the need for future rescue.¹⁷ While it may seem that this idea of memorialisation as rescue is a story about prevention, about rescue-in-advance, there is very much a sense that it is also a last-ditch act of rescue which aims to save something of the humanity of those who were not rescued in the bodily sense.

Dwelling on the intangible meanings of rescue of course takes us close to religious discourses of salvation, which clash somewhat with the idea that

¹⁵ Laqueur, "Mourning, Pity, and the Work of Narrative in the Making Of "Humanity"".

¹⁶ Francisco Goya, *The Disasters of War* (New York: Dover, 1967).

¹⁷ For an interesting analysis of the politics of “never again” see Jacob Schiff, "The Trouble with 'Never Again!': Rereading Levinas for Genocide Prevention and Critical International Theory", *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 36, no. 2 (2008).

humanitarianism always involves a strong conception of the practical and the possible. This dimension will be examined in the next section. But this intangible sense of rescue also speaks to a more practical notion of *témoignage*, which situates testimony squarely in the present, in relation to on-going injustices, and is central to much of the French humanitarian tradition, and especially important to MSF.¹⁸ For José Antonio Bastos: “[even] if it is impossible to help the refugees, we must keep trying, and find the truth of what is happening, and we must speak. Sometimes speaking is the only action that is possible. To not speak is to fail the possibility of humanity.”¹⁹ The implication is simply that, at times, if we cannot rescue the individual lives under threat, we can at least save a “possibility of humanity”.

Even in the case of a single individual, at a single moment in time, humanitarian action as rescue potentially has to negotiate conceptions of humanity across a wide range of contexts, which include humanity as a set of biological properties and humanity as ethical, political and legal identities. For some, these would include less tangible notions of a soul or of unity with a divine being. For others, they might include the ability to care, love, laugh and cry.

Humanity can be understood across all these parameters, understood to be violated across any of these parameters, and rescue of that humanity conceptualised across any of these parameters. The complexity of that which is to be rescued and preserved is inextricably interwoven with the complexity of how we articulate the distinctiveness, value and beauty of humanity. It is likely that attempts to pin it down once and for all will always fail, just as a lepidopterist’s display case must always fail to reveal the most vital characteristic of the butterfly: its mesmeric flight. Among influential recent attempts to grapple with this complexity, we might think of Martha Nussbaum’s list of the central human capabilities, a thoughtful and rich questioning of what constitutes a human life, of what people should be able to do and be to live a life that might be considered fully human, including, for instance the ability to have an emotional and imaginative

¹⁸ On MSF and *témoignage* see D. Robert DeChaine, *Global Humanitarianism: NGOs and the Crafting of Community* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2005), 82-90.

¹⁹ Orbinski, *An Imperfect Offering*, 290.

life.²⁰ But ultimately, as an answer, it proves unsatisfactory, precisely because it takes the form of a list, and such a document is always likely to be more plausible as a political programme to enable more humane lives than as a description of humanity itself.

A list cannot quite ever succeed in capturing the boundless and unpredictable creativity of a Mozart or a Shakespeare. Nussbaum comes closer than most, by trying to capture the potentialities of human life, and taking seriously the things, like love, that really give it meaning. She makes a good case for a human life conceived of according to the central capabilities as being much less nasty, brutish and short than any number of alternatives. But the intangible, by definition, still eludes such an exercise. We are unlikely to place such a list in our time capsules. Had Nussbaum composed her list, on the 9th of May 1927, for instance, it would arguably have to have been understood in a new light on the 10th, when Louis Armstrong recorded "Potato Head Blues".²¹ Are such artefacts not equally, if not more powerful, groundings to take forward?

This complexity is added to by the fact that, when it comes to potential acts of rescue, there may be profound tensions in terms of which elements of a common humanity may be rescued. Some elements may be saved, others sacrificed.²² In contexts of forced migration, for instance, there are genuine and important questions about whether the humanitarian act is to try to save the most bodies or to try to save the context and way of life within which people conceptualised their

²⁰ The list is evolving, but a good account can be found in Martha C. Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 70-86. Her list consists of: life; bodily health; bodily integrity; senses, imagination, and thought; emotions; practical reason; affiliation; relationship with other species; play; control over one's political and material environment.

²¹ This recording features in another famous list of things that make human life worth living, as read by Woody Allen into his dictaphone in *Manhattan* (1979).

²² For an interesting, and related, discussion of sacrifice and triage, see Redfield, "Sacrifice, Triage, and Global Humanitarianism".

own humanity. One may well involve sacrificing the other.²³ Though it may not always be articulated as such, this dilemma can go all the way down into an individual's experience of rescue. Caroline Moorehead's sensitive study of refugees, *Human Cargo*, demonstrates that many refugees who are relocated and attain bodily security, who are thus rescued in quite a concrete way by institutionalised humanitarianism, nevertheless often experience a numbing, irreplaceable loss of all the other elements, beyond their own immediate bodily security, that add up to a human life beyond the mere passing of days.²⁴

This tension is of course primarily experienced by the rescued. But it also characterises some of the sharpest dilemmas of humanitarian action by potential rescuers. Naturally, other considerations beyond the rescue of those in danger, such as political expediency, often condition the actions of potential humanitarian actors. But assuming their good faith (and at times that can be a heroic assumption), there can often be real dilemmas about whether, say, to effectively collaborate in an ethnic cleansing, and the destruction of ways of life, in order to save people in the short term. Variations of this kind of dilemma have been experienced widely within the "humanitarian international", for instance in the creation of "safe areas" in Bosnia in the early 1990s, in the delivery of aid in Hutu-run camps in Zaire in 1994-1996, or in the violation of the principle of *non-refoulement* in disbanding those camps.²⁵ Of course, in facing these dilemmas, humanitarian actors are necessarily imposing their own conceptualisations of rescue, and what it means to be rescued.

²³ This links to the discussion of the relationship between humanitarianism and human rights in the next chapter. For an argument on how humanitarianism can aggravate the issues by dehistoricising and depoliticising refugees, see Liisa H. Malkki, "Speechless Emissaries: Refugees, Humanitarianism, and Dehistoricization", *Cultural Anthropology* 11, no. 3 (1996).

²⁴ Moorehead, *Human Cargo*.

²⁵ Power, *Chasing the Flame*. Terry, *Condemned to Repeat?*

II The Subjects of Rescue: The Rescuers

It is clearly very hard to gain a clear picture of what saving a human being, beyond saving a human body, entails. Bodily survival is obviously vital, but is never likely to be sufficient to make sense of the negotiation of what a common humanity is and entails, which is at the heart of the way humanitarianism, in all its guises, functions. The dilemmas evoked above, wherein humanitarian actors have to choose between which kind of act of rescue will better honour their conception of a common humanity, also make clear the fact that, ultimately, it is their conception of that common humanity which will inform the decision taken. It is therefore their conception that will be saved or lost, along with the human lives at stake.

This relates back to the danger raised at the end of Chapter 2, that in articulating a conception of wounded common humanity in response to the suffering of another, the concerned agent risks defining the other's humanity for her, albeit perhaps for the very "best" of motives. The stakes are raised when it comes to engaging in potential acts of rescue, for the moment of rescue is, almost by definition, one in which one agent holds the other's life in her hands. How she understands and characterises the other's humanity is in her hands as well. While she may want to deny this power, she must also will it. This is well illustrated by Roger Rosenblatt:

If you really knew what drives me - and I imagine drives most of my colleagues when we go to places where people are suffering things that no people ought to suffer - it is the impulse to rescue. The impossible, illogical, entirely emotional, impractical, impolitic impulse to take those children in my arms - and adults in my arms - and save them. If you have ever watched a man or a woman or a child die from starvation, you know the powerlessness of mortality, and you so want to be a god at that moment and to be able to breathe life into a fellow creature.²⁶

²⁶ Again, we see the negative articulation, "suffering things that no people ought to suffer", examined in Chapter 2. Roger Rosenblatt, "Introduction to Rescue: The Paradoxes of Virtue", *Social Research* 62, no. 1 (1995): 6.

This states very clearly something that is arguably a necessary correlate of the desire to engage in humanitarian action and save human lives: the desire to play God (and the relationship between God and his creation cannot be one of equals).

Though merely a figure of speech for Rosenblatt, the character of a quasi-religious, or indeed avowedly religious mission is writ large across the history of humanitarianism. This speaks to perhaps the deepest paradox within modern humanitarianism. It was enabled by the opening up of a particular intellectual space by Humanist and then Enlightenment thinking, largely against the strictures of religious dogma. However, as humanitarianism emerged as a framing for practical action, much of the motivation of those who engaged in humanitarian action remained deeply religious, linked to powerful ethical codes such as Christian charity.

This was very clearly the case during the first modern international humanitarian campaign, the British-based campaign to abolish the Atlantic slave trade.²⁷ The campaign was characterised by Enlightenment discourses of humanity and freedom, visceral reactions to revelations about the cruelty of the practices involved, and strong conceptions of religious mission. Perhaps for some abolitionists, what they aimed to save might have been simply the tortured bodies of the slaves, to be released from bondage to engage in, develop, or rediscover their own projects. But for others, the object of rescue was the freedom of the Enlightenment's universal, perfectible man. Crucially, for many, the key objects of salvation were people's souls. The slaves were to be freed not to become fully human on their own terms, but rather to become fully human in the only acceptable way, as Christians to be saved, if not in this life then in the next. Equally important to many abolitionists, and perhaps the dominant concern in fact, was the salvation of their own souls, the preservation of which became, in their eyes, incompatible with the owning of slaves.

A militant religious drive for salvation was a major factor in the development of institutionalised humanitarianism in the nineteenth century, whether we think of the floods of missionaries to "uncivilised" parts of the world, or, at the domestic

²⁷ See for instance Hochschild, *Bury the Chains*.

level, the creation of organisations like the Salvation Army. The humanitarianism of Gladstone encompassed campaigns to save far-flung Christians, notably in Bulgaria, and nocturnal missions to “rescue” “fallen women”.²⁸ In the same era, the campaigning journalist W.T. Stead linked his sensational reports on atrocities in Bulgaria to his own spiritual self-preservation and avoidance of damnation.²⁹ A happily “fallen” nineteenth century humanitarian, Byron, mocked the naïve tendency of his contemporaries in the London Greek Committee to conceive their putative objects of rescue in a manner equally detached from the lived experience of the actual people at stake.³⁰ “Philhellenes” obsessed with ancient Greece were no doubt dismayed to find an absence of philosophising Classical Greeks to save when they arrived on the shores of a contemporary Greece heavily under Ottoman influence.

To take another different conception of what is being saved, Andrew Carnegie’s “scientific philanthropy” embodied a vision of the human perfectible through the application of modern scientific knowledge.³¹ Perhaps what links the humanitarianism of Gladstone and Byron and Carnegie is the ease with which humanitarianism can become associated with utopian projects and the projection of an idealised humanity. The persistence of this tendency is powerfully critiqued by David Rieff, who sees contemporary humanitarianism as taking on the role of “saving idea”, “central to the Western imagination” because of its persistence as the last “moral fable” left standing.³² For Rieff, “humanitarianism is a hope for a disenchanted time. If it claims to redeem, it does so largely in the limited sense that in a world so disfigured by cruelty and want it intervenes to save a small proportion of those at risk of dying, and to give temporary shelter to a few of the many who so

²⁸ On Gladstone’s nocturnal rescue missions, see Anne Isba, *Gladstone and Women* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2006), 99-121. Roy Jenkins, *Gladstone: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 1997), 100-115. On the Bulgarian episode, see Finnemore, *The Purpose of Intervention*, 62-63. Jenkins, *Gladstone*, 399-414. Richard Shannon, *Gladstone and the Bulgarian Agitation 1876* (Thomas Nelson and Sons: London, 1963).

²⁹ Laqueur, “Mourning, Pity, and the Work of Narrative in the Making Of “Humanity””, 35.

³⁰ Gary J. Bass, *Freedom’s Battle: The Origins of Humanitarian Intervention* (New York: Knopf, 2008), 78.

³¹ Calhoun, “The Imperative to Reduce Suffering”, 79.

³² Rieff, *A Bed for the Night*, 91-93.

desperately need it.”³³ Rieff actually wants to defend the minimal, visceral act of providing “a bed for the night”, that is, a minimal, partial act of rescue. But he is sceptical about the way it also nourishes a “longing for salvation [which] is all but hardwired into Western culture”. When it comes to the bigger picture, it “is a saving idea that, in the end, cannot save but can only alleviate”.³⁴

But Stephen Hopgood’s work suggests that this is unlikely to be satisfactory for many of those engaging in humanitarian action, for they crave a justificatory framework within which to define their moral authority, even when they are not concerned with saving souls, but merely bodies.³⁵ Laura Hammond also notes the tendency of professional humanitarians to elevate their principles “to the level of the secular-sacred”.³⁶ For religious strands of humanitarianism, the framework is clear, as is the redemptive power of acts of rescue. But returning to Rosenblatt’s quote, even the most avowed atheist, confronted with an expiring child, will either yearn for a God-like power to rekindle life, or a God-like, transcendental authority to say that this suffering is wrong. Even if the conception of the human invoked is not a religious one, it goes significantly beyond mere embodiment. While the chosen, practical act of rescue may well be limited to an act of bodily life-saving, with the attendant risks of negotiating with the other only on the basis of “bare life”, the context of that act of rescue can never be limited to the practical act, for it is always embedded in a struggle to articulate and preserve a thicker, more intangible sense of common humanity, albeit one that may be narcissistic and contain its own sources of violence and suffering.

But these excesses need not always be the case, for there is always “a possibility of humanity” connected to that visceral experience of a human life in danger, and therefore a possibility of rescue if the more intangible meanings of humanity at play for the rescuer is in synch with the requirements of the situation.

³³ Ibid., 91-92.

³⁴ Ibid., 86.

³⁵ Hopgood, *Keepers of the Flame*. Hopgood, “Moral Authority, Modernity and the Politics of the Sacred”.

³⁶ Laura Hammond, “The Power of Holding Humanitarianism Hostage and the Myth of Protective Principles”, in *Humanitarianism in Question: Politics, Power, Ethics*, ed. Michael Barnett and Thomas G. Weiss (London: Cornell University Press, 2008), 189.

Moreover, how much does it matter if I think you're saving my body, while you think you're saving your soul? This leads to the question of how to weigh motives, intentions and consequences. But before delving deeper into that discussion, it is worth briefly recalling here the Rescuers of Jews during the Holocaust.

In Chapter 2 I referred to work that suggested that a category of common humanity was particularly psychologically salient for Rescuers, belying the possibility that, once I had identified the shifting meanings of humanitarianism, the category itself would implode. But in engaging in reactions of rescue, the visceral played a part, and also threatened the integrity of the Rescuers' identity, sense of self and humanity. For Otto, "the primitive had certainly a strong part in my motives." He also evoked a fellow rescuer, "a woman who said she was tired of hearing about her spirit, courage, and nobility. 'I did it because of self-respect,' she said, 'a lot of self-respect.'" For Otto: "I like the word self-respect because it is what I said before. It is one of the egotistic components in my motivation. I respect more and feel good about it and this is a very good definition."³⁷

This suggests that humanitarian rescue is always both about saving the other and saving one's sense of self. It is both other-regarding and narcissistic, and the two elements are not really separable. This builds on the analysis presented in the previous chapter. The problem here, of course, is that the risks of failure are not necessarily equivalent. For the rescuer, the risk may be a loss of self-esteem, for the other, death, another facet of the inherent inequality of rescue. This pushes us to explore further how we might plausibly characterise rescue meaningfully, and to ask whether there is any stable basis to assess an act of rescue and say that it is consistent with an account of humanitarianism.

³⁷ Monroe, *The Hand of Compassion*, 97. For a study of religious cultures and acts of rescue, see Pearl M. Oliner, *Saving the Forsaken: Religious Culture and the Rescue of Jews in Nazi Europe* (London: Yale University Press, 2004).

III Motives, Intentions and Consequences

On what basis, if any, can we make qualitative assessments of acts of rescue, in a manner that can honour the meaning of rescue for both rescued and rescuer? Yad Vashem accords the title of “Righteous among the Nations” according to both the acts themselves and the motives behind them.³⁸ The question of motive is of course a key touchstone in contemporary debates on humanitarianism. For many, the absence of a motive entirely consistent with the act of rescue calls into question the validity of that act, whatever the outcome. In fact, three distinct variables are worth considering here: motives, intentions and consequences. For Terry Nardin, an “agent’s intention is what he chooses to do; his motive is the dispositions and desires that explain his choice”.³⁹ Motive relates to our reason for action, intention to how we plan to act. Nardin also notes that motive and intention are often used interchangeably, a problem we will encounter below. When it comes to the carrying out of the act itself, another element comes into play: the means of rescue, which have the potential, for some, to invalidate any or all of those three potential criteria, if deployed inappropriately. This question will be examined in the next section. For now, we will concentrate on the interplay between motives, intentions and consequences, arguing that, for different reasons, all are important, but that they function at different levels of the humanitarian endeavour.

In a provocative recent essay Stephen Hopgood makes a compelling argument that, if the core justification of the practice of humanitarianism is to save

³⁸ Monroe, *The Hand of Compassion*, 287. One of the criteria is that the act not be motivated by desire for money, which presents interesting links to professional humanitarians’ mistrust of money, explored below.

³⁹ Terry Nardin, “Introduction”, in *Humanitarian Intervention, NOMOS XLVII*, ed. Terry Nardin and Melissa S. Williams (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 10. A debate between Fernando Tesón and Terry Nardin in the aftermath of the invasion of Iraq usefully fleshes out these issues. Terry Nardin, “Humanitarian Imperialism”, *Ethics and International Affairs* 19, no. 2 (2005). Fernando R. Tesón, “Ending Tyranny in Iraq”, *Ethics and International Affairs* 19, no. 2 (2005). Fernando R. Tesón, “Of Tyrants and Empires”, *Ethics and International Affairs* 19, no. 2 (2005). For a summary of debates on motives and intentions in the context of humanitarian intervention, see Lang, “Humanitarian Intervention”, 138-141. For a recent treatment of these issues, see James Pattison, *Humanitarian Intervention and the Responsibility to Protect: Who Should Intervene?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 153-180.

lives, a consequentialist logic ultimately imposes itself upon the process of deciding how those lives should be saved.⁴⁰ If it can be done best by a profit-seeking company, then why not? After all, is humanitarianism not always motivated by a variety of different justifications?⁴¹ The piece provokes partly because in raising the question of money and profit, it touches upon an issue with which many professional humanitarians are profoundly uncomfortable. As pointed out in the introduction, the Red Cross principle of voluntariness is rarely mentioned in analytical work, because it is generally not seen to carry as much weight as ideas such as impartiality or neutrality. But arguably it still goes deep into professional humanitarians' sense of self, and suggests that for many, doing the right thing for the right reasons remains crucial (even if they are prey to much doubt about what the right thing might be).

Moreover, for Hopgood, this kind of question fits into his broader analysis of how humanitarianism always oscillates between the sacred and the profane. To focus on effectiveness and what works is to risk forfeiting a grounding sense of transcendental moral authority, which links back to the argument evoked earlier that there is always an intangible element at stake in an act of rescue. Yet the "keepers of the flame", in becoming stern gatekeepers of their practice, risk having little, or no impact in the real world, and is that not a greater danger?⁴² Fine motives, or plausible declared intentions alone can never be enough if they do not lead to meaningful outcomes. James Orbinski also sees it as important that: "[the] moral intention of the humanitarian act must be confronted with its actual

⁴⁰ Hopgood, "Saying "No" To Wal-Mart?" A recent defence of military humanitarian intervention from a consequentialist perspective is Eric A. Heinze, *Waging Humanitarian War: The Ethics, Law, and Politics of Humanitarian Intervention* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009). For a critique, see Henry Radice, "Review of *Waging Humanitarian War: The Ethics, Law, and Politics of Humanitarian Intervention*. By Eric A. Heinze", *International Affairs* 85, no. 5 (2009).

⁴¹ He also emphasised this in his presentation at a recent workshop. Stephen Hopgood, "Killing with Kindness: The Moral Authority of Humanitarian Violence" ("War and the Future of Humanitarianism" BISA Workshop, Royal Holloway, University of London, 19 June 2009).

⁴² Hopgood highlighted humanitarian organisations' reluctance to commission impact studies at a recent talk he gave at the LSE to the staff and research students of the International Relations Department (18 November 2009). See also Hopgood, *Keepers of the Flame*.

result”.⁴³ The challenge of Hopgood’s argument is to ask whether there is any better route to defining humanitarianism than a necessarily vague, but visceral, notion of the “existential act” of saving a life.⁴⁴ His conclusions come close to David Rieff’s: humanitarianism should scale down its ambition and stick to saving some lives and providing some beds for the night.

This intervention goes to the heart of contextualising the notion of rescue within humanitarianism, and consequently of defining the contours of humanitarian action. On its own terms, Hopgood’s argument is difficult to rebut. One possibility, from within the realm of practice, is suggested by Rony Brauman. We might accept the consequentialist logic of varying sources of life-saving relief, such as armies or corporations. But that does not necessarily mean we have to label the action “humanitarian” and to locate it within the sphere of humanitarianism. It can be valuable on moral grounds other than those described as humanitarian.⁴⁵ Brauman’s point makes a lot of sense in terms of trying to pin down operational principles to run a consistent humanitarian practice. There may well be value to a brand identity for humanitarianism based on consistent principles. But ultimately, the distinction between humanitarian relief and relief provided by less consistent actors cannot fully hold beyond the level of practice, if we see humanitarianism as a wider context for the negotiation of a common humanity and attendant requirements of human solidarity. In this negotiation, surely what is crucial is not what professional dedicated humanitarians are willing to do, but precisely what those who are not might be. Humanitarianism is as much about expanding the latter category as the former. Humanitarianism teases out the minimal, as well as rigorous maximalist understandings of our common humanity and what is required to preserve or save it. For instance, part of the role of International Humanitarian

⁴³ “Moral intention” is of course a somewhat ambiguous phrase, and is best read as relating to motive. Orbinski, “Nobel Lecture”.

⁴⁴ In discussion with Hopgood at a number of workshops and conferences during the course of 2009, he emphasised that, though he cannot set out a rigorous philosophical definition of it, some kind of visceral, “existential act” of saving lives has to be at the heart of any notion of humanitarian action.

⁴⁵ Rony Brauman, “Masterclass: A Review of the Last Two Decades of Humanitarian Assistance” (“Who are the Humanitarians Now?” Seminar, Humanitarian and Conflict Response Institute, University of Manchester, 24 November 2009).

Law is to define what one should accord one's enemies out of common humanity. Brauman and Hopgood both share a consequentialist vision of life-saving action, they merely differ on the significance and placement of the boundaries of "humanitarian" action within that.

A consequentialist approach to saving lives can coexist perfectly well with a concern to take intentions seriously, as long as the intentions correspond to the articulation of outcomes, and are not simply collapsed with a deontological account of a "correct" humanitarian motive. In the context of humanitarianism, it is especially important to make a clear distinction between motive and intention, for the way humanitarianism has been described so far in this work is as a context in which different motives can coalesce into a shared intention to act in pursuit of a certain kind of outcome. The common phrase "good intention" is problematic because it often means "correctly-motivated intention". The idea of a single legitimate humanitarian motive for rescue is a category error, which reduces "humanitarian" to a synonym of "altruistic". We can have mixed motives, wildly divergent reasons for engaging in an act of rescue, but share the determination and declared intention to engage in an act of rescue.⁴⁶ One might be interested in the preservation of an immortal soul, the other in a sense of consistency with a political ideology in which the care for others is important, the third feel the need to expunge a previous act of cruelty. It makes more sense to discuss the role of motives within humanitarianism, rather than humanitarian motives as such. It is the political negotiation of different motives that leads to intentions.

At a different level of analysis, motives present the biggest qualification to a purely consequentialist account of acts of rescue within humanitarianism. Within humanitarian practice, a consequentialist logic is ultimately irresistible if the goal of the practice is to maximise life-saving action. But the previous two sections, in discussing the complexities of articulating the meaning of saving a human life, suggest that, if the idea of saving lives, Hopgood's "existential act", is to be assigned

⁴⁶ For example, the Make Poverty History campaign embodies a collective intention, nourished by all kinds of different motives. In fact, at the level of collective actors, it makes sense to identify intentions and consequences, but for motives we need to look to the individual level.

value, we have to turn back to the ways in which such value is generated. The goal of the practice, even if described only as the saving of human lives, is deeply complex in its possible meanings. Moreover, the goal of saving human lives exists in a wider social context, one in which the goal is articulated and defined as valuable. The goal is such a fragile one, its betrayals so frequent, that it becomes vitally important to understand how it can come to be valuable and spur people to act on it. That is, we have to turn back to the reasons why people save other people, and take motives seriously in a more general sense, that is, the kind of study of motivations set out in the previous chapter. So it is not a question of finding some pure humanitarian motive, but rather of drawing together the threads of why a sense of solidarity can emerge sufficient to call for and generate acts of rescue, that is, to coalesce into concrete intentions.

This leads us back to the Rescuers of Jews. If a sense of common humanity makes it important and desirable that Jews be rescued, the rescue of Jews can plausibly become a humanitarian campaign within which not every individual act has to be linked back to a pure “humanitarian motive”. To do so would be unnecessarily demanding, untestable and a misunderstanding of the breadth and complexity of humanitarianism as a category. Yet, to understand the development of the view that it is desirable that Jews be rescued under the auspices of a common humanity, it also seems valuable and important to look at the particular reasons given by those who did exactly that.

Furthermore, when those reasons are examined, they reveal that a search for some kind of purity would be fruitless. For Otto: “I also examined myself whether it wasn't part of showing off, and it was”.⁴⁷ When asked, “did you see your activities with the Resistance as being primarily political or primarily as a result of your humanitarian instincts?”, he responded “Both. Both. Both.”⁴⁸ For Knud, “humanitarian” motivations were inextricably mixed with a strong desire to resist German aggression at all costs, and the desire to protect Jews as fellow Danes.⁴⁹ What is interesting is precisely that the rescuers were very different, “ordinary”

⁴⁷ Monroe, *The Hand of Compassion*, 91.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 95.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 180.

people (or at least people who saw themselves and their actions as ordinary) who engaged in exceptional activity according to a similar pattern. Very different lives and experiences fed into common ways of interpreting and acting on the situation they saw before them. Moreover, very different and complex sets of life choices led to a moment in which they felt they had no choice but to act. Their perceptions of what was at stake were very similar: they all felt the salience of belonging to a common humanity, the resonance this had within their sense of identity, and that the integrity of their sense of self depended on the consistency of their actions with their self-understanding.⁵⁰ So in understanding the rescue of Jews during the Holocaust, we can characterise rescue in a number of different ways, including the practical rescue of Jews (in which a consequentialist logic should be seen as important at an aggregate level, lest we return to the position that the only valid acts of rescue were ones done for impeccable reasons), the saving of the sense of self of those who felt compelled to rescue. Kristen Monroe also points to the acts of rescuers saving the very “possibility of humanity” evoked earlier:

Resistance to genocide is not just an affirmation of universalism in which every human being is entitled to rights and equal treatment by virtue of being born human. It is more than simply seeing the humanity in the Jews, more than seeing the bonds that connect us. It is also a cherishing, a celebration of all the differences - individual and group - that allow for human flourishing, set firmly within the context of universal worth. This is what the rescuers protected for all of us when they resisted genocide, prejudice, and ethnic violence. Their very ordinariness, their very humanness, encourages us to look deep within our own souls and ask if we, too, do not possess this possibility.⁵¹

Within the context of humanitarianism, then, rescue can plausibly entail a consequentialist logic once articulated, but we must look beyond that logic to understand the reasons behind its articulation. Humanitarian action can be invalidated both by a lack of tangible results, and by lack of justification for why those results might be valuable. It cannot, however be assessed at the level of

⁵⁰ Ibid., 237.

⁵¹ Ibid., 265-266.

intention, for that will yield the most impoverished account that explains neither inputs nor outcomes in the politics of humanity.⁵² Yet another important element has been missing from the discussion so far: the potential of humanitarian action to cause harm in a ways that potentially invalidate a plausible categorisation as rescue, either through the act itself, action leading to unintended harmful consequences, or through the use of violent means.

IV The Problem of Causing Harm and the Means of Rescue

The potential of humanitarian action to cause harm is now widely recognised. For example, Mary B. Anderson's work has noted the negative side-effects that humanitarianism can have, such as the way aid can exacerbate conflict, or create dependency.⁵³ In a famous argument, she called for humanitarianism to strive to "do no harm".⁵⁴ But is this remotely possible? The potential to cause harm in and through rescue was surely implicit in the first two sections, indeed in the previous chapters too. The moment of rescue is necessarily a radically contingent and undetermined one, wherein different conceptions of the human are negotiated, but negotiated in a context of fundamental power disparity. This context of inequality, though, is necessary to the possibility of rescue, just as it is in many areas of our social life, such as fire fighting or in an intensive care unit. We might well think that acts of rescue are valuable and tolerate, or even promote, such inequalities. But we must recognise the potential for harm inherent within them. The most obvious instance is where the potential rescued agent does not see themselves in need of rescue at all, and the act of rescue actually becomes the main, unwanted, driver of change in their life.

The possibility of missionary excesses is one that can never be completely overcome, for the moment of rescue is always one of life's "presumptive

⁵² Yet this is the place where many look, often in the process conflating motive and intention through the concept of "good intention".

⁵³ Anderson, "You Save My Life Today, but for What Tomorrow?".

⁵⁴ Anderson, *Do No Harm*.

occasions”, to borrow Michael Walzer’s phrase.⁵⁵ Walzer uses the example, which we will return to at greater length in Chapter 6, of stopping someone committing suicide, even though they might have good reason to do so. We choose to emphasise the overriding value of life, even though we cannot fully know how much worth that value retains for the attempted suicide. The question of how much we need to know about the other, as a stranger or outsider, in order to save them is a vital one for humanitarianism.⁵⁶ But perhaps humanitarianism can never know enough, because it is constantly negotiating the earthly and the intangible, and therefore humanitarian action must always be seen as a presumptive occasion to some extent, with the potential for immense rewards, but also immense harms. How we might summarise and situate our presumptive intuitions in the context of contemporary liberal thought will be returned to in Chapter 6.

But even in cases where a large part of the act of rescue is clearly agreed upon between rescuer and rescued, the act can still cause harm, for instance in limiting, or appearing to limit the rescued’s humanity and possibilities to that particular relationship of bodily rescue. This could be seen to be case in many entrenched refugee situations. The body is nourished and, in some cases free (for only a lucky few), but the humanity is left on life-support. The danger of this is particularly high in the kinds of contexts in which humanitarian acts of rescue are called for, precisely because they are contexts of radical and rapid change, in which a conception of restorative rescue, to a life similar to that which went before, may well be impossible.⁵⁷ In that case, the rescuer faces choices about what new and different life they are enabling or imposing. Even assuming good faith here, these can be impossibly difficult choices, with the potential for causing harm at every step.

⁵⁵ Michael Walzer, *Thick and Thin: Moral Argument at Home and Abroad* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1994), 16.

⁵⁶ It is addressed for instance in the famous debate between Michael Walzer and his critics in *Philosophy & Public Affairs*. See in particular Luban, "The Romance of the Nation-State". Walzer, "The Moral Standing of States".

⁵⁷ Pasic and Weiss provide a good account of the difficulties of restorative rescue. Pasic and Weiss, "The Politics of Rescue".

There is also the question of unintended side-effects. The provision of food aid is notoriously difficult precisely because of the distortions it can impose on local economies and livelihoods, and its ambiguous role in the political economy of conflict. Even more troubling, David Rieff notes that while UN officials can justifiably assert that their humanitarian endeavours have saved many lives across the world, “their presence has also cost lives by raising in people who might have succeeded in fleeing and saving themselves the false confidence that they would be protected.” Rieff refers to those Rwandans bereaved because of just “such a waste of hope.”⁵⁸ Similarly, Alex de Waal with respect to famine, argues that “[the] greatest harm done by the humanitarian international is to create delusion”. For him, this delusion takes on a triple character:

Western governments and donating publics are deluded into believing the fairy tale that their aid can solve profound political problems, when it cannot. The humanitarians deceive themselves about their own importance. Most significantly, local people (“recipients” or “beneficiaries”) are deluded into believing that salvation can come from other than their own actions. Some tangible material benefits (many fewer than are commonly believed) are delivered, but at the cost of sustaining this tremendous, institutionalized delusion. Meanwhile, the real reasons why people survive and conquer famine are obscured.⁵⁹

Rieff’s view is very clearly that “it is impossible to really do no harm”.⁶⁰ This links to Rieff’s sense that it is important to acknowledge that the context of humanitarianism is failure, and therefore thinking that we can step into hell and do no harm must always be entirely illusory.⁶¹ Conceivably, some situations that prompt humanitarian rescue may be very simple cases of help being called for and granted. But the scenarios in which humanitarianism currently functions are rarely that simple. Moreover, if the act of rescue can be understood in a way that is devoid of harm for rescued and rescuer alike, the question remains of what means

⁵⁸ Rieff, *A Bed for the Night*, 13.

⁵⁹ de Waal, *Famine Crimes*, 221.

⁶⁰ Rieff, *A Bed for the Night*, 22.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 304.

are used in the service of rescue, whether these have the potential to cause harm, and whether that provides a definitive criterion for acts of humanitarian rescue.

Among means, the most controversial point must surely be the use or threat of violence.⁶² The problem of violent means has been debated throughout the history of humanitarianism. It is arguably the single most important issue in discussing whether military humanitarian intervention can ever lie within a coherent understanding of what humanitarianism is. The issue here is not whether the ICRC should have a standing army at its disposal. Rather, the key question is whether professional humanitarian organisations' many understandable reasons for separating themselves from the use of violence are also adequate arguments for excluding the use of violence entirely from the wider discussion involved in humanitarianism's politics of humanity.

David Rieff's disenchantment with the notion of humanitarian violence is a particularly interesting case here, for he is equally without illusions as to the purity of the humanitarian endeavour and to the consequences of violence. Having acknowledged the impossibility for humanitarian action of doing no harm, his work, as it has evolved, also makes clear the sense that by allying itself to the use of force, humanitarianism risks undermining its ability to do any good. He criticises the obscuring of the reality of violence by defenders of humanitarian violence. "The image evoked [by figures like Bernard Kouchner] is one of a burly man breaking down a door in a burning building, rather than of an action that even in the best of circumstances is inseparable from the slaughter of innocents."⁶³ Rieff is not a pacifist, and believes that force may be sometimes morally required, but he wishes to separate that moral justification of the use of force from the practice of humanitarianism, which should lose its utopian streak and abandon a sense of itself as a saving idea. As Orbinski puts it: "Humanitarian action exists only to preserve

⁶² Here I mean violence in the visceral sense, not the forms of structural violence that could be read into the "harms" described above. Or indeed in the form examined in Riina Yrjola, "The Invisible Violence of Celebrity Humanitarianism: Soft Images and Hard Words in the Making and Unmaking of Africa", *World Political Science Review* 5, no. 1 (2009).

⁶³ Rieff, *A Bed for the Night*, 216.

life, not to eliminate it".⁶⁴ We might also recall that the Talmudic saying that prefaced this chapter is preceded by the idea that whoever destroys a life, destroys an entire world.⁶⁵

It is not hard to agree with Rieff that "the slaughter of innocents" is wrong, and can never be a "humanitarian act" as such. But the problem is that surely Rieff's intuition that force should be used to stop a genocide (wherever it may occur), and his implication that the slaughter of innocents is always wrong (wherever it may occur) stem from the same discussion, which is a humanitarian discussion about the universal value of human life and the need to defend a common humanity. Though, in practical terms, he ultimately comes down on the same side of the argument as Rieff, Hugo Slim argues that:

The paradox of humanitarian violence should be allowed to raise its head and not simply be shouted down by humanitarian purists and critics of neo-liberal hegemony, for it represents a serious moral problem. The fact that the best way to restrain extreme violence and to protect civilians might be to use violence itself is a moral paradox that needs careful attention, not simple slogans.⁶⁶

It may well not be appropriate to give the symbols of that value, organisations like the ICRC and MSF, guns. But that is not quite the same thing as saying that those with guns, who stop a genocide, however imperfectly, are not part of the same discussion. If humanitarianism becomes the vocabulary through which we describe and understand the worst excesses of cruelty and inhumanity, it cannot exclude *a priori* action that comes into being precisely as a response. Of course, we should always be sceptical of justifications for the use of force. But can we really exclude force once and for all from our understanding of how humanitarianism functions? Is

⁶⁴ Orbinski, "Nobel Lecture".

⁶⁵ The Rescuer Otto also notes this. "On my medal, the Yad Vashem Medal, there is an inscription. It says, 'Whoever saves one life, he has saved the entire humanity.' And I think the inversion of that is also true. Whoever kills one innocent human being, it is as if he has killed the entire world." Monroe, *The Hand of Compassion*, 88.

⁶⁶ Hugo Slim, "Violence and Humanitarianism: Moral Paradox and the Protection of Civilians", *Security Dialogue* 32, no. 3 (2001): 337.

it not possible that violence may always be the worst way to honour our sense of humanity, but on very rare occasions the only way to save or preserve it?

A first point to make here is that humanitarian identity need not be co-terminus with particular agents across all time and all actions engaged in by the relevant agent. Immaculate humanitarian identity is not necessary to engage in humanitarian action or rescue, and it may be inappropriate for some coherent acts of rescue carried out in the name of a common humanity. Arguably the tendency to think that it this is not the case reflects the desire to preserve the moral authority that humanitarian NGOs carry as a result of the more singular character of their agency and voice within international politics. The impulse to rescue looms large in our understanding of what humanitarianism is. But it necessarily coexists with the desire to pre-empt future occasions for suffering, to engage in rescue-in-advance through the elaboration of laws, institutions and practices. An obvious example here is the development of human rights, and this will be examined as a key example in the next chapter on institutionalised humanitarianism. Perhaps when it came to designing a more just system that obviated the need to rescue at all, someone who had spent their life publicly arguing against prejudice on the basis of race or religion would be able to make a more coherent input. Thus we may well require high priests of humanitarianism, to go back to Hopgood's notion of the sacred and the profane. We should not ask these high priests necessarily to get their hands dirty, but merely tolerate within the politics of humanitarianism, the "politics of humanity", some who accept that burden.

This potential burden is complicated in two ways. First, the agents involved in actual humanitarian action are more likely to be collective agents. How to understand that complication of responsibility within the context of humanitarianism will be addressed in Chapter 6. But my argument, while mitigating against a blanket exclusion of violence from humanitarian action, fails to account for an important dimension of the actual use of violence in humanitarian acts of rescue. We might reasonably argue that a reactive killing in defence of an innocent as an act of last resort does not represent a moral crime. But in more likely real-world scenarios faced by collective agents, violence usually involves a strong

possibility of “collateral damage”. As Michael Doyle puts it: “the necessarily ‘dirty hands’ of violent means often become ‘dangerous hands’ in international interventions.”⁶⁷ The presumption of the rescuer is scaled-up, and he is confronted with an irresolvable equation with rescued victims on one side and innocent victims of collateral damage on the other. So some of the violence involved will very likely represent an important moral crime on the very terms of the declared humanitarianism. In his seminal essay on dirty hands, Michael Walzer writes that in the case of a politician who carries out, or orders a moral crime to be carried out:

he committed a moral crime and he accepted a moral burden. Now he is a guilty man. His willingness to acknowledge and bear (and perhaps to repent and do penance for) his guilt is evidence, and it is the only evidence he can offer us, both that he is not too good for politics and that he is good enough. Here is the moral politician: it is by his dirty hands that we know him. If he were a moral man and nothing else, his hands would not be dirty; if he were a politician and nothing else, he would pretend that they were clean.⁶⁸

His concept of the moral politician is particularly interesting in the context of our politics of humanity. It is this kind of actor which might be tentatively situated within humanitarianism (perhaps at the helm of a government or a military force) to engage in acts of rescue. The moral politician is different from the high priest within the “politics of humanity”, but they are both part of the same broad enterprise. There are obvious problems here, such as the danger of state leaders co-opting humanitarians as a “force multiplier”.⁶⁹ But this section’s aim has been merely to suggest that while they should always be approached gingerly, there is at least the possibility that violent means entirely be excluded from humanitarianism, broadly understood, in some instances, to defend the idea of a common humanity and human life, as well as particular human bodies.

⁶⁷ Michael W. Doyle, "A Few Words on Mill, Walzer, and Nonintervention", *Ethics & International Affairs* 23, no. 4 (2009): 354.

⁶⁸ Michael Walzer, "Political Action: The Problem of Dirty Hands", in *Thinking Politically: Essays in Political Theory*, ed. David Miller (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2007), 284.

⁶⁹ de Torrente, "Humanitarian Action under Attack: Reflections on the Iraq War ": 9.

Perhaps more than anything else, the problem of humanitarian violence reminds us of the possibility of tragedy, in the genuine sense of the term, inherent in the humanitarian enterprise: professional humanitarians are frequently in positions where all the options at their disposal involve doing wrong in a morally important way.⁷⁰ De Waal has recently argued that the tragedy of humanitarians is precisely that ultimately they are unable completely to escape the possibility of acting cruelly.⁷¹ That is, they cannot entirely avoid causing precisely the kind of suffering that, as we saw in Chapter 2, lies at the heart of the manner in which humanitarianism comes into being in the first place. This makes a strong case for embracing the role of the “moral politician”, for as Rieff argues: “[the] virtue of the politician is that the case for making the most tragic of all public decisions becomes controversial and a matter for public debate, rather than some kind of categorical moral imperative whose need to be undertaken is deemed to be self-evident.”⁷² The challenge for professional humanitarians then, is how to face up to their moral and political responsibility in such situations, for as we will see in the next chapter, they are not easily avoided or pre-empted.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that it is not possible to resolve the paradoxes of humanitarian action by reducing it to its core act of saving lives. Acts of humanitarian rescue always involve a complex negotiation of what is being saved, which flits between the self and the other, the tangible and the intangible. Yet once again, some definable contours can be identified: rescue is most coherent when outcomes in terms of actual human bodies saved simultaneously honour the integrity of the category of common humanity. Moreover, while the idea of doing no harm must necessarily be aspirational, harmful ends or means must be

⁷⁰ For an argument about why international political theory should take tragedy seriously, see Brown, "Tragedy, 'Tragic Choices' and Contemporary International Political Theory".

⁷¹ de Waal, "The Humanitarians' Tragedy".

⁷² Cited in Smillie and Minear, *The Charity of Nations*, 1.

coherently understandable within the “politics of humanity” being sketched in this work. Rescue comes into focus as one of our moral life’s crucial “presumptive occasions”, without which the meaning of human solidarity would founder. The next chapter will examine the attempts of professional humanitarians to escape the many contingencies of rescue, and to rein in their capacity to cause harm.

5. The Pursuit of a Humanitarianism beyond Contingency: Accountability, Human Rights and Global Justice

This chapter looks at three related attempts, three normative projects, to resolve some of the contingencies of humanitarian action explored in the previous chapters through different kinds of institutionalisation: internal accountability mechanisms, universal human rights and global social justice. These represent three different visions of how the “politics of humanity” should be pinned down. The chapter argues that looking at the institutionalisation of humanitarian impulses, and humanitarian action, inevitably returns us, via the nature of the action that is institutionalised, to the question of the purpose and scope of humanitarianism, of what it can, and should achieve, a problem that evades easy resolution.

Institutionalising humanitarian action has often simply been a matter of readiness, of creating a capacity to respond to crises that will inevitably emerge in order to temper, wherever possible, their inhumanity. The birth of professional humanitarianism was itself the result of a desire to be ready when the next act of rescue was needed, and readiness to rescue is itself a kind of rescue-in-advance, the attempt to make the capacity to rescue less contingent and coincidental. When Dunant composed his *A Memory of Solferino*, it was exactly for this purpose: so that the relief of the next army of battlefield wounded would not be entirely the result of spontaneity or coincidence. This approach is at the heart of the Dunantist tradition of humanitarianism and of the central question he puts to his readers:

Would it not be possible, in time [sic] of peace and quiet, to form relief societies for the purpose of having care given to the wounded in wartime by zealous, devoted and thoroughly qualified volunteers?¹

Writing of Dunant’s efforts in the aftermath of the battle of Solferino, Ignatieff remarks that “[it] is doubtful Dunant saved a single life that weekend”.² His

¹ Dunant, *A Memory of Solferino*.

² Ignatieff, *The Warrior's Honor*, 110.

contribution to humanitarianism is not to be found in the particular acts of rescue that may or may not have taken place that weekend, but rather in his foundational role in creating an institution that would be there to save lives in the future.

But as the provision of life-saving action becomes more institutionalised, something that could potentially be relied upon, it inevitably comes to relate back to more preventive concerns, relating directly to the question posed by Mary Anderson and evoked in the previous chapter: “you save my life today, but for what tomorrow?”³ Or, we might add, “why was I not protected yesterday”. Issues of protection from harm, and protection after rescue, have also frequently been the subject of institutionalisation. This type of impetus towards institutionalisation is far more ambitious. It frequently draws on notions of human perfectibility, that contingency can be escaped in a more profound sense. It suggests that we can learn from and improve the world around us, and that much human suffering is “avoidable” and can, with effective action, be avoided.

Suffering not avoided raises the question of accountability for suffering that has occurred or will occur. In the previous chapter, it was suggested that even the smallest acts of memorialisation or testimony can, in a sense, rescue a conceptual, if not fully realisable in the obtaining circumstances, space for a “possibility of humanity”. The struggle to create mechanisms of accountability represents an amplification of this desire for recognition and justice, and in a sense demonstrates a circular pattern (which can take the form of tautology in some humanitarians’ account of what they are engaged in). The hope is that in creating accountability for suffering, future suffering will be pre-empted, abuses deterred. So though such projects may appear remedial, they are also deeply preventive: they aim to normalise “good” behaviour” that will not result in avoidable suffering.

Since its inception, professional humanitarianism has struggled over which of these purposes should take priority, and over the extent to which the contingencies of rescue can be overcome. But the partial successes humanitarianism has achieved in enshrining them all has paradoxically led to humanitarianism itself being the object of such humanitarian critiques. We saw in

³ Anderson, “You Save My Life Today, but for What Tomorrow?”.

the previous chapter how humanitarian action could cause harm and be deeply unaccountable at the level of specific acts of rescue. Institutionalisation has always amplified and complicated these problems. A fundamental question, such as whether humanitarianism embodies charity or justice, finds itself complicated when humanitarians find themselves committing injustices themselves.

The chapter first considers the pursuit of accountability within the sphere of professional humanitarianism. It then explores whether it can subordinate itself to the project of enshrining universal human rights. The deepest tensions are brought into focus through an examination of the question of humanitarian intervention. Finally, the chapter asks whether justice itself can provide a leitmotif for humanitarian action.

I Accountability and “Humanitarian Rights”

The narrowest sense in which humanitarians have tried to resolve the contingencies of rescue is through the creation of internal accountability mechanisms within the practice of professional humanitarianism. Humanitarians have devoted a lot of energy to holding others to account. But in recent years they have found themselves to be unaccountable in the carrying out of humanitarian action. Accountability thus presents a particularly interesting problem for actors like aid NGOs.⁴ Janice Gross Stein underlines the importance of accountability to the study of humanitarianism, noting that though her “subject is accountability, what is at

⁴ Leif Wenar, "Accountability in International Development Aid", *Ethics & International Affairs* 20, no. 1 (2006): 13. In what follows I will also draw on the debate on accountability relating to the “development” sector, which presents very similar issues for our purposes. This is of course not surprising, as the international development aid sector is clearly an instance of professional humanitarianism on the terms set out in this thesis, and there is a relevant and often cross-cutting literature on the failure of “good intentions”. See for example William Easterley, *The White Man's Burden: Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good* (London: Penguin, 2006). Dambisa Moyo, *Dead Aid: Why Aid Is Not Working and How There Is Another Way for Africa* (London: Allen Lane, 2009). For a forceful critique of a rigid humanitarian/development distinction, especially in the context of the turn towards rights-based approaches, see Hugo Slim, "Dissolving the Difference between Humanitarianism and Development: The Mixing of a Rights-Based Solution", *Development in Practice* 10, no. 3 (2001).

stake is humanitarian ethics, humanitarian practice, and humanitarian identity as they evolve within a changing political dynamic".⁵ Arguably, the crisis of humanitarianism is in large part a crisis of accountability. Indeed, I will argue that the search for accountability must always be one of the grand, yet unresolved, underlying purposes of humanitarianism. Exploring this question reveals the core problem about the source of accountability within humanitarianism: it is "humanity". Yet humanity is not an agent it is easy to be accountable to or for.

The concern with accountability is intimately linked to the recognition of the harm that humanitarian action can cause, as set out in the previous chapter. The account given was in agreement with David Rieff's conclusion that "it is impossible to really do no harm".⁶ The institutionalisation of humanitarian action can exacerbate or prolong this in a number of ways.

Firstly, it was seen in the last chapter that power disparities in the mechanisms of rescue created a problem: on the one hand, to need to be rescued is to need someone with the power to rescue, on the other, that power conditions the content of acts of rescue. Secondly, it can cement inaction. Michael Barnett makes the point that the institutionalisation of humanitarianism has given humanitarian organisations the power to shape social reality. Their power and authority gives them a big role in shaping what we consider relevant emergencies and suffering worthy of consideration.⁷ It therefore impacts substantially on what become "forgotten crises". Thirdly, institutionalisation can merely represent the institutionalisation of emergency, and states of "permanent emergency".⁸ A prime example of this is the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine

⁵ Janice Gross Stein, "Humanitarian Organizations: Accountable - Why, to Whom, for What, and How?" in *Humanitarianism in Question: Politics, Power, Ethics*, ed. Michael Barnett and Thomas G. Weiss (London: Cornell University Press, 2008).

⁶ Rieff, *A Bed for the Night*, 22.

⁷ Michael Barnett, "Humanitarianism as a Scholarly Vocation", in *Humanitarianism in Question: Politics, Power, Ethics*, ed. Michael Barnett and Thomas G. Weiss (London: Cornell University Press, 2008), 256.

⁸ On the concept of "permanent emergency", see Mark Duffield, "Complex Emergencies and the Crisis of Developmentalism", *IDS Bulletin* 25, no. 4 (1994). A useful in-depth study is Mark Duffield and John Prendergast, *Without Troops & Tanks: The Emergency Relief Desk and the Cross Border Operation into Eritrea and Tigray* (Lawrenceville: The Red Sea Press, 1994). See also Edkins, *Whose Hunger?*, 136-139.

Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), which is still, more than half a century later, officially dealing with an “emergency”.⁹ Fourthly, humanitarian action can just be incompetently, corruptly or counterproductively executed. All these represent abuses of power. At the heart of David Kennedy’s critique of humanitarianism is the charge that professional humanitarians have sought power without acknowledging, or accepting responsibility for it.¹⁰ Coupled with the moral authority that professional humanitarians jealously and understandably guard, this can be especially damaging. We are all well aware of the damage that can be wrought by an abuse of power or an act of betrayal by a trusted source of moral authority.¹¹ It is also not coincidental that the rise in concern over unaccountability has taken place during the same period that humanitarian institutions have become more powerful and better funded.

There are a number of possible internal responses to the institutionalisation of humanitarianism’s capacity to cause harm. One is simply to throw up one’s hands and characterise the constant possibility of tragedy inherent in humanitarian action as inevitable, as definitive of its very nature, and of the human condition in general. Another is to redescribe anything harmful as not being “humanitarian”. The most prominent example of this is the tendency among some professional humanitarians to acknowledge the occasional need for military intervention in response to a crisis, but refuse to allow action they see as morally necessary to be included within the ambit of humanitarian action. Or one can place one’s faith in the ability of technical knowledge and solutions to solve every problem. Most radically, one could read harm as evidence that humanitarianism as a concept, and as a project, is really always about subjugating the “other”, and abandon the project. Previous chapters have already implicitly rejected these approaches as an overarching response.

The route professional humanitarians have largely, and plausibly, chosen is to attempt to institutionalise “accountability” as a defining characteristic of

⁹ Calhoun, “The Imperative to Reduce Suffering”, 83.

¹⁰ David Kennedy, *The Dark Sides of Virtue: Reassessing International Humanitarianism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

¹¹ The current crisis over widespread child abuse in the Catholic Church is an obvious example of this.

institutionalised humanitarian action. In many ways this is the most promising approach. Accountability has long been the pursuit of those areas of institutionalised humanitarianism, notably in its legal forms, whose aim is to hold others, those with “bad intentions”, to account for the harm they caused. Widening the net of accountability to include humanitarianism itself, for all its “good intentions”, could be seen as a mature acknowledgement of the flawed and complex nature of an essentially valuable endeavour. Arguably, it represents the real acknowledgement that humanitarianism has become a profession. As with other fields coming to terms with professionalisation, concepts such as “quality” and accountability become important buzzwords.¹² Perhaps they also represent the acknowledgement that their principles and moral authority are no longer an automatic, transcendent source of legitimacy. Laura Hammond notes that there has often been a mismatch between the work professional humanitarians think a clearly-expressed commitment to principles of impartiality, neutrality and independence do, and aid recipients’ perceptions, which are rarely expressed in relation to these. Instead, they make judgements based on humanitarians’ responsiveness to local needs.¹³ It recognises the increasing evidence that even when they are not doing serious harm, humanitarians are frequently not doing much good, and that they need, as we saw in the previous chapter, to take outcomes, the consequences of their actions, seriously. It is also linked to the shift away from seeing victims as helpless and the shift in vocabulary from relief to “assistance”.

So what does accountability mean for humanitarians? In practice, it has resulted in a number of widely, though not universally, endorsed documents and networks: the Red Cross Code of Conduct;¹⁴ The Sphere Project,¹⁵ which resulted in

¹² There is an interesting parallel here with the quality agenda, and benchmarking exercises, in higher education.

¹³ Hammond, "The Power of Holding Humanitarianism Hostage and the Myth of Protective Principles", 193.

¹⁴ IFRC, *The Code of Conduct*.

¹⁵ *The Sphere Project*. Available at <http://www.sphereproject.org/>; accessed on 13 August 2010.

a set of minimum standards and a “Humanitarian Charter”;¹⁶ a self-regulatory body, the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership;¹⁷ ALNAP, an Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action.¹⁸ In conceptual terms, Koenraad Van Brabant, when co-director of the influential Humanitarian Accountability Project (the precursor to the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership), set out the core elements of an accountability system from a humanitarian perspective as follows. It requires: (1) an affected party; (2) an articulation of the rights of the individual or group; (2) duty-bearers responsible for respecting and fulfilling those rights; (3) standards for judgement of performance; (4) autonomous duty holders to monitor the duty-bearers; (5) praise for responsible performance and reprimand or redress for bad performance.¹⁹ Van Brabant went on to contextualise the pursuit of accountability, in the process neatly summarising why accountability should be a major consideration for an international political theory analysis of humanitarianism:

Accountability is an act of justice, and relates to power. At the core of the contemporary debate about accountability are the questions of the social contract between citizens and the State, and inter-State relationships. This debate is not static: the terms in which ‘accountability’ is debated, and who

¹⁶ Sphere Project, *Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response*. A revised version is expected in early 2011. Sphere has garnered a mixed response within the humanitarian sector. See James Darcy, "Locating Responsibility: The Sphere Humanitarian Charter and Its Rationale", *Disasters* 28, no. 2 (2004). Charlotte Dufour et al., "Rights, Standards and Quality in a Complex Humanitarian Space: Is Sphere the Right Tool?" *Disasters* 28, no. 2 (2004). Jacqui Tong, "Questionable Accountability: MSF and Sphere in 2003", *Disasters* 28, no. 2 (2004). Peter Walker and Susan Purdin, "Birthing Sphere", *Disasters* 28, no. 2 (2004).

¹⁷ *Humanitarian Accountability Partnership*. Available at <http://www.hapinternational.org/>; accessed on 17 June 2010.

¹⁸ ALNAP: *Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action*. Available at <http://www.alnap.org/>; accessed on 13 July 2010. Its most recent report is ALNAP, *The State of the Humanitarian System: Assessing Performance and Progress* (London: Overseas Development Institute, 2010). Available at <http://www.alnap.org/pool/files/alnap-sohs-final.pdf>; accessed on 17 June 2010.

¹⁹ Koenraad Van Brabant, "Accountable Humanitarian Action: An Overview of Recent Trends", in *Forum: War and Accountability*, ed. ICRC (Geneva: ICRC, 2002). Available at [http://icrc.org/Web/Eng/siteeng0.nsf/htmlall/p0808/\\$File/ICRC_002_808_FORUM_WAR_A_ND_ACCOUNTABILITY.PDF](http://icrc.org/Web/Eng/siteeng0.nsf/htmlall/p0808/$File/ICRC_002_808_FORUM_WAR_A_ND_ACCOUNTABILITY.PDF); accessed on 17 June 2010.

participates in that debate, evolve historically and can themselves be the object of a political struggle.²⁰

Dorothea Hilhorst echoes this last point, that though these discussions do not often admit to it, they are highly political.²¹ Professional humanitarians have often been the subjects of the political struggle for accountability, and now the problem of harm leads them to place themselves as its objects as well, in a discussion that emphasises rights, justice, and the role of states, and will be unfolded in the course of this and the following chapter.

Van Brabant's criteria are straightforward enough as a description of what accountability means. It may be possible to define accountability within very specific contexts (although real accountability for action remains elusive). But in the broader context of humanitarianism, it is incredibly hard to define who is accountable to whom, and how. Certainly, the practical accountability of humanitarian NGOs is far from fitting the five criteria outlined by Van Brabant. Janice Stein notes that: "[accountability] is by definition relational: one party is accountable to another. Standards are determined in negotiation with another, or imposed by one on another, rather than internally established."²² She presents an even simpler way of capturing accountability, arguing that accountability can be summed up by the questions: "To whom am I accountable? For what? How is my performance monitored or measured? What are the consequences of a failure to meet expectations?"²³

It might be assumed that if the problem is the capacity of humanitarian action to lead to harm and not be held to account, the relationship with those who either benefit from or are harmed by humanitarian action would be determinate. That is, that professional humanitarians would be accountable to recipients of aid for the consequences of humanitarian action. But it is not always as simple as that. In practice, it is often the relationship with donors, rather than recipients of aid,

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Dorothea Hilhorst, "Being Good at Doing Good? Quality and Accountability of Humanitarian NGOs", *Disasters* 26, no. 3 (2002): 197.

²² Stein, "Humanitarian Organizations", 125.

²³ Ibid.

that determines how accountability is actualised.²⁴ In other words, professional humanitarians become accountable to donors for the funds they receive. In many cases, they are the agents to state principals in the delivery of assistance.²⁵ The pursuit of accountability has, to a large extent, merely formalised its dependence on contingent philanthropy, especially the philanthropy of states, rather than rendering the provision of rescue non-contingent, or its exercise accountable. Vaux confirms this: “[the] disadvantage of accountability is that it usually means accountability to those outside, not to the person in need”.²⁶ This problem partly stems from the way that institutionalisation often creates distance between rescuer and rescued and fragments the former into a chain of different actors, precluding the possibility of unidirectional accountability. The picture can be even more complicated, as agreements or contracts with host governments can add a third potential stakeholder to the mix.

The Red Cross Code of Conduct, signed by most of the major humanitarian NGOs suggests that there need not be a problem: “We hold ourselves accountable to both those we seek to assist and those from whom we accept resources”.²⁷ But this formulation presents two revealing problems. Firstly, there is no reason why accountability to both parties should always be possible. They can often pull in different directions. As I argued in Chapter 3, there is no necessary match between what donors want and the needs of recipients. On occasion, these might make utterly incommensurate demands on humanitarian organisations.

Secondly, who is holding humanitarians to account? The Code’s formulation, “We hold ourselves”, goes to the heart of the problem: to a large extent, humanitarian accountability is a voluntary exercise that may condition action in the desired direction but is difficult to punish in the breach.²⁸ In a curious sense, the idea of a code of conduct takes professional humanitarians full circle. Having drawn

²⁴ Wenar, "Accountability in International Development Aid": 16.

²⁵ Stein, "Humanitarian Organizations", 127.

²⁶ Vaux, *The Selfish Altruist*, 68.

²⁷ IFRC, *The Code of Conduct*.

²⁸ Though Wenar argues that such “horizontal” accountability mechanisms, if well-designed can lead to concrete improvements. Wenar, "Accountability in International Development Aid": 17-23.

on concepts and codes such as “warrior’s honour” to embed humanitarian limitations on the brutality of war, they have come to the realisation that their own capacity to do harm, a side-effect of their increasing power, leaves them in the position of needing to define a code to guide themselves, in a similar self-ascribed way.

Donors can hold them to account on their terms by withdrawing funding, host governments can by withdrawing permissions. But those who prompted a concern in the first place are often, by definition, not in a powerful enough position to challenge providers, let alone ensure compliance or punish failures to comply. There is a basic problem here that the likely relative positions of the likely actors simply do not match up to the positions they should occupy in a standard accountability structure, and it is hard to see how they ever truly could, as humanitarian problems tend to arise precisely in (and often as a consequence of) the kinds of situations in which accountability mechanisms of all kinds are profoundly failing, and the positions of the victims and agents of succour are highly unequal.²⁹

That is not to say that humanitarian accountability is necessarily entirely unenforceable, or non-existent. There can be kinds of “surrogate” accountability.³⁰ Donors can, if they choose, call humanitarians to account in the name of the recipients, on the basis of the emerging set of principles of “good humanitarian donorship”, endorsed by most of the major donor governments and UN agencies in Stockholm in 2003.³¹ But the document they signed up to remains a statement of intent, rather than representing a rigorous policing mechanism of any kind.³² It

²⁹ On the problems inequality poses for standard accountability mechanisms to work, see Jennifer Rubenstein, “Accountability in an Unequal World”, *Journal of Politics* 69, no. 3 (2007).

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Good Humanitarian Donorship*. Available at <http://www.goodhumanitariandonorship.org/>; accessed on 13 July 2010.

³² GHD, “Principles and Good Practice of Humanitarian Donorship”, *Good Humanitarian Donorship* (17 June 2003). Available at <http://www.goodhumanitariandonorship.org/background.asp>; accessed on 13 July 2010.

merely formalises “the charity of nations”, to borrow a phrase from Smillie and Minear.³³

The other option is for host governments to hold organisations to account. Indeed, Matthew Winters demonstrates that aid is most effective in countries with robust accountability mechanisms of their own.³⁴ But again, in practice, this is unlikely to happen in the most extreme cases, either because the host government is heavily dependent on resources in question, is failing, or because they simply do not act out of concern for their citizens and have caused the problem in the first place.

There has been a major attempt at improving, integrating and streamlining humanitarian action, epitomised by the “cluster approach”. This UN-led humanitarian reform initiative aims, in the context of complex inter-agency interventions, to ensure sufficient capacity, establish predictable leadership, build inter-agency partnerships, strengthen accountability, and improve coordination and prioritisation in the field.³⁵ But high profile crises, such as the aftermath of the Haiti earthquake, are, despite these efforts, still characterised by a scramble of NGOs desperate to plant the flag. Some will no doubt carry out genuine life-saving action, but there is no real way to oversee this, or for those who lose out on the ground to call them to account.

So while the drive for accountability within humanitarianism may well have raised the quality of the delivery of relief (a similar story could be told in the case of development aid), the fundamental unaccountability of humanitarian action largely remains. Stein is deeply sceptical that these issues will be resolved, arguing that accountability in the humanitarian sector has become “constructed as outcome, framed conceptually as a principal-agent relationship, [...] an exercise in

³³ Smillie and Minear, *The Charity of Nations*.

³⁴ Matthew S. Winters, "Accountability, Participation and Foreign Aid Effectiveness", *International Studies Review* 12, no. 2 (2010).

³⁵ The on-going humanitarian reform programme is detailed at *Humanitarian Reform*. Available at <http://www.humanitarianreform.org/>; accessed on 16 August 2010. Resources relating to the cluster approach are in the process of migrating to *OneResponse*. Available at <http://onerresponse.info/>; accessed on 16 August 2010.

instrumental rationality that will prove to be a project that is largely unachievable".³⁶

The dilemmas that faced aid workers in the refugee camps of Zaire, say, over which kind of harm would be the least bad option, are still present in extreme situations, and still have to be resolved by professional humanitarians themselves, rather than them being constrained to action by an accountability mechanism working on behalf of the neediest. Professional humanitarians have to choose to whom, or to what, they hold themselves accountable.

At such moments, at an individual level, perhaps they feel themselves ultimately accountable to a religious or other moral code, but collectively, as humanitarians, they are returned to being accountable to their guiding principles, most importantly the principle of humanity, and the idea of acting "in the name of humanity". In the last resort, they find themselves to be the only form of accountability the needy can call on. But that rescue of last resort itself represents a moment of radical unaccountability. In effect, this returns professional humanitarians to the paradox of acting in the name of an extremely powerful legitimising idea, supposed to be the ultimate source of accountability, but one that can result in the most profoundly unaccountable, contingent actions, of the kind examined in the previous chapter. Arguably, this is the position of many acts "in the name of humanity". For example, for many, the Nuremberg judges may have represented a last possibility of holding to account, but the judges themselves were unaccountable to anything other than their concept of the requirements of defending the idea of common humanity. Arguably, then, the real challenge for humanitarians is to fully acknowledge this unaccountable moment in any claim made in the name of humanity, as humanity as such is never a capable collective agent.

Alternatively, we could shift the emphasis of what kind of accountability is being sought. Returning to Van Brabant's definition of an accountability mechanism, we could characterise the critique presented above as a failure to really articulate a plausible category of "humanitarian right" and concomitant

³⁶ Stein, "Humanitarian Organizations".

responsibility (though in practice the tendency is to simply refer to the common vernacular of human rights). Though the intention is for aid recipients to become rights-holders, their rights are never stronger than the discretionary charity that underwrites, morally and financially, the structuring of humanitarian action.

Chris Brown writes that “[at] one level of generality, rights are ways to restrain the unfettered power of rulers”.³⁷ But rulers have frequently played on the granting of rights to legitimise their power. Could the attempt to internal accountability be a way of legitimising a power that is actually inappropriate in the context of the problems humanitarianism seeks to resolve? Do “humanitarian rights” perhaps enshrine the rights of humanitarians, rather than create empowered rights holders? Is accountability a way of institutionalising humanitarianism in ongoing crises, disregarding with hubris the limited contribution they can make? For example, famously, Alex de Waal remarked that “relief is generally merely a footnote to the story of how people survive famine”.³⁸ For de Waal, the problem is precisely the notion of humanitarian as ruler, as he sees the institutionalisation of humanitarian power, possibly legitimised through internal accountability mechanisms, as undermining potential local sources of accountability that in the longer term are more realistic and reliable ways of preventing famine. Already in 1994, de Waal, writing with Rakiya Omaar was deeply sceptical of a humanitarian agenda driven by humanitarian relief: “At the end of the day, relief organizations will always make charitable works their priority, which means that human rights concerns will be fudged or jettisoned”.³⁹ Winters argues that affairs can be improved through a greater emphasis on “participation”, another buzzword of the aid industry.⁴⁰ But such efforts still largely seem to fall short of really empowering, or at least giving political voice to the recipients.

³⁷ Brown, *Sovereignty, Rights and Justice*, 116.

³⁸ de Waal, *Famine Crimes*, 1. Also cited in Terry, *Condemned to Repeat?*, 233.

³⁹ Their tentative answer was nevertheless to endorse a solidarity based on human rights, which links into the next section of the argument here. de Waal and Omaar, *Humanitarianism Unbound?*, 36.

⁴⁰ Though he acknowledges that it does not provide a panacea. Winters, "Accountability, Participation and Foreign Aid Effectiveness".

Indeed, if the issue is really about empowering those at the mercy of contingency, there are other options potentially available to us in terms of removing victims from the contingencies of charity, by placing the “humanitarian international” within the auspices of more ambitious political projects, namely universal human rights and global social justice. Perhaps the failure of humanitarian accountability is due to a lack, rather than an excess of ambition?

II Human Rights

More substantial in its attempt to escape contingency, notably the contingency of action ultimately determined by charity, is the putative elision between humanitarianism, and one of the most significant crystallisations of the humanitarian impulse, the attempt to define and protect universal human rights through a comprehensive international regime. Hugo Slim sees the projects examined above, such as Sphere, as indicative of a shift towards a rights-based humanitarianism.⁴¹ But often, as we saw above, though the language of human rights may be used to describe the violations at stake, what is actually at issue is a kind of “humanitarian right”, the scope of which is defined by the practice of humanitarianism. The issue in this section is defining the practice more in terms of the international human rights regime, which is effectively the question that defined the debates on the so-called “new humanitarianism” at the turn of the century: rather than constant palliation, humanitarianism should look to institutionalise a much more preventative mode, and err on the side of a determined protection of human rights, rather than adopting a strictly neutral position. As Bronwyn Leebaw puts it: “[as] humanitarian organizations have struggled to address the limitations of impartial activism, many have looked to human rights as a basis for politicizing their work. The human rights movement is appealing because it offers a framework for critical transformation, yet also claims

⁴¹ Slim, “Not Philanthropy but Rights”.

to remain politically impartial.”⁴² For Fiona Fox, “new humanitarianism demands that all aid be judged on how it contributes to promoting human rights”.⁴³ The biggest test of such an approach has come in the form of debates over the controversial practice of military humanitarian intervention, which will be examined in more depth in the next section. First, I will set out the potential conceptual value-added that human rights offer to the disempowered recipients of aid discussed above. Then I will question two equally implausible practical approaches to the relationship between humanitarianism and human rights: a complete elision, and a firm distinction. Neither succeeds in avoiding the contingencies of humanitarian action, as is further illustrated by the case of military intervention.

Few would disagree with Charles Beitz that “the language of human rights has become the common idiom of social criticism in global politics”.⁴⁴ Chris Brown agrees that “the language of rights has become the way in which humanitarian impulses are expressed in the modern international system”.⁴⁵ Beitz sees this development as a watershed moment in the broader history of international humanitarian action. The relationship between humanitarianism and human rights is an extremely complex one, not least because both ideas defy (in similar ways), simple categorisation. In his recent study of human rights Beitz concludes that:

the idea of a human right is not best understood as a fundamental moral idea in the way that some people conceive of ‘natural’ or ‘fundamental’ rights. Human rights operate at a middle level of practical reasoning, serving to consolidate and bring to bear several kinds of reason for action. Their normative content is to some extent open-ended and their application is frequently contested.⁴⁶

⁴² Leebaw, “The Politics of Impartial Activism: Humanitarianism and Human Rights”: 232.

⁴³ Fiona Fox, “New Humanitarianism: Does It Provide a Moral Banner for the 21st Century?” *Disasters* 25, no. 4 (2001): 278. For a good case study of the “new humanitarianism” in action, see Tanja Schümer, *New Humanitarianism: Britain and Sierra Leone, 1997-2003* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

⁴⁴ Beitz, *The Idea of Human Rights*, xi.

⁴⁵ Brown, *Sovereignty, Rights and Justice*, 133.

⁴⁶ Beitz, *The Idea of Human Rights*, 212.

On this account, then, human rights perform a similar function to the one so far described for humanitarianism as a whole in this thesis, negotiating, summarising and integrating disparate but related concerns. They provide a moral vernacular with which to negotiate claims.⁴⁷ The key potential value-added of human rights over other brands of humanitarianism is the central position of the rights-holder or rights-bearer in any human rights discussion.⁴⁸ There is of course much disagreement over the best way to ground and articulate rights at a fundamental level, as Beitz indicates, but a shared aim is to give the rights-bearer a privileged position: using the language of human rights, they can legitimately, and loudly, voice a demand and identify a violation that, when human rights are working, should entail ethical, political and legal consequences. Now, as Beitz suggests, those may well be contested, but at least it should ensure a status for the object of the violation in the discussion beyond simply that of passive victim. If only at a discursive level, it should provide a modicum of empowerment in advance with regard to the content of the universal human right at stake. There is much debate over whether it is appropriate to conceptualise human rights as entitlements, but at the very least they should be recognised as entitlements to articulate and decry a violation or a right, and a failure of human rights responsibility should remedy prove elusive. The key point is that a right is precisely non-contingent, at least in theory. It creates a voice that should not be silenced.

This potential is now backed up by a substantial international human rights regime. The idea of universal human rights emerged and developed in international political life as a succession of humanitarian projects, as particular crystallisations of humanitarian concern, and as political responses to expanding notions of who counts as human. But perhaps the key moment in the emergence of human rights as a linchpin concept that should sustain an international political regime came in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War.⁴⁹ Revelations about the full horrific extent of Nazi atrocities led to a typically humanitarian negative articulation in response to suffering: “never again”. The UN Charter contained some very

⁴⁷ Michael Ignatieff, *The Rights Revolution* (Toronto: Anansi, 2000).

⁴⁸ This is true whether human rights are seen as foundational or derivative of duties.

⁴⁹ Brown, *Sovereignty, Rights and Justice*, 119.

generalised human rights provisions. By 1948 two key documents emerged, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide.⁵⁰ These were followed by the International Covenants on Civil and Political Rights and Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (both entered into force in 1976), the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination (1969), the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (1981), the Convention against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (1987) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990).⁵¹

By the 1990s, it had thus become possible to articulate the vast majority of the suffering with which professional humanitarians were concerned in terms of the now complex and extensive language of human rights. Firstly, it had very clearly become the dominant vernacular to express international humanitarian concern. Secondly, instead of the perfect, perpetrator-less crime of a “humanitarian crisis”, human rights promised to provide a description of events in terms of specific failures of political responsibility, just as professional humanitarians were becoming disillusioned with constant palliation, and aware of the harm that even an apparently “do no harm” approach could entail, such as Tony Vaux experienced in Sudan where “providing a few sacks of food was virtually the same as providing a Kalashnikov rifle. They could be exchanged for each other within hours of delivery”.⁵² Most importantly, human rights represented the most ambitious attempt to create accountability for suffering in various forms.

For professional humanitarians, the dilemma became one of how to situate themselves in relation to the question of political responsibility with regard to human rights violations: as radically distinct, or, increasingly, as part of the

⁵⁰ On the drafting of the UDHR, see Mary Ann Glendon, *A World Made New: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (New York: Random House, 2001). On the Genocide Convention, see Samantha Power, *'A Problem from Hell': America and the Age of Genocide* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 47-60.

⁵¹ The most comprehensive overview of the international human rights regime is Henry J. Steiner, Philip Alston and Ryan Goodman, eds., *International Human Rights in Context: Law, Politics, Morals*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁵² Vaux, *The Selfish Altruist*, 82.

international human rights regime, with all the questions that raises about what responsibilities are being acquired. With the continued prominence of human “rights talk”, the terms of this dilemma became more and more ambiguous.⁵³ While it is not possible to offer any kind of definitive resolution to the question here, I will set out the considerations on either side of this dilemma, before looking at the issues in a more applied way in the context of military humanitarian intervention.

For many humanitarians, it has become important to preserve a strong conceptual distinction between humanitarianism and human rights, along the lines of humanitarian action being about an apolitical, neutral, impartial provision of relief, and human rights being a politico-legal contract between individuals and their states or, at a stretch, various articulations of that nebulous entity, “the international community”.

To be clear from the outset, there are four clear limits to maintaining an impermeable practical or conceptual distinction between human rights and humanitarianism, all of which have already been discussed in this thesis. The first is simply the sheer power of human rights as a contemporary vocabulary to articulate the unacceptable, along the lines explored in Chapter 2. Though “human wrongs” may, as Ken Booth suggest, be even more powerful agreed framings, rights have worked themselves into the very fabric of the language in which humanitarian concern is expressed.⁵⁴ Yet they retain much of the contingency of humanitarian concern as set out in earlier chapters. As Lynn Hunt puts it:

Human rights are difficult to pin down because their definition, indeed their very existence, depends on emotions as much as on reason. The claim of self-evidence relies ultimately on an emotional appeal; it is convincing if it strikes a chord within each person. Moreover, we are most certain that a human right is at issue when we feel horrified by its violation.⁵⁵

⁵³ The phrase comes from Mary Ann Glendon, *Rights Talk: The Impoverishment of Political Discourse* (New York: Free Press, 1991).

⁵⁴ Ken Booth, "Human Wrongs and International Relations", *International Affairs* 71, no. 1 (1995).

⁵⁵ Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights*, 26.

The second, related point is to recall the historical context. It is important to remember that accounts of universal human rights have largely come about as humanitarian projects. They represent instances where the contingent, discretionary character of a humanitarian ambition, such as eradicating slavery has, on paper at least, been overcome. Yet they remain, to the extent that they are sustained and advocated for by others, humanitarian projects. Even in that temple of human rights, Amnesty International, it seems that rights, stripped of their humanitarian hinterland, are inadequate to describe a sustained commitment to human rights. In his study of Amnesty, Stephen Hopgood notes that in referring to “the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), it did not do so as foundation but as corroboration”.⁵⁶

The third, is that, as the first section made clear, even a limited account of humanitarian action comes up, by virtue of the discretionary nature of a humanitarianism not based on rights, against serious problems of unaccountability that undermine the force of its declared principles.

The fourth is that a clear distinction relies on an unsustainable humanitarian pretence of detachment from politics. This may represent a principled independence from particular political actors, such as states (as will be discussed in the next chapter), but it is not sustainable in the contemporary, highly organised and institutionalised engagement of professional humanitarianism with contexts in which human rights are at issue. This is especially true when emergencies are institutionalised.⁵⁷ For example, UNRWA, technically a humanitarian rather than human rights actor, could never plausibly claim to have nothing to do with the human rights of several generations of Palestinians who have lived in its camps. As de Waal notes:

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,

⁵⁶ Hopgood, *Keepers of the Flame*, 9.

⁵⁷ This also relates back to Van Brabant’s point in the previous section about the importance of the social contract inherent in such relationships.

but as emergencies become prolonged, it is a pretence that becomes harder to uphold.⁵⁸

As such, human rights might appear to represent the best available version of humanitarian politics, one that humanitarians should embrace. However, there are good reasons why professional humanitarians should be wary of defining themselves by working backwards from accounts of universal human rights. Firstly, there are some good practical reasons for this caution, to do with enabling a degree of humanitarian space in difficult contexts: it may well be more expedient to agree that a child is starving, than to agree that the child's human right not to starve has been violated by a particular agent, not least when that agent controls access to the child. This is where David Rieff's "bed for the night" is at its most plausible: buy some time, keep the child alive while other, appropriate agents sort out the politics of the situation. Professional humanitarians should guard against the danger that in trying to do too much, they will end up doing nothing well. Rieff notes that "for all the talk of human rights, the imperative for most NGOs that want to remain operational is to cooperate with murderers and torturers. They have to do so to help the victims, and, quite rightly they hate it".⁵⁹

Furthermore, in grey areas of human rights practice, a clearer account of humanitarianism, not exclusively based on human rights, might be possible. The biggest example of this is of course war, in which humanitarian responsibilities are much more clearly codified in IHL than human rights responsibilities (though these are present, albeit to a lesser extent). A second example is International Refugee Law, which in a sense represents the institutionalised recognition of the past, current and future failures of International Human Rights Law: it comes into play when people lose their "right to have rights", to borrow Arendt's famous phrase.⁶⁰

Another interesting tension is illustrated by the debate over slave redemption among abolitionists. Slave redemption is the practice of buying and then freeing a slave, and is still a point of contention in areas where slavery of

⁵⁸ de Waal, "The Humanitarians' Tragedy": 135.

⁵⁹ Rieff, *A Bed for the Night*, 327.

⁶⁰ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1968).

different kinds persists. A high profile example was given by the *New York Times* journalist Nicholas Kristof in 2004, who purchased and liberated two women enslaved in a Cambodian brothel. In relation to Sudan in the 1990s, Christian groups, including Christian Solidarity International, fundraised to free Christian Dinkas from the South enslaved in the Muslim North. But UNICEF and Human Rights Watch became heavily critical of the practice of slave redemption. Redemption was driving up the price of slaves, creating incentives for slavers to enslave more people.⁶¹ Margaret Kellow shows that these reproduce debates in nineteenth century American abolitionism.⁶²

Moreover, it is perfectly possible to articulate serious humanitarian concerns and projects that are not best served by elision with human rights. For instance, at the heart of human rights practice is the possibility of recognising specific violations, either negative or positive. There needs to be a high degree of specificity about whose rights are the subject of violation, whether they be the rights of an individual or a group, and ideally, whose responsibility is at issue. An important contemporary example of the problem this poses, and the danger of effecting a complete elision, is the current attempt to formalise widespread humanitarian concern with climate change with a specific project of human rights. An increasingly popular way of thinking about the issue is to create some kind of accountability mechanism by assigning a “human right to a green future”.⁶³ This seems like a vastly more abstract and obtuse way of conceptualising a problem that can be captured in broader humanitarian language, relatively simply: that is, that anthropogenic climate change represents, in the terms set out in Chapter 2, a serious humanitarian crisis in the sense of an urgent “crisis of humanity” that radically questions the underpinnings of

⁶¹ Margaret M. R. Kellow, "Hard Struggles of Doubt: Abolitionists and the Problem of Slave Redemption", in *Humanitarianism and Suffering: The Mobilization of Empathy*, ed. Richard Ashby Wilson and Richard D. Brown (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 118-119.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Richard P. Hiskes, *The Human Right to a Green Future: Environmental Rights and Intergenerational Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). For more recent discussion and research, see Stephen Humphreys, ed., *Human Rights and Climate Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

a common humanity. I will return in more detail to this topic in the concluding chapter.

While there is very significant conceptual overlap inherent in the practice of humanitarianism and the practice of human rights, a further caveat should be noted, which in fact relates to the perceived strength of human rights for humanitarians in search of greater accountability. The concerns summarised by humanitarianism are necessarily other-regarding. To express humanitarian concern does not imply pure altruism, as we have seen, and can often productively interact both with our sense of self and our sense of self-interest. However, the object of humanitarian concern is necessarily different from the subject. In contrast, human rights summarise both other-regarding, humanitarian concerns and self-regarding concerns. I cannot conduct a humanitarian campaign on my own behalf, but I can advocate for my own human rights. Indeed, there is a strong argument, which we can find in both John Stuart Mill and Michael Walzer, that the political gains of human rights protection are strongest when they represent the result of concerted struggle. Marie-Bénédicte Dembour has recently characterised this perspective as the “protest” school of thought.⁶⁴

Here we approach the idea that human rights may be most effective when, at least collectively, they become a self-help mechanism. If it is the case, as I have argued, that an important way to understand human rights is as the crystallisation of humanitarian impulses, and therefore as an important humanitarian project, it must nevertheless be recognised that this is by no means the only, nor perhaps the most important source of actually-existing human rights. The other dynamic in play is the process through which people, and peoples, have struggled to take power from the grasp of rulers in the form of rights.⁶⁵ In doing so, they have frequently seized upon the vocabulary of universal human rights to do so. So though universal human rights may represent a language formulated amidst the concern for the

⁶⁴ She makes the following distinction: “‘natural scholars’ conceive of human rights as *given*; ‘deliberative scholars’ as *agreed upon*; ‘protest scholars’ as *fought for*; and ‘discourse scholars’ as *talked about*.” Marie-Bénédicte Dembour, “What Are Human Rights? Four Schools of Thought”, *Human Rights Quarterly* 32, no. 1 (2010): 2. Italics in original.

⁶⁵ Onuf, “Humanitarian Intervention”: 773.

suffering of others, their embodiment in laws and practices owes much to struggles driven by self-help. Moreover, there is no guarantee that human rights can represent a stable summary of self-regarding and other-regarding concerns. There is no necessary reason for them to always pull in the same direction.

While humanitarianism may give voice to a project like human rights, one of its potential hubristic excesses is of seeing itself as the sole vehicle through which it might come into being. The important point here is not to effect an ultimate decoupling of human rights and humanitarianism. Such an endeavour would be vain as they, at least in part, issue from the same source, and share a common history.⁶⁶ Rather it is to recognise the inherent complexity of the idea of “action” within humanitarianism, which can never be reduced to a single set of agents or acts.

This relates to the problem of enforcement, one of the strongest arguments against collapsing humanitarianism and human rights together. As Lynn Hunt pithily puts it, human rights are “easier to endorse than to enforce”.⁶⁷ The international protection of human rights, as we will see with the humanitarian intervention example in the next section, is a highly imperfect science. We might well identify greater success in terms of longer-term normative change, and this goes back to the point that human rights may be most effective when they become integrated into the texture of people’s lives: a local vernacular and not just a kind of moral Esperanto. But humanitarianism, understood more broadly, preserves the possibility of acting in the last resort, where human rights structures fail or are absent. In these cases, it is not clear that we can plausibly create an infinite chain of human rights responsibility. Recent scholarship is finding new and creative ways to conceptualise human rights responsibility for non-state actors.⁶⁸ But states clearly represent the central bearers of human rights responsibility, for good reasons that will be returned to in the next chapter. Furthermore, it is not clear that it is either

⁶⁶ Wilson and Brown, “Introduction”, 5.

⁶⁷ Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights*, 208.

⁶⁸ For a summary of recent thinking, see Steiner, Alston and Goodman, eds., *International Human Rights in Context*, 1385-1432. For an interesting argument relating to transnational corporations, see David Jason Karp, *Human Rights Responsibility and Transnational Corporations: An International Political Theory Analysis*, unpublished doctoral thesis (London: University College London, 2010).

possible or desirable to create a system in which, in response to a human rights violation, another bearer of human rights responsibility can always be found or assigned. Perhaps we need to recognise that, in the last resort, we might have to return to the presumptions of rescue, examined in the previous chapter.

In sum, human rights may be the dominant humanitarian project of our time, but conceptually, humanitarianism must always remain the broader category. On a commonsense level, the statement “humanitarianism is a human rights project” just does not ring true (although, as I suggested in Chapter 1, international political theory often comes close to making just such a claim). The clear upshot here is that human rights cannot resolve the contingencies of humanitarian action, precisely because the latter frequently comes into play where the former ends or fails. These issues will now be explored further in the context of the controversial practice of military humanitarian intervention.

III Humanitarian Intervention: Contingency Laid Bare

The question of military humanitarian intervention builds in a particularly interesting way on the issues raised in the discussion of humanitarian accountability and human rights, while bringing out all of the ambiguities inherent in the idea of rescue. As I noted in Chapter 1, the subject of humanitarian intervention has been examined in great detail by international political theory, as well as in other areas of international relations theory and international legal theory.⁶⁹ I shall not reproduce all these discussions here, as I have already implicitly addressed the central points of debate such as thresholds of suffering (Chapter 2), the relationship between motives, intentions and consequences and the problem of humanitarian violence

⁶⁹ For excellent collections of the literature, see J. L. Holzgrefe and Robert O. Keohane, eds., *Humanitarian Intervention: Ethical, Legal and Political Dilemmas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). Anthony F. Lang, Jr., ed., *Just Intervention* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2003). Terry Nardin and Melissa S. Williams, eds., *Humanitarian Intervention, NOMOS XLVII* (New York: New York University Press, 2006). Jennifer M. Welsh, ed., *Humanitarian Intervention and International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

(both in Chapter 4). Instead, I will consider the practice in the way it illustrates the twin impossibility for professional humanitarians of ring-fencing their practice to exclude the possibility of humanitarian intervention, and of using the language of universal human rights as a means to overcome their own unaccountability, I will then assess the potential of the emergent notion of a “Responsibility to Protect” to do a better job of resolving this tension, before, in the next section, asking, in the context of debates on global justice whether in fact the limited scope of responsibility in question is the problem, as far as resolving the contingencies of humanitarian action is concerned.

David Rieff remarks that “human rights interventions” would be a less misleading term for what we commonly term “humanitarian interventions”.⁷⁰ Though I will continue with the common term “humanitarian intervention”, Rieff reminds us of one of the reasons why humanitarian intervention is controversial within professional humanitarianism: that recent discussions of humanitarian intervention have taken place on the grounds of human rights protection rather than more diffuse conceptions of human suffering. The concept currently functions in relation to the protection of human rights, and substantial sections of professional humanitarianism see their own task differently. As such, humanitarian intervention has been the linchpin of discussions over how far humanitarianism should define itself in terms of human rights, and follow the logic of human rights, should that logic dictate military intervention. Chris Brown makes clear that there can be no beating around the bush. When it comes down to it, “effective humanitarian intervention is an act of power”.⁷¹ As such, the issue goes to the heart of professional humanitarians’ reluctance to see themselves as powerful actors, or to see powerful actors as humanitarian.

Rieff notes that, “[like] most humanitarians I have known, I am not a pacifist”, going on to make the case for military intervention and protectorates in certain extreme cases.⁷² He maintains that “to argue for military intervention on political grounds ... is not the same thing as arguing for military intervention on

⁷⁰ Rieff, *At the Point of a Gun: Democratic Dreams and Armed Intervention* xi.

⁷¹ Brown, *Sovereignty, Rights and Justice*, 153.

⁷² Rieff, *A Bed for the Night*, 329.

humanitarian grounds. For me, that will always be a contradiction in terms. It is a perversion of humanitarianism, which is neutral or it is nothing.”⁷³ As should now be clear, though, this justification is ultimately untenable, as I have demonstrated that “humanitarian grounds” necessarily represent a vision of politics, and the “political grounds” acceptable from a humanitarian perspective will precisely be those that plausibly represent a politics of humanity. Moreover, as we saw in the previous chapter, the use of violent means cannot *a priori* be excluded entirely from the category of humanitarianism, as some potential exclusions might cause us to lose faith with our own sense of humanity. When conflict rages precisely over the content of common humanity, there is no neutral ground for humanitarians

The real issue then becomes one of whether human rights, if they are sometimes, in the breach, justification for military intervention, can be isolated from other humanitarian concerns. That is, do they represent different, legitimate, political grounds, from the political grounds on which professional humanitarians act? Again, it is hard to see how this case can now be maintained, as professional humanitarians want to use the claim that “you can’t stop a genocide with doctors”, as a means to make other political actors face up to their responsibilities.⁷⁴ In making such a call, they effectively become part of the human rights regime, because it is hard to see, in relation to this issue, how the advocacy of an MSF in asserting its moral authority differs qualitatively from that of Amnesty or Human Rights Watch. Any call for political responsibility to take the form of military reaction to human rights abuses necessarily conceptualises it as acceptable (in response to the unacceptable) in a similar way that the action professional humanitarians can offer is acceptable or appropriate. That is, it is acceptable on humanitarian terms, and the potential of humanitarian intervention to honour human rights adds coherence to professional humanitarians’ response to suffering. It addresses the danger of humanitarianism getting into the self-undermining position of having less and less to say, the worse the crime against humanity at

⁷³ Ibid., 330.

⁷⁴ See for instance Orbinski, "Nobel Lecture".

stake, when humanitarianism is precisely the context in which we are supposed to articulate our response to inhumanity.

Christopher Coker reveals interesting assumptions, which are worth brief exploration, about the problem-solving predisposition of humanitarianism and about the timeframe in which humanitarian action following on from that response to inhumanity is expected to take place.

Our humanism also rests not as it did in the past on the redemption of humanity over time (the purported “end of history”). It rests on “real time”. Our age is intensely self-referential. Increasingly we experience events without the need for historical perspective that characterized the past. We are not products of a grand narrative; instead, we have become our own source or object of reflection. Accordingly, our achievements are no longer directed at the future. Few of us are much interested in the opinion of the next generation. Few if any look to posterity for their reward. Instead, we demand immediate recognition. Most of our popular heroes are disinclined to postpone the results of their efforts beyond their own personal existence. Humane wars are likewise predicated on the belief that martyrdom is illegitimate unless freely chosen; that the martyr should no longer be expected to bear witness to the future. The victims of history should be avenged at the time.⁷⁵

This statement about humanism seems particularly true of contemporary humanitarianism, which demands practical responses and resolutions in the here and now, and privileges them over, say, post-facto acts of memorialisation. Common humanity must be defended now, and defence may imply an army. There are good reasons for this, as we have seen, to do with the desire to stop cruelty and suffering. But Coker’s point reveals the magnitude of the task of replacing grand narratives with the grand ambition of redeeming humanity in real time, and suggests that the task, when it comes to humanitarian intervention as a redemptive practice, may be a Sisyphean one.

Once enacted, humanitarian intervention brings home with force the contingency of even a humanitarianism that takes human rights seriously. The paradox to emerge here is that the attempt to establish a humanitarianism based

⁷⁵ Coker, *Humane Warfare*, 19.

on the protection of human rights led to some of the most unaccountable humanitarian action yet. Though professional humanitarians have pursued human rights as a vocabulary both to hold the perpetrators of suffering to account, and to grudgingly accept that in carrying out humanitarian action they might need holding to account themselves as increasingly powerful actors, the ultimate expression of this, humanitarian intervention, is profoundly unaccountable, for reasons that cannot be reduced to the popular claim that it is always merely a front for self-interested power politics.

The first set of problems here are practical. As much as we might like to describe war euphemistically, employing terms like “collateral damage”, immaculate war is as unlikely a concept as the immaculate conception: hands are always dirtied in the process. Judith Shklar reminds us that “war works in favour of the strong and against the interests of the weak”.⁷⁶ The fact that none of the legal institutionalizations of the humanitarian impulse that deal with the conduct of war are strictly part of International Human Rights Law is an indication of the practical tension here: even the neatest, tidiest war is unlikely to fully respect the human rights of those whose lives are radically disrupted, although of course in the contexts in which humanitarian intervention is discussed this might represent an improvement. But however well-intentioned, invading armies are rarely easily held accountable in a battlefield context. There are of course accountability mechanisms in place, both internal to those actors, such as military tribunals, and external, such as war crimes trials. But these are defined not just by the victim (or the victor) but, as Gerry Simpson makes clear, by a complex interaction of different political relationships.⁷⁷

There can also be wider processes of accountability, but they tend to reach upwards, back to the political leadership or political community that has usually asked them to risk their lives. If democratic states are the ones carrying out humanitarian interventions, then at least the military force used will be of paid volunteers rather than conscripts. Here we might recall the ICRC principle of

⁷⁶ Shklar, *The Faces of Injustice*, 100.

⁷⁷ Gerry Simpson, *Law, War and Crime: War Crimes Trials and the Reinvention of International Law* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007).

voluntary service. Indeed, there have been calls for a voluntary UN army, but at the present this seems fanciful to say the least, and in any case would not guard against the kind of abuses that UN peacekeepers have been guilty of.⁷⁸ The best that can currently be hoped for are volunteer soldiers from democratic states, but even in this case, the accountability of a soldier asked to die for his country in the name of humanity is at several removes from the likely victims of excesses he might commit.

This links to the issue of where humanitarian intervention sits in relation to human rights violations, and what it is supposed to deliver: an end to the killing, peace, justice or punishment?⁷⁹ Does humanitarian intervention represent the failure, or success of human rights? Success in the sense of an ability to summon armies, failure because war is the worst way to honour human rights. Arguably humanitarian intervention exists in a liminal space at the edge of human rights protection, where the enforcement of the international human rights regime reaches its end, and yields once again to the contingencies of rescue. Clearly, this is a terrain that only humanitarianism as a concept can fully accommodate, and as such, has to acknowledge the possibility of. If humanitarian intervention is the human rights regime working, then professional humanitarians must find it difficult to detach themselves from seeing that end as desirable. If humanitarian intervention is the human rights regime failing, what else but humanitarianism can provide a vocabulary to articulate a last resort act of rescue in defence of common humanity?

These tensions were well summarised by the Independent International Commission on Kosovo's famous description of the NATO intervention as illegal but legitimate.⁸⁰ This put the intervening states, and those who supported them, including many NGOs, in the position of acting both irresponsibly, and therefore unaccountably, in legal terms, but responsibly in broader humanitarian terms. This

⁷⁸ Carl Kaysen and George Rathjens, "The Case for a Volunteer UN Military Force", *Daedalus* 132, no. 1 (2003). Pattison, *Humanitarian Intervention and the Responsibility to Protect*, 229-236.

⁷⁹ For instance, it may be useful, as Lang suggests, to distinguish between humanitarian and punitive intervention. Anthony F. Lang, Jr., *Punishment, Justice and International Relations: Ethics and Order after the Cold War* (London: Routledge, 2008), 59-65.

⁸⁰ Independent International Commission on Kosovo, *The Kosovo Report*.

cognitive dissonance led to a new attempt at resolution: the Responsibility to Protect (R2P).

R2P, the product of a high-level commission featuring many of the key protagonists of the 1990s debates on humanitarian intervention, linked them to ongoing debates on how to reconceptualise sovereignty to resolve the tension between sovereignty norms and human rights norms, through notions such as Francis Deng's "sovereignty as responsibility".⁸¹ It created a framework in which, for the worst "mass atrocity crimes", there would always be a responsible agent: in the first instance the host state, and if unwilling or unable to fulfil its responsibilities, the wider community of states, led by the UN Security Council. Responsibility here is conceived of across three parameters: preventing, reacting and rebuilding. A watered-down version of R2P was endorsed by the 2005 UN World Summit.

Since then there has been much debate on what R2P represents. In the absence of new international legal obligations, it is at best a doctrine. But a doctrine implies a consistent impact on the shape of international policy-making, which is as yet difficult to detect. Alex Bellamy, who has been providing almost real-time academic comment on the evolution of R2P, recently concluded that as

indeterminacy makes it unlikely that RtoP will act in the near future as a catalyst for international action in response to genocide and mass atrocities, it seems reasonable to argue that the most prudent path is to view the principle as a policy agenda in need of implementation rather than as a "red flag" to galvanize the world into action.⁸²

That is, it provides no shortcut to professional humanitarians in search of reliable, consistent action, and a robust internationalised responsibility for mass atrocity crimes. R2P offers a change, and perhaps a useful one, in vocabulary, but it does not

⁸¹ ICISS, *The Responsibility to Protect: Report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty* (Ottawa: International Development Research Centre, 2001). Available at <http://www.iciss.ca/pdf/Commission-Report.pdf>; accessed on 18 June 2010. A recent account, and defence, by a key protagonist is Gareth Evans, *The Responsibility to Protect: Ending Mass Atrocity Crimes Once and for All* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2008).

⁸² Alex J. Bellamy, "The Responsibility to Protect - Five Years On", *Ethics & International Affairs* 24, no. 2 (2010): 166. For a book-length survey see Alex J. Bellamy, *Responsibility to Protect: The Global Effort to End Mass Atrocities* (Cambridge: Polity, 2009).

alter the fundamental problem that faced those professional humanitarians who denounced the failure of the West to engage with the Rwandan Genocide in 1994: how to generate political will to intervene? Professional humanitarians cannot *a priori* detach themselves from full involvement in this conversation (although some organisations may wish to for operational reasons). We are returned to questions of how to mobilise the humanitarian impulse and how best to situate this effort in contemporary international politics. A plea for an internationalist perspective of humanitarian politics will be the subject of the next chapter.

But before engaging in that discussion, it is worth considering the other big conceptual vocabulary through which humanitarians attempt to avoid contingency and unaccountability: the language of justice.

IV Global Justice and the Recognition of Injustice

A more comprehensive, and ambitious, attempt to address human wrongs, than the mass atrocity crimes at the centre of R2P, are contemporary projects of global justice, which also make the most demanding claims about how common humanity is best protected by a comprehensive global scheme of duties of justice. On this view, the focus on mass atrocity crimes ignores the crushing everyday poverty in which billions live, and should not monopolise humanitarian concern.

As with human rights, the question is whether humanitarianism as a project should embrace the pursuit of justice, as a way of escaping the contingencies of charity. As with human rights, justice is a vocabulary that humanitarians draw upon in making claims about the truth of a situation, and the need to hold those responsible to account.⁸³ Rather than delve too deep into the intricacies of different global justice theories, I would like to situate humanitarianism in relation to the project of fixing global duties of justice to account for unacceptable suffering. As

⁸³ Rony Brauman recently noted the increasing enthusiasm for international retributive justice projects within the NGO community. Brauman, "1989-2009: What Has Changed?" In what follows, however, I will largely focus on projects of global social justice, as these make the biggest claims to deal with the root causes of suffering.

with human rights, we will see that injustice creates a space that demands a broader account of humanitarianism in response to the question: when justice is not done, can nothing be done?

In setting humanitarianism against the work being done in international political theory on justice, and in particular against the global justice projects advocated by cosmopolitan theorists, we come up against an initial conundrum: humanitarianism is often thought of as a cosmopolitan category, yet many cosmopolitan thinkers see humanitarianism as profoundly unsatisfactory, because relying on the contingencies of charity or philanthropy, rather than generating, or serving, an account of justice. So, many accounts begin by contrasting what we owe to each other as a matter of justice, with what we might offer out of charity, compassion or “mere” humanity.⁸⁴ There is an initial contrast between justice and humanitarianism that, on the account given so far of humanitarianism, represents a category error, in the sense that the concern of global justice theorists to formulate principles of justice to do away with unnecessary suffering is in almost every case a humanitarian concern. The starting assumptions, such as that the child drowning in the pond offends our basic humanity, are, in a relatively trivial sense, clearly humanitarian.⁸⁵ Brian Barry relates this assumption to “duties of humanity”.⁸⁶ So too are the moral awakenings that these theorists sometimes describe. For instance, Thomas Pogge links his to finding out about the Holocaust when a child in Germany: “My discovery of the Nazi crimes was the experience that I had misunderstood the world – completely”.⁸⁷ Pogge then describes a process of questioning and rebuilding his moral universe from this negative moment, in a

⁸⁴ I will argue later that the problem is actually seeing humanitarianism as a necessarily cosmopolitan category.

⁸⁵ That the statement seems trivial could be seen as a success of humanitarianism, at least in the sense that the assumption is now easily made for a child of any race, religion etc. Also, it is not always so obvious in an era of child soldiers and when the Rwandan Genocide saw the bodies of children pile up by the thousands.

⁸⁶ Brian Barry, "Humanity and Justice in Global Perspective", in *Global Justice: Seminal Essays*, ed. Thomas Pogge and Darrel Moellendorf (St. Paul: Paragon House, 2008), 180-181.

⁸⁷ Thomas Pogge, *Politics as Usual: What Lies Behind the Pro-Poor Rhetoric* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), 1.

similar manner to those explored in Chapter 2 in the context of “crises of humanity”.

But putting this aside, the key point here is the distinction between charity and justice, which is often identified by humanitarians and cosmopolitans alike as a crucial distinction. For instance, David Forsythe quotes Jean Pictet: "One cannot at the same time serve justice and charity. It is necessary to choose. The Red Cross, for a long time, has chosen charity."⁸⁸ Should professional humanitarians choose the best global justice theory going and devote all their energies to bringing it about? For a number of reasons, I argue that the distinction between charity and justice presents us with a false choice.

Firstly, as I argued in Chapter 3, the discretionary, partial choices we make can be vitally important in generating more humane visions of justice. Until it is institutionalised as non-discretionary, action is necessarily discretionary. Those who act on a discretionary basis frequently feel bound by a sense of justice, and of the just way to act, in the absence of an institutionally perfect world. Even Peter Singer has to give “to charity” to make his material impact on the world, as indeed he does, in impressive amounts.⁸⁹ Of course, Singer does not accept the discretionary nature of the obligation he is acting upon. But would he then require an act of charity, defined as opposed to an act of justice, to be one that was understood at an individual level as entirely discretionary? As a strict consequentialist, that would place him in a rather curious position of caring about precise motivations.

But behind this all there is also once again the sense that starting from an impartial perspective with a concern for humanity at its heart, will yield a better account of justice. This may be true to some extent at any given point in time, but it

⁸⁸ David P. Forsythe, *The Humanitarians: The International Committee of the Red Cross* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 196.

⁸⁹ According to Singer’s own website, he currently gives about 25% of his earnings to NGOs, most of which goes to Oxfam. Peter Singer, "FAQ", *Peter Singer*. Available at <http://www.princeton.edu/~psinger/faq.html>; accessed on 16 August 2010. His most recent statement on why we should follow this example is Peter Singer, *The Life You Can Save: Acting Now to End World Poverty* (New York: Random House, 2009). This book has also inspired a campaign, which claims to have mobilised over \$11 million dollars in pledges between February 2009 and August 2010. See *The Life You Can Save*. Available at <http://www.thelifeyoucansave.com/>; accessed on 16 August 2010.

neglects the historical process through which the abstract, impartial human at the centre of the theory is formed. If we now have theories of global justice that can make a good case for improving the life chances of women, that is in large part because of the struggle of feminists. Few today would want to live under nineteenth century conditions of social justice. The fact that such projects are no longer on the table is not just through the refinement of our obligations of justice, but because discretionary action has built up a broader sense of the demands of human solidarity.

The key point here, though, comes with the critique made recently by Amartya Sen, drawing on social choice theory, of the dominant Rawlsian mode of theorising justice, what he calls the transcendental approach. For Sen,

Even if we think of transcendence not in the gradeless terms of 'right' social arrangements, but in the graded terms of the 'best' social arrangements, the identification of the best does not, in itself, tell us much about the full grading, such as how to compare two non-best alternatives, nor does it specify a unique ranking with respect to which the best stands at the pinnacle; indeed, the same best may go with a great many different rankings at the same pinnacle.⁹⁰

This has radical implications for justice, especially in so far as it applies to thinking about humanitarian action, which by definition takes place under less than ideal conditions. Sen goes further, arguing that we neither need the best to rank non-best alternatives, nor do our rankings yield a "best". What is central, for Sen, as a starting point, is the "identification of redressable injustice".⁹¹ He considers "that we can have a strong sense of injustice on many different grounds, and yet not agree on one particular ground as being *the* dominant reason for diagnosis of injustice".⁹²

When Condorcet and Smith argued that the abolition of slavery would make the world far less unjust, they were asserting the possibility of ranking the world with and without slavery, in favour of the latter, that is, showing the

⁹⁰ Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, 100-101.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, vii.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 2.

superiority – and greater justice – of a world without slavery. In asserting such a conclusion they were not also making the further claim that all the alternatives that can be generated by variations of institutions and policies can be fully ranked against each other. Slavery as an institution can be assessed without evaluating – with the same definitiveness – all the other institutional choices the world faces. We do not live in an ‘all or nothing world’.⁹³

Judith Shklar, in her *The Faces of Injustice*, makes a strong case for bringing injustice into focus as a central consideration in political theory, and it is her description of “a sense of injustice” that will bring the issues so far explored in this chapter into focus, and provide a bridge to the more normative turn of the final chapters.

For Shklar, injustice, which she contrasts (although she argues that the distinction is slippery) with misfortune, is consistently neglected in discussions of justice. She uses the example of John Stuart Mill, but her point would hold for most theories of justice mentioned above. She argues that theorists such as Mill generally begin with the intuition that justice can best be defined by its opposite, and then briefly sketch an account of injustice. In Mill’s case, the concern is with injustices such as violating laws, breaking promises, rejecting valid claims or punishing crimes.⁹⁴ Shklar suggests that such sketches merely represent a negative image of the theory of justice at issue, that the real concern is “to show why justice is binding upon us and why it is the first of the social virtues”. Her view is that “injustice should not be treated intellectually as a hasty preliminary to the analysis of justice”.⁹⁵

This kind of beginning is recognisable in the writing of global social justice theorists. For instance, it is frequently employed by Thomas Pogge. To take one example, he introduces a major symposium on his work with the following paragraph:

Despite a high and growing global average income, billions of human beings are still condemned to life-long severe poverty, with all its attendant evils of low life expectancy, social exclusion, ill health, illiteracy, dependency, and

⁹³ Ibid., 398.

⁹⁴ Shklar, *The Faces of Injustice*, 18-19.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 19.

effective enslavement. The annual death toll from poverty-related causes is around 18 million, or one-third of all human deaths, which adds up to approximately 270 million deaths since the end of the Cold War.⁹⁶

Arguably, Pogge goes to far greater lengths in his work than most to take injustice seriously, in the sense that he always takes pains to demonstrate that such appalling states of affairs represent the perpetuation of ongoing, active injustices, rather than unredressable misfortunes. He then sets out his grand project of institutional reform.⁹⁷

But his project is still characterised by the view that injustice is best conceived of as opposed to a “best” vision of justice to work towards. Again, he is more careful than most to suggest workable proposals to move towards that ideal, and grounds his account on empirical data. But arguably this approach falls prey to the critiques of both Sen and Shklar.

In the first place, by designating a “best” and the route towards it, his account depends entirely on an empirical story that may not prove to be robust. Indeed, it is arguably undermined by the work of development economists like Paul Collier who characterise the causes of extreme poverty in a more complex and plural way than Pogge’s grand narrative allows.⁹⁸ Pogge’s transcendental institutionalism does not really allow him the space to gather Sen’s “strong sense of injustice on many different grounds”, and build from that through a comparative process of public reasoning. Pogge does give us several grounds for injustice, but they all point in the same direction, towards a possible resolution through the development of cosmopolitan duties of justice, and continued inhumanity in their absence.

In fact, as Thomas Nagel points out in response to Pogge’s case in *World Poverty and Human Rights*: “[the] facts are so grim that justice may be a side issue. Whatever view one takes of the applicability or inapplicability of standards of justice

⁹⁶ Thomas Pogge, “World Poverty and Human Rights”, *Ethics & International Affairs* 19, no. 1 (2005). A similar list can be found in the book that prompted the symposium Pogge, *World Poverty and Human Rights*, 2. See also Onora O’Neill, *Faces of Hunger: An Essay on Poverty, Justice and Development* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1986), 1.

⁹⁷ See in particular Pogge, *World Poverty and Human Rights*.

⁹⁸ Collier, *The Bottom Billion*.

to such a situation, it is clearly a disaster from a more broadly humanitarian point of view.”⁹⁹ Nagel brings the question back to the issue of empathy discussed earlier in this thesis. “The normative force of the most basic human rights against violence, enslavement, and coercion, and of the most basic humanitarian duties of rescue from immediate danger, depends only on our capacity to put ourselves in other people’s shoes.”¹⁰⁰ The extent of disagreement over what constitutes justice between global justice theorists and their liberal critics has largely hidden the broader humanitarian concern they all share, and a broad extent of agreement on basic, visceral injustices. It would be absurd to minimise the force of the humanitarian vision underpinning Rawls’ work, say. For instance it is easy to neglect how transformative his duty of assistance to burdened societies would be if fully implemented, and interesting to note that it actually proves a rather better fit with the kind of empirical work done by scholars like Collier and, especially, Sen on whose work Rawls in fact draws in his account.¹⁰¹ Richard Shapcott also makes the point that Rawlsian cosmopolitans display a tendency to reduce “all questions of ethics to those of justice”.¹⁰²

Shklar’s injunction to take injustice seriously adds another dimension to the question, in that it recognises that justice and a sense of injustice do not quite sit in opposition to each other. For instance, a sense of injustice might conceivably be sated by revenge, which could not plausibly be accommodated within a conception of justice.¹⁰³ Moreover, Shklar gives the example of the case of *Bardell v. Pickwick* in *The Pickwick Papers* to show how a misunderstanding between Mr. Pickwick and Mrs. Bardell leads to two conflicting, yet fully understandable senses of injustice. Any full resolution would require knowledge only accessible to the reader (or to a God, presumably).¹⁰⁴ A focus on injustice demands that we give voice to the

⁹⁹ Thomas Nagel, "The Problem of Global Justice", *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 33, no. 2 (2005): 118.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*: 131.

¹⁰¹ John Rawls, *The Law of Peoples* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 105-113.

¹⁰² Shapcott, *International Ethics*, 227.

¹⁰³ Shklar, *The Faces of Injustice*, 84. This adds an interesting gloss to the discussion of humanitarian intervention above. Should humanitarian intervention perhaps be characterised as an avenging practice, rather than an act of justice?

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 9-14.

aggrieved party. As such it is victim-centred. But it assumes no harmony of grievances among them. This is a particularly important point for humanitarianism, which deals with situations in which conflicts of genuine injustices are extremely likely.

Thus we cannot be confident that a vision of justice represents any kind of definitive resolution of injustice. With regard to legislative processes, Shklar writes that: “Every social change, every new law, every forced alteration of public rules is unjust to someone. The more drastic and sudden the change, the greater the grievances.”¹⁰⁵ This links back to the point made earlier, that few of us would like to live under the blindfolded impartiality of a 19th century conception of social justice. In an interesting aside, Shklar notes that the figure of Justice in Giotto’s magnificent frescoes in the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua, is not yet blindfolded, as would later become the representational convention.¹⁰⁶ We have already seen how impartiality does not truly capture how humanitarians mobilise concern. But need that mean they play no role in the formulation of how we understand justice?

In Chapter 3 I mentioned the view expressed by Luc Boltanski that a “politics of pity” should be replaced by a “politics of justice”. The work presented since suggests that the excesses of humanitarian action can often be traced back to an exclusive reliance on pity, or a total belief in justice. Rather than describe the scope of humanitarianism with reference to one or other theory of justice or rights, or rely on the sometimes degrading experience of pity, I propose that at its best, it might be properly described as a politics of injustice. For Shklar, “the sense of injustice is eminently political”, and injustice seems like a promising way to capture the politicisation involved in the humanitarian rejection of cruelty and inhumanity, and attempts to mobilise empathy and concern in response.¹⁰⁷ We should not essentialise the role of injustice and obsessively try to identify an injustice on every occasion, for suffering worthy of humanitarian concern may result from misfortune. But we should merely recognise its importance in nourishing humanitarianism and in shaping our understanding of common humanity, and prompting us to listen to

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 120.

¹⁰⁶ She draws here on Erwin Panofsky’s work in iconology. Ibid., 104.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 83.

the voice of the victim of injustice, rather than assume that our model of justice will fit. In acting in defence of common humanity, it remains possible that satisfactory acts of justice will be within our reach, or that pity will turn out to be our only resource, but seeking to enable an empathetic sense of injustice seems a more workable way to make sense of and act through the contingencies of humanitarian action.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that we cannot find a resolution to the contingencies of humanitarian action, notably its unaccountability, in either human rights or global justice, but it has provided us with a useful way to account for our visceral sense of the unacceptable and the inhuman in a shared sense of injustice, as suggested by Judith Shklar, and in Amartya Sen's useful shift from seeking transcendental resolution to problems of injustice, and looking for practical ways of making the world less unjust. A definitive sense of accountability remains elusive, largely because humanitarianism encompasses actions of last resort, and the moment of last resort is by definition an unaccountable one. But, as Stein argues accountability "works best when it is used as an opportunity to widen the conversation about the politics, power, and ethics that define humanitarian space".¹⁰⁸ This prompts us to a serious engagement with the political context in which humanitarianism exists, the distinctive space it sees itself as occupying, and to suggest a way forward for articulating human solidarity as the continued development of a shared human identity. Such is the topic of the next chapter.

¹⁰⁸ Stein, "Humanitarian Organizations", 142.

6. Humanitarian Identity and Internationalist Solidarity: Conducting the “Politics of Humanity” in a World of States

At its most plausible, humanitarianism has always been more than a vapid plea for the world to become a nicer place. It is about practical engagement and a visceral response to injustice in a messy world. Yet professional humanitarians still try to ring-fence a separate, individuated sphere for themselves to act in, often through the concept of “humanitarian space”. Especially important to them is preserving independence from states. But the possibility of such a distinction seems dubious, especially in the context of contemporary professional humanitarianism. Craig Calhoun argues that “at the same time that humanitarian assistance has become an industry, it remains centrally a state project”.¹ Barnett and Snyder concur. “States have become central players in humanitarian action over the last twenty years.”²

Moreover, returning to the question of the scope of humanitarianism, it is by now clear that the “politics of humanity” characteristic of humanitarianism is always a kind of progressive politics. It is about the envisioning of a better world through the provision of solidarity. It represents a will towards that world, a gesture of creation. The humanitarian impulse, explored in Chapter 3, provides a good description of the intuition that underpins a broadly conceived progressive international politics of humanitarianism. Yet an understanding of the mechanisms of humanitarian solidarity alone cannot provide us with a full description of such a politics. We need to carve out a space in international political theory to contextualise that humanitarian concern. This chapter will suggest a broad theoretical context which might be useful in elaborating a clearer picture of how to operationalise more systematically our humanitarian solidarities. Furthermore, going back to the concerns expressed in the introduction regarding the rejection by

¹ Calhoun, “The Imperative to Reduce Suffering”, 89.

² Michael Barnett and Jack Snyder, “The Grand Strategies of Humanitarianism”, in *Humanitarianism in Question: Politics, Power, Ethics*, ed. Michael Barnett and Thomas G. Weiss (London: Cornell University Press, 2008), 156.

many professional humanitarians of the state, this chapter will seek to defend a vision of a progressive humanitarian politics in a world of states. That is, a world that resembles our own, and might be harnessed in the short rather than longer term to alleviate suffering. The suggested avenue for enquiry is an engagement with the internationalist tradition. This has recently been pointed to by Peter Lawler, who recommends a return to what he terms “classical” internationalism in asserting the potential of a “good state” against dominant cosmopolitan trends in international political theory.³ This chapter’s core argument is that internationalist thinking provides insight into how our solidarities are often layered in a way favourable to the nesting of the humanitarian impulse within a humanitarian internationalist politics.

The chapter proceeds in three parts. First, it debunks the last remaining potential claim of professional humanitarians to be apolitical, that is in the context of their relationship with the state, through an engagement with the key concept of humanitarian space. Second, it sets out the advantages of an internationalist perspective, defending the agency of states within humanitarianism, their ability to harness collective humanitarian understandings, and their advantages in being closer to the lived experience both of putative humanitarians and their putative objects of concern, than a strictly cosmopolitan perspective. Finally, it illustrates this case for a return to internationalist thinking via an engagement with the work of Michael Walzer, arguing that his work provides a good example of how humanitarian impulses can be situated within a realistic “phenomenology of the moral life” that sits comfortably with the workings of the humanitarian impulse explored in Chapter 3.

³ Peter Lawler, "The Good State: In Praise of 'Classical' Internationalism", *Review of International Studies* 31, no. 3 (2005).

I Humanitarian Identity and Independence: Humanitarian Space and the State

The chapters so far have argued that however we examine the ethical character of humanitarianism, we are always necessarily drawn back towards politics. Even the simplest act of rescue involves a complex, contingent and often highly presumptuous negotiation of different conceptions of suffering, humanitarian concern and appropriate action. This was seen to be ultimately a strength rather than a weakness in defining any conception of humanitarianism, as it fits rather well some of the fuzzy, less certain spaces within our international ethico-political space. Different crystallisations of the humanitarian impulse can represent different versions of humanitarian politics. Yet as we turn to the question of collective agency within humanitarianism, we are faced with the problem that, even among the sections of humanitarianism that are generally recognised to be more “political”, the label is still seen as a charge to be denied. Why is this move being made and what does it tell us? The argument here is that it is a device for distancing humanitarianism from the state, which obscures the different possibilities inherent in that relationship.⁴ To bring this out, let us return briefly to the same text examined at the beginning of Chapter 2, James Orbinski’s Nobel Lecture.

Humanitarianism occurs where the political has failed or is in crisis. We act not to assume political responsibility, but firstly to relieve the inhuman suffering of failure. The act must be free of political influence, and the political must recognize its responsibility to ensure that the humanitarian can exist. Humanitarian action requires a framework in which to act.⁵

Several key tropes can be detected here: the idea that an apolitical response to political failures is possible, the possibility of detachment from “political influence,” the requirement for a humanitarian space existing outside of politics, yet

⁴ Edkins makes a similar point in her review of Rieff’s *A Bed for the Night*. Edkins, “Humanitarianism, Humanity, Human”: 255.

⁵ Orbinski, “Nobel Lecture”.

guaranteed and maintained by politics. This begs the question of what Orbinski is really declaring independence from.

We affirm the independence of the humanitarian from the political, but this is not to polarize the “good” NGO against “bad” governments, or the “virtue” of civil society against the “vice” of political power. Such a polemic is false and dangerous. As with slavery and welfare rights, history has shown that humanitarian preoccupations born in civil society have gained influence until they reach the political agenda. But these convergences should not mask the distinctions that exist between the political and the humanitarian. Humanitarian action takes place in the short term, for limited groups and for limited objectives. This is at the same time both its strength and its limitation. The political can only be conceived in the long term, which itself is the movement of societies. Humanitarian action is by definition universal, or it is not. Humanitarian responsibility has no frontiers. Wherever in the world there is manifest distress, the humanitarian by vocation must respond. By contrast, the political knows borders, and where crisis occurs, political response will vary because historical relations, balance of power, and the interests of one or the other must be considered.⁶

This paragraph demonstrates clearly that in fact, Orbinski is equating politics with domestic and international state politics, and conceptualising civil society in opposition not just to the state, but to politics in general. This is a carefully crafted text, so why this equation? Perhaps the key lies in the requirement for unity and universality as preconditions for humanitarian action. An acknowledgement of the political dimension of humanitarianism would open the door for possible contestations of the universality of their conception of humanity, something that humanitarians in general are loath to accept. They still want to assert, rather than argue for, their vision of humanity, for they recognise that a privileged access to human identity lies at the heart of the power of humanitarian identity. This relates back to de Waal’s observation, encountered in the previous chapter, that a moment of “pure humanity” may be a “necessary fiction” of humanitarian action.⁷ So in displacing politics onto the state, Orbinski is attempting to ring-fence his account of a universal humanity. Yet this only makes sense if this kind of discourse has its

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ de Waal, "The Humanitarians' Tragedy": 135.

intended effect, of guaranteeing the humanitarian space it seeks. Arguably the door has long been opened. The horse has bolted. As we saw in Chapter 2, professional humanitarians frequently function in spaces and contexts in which no such guarantee is available. Indeed, in moments of “crisis of humanity”, it is the contestation of their putatively universal notion of humanity that precisely lies at the heart of the suffering with which they are engaged.

The key question then becomes: do humanitarians nevertheless still want to identify and ring-fence a distinct humanitarian space, which arguably involves collaboration with states anyway, as we will see, or to make all international political space more humanitarian? And if so, how best to conceptualise the politics of achieving that latter goal?

Humanitarian space is a vital trope in recent humanitarian discourse, and provides a useful focus for further elaboration of the themes outlined above. It serves to describe and ring-fence humanitarian action within an international context. For Hopgood, humanitarian identity is intimately intertwined with the concept, in the sense that “legitimacy comes from the idea of a humanitarian space bordered by neutrality, impartiality, and independence”.⁸ It can evoke many different types of space, rhetorical, physical, legal, political, ethical or functional. If we cannot define it outside of or against politics, we can still examine its distinctive elements within.

In a recent study of state fragility, the question was posed “of whether humanitarian space means primarily the space for humanitarian agencies to operate safely and effectively on the ground, or whether it relates to a wider social, political or geographical space within which human welfare is preserved and promoted”.⁹ The ICRC’s Johanna Grombach Wagner attributes the phrase “humanitarian space” itself to Rony Brauman, who defined it as “a space of freedom in which we are free to evaluate needs, free to monitor the distribution

⁸ Hopgood, “Saying “No” To Wal-Mart?” 119.

⁹ Sarah Collinson, Samir Elhawary and Robert Muggah, *States of Fragility: Stabilisation and Its Implications for Humanitarian Action*, HPG Working Paper (London: ODI, 2010), 14. Available at <http://www.odi.org.uk/resources/download/4881.pdf>; accessed on 17 June 2010.

and use of relief goods, and free to have a dialogue with the people”.¹⁰ OCHA, more narrowly, views it as a synonym of “humanitarian operating environment”.¹¹ Brauman’s definition is especially broad, giving humanitarians a privileged status to define the terms of debate, access and action.¹² For actors such as CARE, who fully embrace a rights-based approach, the claim is even more ambitious:

The mobilisation of an emergency response requires an operating environment that is conducive to the deployment of relief workers and supplies, managed in line with humanitarian principles of independence and impartiality. This operating environment is called humanitarian space. Humanitarian space refers to geographical space in which there is physical access to people in need, and institutional space in which positive social, political and military conditions (including security and immunity from attack) are ensured. This implies that aid agencies are free to assist populations in need, and are not constrained by political or physical barriers. For this to be the case, humanitarian agencies need to be free to make their own choices, based solely on the criteria of need.

Humanitarian space is also defined in terms of the rights of beneficiary populations to humanitarian assistance and protection. This definition grounds the concept in a rights-based approach, which implies that actors-including governments and warring parties-have obligations with respect to their right to assist and protect.¹³

The claim has at times been even more transformative. In 1995, Weiss and Chopra posited that

the identity of populations is also expanding beyond nationality to be all-inclusive of the human species, irrespective of origin. This is the basis of a developing global humanitarian space, which is significantly eroding the distinction between concepts of "internal" and "external." Because humanitarian space is not linked to territory and transcends sovereign boundaries, it becomes increasingly difficult to speak of "*intervention*" within it. Consequently, humanitarian assistance shifts from being a

¹⁰ Johanna Grombach Wagner, "An IHL/ICRC Perspective on 'Humanitarian Space'", in *Humanitarian Exchange Magazine* (2006).

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Robert DeChaine sees the MSF understanding of humanitarian space as part of an attempt to forge a global "imagined community". DeChaine, *Global Humanitarianism*, 91-99.

¹³ CARE International, *CARE International Emergency Toolkit*. Available at <http://careemergencytoolkit.org/>; accessed on 14 November 2008.

potential violation of sovereign rights to being a safeguard for fundamental human rights.¹⁴

A decade and a half on, this seems like a breathtakingly utopian reading of the concept. In the meantime, anticipating somewhat the argument of the next section, we could ask ourselves whether we might not plausibly define a state that maintains a serious human rights framework within its borders as a rather impressive humanitarian space. Could Western liberal democracies then be the best examples yet of humanitarian space, and are professional humanitarians missing the wood for the trees here in looking for inspiration?

The issue here is: how do the various dimensions of humanitarian space relate to state and interstate space, and state and interstate agency? The next section will then examine the quality and appropriateness of state agency with respect to humanitarianism on the basis of the ways in which it is seen to intersect with humanitarian space.

In practice, of course, humanitarian space is first and foremost a matter of access, of being able to reach the object of humanitarian concern and provide relief. The simplest way to guarantee this is through belligerent consent, which often means the consent of states. Grombach Wagner points out that:

No belligerent in their right mind would consent to the ICRC's presence if they could not trust the organisation, or if they felt that the ICRC was being used to as a Trojan horse to promote the enemy's wider political agenda, even if the perceived "enemy" is a properly mandated UN peacekeeping mission.¹⁵

If avowedly-political humanitarians endorse the limited aims of the ICRC, then perhaps they should think twice before rejecting wholesale the methodology of the ICRC. Even as they make the case that neutrality is a political choice, they might do well to recognise that in many conflict situations, the ability of the Red Cross Movement to deliver humanitarian aid depends on that basic ability to gain access.

¹⁴ Weiss and Chopra, "Sovereignty under Siege", 88. Italics in original.

¹⁵ Grombach Wagner, "An IHL/ICRC Perspective on 'Humanitarian Space'".

Perhaps a deferral to and functional independence from the states-system is a small price to pay?

Clearly it is rarely as simple as that. While few humanitarians would disown the gains represented by IHL, Forsythe notes that “in places like Somalia, Liberia, and former Zaire, few of those with weapons had ever heard of the Geneva Conventions and protocols”.¹⁶ “When ICRC representatives in Sierra Leone or Liberia faced child soldiers on drugs armed with automatic weapons, the details of IHL were about as relevant as theoretical physics.”¹⁷ In such situations, even basic access may involve the dirtying of hands. Aid workers in Somalia such as Tony Vaux were taken aback by the sight of heavily armed Red Cross vehicles, but noted that: “[to] see an ICRC vehicle mounted with a heavy machine gun and a bunch of gunmen is a sign of flexibility and compromise that has characterized their operations in Somalia”.¹⁸ Nevertheless, it would appear that IHL represents a humanitarian space within law that humanitarians can defend on their own terms against violations by belligerents. In setting out the distinct obligations and rights of all parties, there is a clear formal independence.

However, the question then arises of the evolution of the legal humanitarian space, where a progressive view of the relationship between state and humanitarianism seems more plausible than either a conservative or radical one. The humanitarian space in international law has been constructed and shaped by state and non-state actors alike. The Ottawa Convention is an example of state leadership, notably that of Canada, being crucial in taking the process beyond what the broad coalition of NGOs that initiated the International Campaign to Ban Landmines could otherwise have achieved.¹⁹ So while a radical appeal to civil society makes sense in hastening the formation of a piece of law, and detachment

¹⁶ Forsythe, *The Humanitarians*, 98.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 243.

¹⁸ Vaux, *The Selfish Altruist*, 150. The episode is also cited in Conor Foley, *The Thin Blue Line: How Humanitarianism Went to War* (London: Verso, 2008), 54.

¹⁹ For an interesting account of the relationships between civil society organisations and “sympathetic states”, and the questions of democratic legitimacy that accompany them, see Kenneth Anderson, “The Ottawa Convention Banning Landmines, the Role of International Non-Governmental Organizations and the Idea of International Civil Society”, *European Journal of International Law* 11, no. 1 (2000).

might be plausible once it is in place, the shaping of it necessarily acknowledges that states can be crucial actors within humanitarian endeavours.

The next key question is the protection and enforcement of humanitarian space, which feeds into a consideration of the question of political authority and sovereignty. Peter Redfield argues that humanitarianism “maintains a complex relationship to sovereignty, seeking to restrict it and redirect it even while engaging in parallel activities”.²⁰ Though it has a broader reach, it makes sense to treat this problem initially in terms of physical humanitarian space, such as refugee camps and so-called “safe havens” or “safe areas”.²¹ As we have seen, many humanitarians are traumatised by crucial failings in this area, in places like Srebrenica and the Rwandan refugee camps, and much of their soul-searching relates to debates about whether humanitarians can learn from those failings, or conversely are “condemned to repeat.”²² There are many interlocking issues here, but they all relate in some way to the question of how to situate and understand political authority within humanitarian space. As a starting point, we must exclude the possibility that these physical spaces can be political vacuums. On the account given above, this already seems highly implausible in theory. Fiona Terry notes that such a separation from the political “is seldom possible in practice”.²³

Questions of internal political authority cannot be escaped. If a distribution of food is to take place within a refugee camp, someone is necessarily in control of the distribution. So either the food providers, the aid workers, retain that authority and control the process, or it is *de facto* ceded to powerful groups within the camp. It may of course be the case that there is a deliberate process of empowerment at work, but clearly that will then be a political process negotiated between aid providers and recipients.

²⁰ Redfield, "Sacrifice, Triage, and Global Humanitarianism", 197.

²¹ For a detailed account of the latter, see Hikaru Yamashita, *Humanitarian Space and International Politics: The Creation of Safe Areas* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004).

²² Terry, *Condemned to Repeat?* For thorough accounts of the challenges presented to humanitarians in the context of refugee camps, see Sarah Kenyon Lischer, *Dangerous Sanctuaries: Refugee Camps, Civil War, and the Dilemmas of Humanitarian Aid* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005). Tony Waters, *Bureaucratizing the Good Samaritan: The Limitations of Humanitarian Relief Operations* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2001).

²³ Terry, *Condemned to Repeat?*, 19.

More problematically, in Rwanda, Terry tells us that

The genocide against the Tutsi and those who were seen as supporting them had continued in the camps, and bodies were frequently dragged from the lake. In the MSF hospital we strongly suspected that Tutsi children were given minimal care, or left to die, when we were not around to supervise. We wondered how many of our Rwandan staff – working in the feeding center, the hospital, even in our house – had blood on their hands.²⁴

This paragraph sets out some disturbing themes. The absence of a robust “humanitarian” political authority allows space for a more murderous brand of politics. The assumed advantages of local staff with local knowledge are also shown not to be an unbridled good. In this instance, MSF took the decision to leave the camps they were operating in. Humanitarians were also unable later to defend refugee camps in what was then eastern Zaire against incursions and attacks from “Zairean rebels and their Rwandan army allies”.²⁵ Physical humanitarian spaces are rarely unaffected by inter- and intra-state politics.

This was graphically illustrated in Srebrenica. A humanitarian space that is rhetorically whole, but only enough of a physical reality to gather future slaughter victims conveniently together in one place, is clearly a profoundly troubling construct. Interestingly, one of the few gestures in the direction of humanitarian “accountability” was made by a state, when the entire Dutch government eventually resigned on the issue of Dutch peacekeepers’ failure to protect the “safe” haven.²⁶

This should not be seen as a one-way argument towards massive armed intervention by or on behalf of humanitarianism. When NATO bombed Serbia in 1999, it arguably also constructed a half-formed humanitarian space, in creating a

²⁴ Ibid., 2-3.

²⁵ Ibid., 1.

²⁶ BBC News, “Dutch Government Quits over Srebrenica”, *BBC News* (16 April 2002). Available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/1933144.stm>; accessed on 14 November 2008. On the UN’s responsibility, see Anthony F. Lang, Jr., “The United Nations and the Fall of Srebrenica: Meaningful Responsibility and International Society”, in *Can Institutions Have Responsibilities? Collective Moral Agency and International Relations*, ed. Toni Erskine (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

rhetorical humanitarian space and defending it through military action, without providing real physical protection for Kosovars on the ground against ethnic cleansing. But what the spectre of the “well-fed dead” of Bosnia tells us is that the denial of political responsibility, or simply of politics in the creation of humanitarian spaces can have dire consequences, and that humanitarians need to bring into humanitarianism and humanitarian space the means to make that space at least internally coherent, if not fully externally validated. Often, that will mean accepting one of three choices: abandon the project of creating a humanitarian space lest it prolong the conflict or increase the danger of those it was designed to protect, fulfill some of the functions of states or collaborate with states and/or interstate organisations. While this chapter is mainly concerned with exploring the last two possibilities, it should be noted that hindsight tells us that, for instance, in the Biafran crisis, the more cautious position of the ICRC was perhaps more appropriate, and arguably the more interventionist stance of those agencies, and the dissident ICRC doctors who went on to form MSF, who airlifted supplies to the secessionists may have actually prolonged the war.²⁷ The issue here is not to define criteria for action in all circumstances, but rather to get to a more coherent understanding of effective humanitarian space, based on the contingencies which humanitarians need to acknowledge.

These contingencies are particularly apparent when it comes to the rhetorical or discursive dimension of humanitarian space. Humanitarianism is often seen to provide discursive cover for states’ non-humanitarian activities. At other times it is seen as a way to defer responsibility and action onto an unspecified agent (often the amorphous “international community”, itself a frequent instrument of deferral). By locating problems within humanitarian space, states (among others) engage in the maximum acknowledgement of the problem they are prepared to make, entailing the minimum in terms of engagement. This returns us to the concerns examined in Chapter 2, that were the Holocaust to happen today, it would be described as a “humanitarian crisis”. That is, governments would wring their

²⁷ Allen and Styan, "A Right to Interfere? Bernard Kouchner and the New Humanitarianism": 830.

hands, express humanitarian concern, and do nothing. The concern is that humanitarian language, rather than operationalising calls to “do something,” in reality becomes a dangerous threat to the pledge of “never again.”

These are challenging claims. On the one hand, they suggest that if a clear rhetorical acknowledgement of the political dimension is made, it makes it harder to contrast humanitarian space with political space, and thus defer problems into the realm of the former. It forces states to find political solutions to political problems that have terrible humanitarian consequences. On the other hand, if humanitarian space is brought fully into political space, do humanitarian claims forfeit in an unacceptable way their privileged status, opening the way for all humanitarian claims to be seen as equally valid, or simply give the emperor the benefit of some new clothes?

One view of this question is that the only way for humanitarian language to retain its distinctive status is to fudge the question and keep humanitarian space distinct rhetorically at least from political space, even if a tacit acknowledgement is made that this move does not quite fit the reality on the ground, and with a pang of guilt regarding the human misery and suffering that are kept out of humanitarian space, on the grounds that operationally they are impossible for humanitarianism to alleviate anyway. A more radical, but even more implausible, solution is to maintain a universal humanitarian space, separate from political space, but simultaneously to articulate “global civil society” not as political space but as humanitarian space. Alternatively, we can accept the intermingling of the two spaces, while trying to maintain and describe a distinctive quality and privileged status accruing to humanitarian space (for nefarious or worthy reasons, depending on one’s interpretation).

Ultimately, a pure humanitarian space apart from politics is impossible. A humanitarian space apart from other political spaces seems, for humanitarians who do not want to get into the business of ruling, undesirable. The question becomes a broader one of how to increase the space of humanitarian concerns in international politics and better situate the problem of human solidarity. As Thomas Weiss puts it:

The fact that humanitarian space cannot be opened or maintained by humanitarians themselves suggests clear benefits from thinking politically and collaborating with diplomatic and military institutions. This political vision transforms humanitarianism. At the same time, the political sphere needs to be widened to ensure that the international arena is as hospitable as possible for both emergency aid and the protection of rights. Politics at its best embraces a vision of human solidarity and works to operationalize a strategy for making that solidarity real rather than rhetorical.²⁸

II Taking States Seriously: Humanitarianism as Internationalist Solidarity

An important initial question to be addressed here, before examining the kind of politics at stake, is that of the quality and appropriateness of state agency with respect to the conduct of humanitarian action. In a recent essay, Stephen Hopgood sets out an interesting problem: “can Wal-Mart be a humanitarian organization?”²⁹ Here we ask a related, and arguably more complex question. Can the state be, if not a purely humanitarian agent (for perhaps such an agent does not exist), then an agent of humanitarianism? Agency is understood simply as “the ability to act in the world”.³⁰ Humanitarian agency thus refers to the ability to engage in humanitarian action in the world. It is useful to note here an assumption that has thus far gone unchallenged in this chapter and is rarely challenged in the literature. This is that among humanitarian actors, humanitarian NGOs have a privileged and legitimate claim to speak, and thus to act, on behalf of “humanitarianism” as a whole. Certainly, they are often among the loudest voices, but the humanitarian system is a complex one, with many voices and many actors: NGOs, IGOs, states, state agencies. These are all collective agents. For humanitarian NGOs, the problems of collective moral agency in international relations are as relevant as they are for

²⁸ Weiss, "Principles, Politics, and Humanitarian Action": 21.

²⁹ Hopgood, "Saying "No" To Wal-Mart?" 98.

³⁰ Chris Brown, "Moral Agency and International Society: Reflections on Norms, the UN, the Gulf War, and the Kosovo Campaign", in *Can Institutions Have Responsibilities? Collective Moral Agency and International Relations*, ed. Toni Erskine (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 51.

states. The only examples of humanitarian action entirely conceivable in relation to conventional, individual moral agents discussed so far have been the Rescuers of Jews during the Holocaust.

There is, then, another step to make in discussing the question of moral agency within humanitarian agency. That is to acknowledge the assumption that the collective moral agency of institutions is at least a possibility. Onora O'Neill makes the persuasive point that, "[if] ethical reasoning is accessible only to individuals, its meagre help with global problems should not surprise us".³¹ This claim is not unproblematic, but the key point is that we make this assumption anyway in the initial move from individual acts to the acts of collective agents such as humanitarian NGOs. Thus, either we have to accept the possibility that there is simply no such thing as humanitarianism as we know it (beyond the individual, that is), or acknowledge that there is no absolute *a priori* reason why states cannot lay a claim to the moral dimension of humanitarian agency. Toni Erskine argues that for a collectivity to be a plausible candidate to be ascribed moral agency, it requires:

an identity that is more than the sum of its constitutive parts and, therefore, does not rely on a determinate membership; a decision-making structure; an identity over time; and a conception of itself as a unit.³²

On this account, states are clearly at least as strong candidates for collective moral agency as NGOs or IGOS. In addition to this, it should be made clear that questions of humanitarian agency are not uniquely questions of moral agency. They are also questions of political agency, though any conceptualisation of humanitarian agency entirely divorced from questions of moral agency is difficult to reconcile with the argument made in Chapter 4, that humanitarianism needs "moral politicians" to enact it. To re-frame the lessons of the previous section and the previous two chapters, the moral dimension of humanitarian agency cannot be understood in

³¹ Cited in Toni Erskine, "Assigning Responsibilities to Institutional Moral Agents: The Case of States and 'Quasi-States'", in *Can Institutions Have Responsibilities? Collective Moral Agency and International Relations*, ed. Toni Erskine (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 35.

³² *Ibid.*

isolation from its political dimension. Even the most classical humanitarian agent cannot exercise moral agency without simultaneously exercising political agency. We have seen how in defining, creating and defending humanitarian space, political acts and choices are inevitable and constitutive of the moral agency being exercised, both within and outside of humanitarian space. Humanitarian action is never just an “ethical act”, as many would have it, but also a political act, and therefore moral agency is not the only quality of agency sought for in a humanitarian actor. There may well, then, be a tension here in how these two qualities of humanitarian agency are embodied, with individual agents more appropriate bearers of moral agency, and collective agents ones more capacious political actors.

Any collective agent acting within humanitarianism is necessarily acting “in the name of humanity”, but will always be a surrogate for a collective agency of humanity which, in the light of the argument made so far, will always remain an impossibility. So the relative qualities of second-best agents become very important and have to be politically negotiated.³³ The corporate identity, decision-making structure, identity over time and conception of self need to relate plausibly to the ways in which we generate and enact our sense of humanity. Moreover, though it may be extremely beneficial for MSF or the ICRC to have corporate identities that reflect a certain rigour about what kind of moral agency they need to be, they cannot claim their humanitarian identity as its only possible expression. They can merely make a case for what they, as actors, can do in the world.

This makes for a very strong case that we should take states very seriously indeed as potential enactors of humanitarianism, given their hefty practical capabilities. There are several strands to this argument, to do with processes of collective humanitarian identity formation, the ability of “good states” to formulate some degree of humanitarian agency related to these, and the cautionary lessons of

³³ Following the logic of the same kind of anti-transcendentalist arguments made by Sen as I used in the previous chapter.

“bad states”. I will examine these issues with reference to the work of Peter Lawler, who sees in them the basis of a case for an internationalist account of politics.³⁴

Internationalism is not, as such, a neglected term, either in international political discourse or mainstream international relations theory.³⁵ But Lawler argues that international political theory has largely neglected what he terms “classical internationalism”. Indeed there is a strong case that the discourse of international political theory has been impoverished by this relative neglect. To take one recent example, the idea is absent from the overarching classification in Simon Caney’s influential theory of global justice, which makes for a rather dichotomised view of the issues he discusses.³⁶ The distinction I make in this section, between articulating a cosmopolitan sensibility and an internationalist one, may seem a matter of nuance rather than substance. But I wish to argue that it is a nuance that blinds us, in considering the embedding of humanitarian solidarity, to precisely those ways in which human solidarity can accumulate and become institutionalised in practice.

Moreover, Kimberly Hutchings correctly notes that “[one] of the most striking things about contemporary liberal/communitarian debates is the extent of agreement over practice (most participants support some form of liberal social democracy) and the intensity of disagreement over theory”.³⁷ I would add that another point of agreement is a deep commitment to humanitarianism. They are all, in their writings, clearly motivated by a desire to articulate and defend our common humanity. These two areas of rough agreement, the immediate practical

³⁴ Helpfully, Lawler also employs Erskine’s account of collective agency. Lawler, “The Good State: In Praise of ‘Classical’ Internationalism”: 442. My account here also has parallels with the solidarist wing of the English School, especially in its understanding of the state as the local agent of the common good, but with the major twist that the nature of the common good is highly contested, indeed is what is being negotiated.

³⁵ For a prominent recent example see G. John Ikenberry, “Liberal Internationalism 3.0: America and the Dilemmas of Liberal World Order”, *Perspectives on Politics* 7, no. 01 (2009). Good historical accounts are Carsten Holbraad, *Internationalism and Nationalism in European Political Thought* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003). David Long and Brian C. Schmidt, eds., *Imperialism and Internationalism in the Discipline of International Relations* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005). For a typically idiosyncratic perspective see Fred Halliday, “Three Concepts of Internationalism”, *International Affairs* 64, no. 2 (1988).

³⁶ Caney, *Justice Beyond Borders*.

³⁷ Kimberly Hutchings, *International Political Theory: Rethinking Ethics in a Global Era* (London: Sage, 1999), 29.

orientation and the deep, though diversely articulated humanitarian commitment, are precisely those that emerge as significant in the argument made so far in this thesis. To seek resolution of the theoretical disagreement as an *a priori* requirement of articulating humanitarian political projects is to make a category error about the character of humanitarianism as an on-going conversation, hence the benefits of a less determined internationalism that nevertheless takes the state seriously.

Lawler's internationalism is understood in terms of the ways in which domestic politics, possibly influenced by transnational political discussions, comes to shape the identity of states in ways that accommodate genuinely other-regarding policies. He contrasts this with two cosmopolitan tendencies to instrumentalise the state: one which sees it as an agent of a fixed universal idea of the good, with all the hegemonic excesses that implies; another which sees even democratic statehood as something to be transcended en route to the pleasures of global civil society. Both write off the potential of the state too easily.

This reading of cosmopolitanism relates to two points made throughout this thesis. Firstly, humanitarian action always contains a necessary element of universalising presumption. We are always in the position of foisting our conception of humanity on others if we aspire to act in any kind of solidaristic manner. However, the excesses of humanitarianism come when we take that conception of humanity to be transcendent, rather than something to be argued for and lived in our daily lives. Secondly, working out from a transcendental conception of the good tells us little about the processes examined in Chapter 3 of actually feeling and acting on empathy, a necessarily partial process. What I argued then was that rather than an account of what it might mean to be impartial serving as a reliable corrective, we have to educate ourselves and others to have a wider potential sphere of empathy. Moreover, humanitarian action itself is the result of coalitions being built and expressed in ways which do not have to map onto state boundaries, but do seek to express themselves in terms of the actually-existing political institutions they are embedded in. This was clearly the case in the example of British abolitionism. More recently, Lawler affirms that:

Much of the current spate of international political activism (anti-globalisation, anti-war, and so on) is transnational or transversal in genesis and organisation but often resolutely internationalist in its policy focus. It seeks not the dissolution of states or the transcendence of national sovereignty but greater internal and external accountability and responsibility on the part of states.³⁸

Calhoun complements this view, pointing out that:

Business leaders attending the World Economic Forum at Davos and social movement activists attending the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre tended each to think they were the *real* cosmopolitans. And both tended to describe global civil society as more autonomous from states than it really was.³⁹

A prime example of this is one of the biggest recent global civil society campaigns, the Make Poverty History campaign and its impact on pledges made in 2005 at the G8 Gleneagles summit. The political traction of the Make Poverty History campaign in Britain cannot be dissociated from the disenchantment of an important left-liberal constituency opposed to the Iraq war. There are clear echoes here of the electoral importance of the abolitionist vote in early nineteenth century Britain as made clear by Kaufmann and Pape.⁴⁰ Furthermore, Britain's relatively good record in sticking to its pledges cannot be dissociated from a political culture in which overseas aid is now, even after a change to a right-of-centre government, seen as a privileged area of government spending, and a marker of British national identity.

The other point to make here is the comparative rarity of cosmopolitan as a genuinely "lived category", to borrow Margaret C. Jacob's phrase.⁴¹ That is, a category that corresponds to actual behaviour, to "lived practices and habitudes".⁴²

³⁸ Lawler, "The Good State: In Praise of 'Classical' Internationalism": 440.

³⁹ Craig Calhoun, "Cosmopolitanism in the Modern Social Imaginary", *Daedalus* 137, no. 3 (2008): 113. There are interesting parallels with the account given by Margaret C. Jacob in the same issue of eighteenth century bankers as an example of cosmopolitanism as a lived category. Margaret C. Jacob, "The Cosmopolitan as a Lived Category", *Daedalus* 137, no. 3 (2008).

⁴⁰ Kaufmann and Pape, "Explaining Costly International Moral Action: Britain's Sixty-Year Campaign against the Atlantic Slave Trade".

⁴¹ Jacob, "The Cosmopolitan as a Lived Category".

⁴² *Ibid.*: 18.

Indeed, it may be significant that many professional humanitarians fall into such a category.⁴³ Calhoun notes the danger, which he sees as being encouraged by common cosmopolitan perspectives, of confusing “the privileged specificity of our mobility for universality. It is easy for the privileged to imagine that their experience of global mobility and connection is available to all, if only everyone would ‘be’ cosmopolitan.”⁴⁴ He puts this forward not as an anti-humanitarian perspective. On the contrary: “the genuinely attractive ethical orientation toward a common human community of fate can be undermined by an unattractive self-congratulation and lack of self-critical awareness of privilege”.⁴⁵ He contrasts the expression “citizen of the world” with “man of the world”, the latter implying merely a loose moral framework and a tendency towards indulgent over-consumption of the world’s pleasures.⁴⁶ This recalls Michael Walzer’s rejoinder to Martha Nussbaum’s famous plea for a cosmopolitan education. He writes that he shares many of her conclusions, but ultimately:

I am not a citizen of the world, as she would like me to be. I am not even aware that there is a world such that one could be a citizen of it. No one has ever offered me citizenship, or described the naturalization process, or enlisted me in the world’s institutional structures, or given me an account of its decision procedures (I hope they are democratic), or provided me with a list of the benefits and obligations of citizenship, or shown me the world’s calendar and the common celebrations and commemorations of its citizens.⁴⁷

⁴³ Their memoirs often give a sense of “if it’s Wednesday, it must be Afghanistan...” See for example Foley, *The Thin Blue Line*. The title of John Norris’ study of humanitarians is itself revealing. Norris, *The Disaster Gypsies*.

⁴⁴ Calhoun, “Cosmopolitanism in the Modern Social Imaginary”: 106. Amusingly, he cites LSE as the “academic headquarters” of this kind of cosmopolitan hubris. Calhoun, “Cosmopolitanism in the Modern Social Imaginary”: 108.

⁴⁵ Calhoun, “Cosmopolitanism in the Modern Social Imaginary”: 106.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*: 109.

⁴⁷ Michael Walzer, “Spheres of Affection”, in *For Love of Country?*, ed. Joshua Cohen (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), 125.

Interestingly, in a recent article, Nussbaum appears to have acknowledged the strength of these arguments.⁴⁸ She now draws on Mazzini and Mill in defending a “globally sensitive patriotism”, arguing that:

a nation that pursues goals that require sacrifice of self-interest needs to be able to appeal to patriotism, in ways that draw on symbol and rhetoric, emotional memory and history – as Lincoln, King, Gandhi, and Nehru all successfully did. This is all the more true when a nation pursues not only internal justice but the goal of global justice as well.⁴⁹

To take as example one figure from Nussbaum’s list, “internationalist” and “humanitarian” speak to our understanding of Nehru’s politics. Cosmopolitan, on the other hand, fits less well. Mazzini, one of Nussbaum’s more recent intellectual inspirations, is an interesting figure to bring in here. Mazzini’s universalist humanitarian beliefs were situated in the context of his liberal nationalism.⁵⁰ He saw that internationalism could provide for bonding and solidarity between different, situated individuals, peoples and states. Moreover, he aspired, albeit often unsuccessfully and with a surfeit of utopian zeal, to temper the excesses of both universalism and particularism, both of which can lead to inaction or worse. Mazzini described this when, in an obscure but telling essay which provides us with a useful complement to his masterwork *The Duties of Man*, he affirmed his commitment to a “love for all men [sic]”, but cautioned that the cosmopolitan “is

⁴⁸ Nussbaum, "Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism".

⁴⁹ Martha C. Nussbaum, "Toward a Globally Sensitive Patriotism", *Daedalus* 137, no. 3 (2008): 93.

⁵⁰ Carsten Holbraad also refers to Mazzini as an intellectual father of a category of “humanitarian internationalism”. Holbraad’s category is more explicitly cosmopolitan in nature and focused within a liberal interventionist tradition, reflecting his earlier work on progressive and conservative approaches to the Concert of Europe and Gladstone in particular, but interesting in terms of suggesting the juxtaposition of humanitarianism and internationalism. Carsten Holbraad, *The Concert of Europe: A Study in German and British International Theory 1815-1914* (London: Longman, 1970). Holbraad, *Internationalism and Nationalism in European Political Thought*, 9, 41, 45-48.

compelled to choose between despotism and inertia.”⁵¹ The idea that people have often engaged in progressive humanitarian politics both locally and internationally is a powerful one. To focus exclusively on either tiny localised or huge global problems is surely a recipe for disillusion. More importantly, it fails to reflect the complexity of our empathetic, solidaristic responses and commitments. This starts to explain why on a very local level how often the same “usual suspects” turn up in campaigns for both local, national and international causes. Similarly at state level, it is arguably no accident that states with highly developed domestic welfare states are often also the most generous givers of aid, and these are the ones most often described as internationalist. They recognise boundaries within their spheres of solidarity, but see them as a site of adjudication, rather than blanket exclusion or inclusion.

Indeed, Lawler emphasises the importance of politics at levels other than a blanket global civil society, pointing to the work done by Cranford Pratt on how the “humane internationalisms” of usual suspect putative “good international citizens” like the Scandinavian countries, the Netherlands and Canada have been nourished by the character of domestic politics and collective identity formation in those states.⁵² Lawler emphasises though that

⁵¹ Giuseppe Mazzini, "The Duties of Man", in *Life and Writings of Joseph Mazzini, Vol. 4: Critical and Literary* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1891). Giuseppe Mazzini, "Principles of Cosmopolitanism", in *Life and Writings of Joseph Mazzini, Vol. 3: Autobiographical and Political* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1891), 7-8. For a useful recent selection of Mazzini's writings, that brings his international thought more fully into focus, see Giuseppe Mazzini, *A Cosmopolitanism of Nations: Giuseppe Mazzini's Writing on Democracy, Nation Building, and International Relations*, ed. Stefano Recchia and Nadia Urbinati (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009). For an exception to the tendency for international theory to neglect Mazzini, see Martin Wight, *Four Seminal Thinkers in International Theory: Machiavelli, Grotius, Kant, and Mazzini* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁵² Lawler draws on Cranford Pratt, ed., *Internationalism under Strain: The North-South Policies of Canada, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989). Cranford Pratt, ed., *Middle Power Internationalism: The North-South Dimension* (Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990). See also Peter Lawler, "Janus-Faced Solidarity: Danish Internationalism Reconsidered", *Cooperation and Conflict* 42, no. 1 (2007). On the idea of good international citizenship in practice, see also Peter Lawler, "The Good Citizen Australia?" *Asian Studies Review* 16, no. 2 (1992). Nicholas J. Wheeler and Tim Dunne, "Good International Citizenship: A Third Way for British Foreign Policy", *International Affairs* 74, no. 4 (1998).

Even if internationalism is an essentially domestically-generated practice that reflects, moreover, a culturally-specific account of collective identity, its sustenance necessarily requires not only following through rhetorical declarations with practical and financial commitments but also an account of the international in which practices of solidarity at least become possible and can have real consequences.⁵³

Lawler notes that, though they may be attached to an ultimately exclusionary sovereignty of their state, Western publics

also seem to empathise with distant publics reacting, often violently, to the breach of their state's sovereignty by coalitions of states supposedly acting in the name of humanity, or to a failure to intervene in other, morally compelling cases, or to the evident inequity of a globalising world economy.⁵⁴

In other words, an internationalist perspective can be a humane, egalitarian one, if the merits of living in functioning, humane states are taken seriously, and if the ability to empathise is placed at its heart. Lawler argues that the state remains a "viable form of human community", one that "remains more an aspiration than a reality for millions of people and whose dissolution is greeted with foreboding by millions of others mindful of what may emerge in its place".⁵⁵ For him, this is the real danger of a blanket reliance on a deterministic reading of the evolution of globalisation and global civil society:

Only a thoroughly benign and linear reading of accelerating internationalisation or globalisation coupled with an ahistorical account of the practice of sovereignty could lead straightforwardly to a celebration of the decline of the sovereign state. Anything else must concede that there is a real risk that any further erosion in the capacities of states may not be neatly matched by the evolution of effective and legitimate structures of local, regional or global public governance. Furthermore, such structures that do emerge may exhibit much, perhaps all, of the partiality, inequity and unaccountability of the present international order.⁵⁶

⁵³ Lawler, "The Good State: In Praise of 'Classical' Internationalism": 437.

⁵⁴ Ibid.: 439.

⁵⁵ Ibid.: 434-435.

⁵⁶ Ibid.: 440.

This raises two important points. Firstly, that if we detach ourselves from the “emergency imaginary” and take a broader perspective on the humanitarian gains of the last two centuries, it is clear that the development of Western liberal democracies has created extremely robust “humanitarian spaces” for those fortunate enough to live in them. Though international efforts, especially those of Britain, were crucial in abolishing the Atlantic slave trade in the nineteenth century, the abolition of slavery itself was largely achieved at national level.⁵⁷ One way of seeing this is as exposing the limitations of what international humanitarianism can achieve, and seeing sovereignty as a barrier to humanitarian penetration and achievement. But the abolition of slavery in different countries is no less a humanitarian achievement: it was not a matter of agreement between insiders, but rather the transformation of non-human outsiders to human insiders within each country. The process of identification and recognition had a dynamic that is important to acknowledge. Moreover, it would be to do a disservice to all those who struggled and in the case of the American Civil War, literally fought for a state free from slavery, sometimes on behalf of themselves, sometimes on behalf of others.

What was made clear in the previous section was the unpalatable nature of life in any political space, even “humanitarian ones”, devoid entirely of the qualities of the “good state”, whether “quasi-states” or “outlaw states”, to take two possible ways of framing the problem.⁵⁸ It is hard to imagine even the keenest cultural relativist writing a paean to life in contemporary Mogadishu. Moreover, the plight of the stateless is a famously bleak one, revealing, in Hannah Arendt’s powerful phrase, the “abstract nakedness of being nothing but human”.⁵⁹ Humanitarian

⁵⁷ Finnemore, *The Purpose of Intervention*, 68.

⁵⁸ Robert Jackson, *Quasi-States: Sovereignty, International Relations and the Third World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). Rawls, *The Law of Peoples*.

⁵⁹ Cited in R. J. Vincent, *Human Rights and International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 151.

scholarship is, indeed, increasingly cognisant of these problems.⁶⁰ For Tanja Schuemer-Cross and Ben Heaven Taylor: "[the] primary focus of global humanitarian efforts must be to support states to safeguard the right to life of their own citizens."⁶¹ Moreover, it is tangible issues such as these that spurs Lawler to note that "the refusal of much critical IR scholarship to engage with foreign policy theory and practice, although often framed in a contemporary critical discourse of 're-politicisation', is simply bad politics: it lets most states off the hook".⁶²

Indeed, while Walzer's rejoinder to Martha Nussbaum's plea for a cosmopolitan education was set out earlier, Appiah's is also interesting here, coming as it does from a cosmopolitan perspective:

It is because humans live best on a smaller scale that we should defend not just the state, but the county, the town, the street, the business, the craft, the profession, and the family, as communities, as circles among the many circles that are narrower than the human horizon, that are appropriate spheres of moral concern. We should, as cosmopolitans, defend the right of others to live in democratic states with rich possibilities of association within and across their borders, states of which they can be patriotic citizens.⁶³

Humanitarianism cautions against the "the dangers of a presumptive moral universalism", to borrow a phrase from Lawler, and the crusading excesses with which a smug accommodation with Western liberal power can engender.⁶⁴ But it also demands that we allow for the presumptions of a humbler moral universalism,

⁶⁰ Paul Harvey, *Towards Good Humanitarian Government: The Role of the Affected State in Disaster Response*, HPG Report 29 (London: ODI, 2009). See also Collinson, Elhawary and Muggah, *States of Fragility*. Interestingly, for some, successful involvement in state-building can co-exist with a humanitarianism premised on neutral, impartial and independent action. See Giulio Di Blasi, "Humanitarian State Building: The Experience of Steering Committees in Southern Lebanon", *Journal of Humanitarian Assistance* (3 May 2010). Available at <http://jha.ac/2010/05/03/humanitarian-state-building-the-experience-of-steering-committees-in-southern-lebanon/>; accessed on 21 June 2010.

⁶¹ Tanja Schuemer-Cross and Ben Heaven Taylor, *The Right to Survive: The Humanitarian Challenge for the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford: Oxfam International, 2009), 112.

⁶² Lawler, "The Good State: In Praise of 'Classical' Internationalism": 441.

⁶³ Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Cosmopolitan Patriots", in *For Love of Country?*, ed. Joshua Cohen (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), 29.

⁶⁴ Lawler, "The Good State: In Praise of 'Classical' Internationalism": 448.

in elaborating an internationalist politics that might take seriously the capacity of states to endeavour change, both internally and externally.

III Humanity Through Thick and Thin: Michael Walzer and the Internationalist Tradition

This section aims to flesh out the intuition that the internationalist tradition is a vital middle ground in international political theory, unstable admittedly, but a necessary conduit for our muddled solidarities, and especially the international politicisation of a sense of common humanity. It will examine the sort of moral minimalism described by Michael Walzer in *Thick and Thin*, which is a good starting point.⁶⁵ Walzer is a particularly useful figure here because, among other things, while his international theory sets itself explicitly against cosmopolitanism, Walzer describes himself, and plausibly so, as an internationalist theorist.⁶⁶ Walzer is also always explicit that his theme is solidarity. Analysing how he derives his internationalism reveals something about how “old-fashioned” internationalism has been somewhat obscured by the dominance of cosmopolitanism, and often left unexpressed by many of its other communitarian critics. The point here is that the internationalists in international political theory are not necessarily different people from the cosmopolitans or communitarians we are familiar with, but that this facet of their thought, and the fruitful meeting point it entails, is under-explored.⁶⁷

Jon Elster famously described Walzer as a phenomenologist of the moral life.⁶⁸ Meant as a criticism, for our purposes it constitutes an advantage. Walzer studies moral problems and our responses to them as they actually arise. The opening of *Thick and Thin* recounts the experience of witnessing on television

⁶⁵ Walzer, *Thick and Thin*.

⁶⁶ See for example Michael Walzer, "Michael Walzer on the American Left", *Dissent* Winter (2007).

⁶⁷ An important recent study that examines a similarly wide range of Walzer's work, and also argues against impartialist cosmopolitan perspectives, though with a somewhat different purpose, is Toni Erskine, *Embedded Cosmopolitanism: Duties to Strangers and Enemies in a World of 'Dislocated Communities'* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

⁶⁸ Cited in Brown, *Sovereignty, Rights and Justice*, 94.

people marching on the streets of Prague during the Velvet Revolution, brandishing placards bearing simple slogans such as “Truth” and “Justice”. Walzer unpacks the implications of this image, asking himself what he can and cannot understand in it. He notes that he does not know if he shares the same philosophical perspective on “Truth” as the marchers. Probably they do not agree amongst themselves. “Truth” and “Justice” will mean very different things to atheists and Christians marching side by side.⁶⁹ The important point is that that particular epistemological debate is irrelevant for the political purpose at hand. Walzer can understand that the marchers mean by “Truth” that they do not wish to be lied to or deceived any more. Similarly, without any agreement on theories of “Justice”, Walzer understands from that placard that he is able to empathise and express solidarity with the marchers’ dislike of their totalitarian regime. He writes:

What they meant by the “justice” inscribed on their signs, however, was simple enough: an end to arbitrary arrests, equal and impartial law enforcement, the abolition of the privileges and prerogatives of the party elite – common, garden variety justice.⁷⁰

By “common, garden variety justice”, Walzer is not arguing that there is necessarily an exact account of such a thing that could be agreed on between him and the marchers, merely that they have a shared understanding, and that he rejects the implication that because he cannot assert full agreement with the Prague marchers, he must necessarily fully commit to a relativistic disengagement, or post-modern ironism, something that neither he nor the marchers would see as a desirable outcome. “Minimalism is not foundational: it is not the case that different groups of people discover that they are all committed to the same set of ultimate values.”⁷¹ In short, he asserts both the fallibility of our moral judgments, and the necessity of making them. Walzer’s internationalism derives from his commitment to his conception of moral minimalism, the importance of which “lies in the encounter it

⁶⁹ Walzer, *Thick and Thin*, 18.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 18.

facilitates, of which it is also a product”.⁷² In this case, the reiterative minimalism reflects an internationalist solidarity against totalitarianism. That is, it embodies a shared politics of injustice, a common sense of what, tyranny, is being reacted to. Walzer does not require all Czechs to agree with him that his preference, social democracy would be the best model to replace totalitarianism, in order to be in solidarity with them.

Moral minimalism, while reflecting this reflexive process, crucially also draws on thicker, possibly foundationalist moral conceptions. “Minimal morality is very important, both for the sake of criticism and for the sake of solidarity. But it can’t substitute for or replace the defense of thickly conceived values.”⁷³ “If we did not have our own parade, we could not march vicariously in Prague. We would have no understanding at all of “Truth” or “Justice”.⁷⁴ Walzer, a Jewish American social democrat, does not feel that, in expressing solidarity with the Prague marchers, he can go further in terms of describing or imposing the shape of the state after the fall of the totalitarian regime. But nor can he avoid that expression of solidarity. He rejects, at the other extreme, the cynical judgement that he should not be concerned about a far-off country of which he knows little. Why is this disengagement equally impossible? Walzer does not spell it out, but it is clear from his body of work that it is impossible precisely because of the values he holds as a thinker in the Jewish political tradition, as an American citizen, as a social democrat, that is, the universalising identities that make up his humanity, and contextualise a certain kind of humanitarian concern for the suffering of others. These identities may suggest limits and boundaries for a set of institutionalised responsibilities within the context of citizenship, but that is not the same thing as marking the limits of his concern. The scope of his moral concern is defined by his moral minimalism, but “[minimalism] leaves room for thickness elsewhere; indeed, it presupposes thickness elsewhere”.⁷⁵

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid., 16-17.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 19.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

The thick values are the particular values Walzer holds as a Jewish American social democrat. Obviously the boundaries for the responsibilities entailed by these different identities are not identical. But Walzer places particular emphasis on the political community, usually embodied in the citizenship of a state. His account of why this is necessary, most famously set out in *Just and Unjust Wars*, need not detain us beyond the fact that Walzer derives the rights of the political community from the rights of the individuals that make it up.⁷⁶ The important point is that the political community, which we can identify here – not entirely unproblematically – with the state, still remains, at its best, the most complex example of institutionalised solidarity. As such it defines the gap between the scope of our institutionalised responsibilities (to our fellow citizens) and the scope of our concern (all humanity), even as it arguably, through the process of institutionalising that domestic solidarity, has expanded the scope of our concern internationally.

So, there is a communitarian restriction on the scope of our day-to-day responsibilities, yet moral minimalism entails a wider concern, an internationalist commitment. Much of Walzer's work, and the response to it, focuses on that restrictive move, that critique of the defining of cosmopolitan responsibilities, *Thick and Thin* itself is mostly written in that vein. It places itself in a conversation with contemporary cosmopolitanism, but also arguably fits into debates that go back to Mazzini, to the tension between self-determination and broadly conceived universal human rights (Walzer draws on J. S. Mill in *Just and Unjust Wars* to establish his take on this issue⁷⁷), to Woodrow Wilson and the dilemmas of forcibly "self-determining" others. What will be introduced in the rest of this section is the permissive flipside of Walzer's prevailing restrictive mood. It asks what kind of solidarity an internationalism resting on moral minimalism can accommodate, and suggests that a more nuanced reading might be fruitful, particularly in its potential accommodation of humanitarian solidarities.

Returning to the marchers of Prague, Walzer concludes that in general, if we are to consider the possibility of military intervention, prudence is of the essence.

⁷⁶ Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*, 53-55.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 87-91.

“Truth” and “Justice” are “better defended with the moral support of outsiders than with their coercive intervention”.⁷⁸ A shared concern about injustice does not necessarily put us in a position to enact justice. His reasons for concluding this have been well-rehearsed from *Just and Unjust Wars* onwards: there is value in self-determination, of earning democratic self-rule, following J. S. Mill; there are always perils and excesses involved in the use of military force; the idea of moral minimalism limits our critical purchase on what is going on and what to do about it. But there has always been a space in Walzer’s thought for humanitarian intervention, even if many would consider it an unnecessarily restricted one. This space defines the ultimate scope of Walzer’s internationalism, establishing the conditions in which we risk ourselves to save others. *Thick and Thin* contains an excellent account of the subtleties of judgement involved:

So we intervene, if not on behalf of “truth” and “justice,” then on behalf of “life” and “liberty” (against massacre or enslavement, say). We assume that the people we are trying to help really want to be helped. There may still be reasons for holding back, but the belief that these people prefer to be massacred or enslaved won’t be among them. Yes, some things that we consider oppressive are not so regarded everywhere. The consideration is a feature of our own maximal morality, and it cannot provide us with an occasion for military intervention. We cannot conscript people to march in our parade. But minimalism makes for (some) presumptive occasions, in politics just as it does in private life. We will use force, for example, to stop a person from committing suicide, without knowing in advance who he is or where he comes from. Perhaps he has reasons for suicide confirmed by his maximal morality, endorsed by his moral community. Even so, “life” is a reiterated value and defending it is an act of solidarity. And if we give up the forcible defense out of respect for his reasons, we might still criticize the moral culture that provides those reasons: it is insufficiently attentive, we might say, to the value of life.⁷⁹

At the core of this very rich paragraph lies a favourite device, a domestic analogy. The analogy works in the sense that it establishes the inevitability of a certain degree of presumption in our moral life. Specifically here, to rescue is always to presume, as we saw in Chapter 4. Fallibility is ever-present. There is a problem in

⁷⁸ Walzer, *Thick and Thin*, 16.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

that our willingness to engage in humanitarian intervention may be far less than to stop a suicide, as the risks and costs are likely to be much higher. But humanitarian intervention is a particularly demanding form of humanitarianism, as well as a problematic one, as was made clear in the previous chapter, so there is still a great deal of value here in terms of conceptualising rescue in general terms: a very basic idea of “life” has to be threatened, and we impulsively respond to that threat, in spite of the inevitability of imperfect information and knowledge. Walzer’s description of the farther reaches of his internationalism echoes the contingencies and the moral mechanisms explored through the idea of the humanitarian impulse in the previous chapters. This suggests that his internationalism provides a useful international political theoretical context for the humanitarian impulse.

The space for the humanitarian impulse – the humanitarian space, then - has arguably grown within Walzer’s thought, as he has become slightly more permissive on the desirability of humanitarian interventions, though within the scope of very similar ideas to those he wrote about three decades ago. We can track this evolution via the essays collected in *Arguing About War*, in particular.⁸⁰ His essay on “The Politics of Rescue” is perhaps the key statement here.⁸¹ In effect, in Walzer we find two facets of the threshold that defines the possibility of humanitarian intervention. From his commitment, an internationalist commitment among other things, to the principle of self-determination, he derives the legalist paradigm and the prohibition of over-riding the norm of non-intervention except in cases “that shock the moral conscience of mankind”.⁸² We also glimpse another kind of threshold, that of the willingness to act that lies within ourselves and draws on our thick moral conceptions, the humanitarian urge to rescue, the humanitarian impulse that emerges from our own particular mix of solidarities and empathetic possibilities. We may argue with Walzer on the balance he strikes on any given occasion, but this provides a more useful framework in which to assess the desirability of humanitarian intervention than those who attempt to derive, in

⁸⁰ Michael Walzer, *Arguing About War* (London: Yale University Press, 2004).

⁸¹ Walzer, “The Politics of Rescue”. Also appears as Chapter 5 of Walzer, *Arguing About War*.

⁸² Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*, 107.

abstraction from the mechanisms of political will or of solidarity, a set of criteria that reflects ideals derived from assertions. In the “The Politics of Rescue”, Walzer sets this out in a way that usefully complements the account given in *Thick and Thin*.

Despite all that I have said so far, I don't mean to abandon the principle of non-intervention – only to honor its exceptions. One reads the newspaper these days shaking. The vast numbers of murdered people; the men, women, and children dying of disease and famine wilfully caused or easily preventable; the masses of desperate refugees – none of these are served by reciting high-minded principles. Yes, the norm is not to intervene in other people's countries; the norm is self-determination. But not for *these* people, the victims of tyranny, ideological zeal, ethnic hatred, who are not determining anything for themselves, who urgently need help from outside. And it isn't enough to wait until the tyrants, the zealots, and the bigots have done their filthy work and then rush food and medicine to the ragged survivors. Whenever the filthy work can be stopped, it should be stopped. And if not by us, the supposedly decent people of this world, then by whom?⁸³

So far we have established that Walzer's internationalism and his account of moral minimalism are amenable to the dynamics of the humanitarian impulse. But we have also only given an account of a very particular and controversial aspect of humanitarianism, namely humanitarian intervention. Indeed, this thesis has critiqued the manner in which international political theorists like Walzer only deal with humanitarianism explicitly when discussing that issue. So can we find, building out from the account of Walzer's internationalist moral minimalism, the basis for a much broader reading of humanitarianism, and as a consequence, humanitarian internationalism?

The excerpts from *Thick and Thin* gloss over what is clearly a very important and fertile area of Walzer's internationalism, the space revealed by allusion to the “moral support of outsiders” in defence of “Truth”, “Justice,” and, presumably, “Life” and “Liberty” as well. Walzer cautions that we should avoid “missionizing

⁸³ Walzer, "The Politics of Rescue": 65-66.

maximalism”.⁸⁴ This reminds us of the missionary excesses of some of the abolitionists in the nineteenth century who envisioned the end of slavery as the opportunity either for the slaves to become “good” Christians and/or the subjects of a “benevolent” British imperialism. In doing so, it suggests that a dose of “moral minimalism” might be beneficial to the politicisation of our humanitarian impulses, inevitable as that politicisation, and our moral presumption, may be. Walzer cites organisations like Amnesty International as possible models of how to move “from the particular to the general,” arguing that they can have an effective critical role to play, “so long as they restrain whatever impulse their members have to impose a complete set of moral principles across the range of cultural differences.”⁸⁵ There is an interesting set of ideas at play here. Here in Britain, Amnesty relies on the support of highly committed moral maximalist actors, religious groups for instance. Yet it seems plausible that it has more power contesting torture in a Latin American country than a delegation of Church of England bishops. Simultaneously, within that Latin American country, it will probably be part of a broader campaign, involving perhaps delegations of local priests. So while at first glance Walzer’s internationalism may seem rather too minimal in the eyes of many “progressives,” this may be deceptive, the thinness contains many possibilities, illustrated by Amnesty, the creation of Peter Benenson, a Jewish Old-Etonian Labour lawyer whose moral conscience was sparked by classical internationalist causes such as the Spanish Civil War.⁸⁶ Indeed, his initial “Appeal for Amnesty” referred, in words similar to those of Walzer cited above, to the motivating potential of moral disgust as spur of a practical humanitarianism:

The newspaper reader feels a sickening sense of impotence. Yet if these feelings of disgust all over the world could be united into common action, something effective could be done.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Walzer, *Thick and Thin*, 49.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ For an excellent account of Amnesty and its origins see Hopgood, *Keepers of the Flame*, 54-57.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 56.

It is a call to a political humanitarian internationalism, contra the impotence implied by Mazzini's warning of the perils of a jaded cosmopolitanism. Benenson's call was heeded by a coalition familiar to students of abolitionism: Unitarians, Quakers, and secular progressives. Interestingly, Stephen Hopgood tells us that initially Amnesty had trouble building Southern membership, and evolved its balance between thick and thin in a manner parallel to the development of Latin American liberation theology "that stressed local circumstances, the preference of God for the poor, and the prospect of earthly salvation", against the blanket universalism of the Church.⁸⁸ Hopgood stresses the marginality and internationalism of Amnesty's early supporters: they resemble the internal critics Walzer celebrates.⁸⁹ So Walzer, in pointing to Amnesty, is highlighting a model that both draws on a similar political coalition of humanitarian activists, with thick moral conceptions. Yet it is able to function effectively precisely because of the thinness of its message of understanding, of rejection of threats to "Life" and "Liberty," a message to be thickened out and implemented locally.

This is vital in explicating the space in a Walzerian internationalism for the humanitarian impulse. Quite clearly, this space is larger than the dominant debates within international political theory would suggest. The previous chapter showed how the prioritisation of intervention within international political theory leads to an implied identification of humanitarianism and humanitarian intervention. Walzer is as guilty of this as the next theorist, but the preceding paragraphs confirm that this identification would be quite wrong, for it is precisely the humanitarian impulse, and the humanitarian solidarities that emerge from it, that speaks to his understanding of internationalism.

Walzer has used the analogy of the hotel room to elucidate the meaning of moral minimalism. A hotel room replicates in anonymous and often anodyne form

⁸⁸ Ibid., 59. This relates back to the point made in the previous chapter about human rights being more effective when articulated as a local vernacular, rather than as a kind of moral Esperanto.

⁸⁹ Notably in Walzer, *The Company of Critics: Social Criticism and Political Commitment in the Twentieth Century*

many of the functions of the home, but one cannot be or feel at home in it.⁹⁰ Yet on occasion it can provide much-needed shelter and sustenance. For those who have nowhere to feel at home, either because they simply have no home, or because their home is lacking in the basic amenities of warmth and shelter (or freedom from massacre or enslavement), “hotels” can mean the difference between life and death. The obvious parallel to draw in terms of humanitarianism is the plight of the refugee discussed earlier, which Walzer alludes to in relation to the hotel room analogy in *Interpretation and Social Criticism*, and explores in more general terms in *Spheres of Justice*.⁹¹ As Calhoun notes, the stateless are “citizens of the world” in its more terrifying sense of “exclusion from citizenship and rights in particular states”.⁹² Perhaps, then, we might think of the refugee as an involuntary citizen of the world, one who exposes the hardship that reliance on that citizenship entails. Yet for the refugee fleeing persecution, it is everything. The granting of the status of refugee does not solve any of the thicker problems that led to the flight of the refugee in the first place, but our urge to rescue demands that we grant it. It is a sticking plaster, a term frequently used by humanitarians to describe their efforts. A sticking plaster is of course very “thin”, dealing only with symptoms. Yet when the patient is bleeding to death, it is vital. No-one can heal a corpse, whoever is paying the medical bills.

Interestingly, the internationalist account of moral minimalism Walzer provides is not entirely antithetical to cosmopolitan thought as an organising perspective on our moral life. The recent restatement of philosophical cosmopolitanism by Appiah is of particular relevance, for the account it provides of

⁹⁰ Walzer cites Franz Kafka, who claimed to feel at home in hotel rooms, as an exception, noting the irony that to express his satisfaction with hotels, Kafka used the expression “at home.” Michael Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism* (London: Harvard University Press, 1987), 15. The hotel analogy is also discussed in Brown, *Sovereignty, Rights and Justice*, 93.

⁹¹ Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice: A Defence of Pluralism and Equality* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 48-51. Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism*, 15-16. The International Rescue Committee features as its motto “from harm to home”. The sad reality is that for most displaced people in the world today, the best they can hope for is probably a “hotel”. *International Rescue Committee*. Available at <http://www.theirc.org/>; accessed on 01 August 2010.

⁹² Calhoun, “Cosmopolitanism in the Modern Social Imaginary”: 109.

moral agreement and disagreement explicitly bases itself on Walzer's conceptualisation of "thick" and "thin" values. He describes thin concepts as "something like placeholders. When notions of right and wrong are actually at work, they're thickly enmeshed in the complications of particular social contexts ... morality starts out thick".⁹³ Appiah is concerned with finding agreement through encounter and conversation, and so:

It's when you're trying to find points of agreement with others, say, that you start to abstract out the thin concepts that may underlie the thick ones.

Thin concepts seem to be universal; we aren't the only people who have the concepts of right and wrong, good and bad; every society, it seems, has terms that correspond to these thin concepts, too. Even thick concepts like rudeness and courage are ones that you find pretty much everywhere. But there are thicker concepts still that really are peculiar to particular societies. And the most fundamental level of disagreement occurs when one party to a discussion invokes a concept that the other simply doesn't have. This is the kind of disagreement where the struggle is not to agree but just to understand.⁹⁴

There is a slightly different emphasis here in the understanding of thick and thin, and Appiah's conception of thin concepts certainly reveals itself to be more foundational as his argument develops. He arguably is also more optimistic than Walzer on how thick agreement might become when we meet on thin terrain. But his description of the interaction between thick starting points and mutually-held thin conceptions shares with Walzer an understanding of how our moral lives play out, and thus serves as a promising zone of agreement, the zone this chapter has been searching for.

In the final analysis, the use of Walzer's moral minimalism as a basis for a humanitarian internationalism serves three functions, the least important of which perhaps turns out to be the "hard-case" value, namely that if we can tie together the humanitarian impulse and a liberal communitarian perspective, we *a fortiori* have a package that many cosmopolitans would accept as a minimal improvement, especially those who broadly share his picture of moral life, such as Appiah. His

⁹³ Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism*, 46.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 46-47.

phenomenology of our moral life directs our attention to how humanitarian problems arise in a world of states, the world in which humanitarians on the ground have to work. Finally, it serves to cast our focus on the sources and variety of our moral responses in a manner closely related to the account of the humanitarian impulse explored in the previous chapters.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that a hermetically sealed “humanitarian space” is both unrealistic and undesirable, especially given professional humanitarians’ misgivings about becoming rulers. As such, it was seen that an engagement with the state as an actor was inevitable. The argument made was that this engagement should not merely be seen as a damage limitation exercise, for the state, in its more benign forms, can come to represent precisely the kind of sustained institutionalisation of humanitarian gains for which professional humanitarians strive. There is, for instance, a strong argument that humans are less “made to suffer” in liberal democracies than any other form of polity yet invented. Moreover, as actors in international politics, states are capable both of action on a scale inaccessible to other kinds of actors, and are also capable of embodying collective understandings of what humanitarian politics should entail. This is not without its excesses of course. Many of these are the excesses documented throughout the thesis. But a modest internationalism suggests a good basis for humanitarian solidarity nevertheless. This was illustrated by engaging with the work of Michael Walzer, whose thin universalism sets out a useful account of how our identities and solidarities structure our moral and political lives, one that realistically reflects the muddle of solidarities and empathetic interactions so characteristic of the “politics of humanity”, as set out in earlier chapters of this thesis.

7. Conclusion: The Struggle for Humanity

The “humanitarian identity crisis” turns out to be something of a proxy war. The prominent place of humanitarianism in international public discourse since the end of the Cold War has, above all, provided a context in which to express a perennial struggle, that over the meaning and content of human identity. This struggle takes place through a “politics of humanity”, an inevitably complex politics, the breadth of which can never fully be encompassed by any particular practice, even one that aspires to always act in its name. This thesis has set out some of the crucial parameters of this politics.

I suggested, in Chapter 2, that the first area of complexity and negotiation concerns human suffering. I argued that it is important to look beyond pre-determined framings of “emergency” and “crisis”, and to pay attention to how concern is prompted and nourished by our responses to suffering, such as a visceral rejection of cruelty. It is through these that we come to formulate our sense of common humanity, in response to instances of inhumanity that take on a greater symbolic power as “crises of humanity”. As such, professional humanitarians may indeed be the “sentinels between the human and the inhuman”, but the boundary that they patrol is not always clearly marked out in advance.¹ Indeed, they cannot always be sure themselves of exactly which side of it they are on.

Expanding and defending the territory won for “humanity”, depends in part on the ability to tell “sad and sentimental stories” that help to see others as “like us”. Sometimes, for those with an already rich sense of common humanity, such as the Rescuers of Jews during the Holocaust, seeing others as “like us” simply at the level of a shared human identity can be enough to prompt action. For such tales to have wider traction, they need to both draw on but also expand our capacity for empathy. In Chapter 3 I argued that in overcoming indifference and the abstract quality that the suffering of others can acquire, sentimental stories can also

¹ Ignatieff, *The Warrior's Honor*, 161.

dehumanise those whose tales they tell, leading to responses of pity at best. Yet there seems little else but to tell better, more representative stories, and to work to bring together disparate kinds of engagement with suffering into political constituencies for a more humane politics. This was seen to be a process that does not sit particularly well with a blanket demand for impartial concern, not least because it represents a struggle, and struggles are not dispassionate affairs.

At the heart of the humanitarian action that does take place are practices of rescue. The apparently simple notion of saving a human life must always be central to humanitarianism, as I argued in Chapter 4. Yet it presents perhaps the most profound conundrum of humanitarian action: attributing significance to humanity means that saving a human life is necessarily far more complex than simply saving a human body. Any action, claiming to take place in the name of humanity, that fails to save human bodies will always be suspect. But so too is action that privileges the saving of bodies above all else, for it too will rightly be seen as lacking in humanity in its more ineffable sense. The carrying out of even the simplest act of rescue was thus seen to be a deeply contingent and presumptuous occasion. It involves taking the consequences of action seriously, not least because of the demonstrable capacity for humanitarian action to cause harm, but it also requires that we understand the broader motivational context in which “good” humanitarian consequences come to be envisaged and marked as valuable. Moreover, along with problems of unintentional harm comes the irresolvable paradox of humanitarian violence.

Attempts to overcome, or at least minimise, these contingencies were explored in Chapter 5. A core concern of professional humanitarians is their unaccountability, but their own efforts to hold themselves to account ultimately cannot equate to truly empowering those they aspire to help. Frequently, in fact, it renders them more accountable to the donors, and the social contexts of concern, that fund and enable them. As such, I examined more ambitious attempts to empower current and potential future victims of unacceptable suffering. The dominant project in this regard is the language and institutions of universal human rights. But in extreme contexts of human rights violation, the possibility of

humanitarian intervention returns us to the paradoxes of humanitarian violence, and moreover raises the question of what else but humanitarianism can describe the sphere of concern and the acts of last resort that lie beyond the inevitable failures of any given version of a human rights regime. A similar set of issues affects the ambition to devote humanitarianism to seeking a more comprehensive engagement with the root causes of suffering through projects of global justice. But engaging with such projects yielded two insights important to understanding humanitarianism: that we do not necessarily need to find or agree on transcendental ideals of justice to improve the world around us, and that humanitarians can usefully politicise the unacceptability of the suffering they encounter as representing injustice. A common sense of injustice can provide the basis for an account of human solidarity.

The politics of this human solidarity were then explored in Chapter 6. I argued that it is ultimately both impossible and undesirable for humanitarians to ring-fence their endeavour within a separate “humanitarian space”, and that, if they are to take the politics of their endeavour seriously, they need to take seriously the weightiest bearer of political authority, the state. Rather than risk reifying the state as the definitive humanitarian actor, I then set out an account of internationalist solidarity, one that acknowledges the ways in which states can provide the context to institutionalise humanitarian gains, and the potential for expressing a collective humanitarian politics in the world. This was illustrated by an engagement with the international political theory of Michael Walzer, whose thin universalism provides a useful description of how our identities and solidarities structure our lives, and can enable a suitably modest humanitarian presumption in interacting with others, whether at national or international levels.

In the remainder of this concluding chapter, I will first reconsider, in the light of the contours I have set out for the “politics of humanity”, David Rieff’s contention that “even at its best, humanitarian action is always an emblem of failure”.² I will argue that while expanding the scope of humanitarianism beyond the realm of professional humanitarianism has revealed much that is troubling

² Rieff, *A Bed for the Night*, 304.

about the workings of the humanitarian impulse, it also enables us to counter Rieff's assertion with a note of cautious optimism about the persistence of our resources of human solidarity. In the second half of the chapter, I argue that these resources will be in high demand, in view of coming humanitarian challenges. In particular, I argue that anthropogenic climate change precisely presents us with a "crisis of humanity", in response to which the argument put forward in this thesis provides us with useful conceptual tools, but also reveals the daunting humanitarian challenge ahead.

I Failing Better? Humanity on a Human Scale

There is little doubt that, whatever definition one employs, humanitarianism is intimately linked to the many failures of human solidarity. That much was made clear in Chapter 2, wherein our very idea of common humanity was seen to emerge through a negative process of defining unacceptable suffering. Indeed, some of these failures were seen to be professional humanitarians' own. But while the perspective of professional humanitarians was seen to be a useful starting point for the exploration of the dilemmas and paradoxes that characterise the "politics of humanity", it also contains a serious risk of taking the part for the whole when it comes to deciding how one might assess at any given point, whether the world has made any progress towards becoming a more humane place.

The danger here is that because professional humanitarianism is set up to deal with the most acute forms of human suffering, because it functions in "exceptional" contexts, we read the progress of humanitarian concerns only through the suffering they have failed to alleviate or to prevent. There are good reasons for this, to do with the struggling, passionate nature of humanitarianism as a politics of refusal, one that is prompted by outstanding injustices. But as I argued in Chapter 3, humanitarianism is not served by seeing the world only as a place of suffering and misery, or rather, of seeing humanity as defined only by its worst moments. Rieff himself acknowledges that

The tragedy of humanitarianism may be that for all its failings and all the limitations of its viewpoint, it represents what is decent in an indecent world. Its core assumptions – solidarity, a fundamental sympathy for victims and an antipathy for oppressors and exploiters – are what we are in those rare moments of grace when we are at our best.³

But is the formulation of such a package, even in the worst contexts, not an achievement in and of itself? Moreover, beyond humanity's theatres of disgrace, it is a package that has been quite substantially institutionalised, as I argued in Chapter 6, in a number of liberal democratic states, and interstate organisations, of which the European Union is an important example, often through domestic humanitarian reform campaigns. Indeed, it is important to remember that in the nineteenth century humanitarianism was not the predominantly international category it has come to be identified with today. I put forward this argument not to defend a complacent view of Western interventionism, the failings and excesses of which I have acknowledged throughout this thesis. Rather, I wish instead to point to the substantial lived experience of past humanitarian gains.

To give one example, the fact that, as a citizen of the United Kingdom, it seems in no way unusual that, as far as I can tell, I have no particular disposition towards racial prejudice, clearly represents a past humanitarian gain. No humanitarian credit should accrue to me for this fact, nor is there any kind of humanitarian impulse at stake. It is precisely the banality of no longer seeing others through dehumanising lenses that represents the achievement of a humanitarian politics in this example. The more general point is that once one moves beyond the requirement for a certain kind of active motivation, and the requirement for altruism, to be present in every encounter or action, one can take a more expansive view of moral progress regarding human solidarity in a Rortean, non-deterministic sense.⁴ Rorty writes that:

³ Ibid., 334.

⁴ Though for compelling arguments against the still-powerful humanist hope that underpins this thesis, see John Gray, *Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals* (London: Granta Books, 2002). John Gray, *Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia* (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 2007).

The view that I am offering says that there is such a thing as moral progress, and that this progress is indeed in the direction of greater human solidarity. But that solidarity is not thought of as recognition of a core self, the human essence, in all human beings. Rather it is thought of as the ability to see more and more traditional differences (of tribe, religion, race, customs, and the like) as unimportant when compared with similarities with respect to pain and humiliation – the ability to think of people wildly different from ourselves as included in the range of “us”.⁵

Furthermore, when it comes to current action, professional humanitarians find it especially difficult to accommodate the more partial, in both senses of the term, humanitarianisms of the ordinary individuals who make up so-called “global civil society”, and of states, the failings of which so often fill their schedules. But the popes of humanitarianism have had to recognise their own fallibility in recent years. Indeed, those who would have others see them as infallible generally have to issue a Bull to that effect, a term arguably as descriptive of such a document’s content as it is of its form. Simultaneously, professional humanitarians should be aware that, one of the greatest dangers for humanitarianism is to become, or remain, an elite project, as then its fate will rest with that of the elite in question.

Moreover, on the account presented here, it is precisely the interaction of these two kinds of actors, individuals and states, that both determines the operating context for professional humanitarians, but also sustains more durable humanitarian gains. This is not to say that there is no place, for, say, a humanitarian organisation like the ICRC that clearly states the political neutrality of its action, and consistently respects its own operating principles. On the contrary, the point is that the ICRC does not need to make a hegemonic claim on the identity of humanitarianism to succeed in its endeavours. It can truthfully state the principles according to which it operates, without needing to state, mendaciously, that this is

⁵ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, 192. I take Norman Geras’ point that Rorty neither needs to or quite succeeds in escaping essentialism entirely here. But this does not undermine the relevance of the process he describes. Geras, *Solidarity in the Conversation of Humankind*.

the only way to be humanitarian.⁶ This is important if we are to avoid only seeking the kind of bittersweet humanitarian success envisaged by Goethe in 1787: “I must admit that I too consider it true that humanity will finally be victorious, but I also fear that the world will turn into a vast hospital and each of us will become the other’s humane nurse”.⁷ To do so would be like seeing health only in terms of what went on in hospitals.

A more tempting vision of humanity is suggested by David Miller, who enjoins us “always to see human beings as both patients and agents: needy and vulnerable creatures who cannot survive without the help of others, but at the same time people who can make choices and take responsibility for their lives”⁸ Success on these terms seems both more in keeping with the argument presented here, and, though in no way easy, perhaps a more realistic goal to aim for. Admittedly, Miller’s political vision of humanity is one that reveals the intractability of the dilemmas of humanitarian representation explored in Chapter 3: to take the individual for the whole? To portray the vulnerable victim, or the feel-good success story? To somehow convey both is both necessary and extremely difficult. It may be best achieved through the kind of sustained storytelling, such as in novels, identified by both Rorty and Lynn Hunt as crucial to the development of a richer sense of common humanity. While humanitarians were seen, in the Introduction, to be recognising the political nature of their endeavour and “acknowledging that they have been speaking prose”, they cannot afford to forget how to write poetry, if they

⁶ This relates to the debate on the risks facing aid workers in the field. Laura Hammond argues that the integrity of a list of principles is not crucial in determining the safety of aid workers, since those attacking them in recent conflicts are concerned with the symbolic power of attacking humanitarianism. Indeed, she argues that humanitarian integrity can lead to a false sense of security, though they clearly have value in other respects. For her, reducing risk is linked to the strength of the relationships they can build with the recipients of their aid, and the accountability with which they act with regard to them. Hammond, “The Power of Holding Humanitarianism Hostage and the Myth of Protective Principles”.

⁷ Cited in Alain Finkielkraut, *In the Name of Humanity: Reflections on the Twentieth Century* (London: Pimlico, 2001), 89.

⁸ David Miller, *National Responsibility and Global Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 21.

are to do justice to the revelatory moments of humanitarianism, which take place on an intimate scale.⁹

Another way of putting all this is to recognise the importance of a kind of democratic impulse in the politics of humanity. We have already seen this in several different contexts: the power of a life story, fully told (Chapter 3); the desire of professional humanitarians to be accountable to those they aid (Chapter 5); the promise of human “rights talk” to empower victims to speak (Chapter 5); the importance of bearing witness as a last ditch attempt to preserve the “possibility of humanity” (Chapter 4). This is the intuition that, though humanitarian action itself is necessarily presumptive (we presume to help the patient, but in doing so may constrain the agent), it is at its best when it creates space for the voices of those with whose suffering it is concerned, and it considers their felt injustices (and indeed perhaps the felt injustices of their enemies) alongside the mobilising collective sense of an injustice done to others.

By raising the question of a democratic impulse, I make no pretence to be articulating a cosmopolitan vision of global democracy. The “politics of humanity” is clearly far too contingent for that, not least because it is a politics without political community, and because, in answer to the classic question of democratic politics, “who are the people?”, the answer must always be both simple, everyone, and infinitely contestable, anyone.¹⁰ In the absence of a collective agency of humanity, claims to act in the name of humanity necessarily serve as surrogates, with the totalising excesses that implies.

Rather, in pointing to the importance of a democratic impulse, I want to make the point that since humanity is political, it is important to consider how we approach the “politics of humanity”: do we want a totalitarian understanding of it, in which only a privileged few can legitimately speak “in the name of humanity”? If

⁹ Stein, “Humanitarianism as Political Fusion”: 741.

¹⁰ For a recent apposite use of “everyone” as a humanitarian campaign slogan, see Save the Children, *Everyone: Our Campaign to Save Children's Lives*. Available at <http://everyone.org/en/>; accessed on 13 August 2010. The front page of the campaign website asks a classic Singerian question: “Q1: What would you give up if you knew it would save the life of a child you’ve never met?” The possible answers are: “a cup of tea”, “a meal”, “a day’s pay”, “a holiday”, “a car”, “your home”, “nothing at all”, “don’t know”.

not, some sense of democracy seems appropriate. Furthermore, I do not want to tie the notion to any single definitive characteristic of democracy, such as deliberation, for example.¹¹ Indeed, in response to a reification of their master signifier by deliberative democracy theorists, Michael Walzer provides a long list of the different elements that, for him, characterise the play of democratic politics: political education, organisation, mobilisation, demonstration, statement, debate, bargaining, lobbying, campaigning, voting, fund-raising, corruption, mundane chores, ruling.¹² Over the course of the thesis, humanitarianism has been seen as implicated in all these political activities at different times. Thus, if a humanitarian “politics of humanity” is characterised by anything, it is complexity. The temptation will always be to try to resolve that complexity, to find a key that will simplify it. I have argued that such an enterprise is doomed. What clarity I offer is as follows: by embracing their endeavour as engaged in a particular kind of politics, humanitarians of all hues can cease to situate themselves merely as outsiders to various brands of politics, the interaction with which either pollutes one or the other party (and critiques of humanitarianism are generally concerned with either one or the other). Instead, they can start to acknowledge, and in doing so enrich, the real discussion they are engaged in, and bring home with greater force the importance for all of us of its outcomes.

Moreover, the complexity of this politics implies a degree of humility with regard to the legitimacy and qualities of its stakeholders. Firstly, if a democratic quality is to be preserved, it demands that the voices of those to whom solidarity is tendered should be heard, even if they cannot entirely be honoured across all the parameters of activity.

Furthermore, in contrast to an idealised ethical act, the complex nature of the “politics of humanity” is not one particularly well served by a requirement for perfect global altruists. In campaigning and mobilising, it may be best not to draw

¹¹ Though, for a more expansive conception of deliberation, argumentation and contestation in non-Western democratic traditions, see Amartya Sen, *The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian Culture, History and Politics* (London: Allen Lane, 2005).

¹² Michael Walzer, "Deliberation, and What Else?" in *Thinking Politically: Essays in Political Theory*, ed. David Miller (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2007).

on transcendental ideals, recalling Sen's warning against their value in making comparative judgements. We all know people around us who are comparatively more empathetic and more humane than us. Is it not better to look to them for inspiration, rather than to seek it in a transcendental ideal of perfect humanity, or to enact it only with respect to distant strangers? After all, Jean Pictet quotes Francis Bacon as saying that "a man who does not treat his neighbour humanely is not truly human"¹³

Simultaneously, we need to constantly avoid the peril of this kind of comparison reifying humanitarianism as a solely ethical endeavour, and recognise that of those empathetic and humane people, those who engage seriously with their political context, and take on the responsibility of getting their hands dirty, tend to achieve more than those who merely dispense well-motivated charity.

This leads to the important last item in Walzer's list: ruling. Again, this reminds us of the half-formed nature of placing one's faith in global civil society. For all of the benefits of a grassroots politics "from below", there always comes a time (if the politics is successful) of rule from "above".¹⁴ Professional humanitarians have found themselves ill-suited to this task, and as Chapter 6 argued, the democratic state, as imperfect as current incarnations of it might be, still clearly presents the most viable option, both in terms of sensitivity to the claims of domestic politics and of an internal humanitarian space, and to the possibility, through such claims, of taking seriously the needs of others.

Humanitarianism may be an emblem of failure: failure because we are still impossibly far from stopping people being cruel to each other, and on a smaller, more intimate scale, failure for the same mysterious reasons that some families do not get along.¹⁵ But it also succeeds if we can come to care about cruelty in common, shared ways, and that can not entirely be captured by particular practices

¹³ Pictet, *The Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross*, unpaginated text.

¹⁴ We might think here of the disillusionment of many of Obama's supporters almost as soon as he took office and began to govern.

¹⁵ There are interesting links here to discussions on the relationship between kinship and humanitarian projects, involving discourses such as those referring to a "family of man". See David Mole, *Discourses of World Kinship and the United Nations: The Quest for a Human Family*, unpublished doctoral thesis (London: London School of Economics, 2009).

such as the “neutral, impartial provision of relief”, though it helps to explain why such practices may well be desirable. If, however, we are to envisage not only patients but agents as the objects of humanitarian action, we need to take seriously the complexities of the “politics of humanity”, and seek in it the expression of a democratic impulse, as the best way to manage a rich and constantly contested idea of shared humanity. This more expansive view of the problem of humanitarianism is certainly more demanding, but yields a richer sense of the ways in which it has already been successful in enabling people to live lives less tainted by degradation and inhumanity.

II Humanitarian Futures: The Challenge of Climate Change as a “Crisis of Humanity”

There is no indication that the earthquakes, floods, droughts, massacres, civil conflicts, wars and forced migratory flows that have kept professional humanitarians so busy during their “identity crisis” are on the decrease. In the course of this thesis I have attempted to enrich the discussion of the many dilemmas and paradoxes that emerge as professional humanitarians tackle them. In this final section, though, I wish to argue that the broad concept of humanitarianism that I summarised in the previous section allows us not just to have a richer sense of the role of humanitarianism in our moral lives, our sense of human identity and the possibilities of human solidarity. It also provides us with important conceptual tools to make sense of climate change as a humanitarian problem. While the brief analysis presented here has no silver bullet policy prescriptions to make, it aims to demonstrate the conceptual value-added of my approach in addressing climate change, to warn against the wrong turnings taken by dominant international political theory approaches, and, in doing so, to suggest the contours of a wider research project of establishing more fully the nature of climate change as a crucial humanitarian problem.

Climate change promises to be the dominant humanitarian concern of the twenty-first century, at least indirectly.¹⁶ This is because its probable effects, even in relatively good-case scenarios, will be substantially to increase the incidences of all of the “classic” humanitarian problems mentioned at the beginning of this section.¹⁷ Even the most optimistic scenarios suggest that extreme weather events will become more frequent and more intense, mostly resulting in adverse effects on human systems.¹⁸ Overall, the weight of scientific analysis behind landmark documents such as the *Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change* and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change’s (IPCC) Assessment Reports, the most recent of which came out in 2007, suggests that climate change presents, even in best-case scenarios, a daunting challenge to human survival in many parts of the world.¹⁹ According to John Holmes, the outgoing UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator: “[any] credible vision of

¹⁶ For a selection of major practitioner reports, see CARE International, Maplecroft and OCHA, *Humanitarian Implications of Climate Change: Mapping Emerging Trends and Risk Hotspots* (CARE International, 2008). Available at http://www.careclimatechange.org/files/reports/CARE_Human_Implications.pdf; accessed on 20 August 2010. Global Humanitarian Forum, *The Human Face of Climate Change*, Forum 2008 (Geneva: Global Humanitarian Forum, 2008). Available at http://www2.ghf-ge.org/annual_forum/forum_2008_new/index.cfm. IOM, *Migration and Climate Change* (Geneva: International Organization for Migration, 2008). Available at [http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/lib.nsf/db900sid/ASAZ-7CGDBH/\\$file/iom_dec2007.pdf?openelement](http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/lib.nsf/db900sid/ASAZ-7CGDBH/$file/iom_dec2007.pdf?openelement); accessed on 20 June 2010. UNDP, *Fighting Climate Change*. For a summary of the data as applied to individual countries, see UNDP, *UNDP Climate Change Country Profiles*. Available at <http://country-profiles.geog.ox.ac.uk/>; accessed on 20 August 2010. Another useful resource is CARE, *Climate Change Information Centre*. Available at <http://www.careclimatechange.org/>; accessed on 20 August 2010.

¹⁷ See for instance Nicholas Stern, *A Blueprint for a Safer Planet: How to Manage Climate Change and Create a New Era of Progress and Prosperity* (London: Bodley Head, 2009), 27-31. Good popular surveys are Elizabeth Kolbert, *Field Notes from a Catastrophe: A Frontline Report on Climate Change* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007). Mark Lynas, *Six Degrees: Our Future on a Hotter Planet* (London: Harper Perennial, 2008). See also Jared Diamond, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (New York: Penguin, 2005).

¹⁸ IPCC, *Climate Change 2007: Synthesis Report. Contribution of Working Groups I, II and III to the Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* (Geneva: IPCC, 2007), 12. Available at http://www.ipcc.ch/publications_and_data/ar4/syr/en/contents.html; accessed on 13 August 2010.

¹⁹ Ibid. Nicholas Stern, *The Economics of Climate Change: The Stern Review* (London: HM Treasury, 2006). Available at http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/stern_review_report.htm; accessed on 13 August 2010.

the future must recognise that humanitarian needs are increasing. Climate change will be the main driver.”²⁰

Indeed, for Holmes, writing in late 2008, these consequences were already with us. “Nine out of every ten disasters are now climate-related. Recorded disasters have doubled in number from 200 a year to more than 400 over the past two decades.”²¹ The Red Cross movement already sees itself as “in the front line of climate change impacts.”²² For instance, the drying up of Lake Chad is pinpointed by many as a factor that might merit the description of the crisis in Darfur as “the first climate change war”.²³ Ban Ki-moon has highlighted the issue of displacement within humanitarianism, calling it “arguably the most significant humanitarian challenge that we face.”²⁴ Indeed, this area of the humanitarian practice seems particularly likely to come under strain in coming decades following the effects of climate change.²⁵ It is extremely hard to give detailed displacement scenarios, and the predictions of total likely numbers come with clear health warnings attached. However, it seems fairly clear that even in the best-case scenarios millions of people will be displaced by climate change (among other interrelated factors) within a few decades. One widely-used loose estimate predicts 200 million displaced by mid-century.²⁶ Not only would such scenarios no doubt overwhelm the capacities of professional humanitarianism, but they are likely to present a very real challenge to

²⁰ John Holmes, “More Help Now, Please”, *The Economist: The World in 2009* (19 November 2008). Available at http://www.economist.com/theworldin/displayStory.cfm?story_id=12494621; accessed on 17 June 2010.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Red Cross/Red Crescent Climate Centre, *Red Cross/Red Crescent Climate Guide* (The Hague: IFRC, 2007), 16. Available at http://www.climatecentre.org/downloads/File/reports/RCRC_climateguide.pdf; accessed on 13 August 2010.

²³ Anthony Giddens, *The Politics of Climate Change* (Cambridge: Polity, 2009), 205. Brauman also recently noted this, though he pointed out that in terms of dealing with the consequences, professional humanitarians had adopted fairly classical procedures. Brauman, “Masterclass: A Review of the Last Two Decades of Humanitarian Assistance”.

²⁴ Ban Ki-moon, *Report of the Secretary-General on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict (S/2007/643)* (United Nations Security Council, 2007).

²⁵ The problem was addressed in some depth in *Forced Migration Review*, “Special Issue on Climate Change and Displacement”, *Forced Migration Review*, no. 31 (2008).

²⁶ Oli Brown, “The Numbers Game”, *Forced Migration Review*, no. 31 (2008).

the more diffuse humanitarian gains illustrated in the previous section. As such, it seems appropriate to characterise climate change as an incipient “meta-emergency” or “meta-crisis” in the conventional sense of “humanitarian crisis”.

But in Chapter 2 it emerged that frequently, behind a “humanitarian crisis”, we can identify a “crisis of humanity”. This either grounds the concern with suffering that characterises our interaction with future “humanitarian crises”, in the sense that professional humanitarians’ sense of the fragility of common humanity revealed by Auschwitz conditions their understanding of, say, the Rwandan Genocide. But a “crisis of humanity” can also be found within the fabric of a “humanitarian crisis”, as was also the case in Rwanda. The argument I wish to make here, is that, more than a “meta-humanitarian crisis”, climate change also represents a “crisis of humanity” in that second sense. That is, the likely “meta-humanitarian crisis” of climate change reveals in a new way a human capacity to endanger the very terms of a common humanity.²⁷

Crucial here is the well-established scientific consensus on the anthropogenic nature of climate change.²⁸ As Randolph Kent, now director of the Humanitarian Futures Programme (HFP) at King’s College, wrote in a *tour d’horizon* of humanitarian crises:

Among the hallmarks of the present age is the fact that human beings have become a force that in many ways dictates the course of nature. The relationship between nature and humans has to that extent altered significantly. Throughout most of history, human beings were subject to nature’s whims. Now the actions of humankind not only affect the prospects

²⁷ Another important example of a possible “crisis of humanity” in this sense would be the invention of the atom bomb.

²⁸ Naomi Oreskes, “The Scientific Consensus on Climate Change: How Do We Know We’re Not Wrong?” in *Climate Change: What It Means for Us, Our Children, and Our Grandchildren*, ed. Joseph F. C. DiMento and Pamela Doughman (London: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2007).

for the survival of the species itself, but also impact on the oceans, the lands, the weather and indeed the very stability of the planet.²⁹

The crucial point here, though, is that human impact on the climate constitutes an involuntary and uncontrolled collective human agency. It has not been able to replace nature's whims with humankind's will. It has merely succeeded in raising the stakes of the play of nature's whims.³⁰ The problem of responding to the threat of climate change brings home the absence of a meaningful, volitional collective agency of humanity with which to respond to the problem, and forces us to place our hopes in more diffuse and contingent possibilities of human solidarity. But, for the eminent historian David Hollinger:

Global warming is a convenient example of a threat to everyone that is difficult to engage from the point of view of any solidarity smaller than the species. But any solidarity capacious enough to act effectively on problems located in a large arena is poorly suited to satisfy the human need for belonging. And any solidarity tight enough to serve the need for belonging cannot be expected to respond effectively to challenges common to a larger and more heterogeneous population. To be sure, one can have multiple affiliations, many 'we's,' some more capacious than others. That we all have multiple identities (national, ethnoracial, religious, sexual, geographical, ideological, professional, generational, etc.) and are capable of several solidarities is widely understood. But the energies and resources and affections of individuals are not infinite in supply.³¹

As such the humanitarian challenge of climate change goes far deeper than increasing the frequency of "humanitarian crises", it reveals what Hollinger calls the "political economy of solidarity", and brings sharply into focus both the necessity and the difficulty of the "politics of humanity" at stake.³²

²⁹ Kent, "International Humanitarian Crises": 860. For the HFP's analysis of climate change, see HFP, *Humanitarian Horizons: Climate Change and Its Humanitarian Impacts* (London: Humanitarian Futures Programme, 2009). Available at <http://www.humanitarianfutures.org/main/hfppubs/climatechange>; accessed on 20 June 2010. See also HFP and FIC, *Humanitarian Horizons: A Practitioners' Guide to the Future* (Boston: Feinstein International Center, 2010).

³⁰ For an alarming view of nature fighting back, see James Lovelock, *The Revenge of Gaia* (London: Penguin, 2006).

³¹ Hollinger, "From Identity to Solidarity": 27.

³² *Ibid.*

For Stephen M. Gardiner, in climate change, we have created a “perfect moral storm” for ourselves.³³ For him, the problem of climate change is characterised by a dispersion of causes and effects, a fragmentation of agency, and institutional inadequacy. Moreover, these daunting characteristics play out across spatial, temporal/intergenerational and theoretical dimensions. Not only does the idea of a “perfect moral storm” indicate just how profound the “crisis of humanity” might be here, it should also sound a note of caution when it comes to setting out the normative contours of the problem. It is here that my approach to humanitarianism presents the potential for serious value-added over dominant ways of conceptualising the normative challenges ahead.

I already alluded, in Chapter 5, to the limitations of conceptualising every problem as a human rights problem, taking climate change as an example. The other prominent and understandable concern, present in contemporary climate change international political theory, is to formulate a theory of climate justice.³⁴ This intersects with prominent NGO calls for “climate justice”.³⁵ Such work generally wishes to provide an account of past, present and future responsibilities for greenhouse gas emissions that can both be fair and just, and generate a collective emissions trajectory compatible with the extremely demanding global reduction requirements associated with less-than-catastrophic climate change. What I wish to question here, is not so much the proposals that come out of such work and such calls, but the starting assumption that a transcendental ideal of justice that can encompass past and present responsibilities for greenhouse gas emissions is at all

³³ Stephen M. Gardiner, "A Perfect Moral Storm: Climate Change, Intergenerational Ethics and the Problem of Moral Corruption", *Environmental Values* 15 (2006).

³⁴ For representative examples of this rapidly expanding literature, see Simon Caney, "Cosmopolitan Justice, Responsibility, and Global Climate Change", *Leiden Journal of International Law* 18, no. 04 (2005). Edward A. Page, *Climate Change, Justice and Future Generations* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2006).

³⁵ A brief search yielded a plethora of examples, including *Climate Justice Action*. Available at <http://www.climate-justice-action.org/>; accessed on 03 August 2010. *The Climate Justice Project*. Available at <http://www.climatejustice.org.uk/>; accessed on 03 August 2010. *Climate Justice: Enforcing Climate Change Law*. Available at <http://www.climatelaw.org/>; accessed on 03 August 2010. *Timeforclimatejustice.Org*. Available at <http://www.timeforclimatejustice.org/>; accessed on 03 August 2010. Christian Aid, *Time for Climate Justice*. Available at <http://www.christianaid.org.uk/ActNow/Countdown-to-Copenhagen-climate-change/Index.aspx>; accessed on 03 August 2010.

plausible, let alone possible to implement in practice. Though they may not be, by and large, overly-optimistic about solving the problem in practice, many assume that the problem of justice is at least solvable in theory.³⁶ The argument I put forward in Chapter 5 prompts three responses to this that suggest the advantages of a broad humanitarian perspective over, say, a cosmopolitan justice perspective.

Firstly, there is a broad consensus that anthropogenic climate change represents, on a number of different levels, a profound injustice, in ways directly relevant to the generation of humanitarian concern. For instance, those least causally responsible for it are almost certainly going to suffer its earliest effects, and its worst effects in the longer term. Moreover, the greatest costs are likely to be borne largely by people who will not yet have been born during the crucial window of opportunity for effective action. Secondly, due to the complexity of the “perfect moral storm”, the achievement of an unassailable ideal theory of justice in relation to climate change seems deeply implausible. Yet, if we recall Sen’s warning that transcendental ideals of justice are not the best guides to making comparative judgements between options on the table, we can do without such theories perfectly well in making any action taken to mitigate the severity of the problem less unjust. Thirdly, it would be, as Shklar suggests, equally delusional to think that what mitigation efforts we will engage in will not create further humanitarian injustices: there will be trade-offs that directly affect people’s welfare.

Furthermore, in working through the politics of climate change, the lessons of Chapters 3, 4 and 6 are important. In terms of mobilising action, it was seen that rather than try to convince people to become perfect altruists, a humanitarian concern for climate change needs to speak to their sense of self and their complex identities, if it is to gain political traction and become embedded in collective identities and aspirations, notably as embodied by states. If there is any optimism to be found in this perspective, it is that a large proportion of those with the most excess emissions to shed live in broadly democratic states, and therefore the opportunities for humanitarian politics are somewhat larger.

³⁶ If one were to be uncharitable, one could say that solving the problem in theory is more important to many international political theorists of climate change, than generating concrete action.

The most challenging issue is that, if serious mitigation efforts are to be engaged in, the timescale in question is so tight, a peak in emissions within the next decade, followed by a rapid decrease, that serious engagement with the most powerful actors to hand must be in order. The merits of an internationalist perspective, as set out in the previous chapter, are obvious here. Indeed Anthony Giddens suggests that rather than awaiting a universal multi-lateral settlement, we should resurrect the idea of coalitions of the willing and look to a vanguard of what Lawler would term “good states”.³⁷

What I have briefly attempted to illustrate in this section is that the humanitarian “politics of humanity” approach contains useful conceptual tools for thinking about the problem of climate change, an application of the approach that merits further academic research. What I was unable to provide was a powerful argument for why a humanitarian perspective is very likely to prompt the drastic and urgent action that may be required. However, one thing that is clear is that should we fail to create a “politics of humanity” commensurate with the problem, we will have to look to humanitarianism, and to the resources of human solidarity it suggests, to pick up the pieces. It may be that, in a strange way, what might seem to be preventive action to mitigate climate change is in fact closer to a last resort occasion for rescue. Should this moment pass, acts of rescue, in a basic, visceral sense, threaten to be more than ever a core subject matter of international politics.

Conclusion

This chapter has briefly concluded the analysis of this thesis, by suggesting that while humanitarianism cannot afford the luxury of self-congratulation, a broader understanding of the endeavour as a “politics of humanity” contains some hopeful hints to the possibility of greater human solidarity. It has also brought out that while

³⁷ This recalls the roots of classical internationalism in the Concert politics of the nineteenth century, as studied by Cartsen Holbraad. Giddens, *The Politics of Climate Change*, 226. Holbraad, *The Concert of Europe: A Study in German and British International Theory 1815-1914*.

the roots and the reach of the humanitarian impulse spread further than any single kind of political institution, there is an important place in humanitarian politics for a democratic impulse, constantly alert to the excesses of power and totalising understandings of humanity that have often characterised the exercise of humanitarian action. I then illustrated the applicability of my approach to one of the central humanitarian problems of our time, anthropogenic climate change, demonstrating that my description of the “politics of humanity” may not take us closer to solving such a complex problem, but that it provides the potential to understand the scope of the challenge it presents. In addressing it, it seems clear that no-one can afford the luxury of turning away from an issue that affects humanity in such a fundamental way. Indeed, perhaps the greatest irony of humanitarianism is that it usually aspires to change others, yet it is at its best when it helps us to change ourselves. We know much about the horrors of which we are capable. But we do not yet know what we can become.

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