

Title: Do Ethics matter in Humanitarian studies?

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Introduction:

Humanitarian interventions have grown significantly in the last decade, bringing together many actors who a few years ago either did not exist or were antagonistic towards each other. The values and ethics guiding these actors are frequently very different, sometimes opposite and in some cases unclear or undeclared.

This paper raises the question of ethics in humanitarian work, and explores the benefits of including “Ethics in Humanitarianism” as a subject of study for the sector as a whole. It also analyses what could be the consequences of developing a professional training in humanitarian issues without paying enough attention to the ethics involved in this complex sector.

The paper presents specific cases where ethics play a key role, (e.g. interaction among different actors, protection, triage, financial management) and addresses some of the key moral¹ dilemmas that humanitarian workers confront, at headquarters level or on the ground.

The paper proposes that humanitarian studies include the subject of ethics in humanitarianism as a topic of the Humanitarian Studies curricula, and suggests some of the topics that this subject should include.

1. Ethics for whom ?

Nowadays Humanitarianism is a territory disputed between a broad range of actors, from the UN agencies and the traditional Humanitarian NGOs to military forces and private companies, from governments to churches, and from local communities to foreign experts and consultants; all claim to be part of the humanitarian world, and to have a role to play in it.

As with any complex social system, it would be naïve to pretend that Humanitarianism is the exclusive space of a limited group of actors, but it would be equally wrong to admit that anyone willing to do humanitarian work is per se a legitimate actor. Humanitarian legitimacy has to be acquired by a proven support and endorsement of humanitarian

¹ For the purpose of this paper I take the words ‘moral’ and ‘ethical’ as being equivalent, although I am aware that some authors attribute different values to these words. My approach to this is that semantically they are interchangeable, moral being the Latin word and ethos the Greek one for a similar meaning.

principles, values and professional standards. Without this, we may talk about illegitimate actors intruding into humanitarianism.

Therefore having clarity on what are the common and universal values and principles of humanitarianism, as well as what are the essential humanitarian professional standards, should be a pre-requisite to be a legitimate part of the so called humanitarian community.

Values and principles, although subject to permanent debate and interpretation as with any ethical question, should be the foundations of any professional work. Professional standards² could be more contextual and evolve more rapidly over time, but this is not the subject of this paper.

Given that the reflection and learning about humanitarian values, their implementation in practice, as well as the dilemmas confronted by them are all so fundamental, it is very surprising that very few university courses on Humanitarianism include the subject of ethics as a fundamental one in their regular curricula.

It is my view that all professionals involved in humanitarian work should be informed and trained in those issues, before embarking in any humanitarian activity.

2. Humanitarianism without ethics?

Can we imagine a humanitarian system in the future which will work without any ethical reference? Will everything that satisfies immediate human needs be considered a humanitarian action, without further consideration of the motivations underpinning this activity, or without considering what consequences the action will have on the people receiving that aid?.

Could we imagine a humanitarian system in which the end justifies all means, and in which war could be labelled as humanitarian action, as has been the case in recent decades in some unfortunate contexts?

Humanitarianism is inherent to the core of humanity and is intrinsically connected with the notion of good and bad and the deepest human values and instincts of people helping other human beings in need. Therefore humanitarianism is fundamentally a moral subject; it is a moral choice.

² By professional standards I refer to the standards which define good practice and set the quality level of any professional work, e.g. Sphere standards

Humanitarianism could be defined simply as ‘doing good to people in need.’ But knowing what is really good and what is not is extremely complex. These are the basic fundamental questions of any ethical framework; avoiding these kinds of questions and their implicit dilemmas will reduce humanitarianism to a mere logistical business of quick basic service delivery, with no added value to it - or probably with a lot of “minus-value” attached to it.

3. Humanitarian ethics: what’s it about?

Having said that humanitarianism is fundamentally an ethical matter, it is important to unpack what the humanitarian ethos implies, and in which areas it will require more teaching at universities and humanitarian centres.

Below I suggest some areas that in my view constitute the basic body of humanitarian ethos.

3.1 Basic Ethical questions: First of all I think it is essential to have a good understanding of the fundamental questions which underpin any ethical reflection. Questions like: What is good or bad? Which values are universal and which ones are cultural contextual ones? What are the limits of humanitarianism and its universal dimension? All these are fundamental questions to be addressed in order to have a well grounded reflection.

Moreover basic concepts like the deontological³ approach and the consequentialist⁴ approach in ethical debate are important to students in order to reflect not only on the concepts by themselves, but on the approaches to analyse these concepts and their implementation.

It is my experience that in most cases students of humanitarian courses have a very superficial understanding of these key issues, or, if they have one, frequently lack a conceptual framework where they can organise their ideas and work them out in a positive manner.

³ Deontological ethics is an approach to ethics that focuses on the rightness or wrongness of intentions or motives behind action such as respect for rights, duties, or principles, as opposed to the rightness or wrongness of the consequences of those actions

⁴ Consequentialism refers to those moral theories which hold that the consequences of a particular action form the basis for any valid moral judgment about that action. Thus, from a consequentialist standpoint, a morally right action is one that produces a good outcome, or consequence.

The lack of conceptual foundation in these debates has created unnecessary tensions and the waste of enormous amounts of energy in translating and understanding concepts like the “do no harm approach” proposed by Mary Anderson⁵, some years ago.

So I propose to include this general framework as the starting point of any humanitarian ethical teaching.

3.2 Humanitarian values: A second area which I think requires some deep reflection is an analysis of the classic humanitarian values and principles, and the way they are played out in reality. The notions of impartiality, neutrality, universality, cultural respect, etc., are frequently understood as abstract dictionary definitions with little connection to the reality and how they are implemented in practice. The traditional western dominated humanitarian machinery is now changing into a much more intercultural humanitarian community including new actors with their own cultures. In this context, new values, principles and backgrounds are coming in, and subsequently it is important to reconsider the meaning of all these basic humanitarian values in a new context, and acknowledge the contradictions that humanitarian work confronts on a day by day basis.

3.3 Ethics of humanitarian management: A third pillar of humanitarian ethics is what I will call “Ethics of humanitarian management”. This is frequently the most ignored area, and probably the hardest one, and in my view one of the fundamental pillars of humanitarianism.

Humanitarianism is a moral issue and equally a serious managerial responsibility involving complex management, as in most cases humanitarianism is done under an organisational umbrella and not on an individual basis. Despite the fact that the original motivation for humanitarianism is born individually within each person, it is in most cases manifested and implemented through organisational structures where the individuals⁶ contribute towards a common goal. In most cases modern humanitarianism involves the management of large sums of funds and large numbers of human resources; it involves heavy logistics, and the most sophisticated areas of business management such as leadership, decision making, team dynamics and emotional management. All these aspects of management are manifested in humanitarian work in a sustained way and come together very intensively in a short period of time during a crisis time. Having a sound management of all these aspects requires high standards of professionalism that need to be rooted in a deep reflection on the moral choices and consequences of each managerial decision.

⁵ Mary B. Anderson 1999: ‘Do no Harm – how aid can support peace or war’ Lynee Rienner Publishers.

⁶ There is also an individual dimension of humanitarianism, the “good Samaritan” approach, but this is not the subject of this paper.

Most of the students of humanitarian courses will sooner or later end up doing “humanitarian management” in one way or another, involving ethical judgements, which frequently will imply making moral decisions several times a week. Therefore it is very important that humanitarian studies include the possibility of learning and reflecting on this area of “Ethics of Humanitarian Management”.

What does this area include? The following topics at least are fundamental: organizational management and power mapping in humanitarian work; financial management, decision making and processes to manage decisions; communications and accountability; and personal behaviour.

Let me give a few words on each of these areas.

Organizational management and power mapping includes how to analyse the potential of a good organizational structure with well defined roles, and the positive aspect of influence, leadership and organizational power to achieve the goals of humanitarianism. But it also includes a reflection on the natural inclination of human organisations to align objectives around power fights and interest groups, beyond the original purpose of the organisation and its humanitarian mandate. Frequently organisations get trapped in their own internal dynamics and lose perspective of their mission and goals. This diverts humanitarian agencies from their genuine moral purpose, and brings them into internal fighting or loss of energy due to the lack of permanent awareness of and reference to their humanitarian ethical values and imperatives.

Financial management: frequently seen as a technical issue or as an “unavoidable and necessary resource”, this is often skipped over in the fundamental ethical humanitarian debate, or reduced to the accountability-auditing aspect of it. Many aspects should be included in this chapter; I would suggest at least the following:

- a) Fundraising and its ethical considerations: targeted appeals, flexible or restricted use of funds, the coherence of messages, limits and use of funds invested for fundraising etc.
- b) Investment, security, profitability and liquidity: the judgement involved in this, the dilemmas inherent in risk taking, and the duty to maximise the profitability of funds.
- c) Ethical investment and Bank moral ratios are also important issues to be aware of and consider carefully. Different countries offer different opportunities to invest and knowing the ethical framework of the banks where the money is deposited is important, and has become a critical aspect in the context of the global financial crisis.

- d) Cash flow management, and its relation with the project cycle, is not only a financial matter but an organisational ethical matter which requires clear shared values from the different staff and departments involved in it.
- e) Administration costs, their definition and control. This topic usually goes beyond a technical or legal requirement to enter into the area of moral choice.
- d) Fraud and financial transparency are of course an essential part of this, but in fact it is my view that this can only be addressed if there is a deep reflection on the above points.

Decision making processes: How to make decisions and how to manage the decision making process, is in my view the Achilles' heel of humanitarian organisations. Probably this is the most visible indicator to judge how solid a humanitarian organisation is, morally and professionally. Key aspects like: Who is entitled to make decisions? Who makes these decisions in real life? How long does it take to make critical decisions? What are the formal mechanisms in place to make decisions? And how far is the organisation able to separate the structural decisions that need to be taken well in advance of a humanitarian programme response from those decisions inherent to the crisis management itself, that need to be taken on the spot?.

But probably more important than all the above points, is to know and understand what are the key criteria - explicit and implicit - that the organisation uses to make decisions.

Strong moral humanitarian organisations are equally strong professional organisations and they are easily recognised by the clear mechanisms and criteria they use to make decisions and how they are able to make them on time and align the organisations around those decisions.

Some organisations hide themselves under the complexity of management or leadership, to justify the lack of clarity of their decisions or the consequences of them. I guess that at the end of the day, it is a lack of ethical management which prevents them from making the right decisions, under the right criteria and with the right resolution of the dilemmas imposed on them.

Communications and accountability: Humanitarianism involves not only hard “business management” but fundamentally the management of feelings and emotions. Humanitarianism only works if people feel about it and are able to canalise their positive emotions of empathy through it. Therefore communications become a fundamental piece of work and this brings a lot of choices and ethical issues to be considered in detail, which merits some study in formal humanitarian training courses.

This area of work is probably one of the most developed areas within humanitarianism and there are specific codes of conduct which address this issue particularly and in detail⁷. Nevertheless and despite the existence of codes of conduct this is an area in which ethical transgression happens frequently, as unfortunately it is quite common that the branding, profiling and fundraising organisational needs get preference over the moral content of the message itself.

3.4 Personal behaviour and its ethics: teaching about humanitarian ethics requires reflection at two levels: the organisational collective or institutional one and the personal individual one.

Although individual ethos is something extremely personal and probably impossible (and maybe not desirable) to standardise, it is true that the aggregation of individual ethos, even where there is no a collective one, has a direct impact on what is the total ethical behaviour of the humanitarian community and how this is perceived by other stakeholders.

I think it is legitimate to request any humanitarian worker to have an individual ethos aligned in some key aspects with the institutional ethos and its policies and codes of conduct; in that sense it is important that humanitarian studies cover part of the individual dimension of humanitarian ethics and help students to reflect on the challenges, dilemmas and tensions they may confront in their future humanitarian practice.

Individual ethos must be reflected in individual behaviour, which should encompass aspects related to relations with local communities and local authorities, gender interrelation, sexual behaviour, and individual behaviour and its impact on risks and the security of beneficiaries and humanitarian staff.

Humanitarian studies should be explicit about the existence of international codes of conduct related to the avoidance of sexual exploitation⁸, fraud⁹ and bribery, etc..

4. Humanitarian ethical dilemmas

One of the most fascinating aspects of humanitarian ethics is identifying the key dilemmas that humanitarian workers confront without exception in every humanitarian

⁷ Code of Conduct on Images and Messages, developed by CONCORD in 2006

⁸ <http://www.humanitarianinfo.org/IASCWeb2/pageloader.aspx?page=content-search-fastsearch&query=sexual%20exploitation>

⁹ ‘Preventing Corruption in Humanitarian Assistance’: Transparency International, and others (www.transparency.org)

response. It is a fascinating exercise and worth being taught and discussed with current and future humanitarian workers.

Humanitarian dilemmas require a solution on the spot, and cannot be kept “in cold storage” to be resolved at a later stage. That’s why it is so fascinating, while at the same time it could provoke enormous degrees of frustration and conflict among humanitarian workers, if they have not addressed some of the key issues in advance and are not trained to deal with moral dilemmas during a crisis.

Identifying the classic traditional dilemmas, such as denouncing versus doing pure assistance, or using armed guards to protect humanitarian workers, or dilemmas related to beneficiaries’ “triage”, should be an important component of regular humanitarian studies.

Other dilemmas, although not new, have gained more relevance in the last decade, such as the conditions under which the humanitarian access to victims is negotiated, or the limits of interaction with military actors in conflict zones.

These dilemmas, when supported by a solid theory and illustrated with the many cases that the humanitarian community has accumulated over the last years, become a very powerful tool to reflect about how humanitarianism happens in reality and how complex some decisions could be.

Dealing with humanitarian dilemmas requires knowledge and techniques, and its management should be embedded into the humanitarian organisations, which unfortunately and frequently operate under managerial silos and without enough interface to make collective judgements on moral dilemmas under an agreed framework.

Managing moral dilemmas is intrinsically connected with the decision making structure exposed above and the moral implications of having a sound decision making mechanism within the humanitarian organisations.

The success of how a humanitarian organisation or an individual humanitarian worker deals with a moral dilemma depends very much on the previous training and reflection done prior to the occurrence of the dilemmatic situation itself. Therefore training on these issues is crucial for the development of professional humanitarianism.

5. Humanitarian codes of conduct: a tool not an end

Some humanitarian studies include some subjects related to humanitarian codes of conduct, as a way to cover the broader field of ethics in humanitarianism. Despite it

being very important to have a clear perspective on what the international humanitarian community has already agreed as the basic rules to ensure some basic acceptable moral behaviour, it is essential that this teaching is embedded in the broader ethical debate and reflection presented here. Otherwise dealing with humanitarian ethics as a set of rules to be fulfilled will reduce the essence of humanitarianism to a mechanistic and legalistic approach which will add more complexity to the humanitarian work and will not solve the basic issue of having professional humanitarian specialists who are able to deal with this complex subject in an holistic way.

One of the key problems of our sector is that there has been a trend to resolve all kind of ethical issues through the development of specific codes of conduct, pretending that having a code is equal to having the final solution. Although we need to recognise that having codes helps a lot to deal with key content issues, as well as helping to unify criteria worldwide, this is always at the end of the day a reductionist approach, and it will only be effective if it is part of the broader reflection as presented here.

Currently there are dozens if not hundreds of codes of conduct¹⁰ which directly impact on humanitarian work. It is essential that humanitarian studies help to differentiate the essential ones and their meaning from those which could be accessorial and probably very much linked to specific contexts. Failure to do so will create the risk that humanitarian students may confuse ethics with a jungle of codes meaningless for them.

My suggestion is to emphasise the profound knowledge and understanding of “The Code of Conduct for International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief”¹¹ developed by the Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response in 1994. This Code, despite its age, is still a basic pillar of all humanitarian codes and gives an entry point for fundamental humanitarian reflections. Although it may need updating in some aspects like gender and connections with environmental behaviour in humanitarian response, this code is still the most important reference which all humanitarian studies should include in their curricula.

6. Humanitarian moral debate: a healthy exercise to develop a strong ethos.

A strong humanitarian ethos can not be built from a prescriptive regulatory approach, but through a sound and dynamic debate.

¹⁰ Codes against sexual exploitation, codes on communication and use of images, codes on relationship with military actors, codes on financial management, people in aid code, good humanitarian donorship,....

¹¹ <http://www.ifrc.org/publicat/conduct/>

A debate which is able to define clear limits of what is good and what is not acceptable under no circumstances, and at the same time is able to identify without shame the blurred areas that require good judgement, expertise and collective debate to clarify the limits of our actions and behaviours.

Cultivating a culture of sound debate, while action is maintained and the necessary discipline is respected during times of acute emergency, is a powerful way to build a strong ethos within the humanitarian community.

It is not strange to find humanitarian students or active humanitarian workers and senior managers who master all kind of theories but are unable to make sound judgements on the spot, mainly because they are afraid of making mistakes in such a complex work.

Teaching the importance of “navigating in the fog” with uncertainties surrounding our actions, but with clear “compasses” to guide our work, is fundamental in the building of humanitarian professionalism. This requires a culture of openness, debate and professionalism that Humanitarian studies should promote and include in their curricula.

It is also very sad to see how many humanitarian workers leave the humanitarian field because they are frustrated with how their organisations or they themselves dealt with some ethical questions. This provokes a drainage of qualified human resources that the sector can not afford, and that could be avoided by a more direct, consistent and open debate and training on humanitarian ethical matters.

It is very important that this debate happens among the humanitarian practitioners. More and more there are Centres of analysis of humanitarian work, that are very good on the diagnosis of the theoretical ethical humanitarian issues, but which are not involved in the practice itself. It is also a matter of concern to see how some humanitarian agencies are moving from a “hands on” approach to a “hands off” theoretical positioning due to the complexity of the issues involved in humanitarian ethics. A strong ethos will only be built by a good research and studies approach combined with a deep reflection done by practitioners and on the basis of real cases and concrete experiences.

7. Humanitarian ethics curricula: a proposal

As with any broad subject, teaching humanitarian ethics could be a full year course in itself, but it is important to define the basic requirements that all reputed universities or humanitarian centres should include as part of a regular and rigorous certificated humanitarian course. Building on my previous comments I would suggest the following content and teaching methodology.

7.1 Curricula content:

Based on my experience in teaching humanitarian ethics in some Spanish universities, I think ethics in Humanitarian curricula should cover at least the following topics:

- General ethics and its connection with humanitarianism
- Humanitarian ethos embedded and beyond International Humanitarian Law
- Key humanitarian values: their universality and their interpretation in specific contexts
- Humanitarian work and professionalism: a moral matter.
- Humanitarian management, ethics involved in it: decision making, allocation of resources, triage, power management, dealing with ethical tensions within teams and with local communities or governments.
- Financial management and its ethical implications
- Codes of conduct: scope, content and use.
- Humanitarian ethical dilemmas: traditional and new ones.
- Dealing with complex judgments and dilemmas

7.2 Teaching methodologies:

As important as the content is the methodology used to teach the subject. My approach is that the most effective methodology is a combination of some theoretical basis followed by case studies.

Case studies need to be a combination of well selected cases which the students could reflect upon by having enough information or knowledge. It is surprising to see how humanitarian students of recent years find the 1994-1995 Great Lakes humanitarian crisis (or any other great crisis of the nineties) as something remote and not really attached to them. Therefore when using critical historical cases they should be well documented or explained in detail, otherwise it is better to use recent cases although their relevance to the subject of debate might not be so powerful.

I recommend using vivid role-play games in which students could experience and perform in a simulation exercise some of the classical dynamics of humanitarian action.

I do think that depending on the time available in the course the ethical training should cover no less than 4 hours and could reach up to 20 hours if the above content has to be developed with some degree of debate.

8. Conclusion

I firmly believe that including humanitarian ethics as a regular subject in all Humanitarian courses around the world will have a long lasting positive impact in the performance and quality of humanitarianism. There is a serious risk of diluting the essence of humanitarianism as a “new market service”, which will imply the end of humanitarianism as such.

New challenges are knocking at the door of humanitarianism and therefore these challenges need to be addressed by the academic and humanitarian communities.

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