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Ethics

With the identity of humanitarian action as a moral endeavor, ethics is central to the study of humanitarianism (Slim 2015). The responsibility to provide humanitarian assistance and abide with international humanitarian law brings up questions of ethics and moral responsibility, as do normative criticisms of the nature and effects of humanitarian efforts.

Ethics is concerned with the evaluation of attitudes and behavior based on a combination of ideas of values and reality. A distinction can be made between *meta-ethics*, *normative ethics*, *applied ethics*, and *descriptive ethics*. *Meta-ethics* examines the theoretical foundations of ethics, such as the idea of deriving prescriptive implications from a notion of humanity in humanitarianism. *Normative ethics* evaluates ethical ideas, such as the adequacy of “humanity” as a principle of action. *Applied ethics* assesses attitudes and behavior in concrete practical contexts, such as the operationalization of a principle of humanity in refugee management. Ethics can also be studied in a *descriptive* sense by examining the ethical ideas that people have, without evaluating whether these are true or false, right or wrong.

When ethics is addressed in the context of humanitarian action, it is usually done in an applied sense with reference to the principles of international humanitarian law, human rights, or the “humanitarian principles” of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence (Pictet 1979). In line with operational demands of aligning practices with these principles, the coherence of policies and practices with the principles are assessed and the justification of departing from the principles is discussed.

The question of coherence relates to the dispute between so-called “Dunantist” and “Wilsonian” approaches concerning the hierarchy between emergency relief based on humanitarian law and a broader development agenda based on human rights (Barnett 2011).

Departing from these principles is the subject of longstanding disputes between principled and pragmatic approaches—a dispute that overlaps with the distinction between duty-based ethics (deontology), evaluating behavior based on its motives, and consequentialist ethics (associated with utilitarianism), evaluating behavior on the basis of its effects (Baron, Pettit, and Slote 1997).

Drawing on the Aristotelian tradition of virtue ethics, another approach to the ethics of humanitarian action concentrates on the qualities of humanitarian workers and decision-makers (Löfquist 2017). This approach seems particularly suited as guidance for action in situations where a multitude of identities, moral codes, and political considerations are at play.

Arguably, the hardest ethical questions pertain to the *consequences* of humanitarian action. It is well documented that immediate relief may have adverse effects. For instance, food relief may keep militias going and refugee camps can be exploited for the displacement of ethnic or political groups (Anderson 1999). Prominent examples include the assistance of the International Committee of the Red Cross in Nazi concentration camps and the military strategic uses (instrumentalization) of humanitarian aid by NATO in Afghanistan (Donini 2012). According to consequentialist ethics, relief should be avoided if the benefits are outweighed by negative side effects. Still, it is highly controversial to allow for avoidable suffering with reference to such side effects—in particular, when decisions involve a high degree of uncertainty and no realistic alternative exists for a humanitarian response.

A problem with the literature on ethics in humanitarian action is that it tends either to be internal to a discourse of humanitarian problems, principles, and solutions or to rely on unrealistic assumptions about alternatives, such as the absolute commitment of politicians to humanitarian objectives or the global redistribution of power and privilege. Ethics can have a constructive role in bridging these opposites through a principled but realistic engagement with humanitarian practices.

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Evaluation

“Evaluation” emerged in the 1990s as an important, now essential, element in the efforts to enhance the quality of humanitarian aid. An evaluation is typically defined as a systematic and objective assessment of an ongoing or completed project, program, or policy, including its design, implementation, and results. An evaluation should provide useful and credible information that enables the incorporation of lessons learned into the decision-making processes of recipients and providers of such aid.

The purpose of such evaluations is to improve ongoing or future projects, programs, and policies through the feedback of lessons learned and/or to provide a basis for accountability, including the provision of information to the public. The OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) has identified five major evaluation criteria and developed a main standard for evaluation. These are:

- *Relevance*: the extent to which the aid activity is suited to the priorities and policies of the target group, recipient, and donor;
- *Effectiveness*: a measure of the extent to which an aid activity attains its objective;
- *Efficiency*: this measures outputs—qualitative and quantitative—in relation to the inputs. It is an economic term that signifies the aid uses the least costly resources possible in order to achieve the desired results;