Between Scylla and Charybdis:
The Ethical and Moral Dilemmas of Humanitarian Action

Alina Sajed
PhD Candidate
McMaster University

Introduction

The topic of this paper was inspired by Fiona Terry's book *Condemned to Repeat?*, in which she illustrates the moral paradoxes confronted by humanitarian agencies in their work. I intend to show how, in their intention to 'do no harm,' humanitarian organizations 'successfully' avoid facing the consequences of their own hubris.[1] By purporting that their work is and should be unambiguously apolitical, they embrace as their core principle the minimalist aim of saving lives. These agencies cause a prolongation of the suffering they are trying to alleviate, as their material resources end up fueling local or regional conflicts.

I think it is most appropriate at this point, to mention that my purpose in exposing the inherent dilemmas of humanitarian action is not to belittle its positive effects or the dedication of its workers. Indeed it is most admirable that there are people whose calling is to alleviate suffering, and that deprive themselves of all comfort and physical security so that they can be in the midst of situations, in which most of us would not dare going.[2] But this does not make humanitarian action, indeed humanitarianism itself, immune to criticism. I believe that, for these very reasons, it is crucial to discuss how it is possible that an enterprise geared towards saving lives ends up prolonging and even creating suffering and tragedy.

My aim is to go beyond a mere description of these tragic consequences, although practical examples will be used to illustrate the argument of this paper. However, my primary goal is to expose the ethical and moral underpinnings of this dilemma. The questions that I am trying to answer are: What are the moral grounds on which the very concept of humanitarianism is founded? What is the prevalent mentality of aid workers 'in the field'? How is it possible that organizations that have as their self-professed aim to alleviate suffering end up aggravating it? Are there any solutions to this dilemma?

Since unveiling the ethical and moral grounds of humanitarianism is the main focus of this paper, I will attempt an exercise in the philosophy of ethics and morality, inspired by Paul Ricoeur's conceptualizations of selfhood and of the "tragic of action" in his *Oneself as Another*. In the first part of the paper, I will discuss the ethical foundations of self and other, and their rearticulation as "self *as* another." Also, as Ricoeur points out, this idea of self *as* another needs to be framed by the dialectic between ethics and morality. It is from this dialectic that the "tragic of action" emerges. The second part of the essay will use this theoretical background to expose the hubris of humanitarianism, which purports that humanitarian action is "a duty-based act that is right in itself" (Duffield, Macrae and Curtis 2001 :271). The second part will also try to expose some of the representation practices authored by aid agencies, which establish a moral hierarchy between a civilized and magnanimous 'us' and a savage and ungrateful 'them.' The third part examines, through illustrative examples and theoretical reflections, how humanitarianism becomes a source

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[1] I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for helping me make this clarification.

[2] I think it is apposite to state that this paper does not claim to fully understand the intricacies and conflicts inherent in the idea and practice(s) of humanitarian assistance. My lack of 'empirical' experience 'in the field' could and should be considered a shortcoming of the view I impart. However, my view comes primarily from a theoretical point of view, one that is informed by ethical and moral preoccupations of postmodernist and postcolonial approaches, and as such, tackles the concept and practice(s) of humanitarian assistance from a predominantly philosophical point of view.

of conflict precisely because of its self-expressed righteousness that leaves no room for self-reflection only for reflex (Brauman 1998: 192). The last part looks at possible solutions for this dilemma, which involve a deep scrutiny into humanitarianism's moral foundations, a shift in its mentality, a reassertion of humanitarianism as an inherently political concept/practice, and a diminishing of the 'humanitarian space.'

Oneself as Another and the "Tragic of Action"

According to Ricoeur (1990), individual identity can be perceived as sameness or identity (from the Latin *idem*) and selfhood or ipseity (from the Latin *ipse*). The former implies oneness, unity, that which does not change in each of us, an "uninterrupted continuity," whereas the latter signifies uniqueness, difference, that which distinguishes one individual from the next. In this context, it can be stated that selfhood is that which belongs to oneself and not to another. But every self is an other, as every individual is unique and irreplaceable (225-6). While this pervasive difference separates us, it also unites us. Thus selfhood can be seen as that which belongs to oneself *as* another.[3]

It is important to note that the dialectic of sameness and selfhood needs to be framed within ethical and moral lines of action. Ricoeur makes an important distinction between ethics and morality. The former, he argues, comes from an Aristotelian tradition and has a teleological perspective, possessing as ultimate goal "the good life." By contrast, the latter stems from a Kantian heritage and has a deontological perspective, focusing on the obligation of the moral norm. Ethics and morality are two distinct realms, but they need to be closely interrelated, which implies that ethics needs to be subjected to the test of the moral norm. Without such test, the ethical is bound to give way to contradictions and conflicts, as each individual's pursuit of the "good life" will necessarily infringe on another's similar pursuit. For such a pursuit to be undertaken in a non-violent way, it needs to be made conditional on duty and obligation. This conditionality engenders respect for another. The injunction to do no harm to another while obeying the universal ethical principle of pursuing "the good life" is not something that can be easily accomplished. What is needed, is practical wisdom or *phronesis*, as Aristotle names it, which implies the search for a "just behaviour" that is adapted to the "singularity of the case," and the need to strike a balance between happiness and suffering (Ricoeur 1990: 313).

The "tragic of action" arises when there is a division between the realms of ethics and morality, between general ethical principles and the historicity of situations and of particular norms. The hubris of

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[3] While Ricoeur frames the self/other relationship in such deeply sensitive and profound terms, it is important to remember that his view on the political identity of humans embraces Arendt's postulation according to which "it is as citizens that we become human." Such an assumption is highly problematic as framing humanity within the discourse of citizenship implies that the identity conferred by a state-centric discourse, which is that of citizen, overrides all other identities present within one individual. As such, humans are truly humans only as 'legitimate' citizens, bound by a territory and loyal to a state. While it is not the aim of this essay to focus on Ricoeur's disappointing state-centric view of political life and practices, I felt it was important that such view be signaled to the reader and be kept in mind. However, his self/other reconceptualization is highly illuminating and provides an excellent background for the discussion of the ethical and moral dilemmas of humanitarianism, and of humanitarian action.

practical reason, as illustrated by Ricoeur, appears in the Greek tragedy of *Antigone*. Here, tragedy is engendered by the division and conflict between the realms of the political, as embodied by Creon, the leader of the *polis* who unflinchingly decrees that the body of the defeated enemy is not to receive the rites of burial, and that of the civic/ethical, as personified by Antigone, the citizen distraught by the death of her brother, considered the enemy of Thebes, and bound by the moral obligation of giving him a proper burial. The conflict is between "the judging conscience" and "the acting person," whereby moral principles are confronted with the intricacy of life, and whereby the universalist claim needs to face the "contextualist limitations of the rules of justice" (Ricoeur 1990: 289-90, 293).

This theoretical discussion leads to the question: how should the self react when tragedy strikes, wherein other selves are involved? The self needs to come to the other's help. But such action involves a relationship of inequality, as both the self and the other find themselves in unequal positions: one is the donor, the other – the receiver. If the self perceives herself as another, then this inequality is transcended by the recognition of the superior authority of the other, and by the awareness that the roles are reversible (Ibid.: 223, 225-6).

The Self-righteousness of Humanitarianism

In this section, I intend to expose a certain mentality on which humanitarianism is founded, namely that "humanitarianism is a duty-based act that is right in itself" (Duffield, Macrae and Curtis 2001: 271). In exposing this foundational perspective, with the help of the theoretical background provided by Ricoeur, my aim is to problematize it and to reveal the tragic consequences that are inherent in it. Humanitarianism boasts a moral legitimacy that is beyond questioning. Where does this sort of legitimacy come from? Who bestowed this unambiguous aura on the forehead of humanitarianism?

Tomohisa Hattori (2003) traces the sources of the current imperative for foreign aid to a long tradition of giving. The act of giving creates or reinforces a certain social relationship and an obligation to reciprocate the gift. This expectation of reciprocation is a "balanced social relationship between equals" (232-3). Forgoing the obligation to reciprocate creates an unequal relationship, whereby the donor situates herself in the position of a generous, benevolent being that extends her grace and favours to an inherently destitute and deprived other. It is precisely this sort of attitude that is so prevalent among humanitarian actors, as it will be shown below.

Thus the "institutionalization of giving," whether referring to states donating to other less developed states, to states and private actors donating to aid agencies, or to aid agencies donating to the 'less fortunate,' reinforces and legitimizes, on ethical grounds, a material *status quo*. Such a material hierarchy becomes rewritten into a moral one (Ibid.: 237). It is strange that while acknowledging this attitude, Hattori glosses over it in an attempt to prove that what matters here is that states are ethically motivated when engaging in practices of giving. I think that the element that should be of deep concern is the "ethical boundary between donor and recipient," which she acknowledges, but without giving it the weight it deserves. This boundary serves not only to reinforce "the material as a moral order of things," but also to sell an image of

"magnanimity" whereby an innate superior generosity and nobility is opposed to an inherent deprivation and to an inferior way of life.

Such a framing is deeply ridden with (neo)colonial assumptions and implications. In her book *Reading Humanitarian Intervention*, Anne Orford (2003) unequivocally states that the practices of humanitarian organizations reinscribe colonial narratives when dealing with tragedies occurring in 'developing' countries. The framework within which international institutions operate suggest a 'narrative' that creates a sense of a secure *self*, which she characterizes as white, masculine, powerful, rational, and determined to discipline (158-180). On the other hand, the identities of the parties involved in wars and conflicts are (re)'written' as insecure barbaric *others* non-white, female, powerless and helpless, undisciplined and weak-willed (Ibid.). This grand "narrative" is written in different "places": the legal text of international conventions and resolutions (see Orford 2003), in the representations disseminated by the media (see Nyers 1999), and most importantly, in the practices of humanitarian intervention and assistance (see Malkki 1996; Hyndman 2000).

I believe that the (re)inscription of this narrative constitutes one of the greatest dangers attached to giving. Not only is our colonial past far from being assumed and problematized, but even more, it becomes the *sotto voce* that prompts the posture of Western generosity. The colonial civilising mission is replaced by a postcolonial moral imperative to give or to feed, the two become synonymous in the current order of things. The 'white man's burden' remains a reality, albeit a more stylized and subtle one (see Hyndman 2000). In her book *Managing Displacement,* Jennifer Hyndman argues that the very 'geography' of the refugee camps is a reinscription of an "us" and "them," "inside" and "outside" colonial attitude. The way in which camps are organized suggests a clear material and moral hierarchy between the staff and the refugees: the quarters where the staff resides are usually located near the local police station, close to roads and enjoy much better security measures than the area where refugees reside. On the other hand, the area of the camp that 'houses' refugees is vulnerable to attacks, theft, and there are many cases of rapes of refugee women due to the lack of security within the camps (Hyndman 2000: 95-8). The spatialization of refugee camps reflects the 'comfortable distance' between refugees and staff, between a secure 'us', self-righteous and obliging, and an insecure 'them,' whose undisciplined ways require a paradoxical *mélange* of distancing and monitoring. It requires distancing as the 'us' enjoys much more comfortable and secure premises, and it requires monitoring, as refugees are constantly watched so that they may not take more than their ratio of food and supplies (Ibid.: 117-147).

As Brauman (1998) aptly remarks, "to do good is accompanied by a feeling of omnipotence," "an excessive and smug faith in the morality of humanitarian action" (192). Humanitarianism's self-expressed goal, as purported by International Committee of the Red Cross' (ICRC) creed, is to save lives, *all* lives, and feed and cure people, *all* people, without any regard to political consequences. Since humanitarian action is and should be completely apolitical and neutral, why should aid workers be preoccupied with the consequences of their actions, which are very much political? It is puzzling that such an attitude has been embraced for decades, in spite of the disastrous consequences it provoked. How is it possible that in

situations characterized by such deep political conflict and turmoil, in which the very idea and action of assistance is a sort of intervention, we can comfortably believe that our actions will have no political consequences, that our endeavours are protected by a vacuum of neutrality that seals all implications shut? I think it is important to note that one of the main causes for the tragic consequences of humanitarian action is specifically this divide between the political and the humanitarian/ethical, this unproblematic embrace of neutrality and impartiality as flawless guidelines (see Brauman 1998; Brauman 2000; Warner 1999). The way in which both realms (the political and the humanitarian/ethical) are currently framed is that while the political is assigned a sphere that has as actors sovereign states, motivated by self-interest and constantly engaged in a ruthless competition devoid of ethics and principles, the humanitarian sphere is one that is 'exclusively' involved with the ethical and with principled action; or to put it more bluntly, the humanitarian sphere is given the role of cleaning up the mess that the political provokes in people's lives and social environments.

I argue that the two spheres cannot be disconnected, that humanitarianism is an inherently political concept and practice: to go into a territory that belongs to another country in order to provide aid is a political action; to provide aid 'indiscriminately' in the middle of conflict and war has deep political consequences. A question that arises is: are not war and tragedy the very conditions for the existence of humanitarianism? And if these are its conditions, is not humanitarianism an inherently political concept and practice? There seems to be two trends within humanitarianism with regards to the idea of the political and its relationship to aid organizations. One trend, a 'traditional' approach to humanitarianism, stipulates that humanitarian space is and should remain an apolitical space, dominated by impartiality and universality in the distribution of aid, and by neutrality towards the conflict in question. The 'classic' example of 'traditional' humanitarianism is the ICRC, whose embrace of neutrality and impartiality, and whose refusal to acknowledge the political consequences of its actions have raised numerous and harsh critiques against its approach, as the example of the Bosnian conflict will reveal in the third part of this paper. ICRC's practices suggest an unproblematic embrace of the *status quo*, and reveal an uncritical acceptance of war and conflict.

Another approach to humanitarianism is adopted by what is now called the "new humanitarianism" (Fox 2001), as promoted by organizations such as Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF). Such an approach implies an acknowledgment of the fact that humanitarian aid and practices are deeply politicized and have political ramifications. However, there is also an implicit nostalgia for the (re)creation of a humanitarian space within which humanitarian assistance is "in response to a crisis that was not caused by the provider of aid" (Terry 2002: 241). Such wishful thinking suggests that there are no connections between aid giver and aid receiver, that aid can exist in some sort of political vacuum. As the examples of the conflicts from Rwanda, Bosnia, and Ethiopia will show, not only there is no such thing as politically innocent aid, but in many cases the development aid industry can provide a serious economic infrastructure for genocidal governments and warring factions, by sustaining projects previous to conflicts, and then continuing to provide aid long after conflict breaks out (see Terry 2002; Orford 2003).

Humanitarianism as an approach to crises is characterized by two overarching elements: one is its sense of emergency; the other is that of 'victimization.' With the first element, when tragedy strikes, humanitarian agencies focus on the rush to save lives, by providing to the satisfaction of the 'basic needs' of those affected by crisis. What is lacking, however, is a questioning of whom it is that they are feeding and how their resources are being used. The other element, that of 'victimization', portrays people affected by crises as helpless victims who can "do little or nothing to help themselves" (Anderson 1998: 139; see also Hyndman 2000; Malkki 1996; Nyers 1999). In this light, humanitarianism as an ideology needs to be scrutinized through the ethical and moral lenses offered by Ricoeur.

If selfhood is perceived as involving such a deep enmeshment and intimate encounter between sameness and alterity/otherness that the two cannot be separated, then the perception of self *as* another should be the moral norm that guides every action. When examining the practices of representation, and the interactions between aid workers and recipients of aid, it becomes more than clear that what happens is a clear-cut separation between humanitarians and people struck by crises, between selfhood and otherness. The self is not perceived *as* another, but rather as *opposed* to the other. This separation is founded on the premise that their roles are fixed and immutable, that there is no sameness that can unite the two, and more importantly, the superior authority of the other as regards one's own life is not only unacknowledged, but indeed altogether dismissed. An interesting example in support of such an accusation is the "Listening to the Displaced" project initiated by Oxfam (see Rajaram 2002). The motivation that stirred this initiative was an admirable one, namely that of "allowing others to speak for themselves," seeking to "imbue humanitarian and development projects with the opinions and experiences of refugees" (Rajaram 2002: 254). The project involved interviewing large numbers of displaced people in 'the Wanni' region of Sri Lanka, so that the organization might have a better understanding of what their needs were and address those needs efficiently. The problems identified by Prem Kumar Rajaram in his article "Humanitarianism and Representations of the Refugee" pointed to the fact that the methodology of the project unproblematically reduced the identity of the displaced "to fit the institutional frameworks and demands of Oxfam as a humanitarian agency" (Ibid.: 255). Thus the reports of the interviews reveal a narrative that establishes clear limits between the 'I,' which is the 'research facilitator,' the 'report writer,' as an individual who enjoys a complex life, and the 'we', the refugees as 'disembodied quotations' that are part of a collective and whose lives revolve around the satisfaction of their basic needs (Ibid.: 261-2). As such, the project aimed not particularly at "listening to the displaced," having little to do with sharing the experiences of refugees and making their voices heard, but at satisfying an institutional requirement for accuracy and efficiency.

Ricoeur mentions that when the other is besought by tragedy, true sympathy of the self towards the other stems from the passage through purification (*catharsis*), terror or awe (*phobos*), and pity or compassion (*eleos*). Going through purification and terror/awe are essential steps, whereby the self acknowledges the shared burden of fragility (the human mortality inherent in every person), the necessary reversibility ('me-you' is fraught with relativity, as the roles are reversible), the irreplaceability of the other, and the similitude that binds the two ('I cannot have esteem for myself without esteeming another as myself') (Ricoeur 1990:

225-6). What happens 'in the field' is only a manifestation of *eleos* (reified as pity), whereby the people struck by tragedy are subdued to the "victim strategy" (Brauman 1998: 188), suggesting that they cannot help themselves and have no authority over the means with which to administer their own lives. Had such ethical and moral prescriptions been heeded, perhaps Oxfam's project would have taken a different turn, one that would have implied an awareness of the complex individuality of the interviewed persons, their uncontestable authority and subjectivity, and thus help could have been offered in a more meaningful way.

The inequality apparent in the relationship between aid workers and aid receivers leads to the inability of the two to identify with each other, and causes the creation of a "new ethos" (Anderson 1998: 151). This ethos becomes constructed as the story of aid workers from the civilized side of the world who have to outsmart, by superior and noble wisdom, the backward and child-like attitudes of the locals. Hyndman (2000) gives a detailed account of monitoring and controlling practices of aid agencies that speak of a paternalistic treatment of refugees and of the 'need' for their surveillance. In many camps humanitarian organizations use headcounts, 'census-taking exercises,' whereby they try to obtain an accurate estimate of the number of refugees so as to match the ratios of food and supplies with the population of refugees within the camp (127). Such exercises are deeply resented and resisted by the refugees (Ibid.) who find them offensive and humiliating. Moreover, refugees who actually take a stand and actively resist such practices are treated as 'disorderly' and 'undisciplined.' Such a treatment establishes a division between 'good refugees', who are submissive, quiet, and non-interfering with the work done by the staff of aid agencies, and 'bad refugees' who are 'undisciplined,' 'create problems,' and hinder the activities of aid workers. Such ethos of 'good refugees' versus 'bad refugees' creates the space for acknowledging only a negative sense of agency, whereby refugees who resist to offending practices are portrayed as the antinomy of the ideal of refugeeness.[4]

It is important to note that this inequality not only leads to obvious 'othering' practices, but it creates dependency of refugees on aid. This dependency transforms people afflicted by crises into persons whose agency and authority are denied. Refugee camps are built far from the settlements of locals, making them unable to resume their regular lives, and causing them to organize their lives around the routines of aid distribution (Hyndman 2000). Another corollary of this inequality, related to dependency, is the inherent short-sightedness of humanitarianism whose expressed and only goal is to save lives. Mary B. Anderson (1998) rhetorically asks: "You save my life today, but for what tomorrow?" What is the point of saving a life, or better said of prolonging a life, if that person is going to be killed later not by hunger, but by a bullet? What is the point of healing the wounded if such an exercise, as beneficial and well-intended as it might be, merely saves them for future suffering and fails to address the very sources of conflict?

When Aristotle, through Ricoeur's reinterpretation, talked about the final aim of ethics being the "good life," what exactly did he mean by "good life?" Did he mean that to reach the "good life" it is sufficient to be fed, sheltered and healed? Is the 'good life' only about satisfying "basic needs," or is it about

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[4] I would like to thank Peter Nyers for this helpful insight.

living and acting in harmony with the other, acknowledging that every self is an other, and by this achieving true sympathy and community of living? My concern is that humanitarianism's double self-framing as "a duty based act that is right in itself" and as having the sole purpose of saving lives (by feeding and healing) creates an ethos that is most arrogant and narrow in its vision, to say the least. Not only is this ethos a reiteration of colonial attitudes for the reasons exposed above (see Hyndman 2000; Kent 2003; Nyers 1999), but it is a reinforcement of a material *status quo*, whereby a moral hierarchy between the 'First' and the 'Third' worlds becomes reified (see Hattori 2003).

The humanitarian dilemma and its sense of tragedy lie also in its inability to match material resources with good intentions (Rieff 1997). According to Sarah Kenyon Lischer (2003), humanitarian agencies have two main assets: their "moral clout" and their material means (102). But the question is: how can these two be reconciled without causing further suffering? Besides the arrogant in-built mentality within the concept of humanitarianism, as discussed above, there is another element that leads to the tragic consequence of prolonging and fueling conflict: humanitarianism has become a business (Brauman 1999; Barber 1997; Rieff 1997; Rieff 1998; Terry 2002). This can be attributed to the rise of neoliberalism as the dominant ideology of economic globalization. Not only is there a self-conceited attitude of humanitarianism as a concept/practice "good in itself," but there is a lot of competition between aid organizations for visibility and funds. Such competitive spirit needs to be placed within the larger context of the liberalization of the global economy. When receiving loans from international institutions, developing countries face enormous pressures to liberalize their economies. As such the presence of development agencies in these countries is an extremely important element in understanding the dynamics between aid and war economy (see Terry 2002; Orford 2003).

In her book *Condemned to Repeat?*, Fiona Terry (2002) deals with the "paradoxes of humanitarian action." By embracing neutrality and impartiality as their guiding principles, aid agencies set up refugee camps and "safety zones," thereby providing refuge not only for displaced civilians, but also for combatants or "refugee warriors," and thus allowing the militarization of camps under the umbrella of "humanitarian sanctuaries" (27). Another paradox engendered by the presence of humanitarian agencies is that an important quantity of the material capabilities of aid agencies are diverted by warring factions for military purposes, thus feeding the war economy in the area (Ibid.: 35-42). The mere presence of humanitarian agencies in zones of conflict can confer legitimacy to "individuals, organizations, rebel movements, and governing regimes," particularly through their appeals for help through the media (Ibid.: 42). Such regimes exploit the presence of aid organizations so as to create for themselves an aura of credibility before the international community. By engaging in negotiations with rebel movements or governing regimes, aid agencies tacitly acknowledge and reinforce the claim that either of the two has on the territory (Ibid.: 44). Another perverse effect of humanitarian assistance is that camps can be and are used as instruments of population control by warring factions. This means that aid becomes an instrument of coercing refugees into taking sides in a conflict, as in many instances, such as in Rwanda, warring factions are sheltered by the camps and place enormous pressures on the refugee population residing therein (Ibid.: 47-50).

Aid agencies are organizations that depend on external donations be it from states or from non-state actors. It is indeed fascinating to observe how their self-proclaimed independence can be reconciled with their almost complete dependence on funds coming mostly from national governments. I argue that it cannot be reconciled, as donors' funding is most of the time conditional on the fulfillment of certain requirements. Aid agencies can decide that a certain crisis needs immediate action, but without the necessary funding their movements and plans of action are painfully restricted.

This situation leads to a very competitive approach towards crises, which implies that various agencies are striving not only to advertise the utterly desolate and desperate nature of the crises, but also to promote their own image and make themselves visible, so that they can be entitled to a share of the 'market' (Terry 2002). Thus when organizations such as Médecins Sans Frontières and the International Rescue Committee (IRC) withdrew themselves from the refugee camps in Zaire, in protest of the misuse of aid for the purpose of militarization of camps, there were other organizations that were all too willing to replace them. The withdrawal of the two agencies did not have the intended effect, namely to send a forceful signal that the presence and activities of humanitarian agencies on the border between Rwanda and Zaire merely fueled and worsened the suffering, instead of alleviating it.

Discussing the issue of the lack of funding which impedes on the activities of aid organizations seems to exculpate them from their hubris. However, this is not necessarily a contradiction, as the relationship between the lack of funding and the hubris of humanitarianism is intimately connected with the division between the political and the ethical spheres, as discussed in the second part of the paper. As such, if the political is the sphere devoid of principles and ethics, the sphere of ethics/humanitarian is by opposition good beyond questioning, which creates the paradox of having a 'smug faith' in its own self-righteousness, but at the same time being painfully dependent on the political sphere for the provision of its material capabilities.[5]

In such a light, the humanitarian field is deemed to be an apolitical one. Naturally, such an idea proves to be a mere illusion in the 'real' world. Moreover, humanitarian action is constantly used as a surrogate for efficient political action, by framing the various crises that occur around the world as 'humanitarian crises' (see Hyndman 2000; Kenyon Lischer 2003; Väyrynen 1999; Warner 1999). It is not surprising therefore that instead of healing, humanitarian action proves many times to be hurtful, since it not only fails to address the real causes of tragedies, but its action is merely a palliative, a band-aid on a gaping wound.

It would be unfair to suggest that the failure to properly tackle the real causes of tragedies lies with the 'humanitarian' agencies alone. The blame, I believe, can be assigned mainly to various political actors (whether states or international agencies) that have the ability and resources to address the roots of conflicts, yet who fail to do so either out of a revolting disinterest that is prompted by 'political' calculations (such as the lack of interest in the area of conflict, as the cases of Rwanda and Ethiopia will show) or that rush too

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[5] I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for prompting me to clarify this apparent contradiction.

quickly to take sides and help restore the peace without weighing the situation and its causes properly (as the case of the Bosnian conflict will show). To go even further, I would state that the source can be traced back to a system in which sovereign entities compete 'freely' for survival, proud of their internal and external sovereignty, and boastful of their congruence of state, nation and territory.[6] Also, as already mentioned repeatedly in the paper, another source would be the conceptualization of the political field as a field completely divorced from ethics. Both sources find their origins in the realist tradition, which still very much controls the framing of the field (see Warner 1999).

Humanitarian Action as a Source of Conflict

Rony Brauman (1998) stated that "humanitarian aid has been used as a tool of totalitarian propaganda throughout the 20th century, from the aftermath of World War I to the genocide in Rwanda" (188). What prompted such blindness on part of humanitarian agencies? I argue that the answer is their hubris. The hubris of humanitarianism, as discussed above, is that humanitarianism is inherently and unquestioningly something good, and more dangerously, something above scrutiny and doubt. This "smug faith," as Brauman put it, prompts aid agencies to act and behave as if their mere presence is enough to alleviate suffering, and as if their actions can carry *only* positive apolitical effects. This also leads to their unwillingness to reflect on their past experiences and learn from their mistakes. For, if one is above good and evil, if one is protected by the impenetrable clout of self-righteousness and neutrality, why should one muse on the consequences of one's actions?

As stated above, humanitarianism today serves to reinforce the *status quo* and a certain moral hierarchy. The example of humanitarian action in Ethiopia during the 1980s serves to illustrate this point. When, as a result of prolonged drought, famine struck in Ethiopia with devastating consequences on millions of people, humanitarian agencies sprang in action only after a BBC documentary made public the desperate situation (Brauman 1998). Although drought played an important role in the famine that struck Ethiopia, Terry identifies two causes for the devastating situation that occurred between 1983 and 1985: one was the counterinsurgency launched by the Ethiopian army against the attacks of Colonel Mengistu's opponents, and the other cause was the disastrous economic programs designed and implemented by Colonel Mengistu's

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[6] When possible solutions for the humanitarian dilemma are examined, there is a paradox that plagues the very alternatives that are being offered: that of the nation-state. Many authors (Hyndman 2000; Rieff 1997; Rieff 1998; Terry 2002; Warner 1999) suggest that most crises are political not humanitarian crises; hence what is needed is strong political intervention and action from those actors/states that are capable of undertaking it. At the same time, it is acknowledged (Agamben 1996; Hyndman 2000; Nyers 1999; Xenos 1996) that the very system of sovereign nation-states is the source of these crises, as the establishment of boundaries/borders creates a division between an 'inside' that becomes the norm whereby the 'outside' is viewed as something to be feared, as something that threatens an ideal of life (for an in-depth reading of exclusionary practices originating in the system of sovereign nation-states see Campbell 1992). Such arbitrary division also decides who gets to be protected within the borders, and who is the 'alien,' the 'illegal,' the unwelcome intruder. Some of the solutions offered seem to reinforce the very system that is being problematized. This serves to show the fragility of not only the concept of humanitarianism, but of the solutions that are envisioned for solving its ethical and moral dilemmas.

government (Terry 2002: 48). Famine was used as a weapon by the Ethiopian government, to deprive the opposing factions of "a base of local support," and to further its agricultural policies of "collectivization" (Ibid.). Rural populations from the north of the country were forcefully relocated in the south in horrible conditions. The camps set up by humanitarian organizations with the purpose of alleviating hunger and providing medical assistance to local populations became instruments whereby the Ethiopian government carried out its relocation policies. The latter withheld aid from areas where opposing factions had control, and used camps to attract local populations and then deport them in the south.

Thus humanitarian aid was manipulated by the Mengistu regime to further its plans of forced population displacement with the goal of creating "the first authentically communist African society" (Brauman 1998: 184). The fact that within camps people were rounded up by government militias, families torn apart and forced to relocate under threats of death and starvation, caused no reaction in the NGOs that were present (Ibid.: 184-85).[7] Since such criminal practices were carried by government officials, according to governmental plans of action, this created an aura of legitimacy around them. Surely the Ethiopian government would know better what is good for its citizens, even if the latter were unwilling and suffered horrible consequences due to the former's plans of social engineering.

What is most interesting is that NGOs were actually split over the rightfulness or criminality of the Ethiopian government's actions. NGOs such as Oxfam, War on Want, and World Vision approved of the relocation policies, whereas organizations such as Save the Children Fund, Concern, Action Contre la Faim, and MSF criticized it, but did not think they had a right to interfere (Ibid.: 185-6). Later on, only MSF had the initiative and courage to protest publicly and was expelled from Ethiopia as a result. In retrospect, the Ethiopian experience proves that humanitarian agencies are in their overwhelming majority not only unaware of the political/social/ethical/moral implications of their work, but even worse they consider it none of their business. Their self-proclaimed righteousness blinds them from seeing that many times, it is their mere presence 'in the field' that legitimizes totalitarian regimes such as Mengistu's, and allows them to manipulate aid for purposes that have little or nothing to do with alleviating suffering. As Brauman (1998) has put it, "mechanical obedience is nothing but unadvised adherence, a sacrifice of judgment, and hence a necessary condition for the unthinkable" (192).

Ricoeur has implicitly warned of the dangers of hubris and of the origins of the "tragic of action." He states that general ethical principles must be subjected to the rigour of moral norms, so that the performance of the former does not cause a conflict between the respect for another and the respect for the law. When examining practical cases of humanitarian action, such as the Ethiopian one, it is important to note that humanitarianism's embrace of neutral, impartial, and universal ethical laws (Pasquier 2001) causes

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[7] Brauman states that for a long time NGOs did not understand what was happening, and failed to have any sort of reaction to the disastrous policies of forced population displacement implemented by Colonel Mengistu's government. It is only with reports coming from the press that the main aid donors started to express reservations about the presence of foreign aid in Ethiopia and its contribution to the displacement practices of the Ethiopian government.

a conflict between the respect for such general principles and the respect for the persons afflicted by tragedy. Since humanitarianism insists on abiding by its ethical principles, it is ultimately the people involved in catastrophes that get to be sacrificed on the altar of its self-righteous ideology. Aristotle purports that, for such conflict to be avoided, one needs to adopt *phronesis* (practical wisdom), which would allow him/her to reconcile the generality of principles with the historicity and contextuality of the particular situation. Unfortunately, such practical wisdom is sorely missing from the actions of humanitarian agencies. It is this unilateralism of the current humanitarian ideology that becomes the source of tragic, as it can be seen below from the humanitarian experience in Bosnia.

One of the reasons for the gross political inefficiency in the Bosnian conflict was its initial framing (see Kent 2003). The manner in which a conflict is framed influences greatly the policies that are to be adopted and implemented. In the case of Bosnia, the genocide planned and executed by the Serbian government was for a long time framed as 'inter-ethnic conflict' or 'ethnic cleansing,' offering the image of a conflict that had its roots in a Balkanic tribal mentality which had resurfaced after the collapse of communism. Such a portrayal served to reinforce a divide between an 'international community' viewed as the promoter of human rights, democracy, and progressive economic policies, and a region convulsed by war precisely because such values were lacking (Orford 2003: 87-96). It has been repeatedly stated that the atrocities committed during this war were due to local factors. Within this frame, the international community placed itself in the position of 'knights in white armour' that had to intervene and pacify the warring parties.

Anne Orford places the Bosnian conflict within a larger context of economic policies of liberalization initiated by the Yugoslavian government in the late 1970s under the pressure of international institutions such as the International Monetary Fund. The latter's programs of structural adjustment and 'shock therapy' played a significant part in creating a 'sense of insecurity,' 'social instability,' and contributed to the destruction of the instruments for the protection of minority rights within a socialist state (Ibid.: 93-4). This climate of social, political and economic instability provided the perfect milieu within which far-right nationalist movements enjoyed legitimacy and seemed to offer a much needed sense of "community and identity" (Ibid.: 94-5). Anne Orford's contextualizing of the Bosnian conflict suggests that while the genocides in the ex-Yugoslavia were perpetrated by locals, the causes of the conflict do not lie in the local alone, but need to be rearticulated within a broader frame of economic policies of liberalization promoted by international institutions. Also, Orford states that framing the Bosnian conflict in terms of local causes obscures the manner in which a deep division is created between 'outside' and 'inside,' between a civilized, secure *self* and a barbaric, insecure *other*, which needs to be pacified and disciplined, between a secure and clearly defined Western space, and an insecure and conflict-ridden non-Western space.

After the collapse of communist regimes in Eastern Europe in 1989, Slovenia and Croatia (until then part of the Yugoslav federation) announced their independence in 1990. As a result, Bosnia-Herzegovina felt threatened by its unequal relationship to Serbia, which was a bigger state and enjoyed greater power. The federal army and the Serbian militias, at the order of Milosevic's government, occupied a third of Croatian

territory and engaged in practices of ethnic cleansing. While the Bosnian government tried to maintain its neutrality for a while, such a neutral stance became impossible as Bosnian territory was used as a base by the Serbian government against Croatian forces. Moreover, Bosnia itself was convulsed by conflicting loyalties between Bosnians and Croatians who favoured separation from the federation on the one side, and Serbs who favoured the preservation of the Yugoslav federation on the other side. Thus between 1991 and 1995 the systematic practices of ethnic cleansing were primarily carried out by Serbian forces against Croatians, Bosnian Muslims, and other minorities, such as Hungarians.[8]

The presence of humanitarian agencies in Bosnia was articulated within a frame of "moral equalisation," whereby both parties (Serbian and Bosnian) were equally to blame and both parties committed atrocities (Kent 2003). The self-professed role of humanitarian agencies was that of alleviating suffering on both sides, and their self-professed attitude was that of neutrality. In such a context, it seems mind-boggling that officials from prestigious humanitarian agencies would witness practices of genocide, or discover concentration camps, and yet refuse to make a statement on such horrendous acts. Unfortunately, this is exactly what happened. The genocide began in Eastern Bosnia, which was the region closest to Serbia. One of the most horrific massacres of Bosnian civilians by Serbian forces happened at Zvornik. A United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) official was a witness to the massacre of Zvornik, yet for a long time refused to make it public (Ibid.). Although 750 Bosnians were forcefully taken from Zvornik and killed in a nearby village, the official press reports mentioned the killing of 10-15 civilians (Ibid.: 12). Apparently a senior UNHCR official seems to have 'significantly downgraded the information' regarding the number of slaughtered civilians in Zvornik, since a clear disclosure of such information would have jeopardized UNHCR's mission in Bosnia and its relationship to the Serbian government (Ibid.: 12).

Another example is the ICRC's discovery of concentration camps operated by Serbs at Manjaca, and its refusal to acknowledge it (Ibid.). According to Michael Ignatieff, the ICRC officials debated for two weeks whether to go public with the information or not. To speak out publicly would have endangered their ability to 'help the victims,' to be silent on the matter would have made the organization accomplice to genocide (Ignatieff quoted in Kent 2003: 16). The information was eventually reported in the press, but since none of the sources used for the release of this information was the ICRC, it was clear that the ICRC did not take on the responsibility of confirming the information (Kent 2003: 16).

As it can be seen from the two examples presented above, ICRC justified its silence by pointing to the fact that going public would have caused the agency to jeopardize its impartiality and neutrality, and would have made it impossible for aid agencies to operate in Bosnia. It is hard to imagine that keeping silent on such events can be justified by any means. How can one witness the massacre of hundreds of men, women and children and keep silent for fear of jeopardizing one's neutrality? I think this is a classic example of

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[8] Two sources were used for the briefly sketched background of the Bosnian conflict: Alan Folgequist, "The Yugoslav Break-up and the War in Bosnia-Herzegovina: Implications for Kosovo," Eurasia Research Centre, 1999; and Steven W. Sowards, "The Yugoslav Civil War," in Sowards, <u>Twenty-five Lectures on Modern Balkan History</u> (The Balkans in the Age of Nationalism), 1996.

humanitarianism's lack of *phronesis*, its championing of general ethics at all costs, even at the cost of thousands of lives. Practical wisdom would have required the two agencies to speak up, nay to cry out loud, against the witnessed horrors, so that firm and prompt political action would be taken. Instead, the two agencies kept quiet for a while, and even when they decided to speak about it, the frame they employed was that of 'moral equalisation.' This frame completely occluded the fact that the main perpetrator of genocide and atrocities was the Serbian government, and that the Bosnian side, while culpable of its own crimes, was reacting in its own way to the genocidal logic of Serbian authorities (see Kent 2003).

The tragic consequences of humanitarian action stem also from a lack of responsibility. I argue that humanitarianism is founded on a lack of responsibility and on a dismissal of agency. By examining the normative frame within which humanitarianism operates, what becomes painfully visible is its refusal to take responsibility. Neutrality, universality, impartiality imply a lack of choice: humanitarian agencies do not take sides, they are apolitical; aid is extended to everyone irrespective of the side they take; humanitarian actors are not concerned about whether the "victims" are guilty or not of any crimes, their job is to feed and shelter everyone. It also ignores any sense of agency as it portrays the people that benefit from aid as 'victims' and 'helpless.' Even when humanitarianism does acknowledge agency in refugees it is a negative agency that is being recognized, whereby refugees that resist to various 'humanitarian' practices are categorized as 'undisciplined' and 'disorderly' (as seen in the second part of this essay).

Ricoeur (1990) talks about responsibility as a three-dimensional concept and practice. Responsibility needs to be performed in a threefold temporality. The retrospective responsibility implies that we assume the past since it belongs to us, even if the past is not entirely our doing (342). This implies that humanitarianism needs to return to its foundations, explore and problematize them, and humanitarian agencies need to assume their past experiences, with all their mistakes, failures and successes. Prospective responsibility means assuming the future and understanding that consequences which occur are due to our actions (Ibid.: 341). It requires us to be on guard and always in a posture of anticipation, whereas retrospective responsibility prompts us to embrace a posture of continuous self-reflection. Both aspects are sorely missing from the work of humanitarian agencies and from the ideological framework of humanitarianism. I feel that humanitarian work is suspended in a present that is fraught with both a sense of emergency and with a lack of perspective. The mission to react, save lives, feed, and shelter is so overwhelming, that there is no time for anticipation or reflection. Time and place simply are; nothing else matters. The present is an important temporal dimension, but when unaccompanied by a sense of recollection and anticipation, it becomes frozen into a painfully short-sighted *carpe diem* that triggers unfortunate consequences.

The most recent example of the failure to take responsibility and acknowledge agency is Rwanda. The genocide committed in 1994 by the Hutu-led government against the Tutsi minority led to counter-insurgency by the Tutsi-led rebels who had been refugees for decades in Uganda. The latter successfully defeated the Hutu-led government, forcing them into exile along with hundreds of thousands of Hutus who were afraid of reprisals. The fleeing population and the Hutu militias took refuge on the border between Zaire

and Rwanda. Instead of looking for a prompt political solution to what was most obviously a political crisis, aid agencies were sent there as a surrogate for political action, to care for the refugees.

When referring to Rwanda's case, many analyses point to the lack of response on the part of the international community in regard to the genocide committed by the Hutus against the Tutsis (Martin 1998; Terry 2002; Orford 2003). According to Orford, the genocide and the ensuing plans for genocide were made possible not only because of the lack of international response, but also due to a steady and inflexible presence of development and humanitarian aid in Rwanda before and after the conflict. Quoting Peter Uvin, she states that "there was no way that the government could [have] implement[ed] any policy, coherent or not, without the assistance of the foreign aid community" (Uvin quoted in Orford 2003: 104). The humanitarian aid agencies operated their camps in northern Zaire and extended their help to all refugees making no distinctions between those that had committed genocide and those that were not involved.

From the very beginning, the Hutu *génocidaires* were mixed with the rest of the refugee population. With the aid of the Zairian government, former Hutu militias manipulated aid for the purposes of militarizing the camps, and of intimidating the refugees into not returning to Rwanda. Moreover, the aid became the fuel of the Hutu militias' activities, as they were planning for another genocide. The misuse of aid and the militarization of the camps were so blatant, that MSF-France and the International Rescue Committee decided to withdraw. This was a situation in which it was clear that aid was instrumental in the staging of another genocide, and in furthering the suffering and misery of the refugees. In spite of such obviously devastating consequences, many agencies decided to stay. Their justification was that, to put it bluntly in the words of Fabrizio Hochchild, an UNHCR official, "even the guilty need[ed] to be fed" (quoted in Kenyon Lischer 2003: 83). In other words, humanitarian agencies needed not to be concerned with who was guilty of what, they were there to feed, shelter, and heal.

This sort of dangerous short-sightedness borders on sheer obsession with grandeur that deepens and accentuates the moral hierarchy between a secure, democratic, and compassionate 'First' world and a savage and ungrateful 'Third' world. Humanitarianism's agenda is beyond good and evil, it has an inherent righteousness and nobility that are beyond scrutiny, whereas the 'victims'' purpose of 'good life' can be satisfied simply by meeting their basic necessities of food, water, and shelter. Refugee-ness becomes constructed as an identity deprived of political agency, which exists somehow suspended in a 'placelessness' stripped of authority and subjectivity, and reduced to a 'bare humanity'(see Agamben 1996; Pratt 2001; Walters 2002). To be reduced to 'bare life' is to be suspended in a dreadful *carpe diem* in which one's highest wish and aspiration is to satisfy one's hunger and thirst.[9]

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[9] I should make clear that the notion of 'bare life,' as conceptualized by Arendt (1951) is a highly contested and debated term. Arendt claims that "it is as citizens that we become human." Such affirmation implies that the state of refugeeness equates to an "expulsion from humanity" (Walters 2002). However, I find this notion helpful as it portrays a sense of taking *away* agency from refugees for the purpose of satisfying one's sense of moral high ground and beneficence/magnanimity. This taking away of agency need not be a conscious act, but it is subtle and yet so discernable from the activities of humanitarian agencies. I do not deny that most aid workers are indeed very well-

Are there Solutions?

In an article in *Foreign Affairs*, Ben Barber (1997) recreates an extensive genealogy of the numerous cases in the past in which aid was used to militarize camps and prolong conflicts; instead of feeding refugees, aid was feeding war. The list is comprised of powerful examples of humanitarian failures such as: the Afghani refugee camps on the Pakistani border in the 1980s, the Cambodian refugee camps on the Thai border between 1978 and 1991, the Algerian refugee camps for nomadic Saharoui people in the 1970s and 1980s, India's Tamil refugee camps in the 1980s, the aid provided to refugees in Southern Sudan, and the crisis from the Great Lakes region in Africa during the 1990s. Is humanitarianism "condemned to repeat" its mistakes over and over again, as Fiona Terry wondered in her book?

There are certainly many voices that have stated that humanitarianism can reinvent itself by going back to its founding principles and expose their inherent flaws (Warner 1999; Brauman 2000; Terry 2002). For this to happen, the imperative of self-reflection becomes essential to the humanitarian enterprise (see Brauman 1998). As stated earlier in this essay, humanitarianism needs to transcend its obsession with immediacy and reflex, and "meet emergency with patience," as Appadurai (2002) has brilliantly put it in one of his articles in *Public Culture*.[10]

Another issue would be the refusal to act, an option embraced by several authors (see Brauman 1998; Kenyon Lischer 2003; Terry 2002; Warner 1999). The idea is that, when it is clear that aid is used to fuel conflict and war, and when it prolongs the suffering of the refugees, as it is used as blackmail and coercion into submission, humanitarian agencies need to pull out of camps. Such an action would not only sever the ties between aid and militarization, but it would also send a clear signal that what is needed is a political solution. Aid should cease being used as a surrogate for political action. Daniel Warner does not speak directly of the refusal to act, but rather of the necessity to diminish 'humanitarian space' and to make aid less available.[11]

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intended in their actions, but perhaps the roots of our colonial past run deeper than we think, framing and influencing our actions. This is one of the instances when we need to assume our past, whether it is our doing or not. To frame the issue in Jungian terms, this colonial legacy has become part of our collective consciousness and needs to be exposed in all its subtle ramifications.

[10] In his article "Deep Democracy: Urban Governmentality and the Horizon of Politics," Appadurai deals with the example of a poor urban community in India that mobilized through grassroots efforts and conceived long-term plans that aimed at improving its living conditions. Devising such plans also meant resisting the pressures from governmental agencies of implementing 'shock therapy' treatment to the community, opting instead for long-term planning that would meet 'emergency with patience.'

[11] The notion of 'humanitarian space' has initiated numerous debates. There are authors (Terry 2002; Pasquier 2001; Fox 2001) that claim that humanitarian space needs to be created and preserved, as its functions are vital for saving lives. There are others (Brauman 1998; Warner 1999) who take the standpoint that humanitarian space needs to be diminished, in order to avoid the tragic consequence of aid becoming a source of prolonging agony. The debate is far from over, especially with the emergence of what is now called the 'new humanitarianism.'

Humanitarian agencies tend to obsess over "assessing needs" of refugees, meaning over the exact quantity of food, shelters and medical supplies that are necessary in certain situations. Instead, they need to start focusing on assessing capacities (Anderson 1998: 142-3). It is undesirable, indeed pernicious, to focus on merely satisfying basic necessities, as it creates dependency. Instead, the authority and subjectivity of refugee needs to acknowledged. It is not a question of allowing refugees to take agency, but rather of acknowledging agency in the refugees.[12]

During the past years, prompted by the disastrous consequences of humanitarian action in the crises discussed by this essay, there has been a stronger call for the embrace of a 'new humanitarianism.' This new form of humanitarian action should be characterized by politicization, whereby aid agencies are encouraged to take political standpoints in a conflict, by a reorientation towards a human-rights based approach that allows aid agencies to withhold or withdraw aid from parties that are in flagrant violation of human rights, and by the shift from the minimalist aim of saving lives to development-oriented approaches (Fox 2001). This new humanitarianism is far from being unproblematic. Some of the dangers identified with this new approach are: the risk that aid agencies would become pawns for national governments to advance their foreign policy agendas; people afflicted by crises would be dichotomized into 'deserving' and 'undeserving victims'; and the possibility that aid agencies would lose their 'humanitarian space,' making it impossible for them to operate 'in the field' (see Fox 2001).

It is important to remember that the perils identified above are to a greater or lesser extent already present in the 'traditional' form of humanitarianism. Many agencies, UNHCR is only one example, are already pawns in the foreign policy game of national governments simply because they depend on their funding. What is needed is an increasing independence from national governments. Framing the second danger as a dichotomy between 'deserving' and 'undeserving victims' glosses over the fact that the portrayal of refugees is that of 'helpless victims.' If one maintains that aid needs to be given to everyone, irrespective of their role in the conflict, then I would argue that we have not learned anything from these experiences. I subscribe whole-heartedly to Warner's position that 'humanitarian space' needs to be diminished, and that aid needs to be made less available, not only with the intent of limiting the possibility of its being manipulated by local warlords or murderous governments, but also for the purpose of not creating dependency. Diminishing 'humanitarian space' would also allow refugees to build on their experience and assert their authority.

As mentioned earlier in this essay, solutions for stronger political action seem to reinforce the *status quo* of national practices of sovereignty by strengthening the position of the state regarding the resolution of conflicts. Paradoxically, it is precisely this system of sovereign nation-states longing for a perfect match between nation and territory that is the source of crises, and that makes possible the very idea of

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[12] The question of taking agency is indeed another delicate and controversial issue. Can agency be taken, as in the now classic case of the Mexican Zapatistas, or does it need to be provided to the agent? I argue that agency needs to be acknowledged, which implies that aid workers, by recognizing the superior authority of the refugees over their own lives, need to be aware of the incontestable subjectivity of refugees.

'refugeeness.' The state is, without a doubt, the epitome of 'othering' practices and exclusion, as its very identity is forged against the existence of other similar entities, and by sequestering a way of life and making it *the* ideal way, thus unambiguously excluding alternate ways of living (see Campbell 1992). Finding a solution that transcends the reinforcement of this system is indeed the challenge that lies ahead of us. Therefore, while searching for solutions to humanitarian dilemmas, we need to keep in mind that the idea of humanitarianism and of 'humanitarian' crises is engendered both by practices of national sovereignty that are inherently exclusionary, and by the selective willingness of such practices to engage into political crises, which do not serve their self-centered interests.

Conclusion

One of the fallacies of the traditional humanitarian approach is its belief, visible in its practices, that aid is something neutral, value-free, and it needs to be 'bestowed' to everyone regardless of their role in the conflict. Aid is not neutral, and is not value-free. It is very much politically charged and it makes a powerful statement. The universal, neutral and impartial distribution of aid creates a moral hierarchy between aid donors and aid receivers, whereby the former situate themselves in the position of civilized and noble benefactors who impart their generous gifts to uncivilized war-mongering 'others.' I believe that this frame is a transfer of colonial attitudes into postcolonial mentalities, a continuation of the leitmotif of the 'white man's burden' into humanitarianism as a concept and as a set of practices.

If one embraces the view that the self can only stay true to oneself by perceiving oneself *as* another, if one understands that selfhood is not merely the assertion of ego, but the awareness that sameness and difference are inscribed within each human being, making us all selves and others, then the relationship between humanitarians and refugees needs to be based on the equality that Ricoeur envisioned. This equality allows, in times of tragedy, for the opportunity to offer help to another while acknowledging its superior authority over one's own life. Such acknowledgement stems from an awareness that the roles are reversible, that the people afflicted by crises are irreplaceable, and more importantly, that one cannot esteem oneself without esteeming the other *as* oneself.

This ethics of responsibility needs to be subjected to the "sieve" of moral norms, so that the "alterity of persons, inherent to the very idea of human plurality" should not clash violently with the "universality of rules that uphold the idea of humanity" (Ricoeur 1990: 305). The universality of rules needs to be adapted to the historicity and contextuality of every specific situation, so that the notion of respect should not split into respect for the law versus respect for people. I argue that this split took place in the case of humanitarian action. The experiences in Afghanistan, Cambodia, Ethiopia, Bosnia, and Rwanda prove that the depoliticized principles of universality, neutrality and impartiality have devastating consequences. For the purpose of upholding these principles, people's lives and protection were sacrificed. Instead of alleviating suffering, humanitarian aid has fueled and prolonged conflict. In the case of humanitarian actions, universal aid meant not some grand ideal according to which everyone was helped irrespective of where they came

from, but allowing aid to be used for militarization, as coercion against refugees, and for the purpose of conferring legitimacy to local warlords and murderous governments.

Solutions to such delicate and painful issues do not come easily. As discussed in the last section of this essay, it is difficult to attempt reform or even radical change, without falling into new traps. What we need are not flawless approaches, but solutions that are imbued with self-reflection and with the awareness that any action has political ramifications, whether we intended it or not. Humanitarianism is an inherently political concept and practice, its existence is made possible by the existence of the present system of sovereign nation-states. Such a system, with its imposition of boundaries, is inherently prone to exclusions and is the very source of the possibility of refugeeness. As Hannah Arendt (1951) aptly stated, "only with a completely organized humanity could the loss of home and political status become identical with expulsion from humanity altogether" (177). The challenge that lies ahead is to reinvent humanitarianism by disembedding it from its state-centric framework, and situating it within a discourse of ethical responsibility that acknowledges that the self cannot be separated from the other, that, as Levinas beautifully put it, "we are all Others somewhere to someone" (cited in George 1995: 210). It is not easy, but it needs to be done, the poetics of our inner *self* demands it.

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