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Special Section: Justice, Healthcare, and Wellness

Can Theories of Global Justice Be Useful in Humanitarian Response?

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Abstract: Why is it that humanitarianism and theories of global justice seem to have relatively little engagement with each other? This article discusses some of the reasons for this being the case, and argues that instead of seeing these two fields as separate or adversarial they should be viewed as complementary. The article begins with a brief overview of humanitarianism, in order to argue for the relevance of justice in humanitarianism. The second section focuses on analyzing selected theories of justice— those of Peter Singer, John Kekes, and Thomas Pogge—through a particular lens, that of the question of responsibility for global well-being. The article concludes by arguing that theories of global justice can be beneficial for humanitarian causes, not in a comprehensive and consistent "all-or-nothing" manner, but rather on a case-by-case basis and through selective application of particular arguments.

Keywords: humanitarianism; global justice; Peter Singer; John Kekes; Thomas Pogge; global well-being

Introduction

My choice of the topic of humanitarianism and global justice was born out of personal puzzlement. Through a recent involvement with a project that focused on ethical decisionmaking in disaster situations, I became acquainted with humanitarian approaches and theories. Interestingly, and contrary to my initial assumption, I discovered that humanitarianism and international relief work appear to have relatively little engagement with theories of global justice. Why is that? Are not both of these fields concerned in the well-being of humans across the world? Are they not both engaged with the plight of those worst off? It is well established that health and well-being are an appropriate focus of theories of justice.[1] On the individual level, adequate health and access to care are an important premise for the majority of autonomous choices in people's lives, and on the societal level, public health research has demonstrated that socioeconomic factors are strong indicators of the health of an individual.

Therefore, why is there so little engagement from political philosophy theories of global justice, with humanitarianism, and vice versa? Some potential explanations follow.

1) Humanitarianism is about charity, not justice. This is a common view, and yet the vast majority of current disasters, crises, and catastrophes in the world do have significant human components. Therefore, questions of responsibility and of justice are not irrelevant. In the first section of this article I argue that justice is relevant in humanitarian debates and practices.

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2) Humanitarianism pertains to urgent and yet marginal fringes of disasters and catastrophies and is, therefore, not central to theories of justice that provide normative guidelines about how societies should be organized in general and during "normal" times. The first and second sections of this article will discuss if and how the core areas of these two fields might overlap.
3) There are disciplinary boundaries. Philosophers are busy with theories of justice, social scientists and disaster relief organizations are busy with development theory and humanitarianism. Can this simply be the result of a common academic phenomenon these days, that despite the loud proclamations of interdisciplinarity, the disciplines are, in fact, digging themselves deeper and deeper into their particular tunnels? There might be a grain of truth here, but I suggest that there are no well-justified reasons for keeping this division.
4) There are pragmatic and conceptual reasons. It has been argued that theories of justice simply do not need humanitarian "crutches" and vice versa. On the one hand, arguments of justice are often privileged before arguments of humanity because they seem to rely more on rationality and less on feelings of compassion, as I discuss in the section on humanitarianism. On the other hand, theories of justice tend to be emotionally unappealing, certainly compared with the picture of a starving child, and abstract theoretical accounts have long demonstrated their inability to get things done in the real world. Therefore, humanitarianism does not need theories of justice to get work done and provide aid for those in need. Furthermore, Christopher Lowry and Udo Schüklenk, among others, have proposed that mixing theories of justice with humanitarianism might bring more harm than benefits.[2] I will argue that instead of seeing these two fields as separate or somewhat adversarial, they should be viewed as complementary.

My overall aim is to discuss whether theories of global justice could contribute to better humanitarian action and disaster relief, and to people's well-being across the globe. I will start with an overview of humanitarianism. This will include the more traditional charity-based approach, a human-rights-based one, as well as the latest development: that of the humanitarian-military intervention. The aim here is to argue for the relevance of justice in humanitarianism. The section on theories of global justice and the question of responsibility will focus on analyzing a selected number of theories of justice through a particular lens: that of a question of responsibility for global well-being. I will end by arguing that theories of global justice can be beneficial for humanitarian causes, but not in a comprehensive and consistent "all-or-nothing" manner as philosophers would no doubt prefer, but rather on a case-by-case basis and through selective application of particular arguments.

Humanitarianism

Theorizing on humanitarian rationale, means, and purpose has much expanded over the past decades, mirroring a similar expansion of actual on-the-ground humanitarian action. Humanitarianism, in the eyes of a wary supporter, has sometimes even replaced politics as usual, being seen as "the secular religion of the new millennium."[3] However, humanitarianism is by no means a coherent set of views.

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Humanitarianism, in its oldest and most *traditional* form, is a response to human suffering and acute needs. Driven by the values of compassion, charity, pity, and care, it intuitively arises from our acknowledgement that involuntary human suffering is bad and is built on our impulses to act on this recognition. It is a topic of debate whether humanitarianism has to rely solely on voluntary actions, or whether it actually can be enforced.[4] The principle of *humanity* rather than of humanitarianism is often used to denote the latter. I will here stick with the more prevalent view that does not associate humanitarianism with coercion.

For the supporters of traditional humanitarianism, the language of human rights tends to be too political, thus complicating discourse; and conscious attempts are made by these supporters to distance themselves from local and international politics. The emergency and exceptionality of humanitarian actions tends to suspend all other concerns;[5] however, focusing on human suffering alone can be seen as problematic, or even, as one author claims, a "sentimental, paternalistic, and privileged discourse of philantrophy and charity."[6] As the goal of saving lives reigns supreme, other aspects of the crisis become invisible, or at least insignificant. Political responsibility is not demanded, and the immediacy of the emergency dislocates attention from context, structural issues such as poverty and inequality, and history. As complex political circumstances become cloaked in the language of suffering, it is almost as if people should be saved after an earthquake but are then free to die of starvation and poverty. The victims can suffer but not speak, and they are not given an opportunity to use a more dignified language; for example, that of rights and justice. Paradoxically, then, although traditional humanitarian organizations have long viewed themselves as "outside" or "the opposite of" politics, critics still accuse them of being collaborators with the political forces of injustice.

There has been dissatisfaction with the traditional humanitarian approach for many decades. One of the important motives for the establishment of the well-known humanitarian organization Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) was the neutrality policy of the Red Cross, as, for example, the latter's reluctance to speak out about the Holocaust during World War II. Instead of the Red Cross's neutrality and respect for national sovereignty, MSF wanted to advocate, to speak out, to bear witness to pain and distress, and, ultimately, to declare borders irrelevant for human suffering. This approach—human *rights-humanitarianism*—demands responsible politics, law, and justice, and sees human suffering largely as a result of shortcomings in statecraft.

At first sight, it might be surprising to start looking for blame and responsibility in cases of disaster, be it tsunamis, earthquakes, tornados, flooding, or mudslides. Humans did not create those events, but do have to deal with consequences. But is this claim true? A comparison between two well-known disasters might illustrate the issue of responsibility. In 2010, the world experienced two major earthquakes. In Haiti, an earthquake of 7.0 magnitude killed approximately 150,000 people and flattened much of the infrastructure. Later, Chile had an earthquake with the magnitude of 8.8, the sixth largest earthquake to be recorded at the time, 500 times more powerful than the earthquake in Haiti; but "only" 525 people were killed. How can this difference be explained?[7] Although humans are unable to avoid natural events such as tsunamis, earthquakes, or tornadoes, they are, on the one hand, capable of preparing for them and building up resilience in

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communities, and, on the other hand, are equally capable of creating additional vulnerabilities. The popular textbook *Public Health Guide in Emergencies* by Johns Hopkins and the Red Cross Red Crescent summarizes:

> Many disasters arising from natural hazards would not have occurred or would have had a smaller impact on communities had it not been for actions by people: deforestation for firewood or building materials has resulted in landslides during heavy rainfall in Central and South America; overgrazing of cattle has allowed desertification in the Sahel; uncontrolled housing construction close to beaches increases risks from tsunamis and storms; removal of wetlands has eliminated a natural mitigating factor for the damage caused by tropical storms; political systems have turned droughts into famine, particularly in Africa.[8]

This recognition is one of the reasons why over the past decades, rights-humanitarianism has become more prevalent, and focus solely on decontextualized human suffering is seen as impossible, futile, or even naïve and dangerous. We can very often look for human responsibility, even in cases of natural disasters. What disasters have we chosen to prevent or alleviate, and which ones have we not?

It is difficult for humanitarian organizations to entirely distance themselves from politics. Humanitarian research can be appropriated for other purposes, and there are well-known dangers of complicity in humanitarian work, as, for example, when humanitarian organizations provide logistics in areas of ethnic violence, and the intervention to save people coincides with the interests of some parties to displace people.[9]

Pragmatically, many humanitarian organizations combine the two discourses: that of human rights and that of traditional humanitarianism. The latter works best for fundraising, as emotional messages of suffering simply are effective. Even the more radical humanitarian agencies have seldom found it in their immediate financial interest to develop a more political rights-based consciousness with their domestic publics when appealing for large funds for those suffering from war and disasters.[10] This is important, because international human rights law, although ratified by many and talked about loudly, "is distinguished by failure of application both locally and internationally,"[11] thus leaving humanitarian organizations without many workable tools.

The most recent development in humanitarianism is the *military-humanitarian intervention*. Within this awkward partnership, humanitarian and military organizations have relied on each other for legitimation, security, and logistics, among other purposes. Lauded by some as necessary cooperation for providing efficient and professional assistance, this intervention is rejected by others as unethical and disastrous in the long term, as trust for the neutrality of humanitarian organizations is jeopardized, and the scope of interventions may be modified, if, for example, focus shifts to infrastructure rather than poverty prevention.[12]

Several phenomena can be distinguished here, from the involvement of the actual military to militaristic activities of the humanitarian organizations themselves. The security discourse associated with the former is more openly normative, and is largely based on arguments from the international relations literature, especially realist and neoliberal thinking. After September 11, 2001, the proper management of desperation and conflict were seen as the main ways of escaping the threat of

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global chaos to the Western world. Various institutional cooperations—civil–military and public–private—are seen as crucial, and humanitarian intervention here is not merely about responding to the most acute needs for food, shelter, and medical attention, but also involves policing, monitoring violations, and institutional capacity building. The discourse of security has been increasingly applied to health, economic, and social needs, and the militarization of humanitarian intervention is part of that process. Ebola is a good example.

Even without the involvement of actual military might, the certain forcefulness and militarism of the recent humanitarian agenda has been questioned by some critics. Laurence McFalls has argued that "the benevolent dictatorship of humanitarian government based on scientific expertise and relying on the institutional form of the non-governmental organization has become the uncontested and uncontestable radical bio power of our age."[13] The concern is that humanitarianism is trumping international law and national sovereignty without proper legitimacy. However, if it is political legitimacy that is lacking in humanitarian intervention, then theories of global justice might well have the adequate theoretical tools to buttress humanitarian causes.

To summarize, the traditional charity- and compassion-based humanitarianism has been central in responding to human suffering and needs throughout history; however, it is increasingly considered insufficient by many contemporary humanitarians who propose a human-rights-based strategy to deal with the causes and the consequences of large-scale human suffering. This is very much linked to the realization that disasters can often be either avoided, or at least minimized, and that it is the duty of governments to do so. Although humans are unable to prevent an earthquake or tropical storm, we are able to enforce construction zones, early warning systems, and even social programs that promote the resilience of communities hit by disasters. If we assume that during disasters and humanitarian crises we are often justified in raising the issue of responsibility and in employing the language of human rights, then theories of justice are a logical place to look for arguments as well as for legitimation of the necessary interventions.

Theories of Global Justice and the Question of Responsibility

The point of theories of justice, which are traditionally nation based, is to argue for certain principles that should be adhered to in the institutional designs and distributive patterns within societies. Over the last decades, however, the issue of global justice has become increasingly popular as well as more urgent. The academic field of global justice and global ethics has grown considerably, and the subsequent description is by no means comprehensive. Most of the approaches that will subsequently be discussed have generated almost unmanageable numbers of commentaries and critiques. I have chosen to focus on selected cosmopolitan authors who offer competing accounts regarding the question of responsibility in global justice. This selection is meant to illustrate the variety of debates around global justice, and I will not be arguing for any one particular account. My implicit premise is that it makes sense to discuss global justice; therefore, I will leave aside approaches that, for various reasons, do not recognize this, such as that of Thomas Nagel.[14] I will also leave aside accounts that largely limit justice-related duties to within national borders, as does John Rawls,[15] as these accounts rarely have anything but humanitarian charity to offer to the global poor. Global justice has a

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wider scope than humanitarianism; however, there is an overlap when there are disasters, conflict zones, refugees, or even widespread poverty that makes certain populations routinely vulnerable to those threats. I will first discuss whether there is an obligation of justice to help those in need. If there is such an obligation, whose obligation is it?

Do we have an obligation to help those in need? An unqualified yes is the answer of Peter Singer, as it is suffering itself that creates in us a duty to respond. His straightforward and well-known argument is as follows[16]:

1) Suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care are bad.
2) If it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it.

Singer famously illustrates this principle with a drowning child: you see a child drowning in the pond, you could save the child with no danger to yourself, therefore you should do it. This principle takes no account of proximity or distance. Distance is not morally relevant when we have a duty to help, because now the world is a global village, so knowledge of local conditions is available. It is also clearly an individual-centered approach. Singer posits responsibility for action with individual people, and does not allow it to be delegated to the level of organizations and states. He also redescribes the traditionally distinct moral categories of duty and charity. Giving money and support for those in need is not generosity or kindness on the individual's part; it is not a supererogatory act, but a requirement of justice.[17] It is also interesting that this requirement of justice does not ask for responsibility, or even for causes. It is perfectly in line with the utilitarian theory that builds moral judgments on consequences and consequences only.

But not everyone is so generous, or so demanding. It is, therefore, common to ask who might be responsible for the global suffering that needs alleviating? Not us as individuals, says John Kekes, who regards Singer's account as "rationally indefensible rampant moralism" and accuses Singer of equating allowing to die with killing, thus making us all into murderers.[18] Kekes claims that the prevention of harm principle is only one ethical principle out of many. Another important principle would be that people should be responsible for the foreseeable consequences of their actions. In his view, a reason for much of the poverty that exists is overpopulation, and people are responsible for deciding how many children to have. He also points at evidence that aid does not always benefit those who are in need, but merely prolongs the problem while feeding corruption and charities. The analogy of the innocent drowning child does not work in his eyes—it is important who is drowning (maybe a contract killer)—because there might be "lifeguards" in the vicinity whose job it is to save people in need; for example, the governments of those countries whose populations are suffering should be functioning in this capacity. And the "real world" case is also that every day there are actually 10,000 drowning children in that pond, not just one.

Like Kekes, Thomas Pogge also thinks that it is important to factor in responsibility when discussing global suffering. But whereas Kekes blames the poor and the destitute of the world for their troubles, Pogge finds that it is the global institutional order of international organizations, trade systems and well-off countries

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that have blood on their hands. We, through electing politicians who support the global trade order and its principles, are responsible for reproducing poverty and its related ill-health. Pogge argues that our imposition of the existing global order is actively "causing poverty… I believe that we are involved in harming—and, more specifically, in massively violating the human rights of—the global poor."[19] The well-developed countries and the ruling classes of the poor countries benefit from the international order that simultaneously harms the populations of the poorer countries. It is not charity or assistance that we owe to the global poor, but rectification of injustice, a negative duty of stopping harm.

Social institutions affect health, and Pogge notes that poverty is the most important factor in explaining health deficits, the most common being malnutrition, unsafe drinking water, lack of sanitation, and no access to drugs.[20] If the international institutional contexts and practices are responsible for creating certain health needs, then a proper reaction would be to prioritize the needs that the system is responsible for creating. Whether a needy person is a compatriot or not has no bearing on the duty to help if it is causality that matters. Pogge's cosmopolitan argument is that "foreigners' medical conditions in whose incidence we are materially involved have greater moral weight for us than compatriots' medical conditions in whose incidence we are not materially involved."[21]

These all-or-nothing debates on global blame and responsibilities can be balanced with the nuanced account of Mathias Risse, who argues that the global order is not fundamentally unjust, but simply incompletely just, and that some evils and disasters that happen cannot be directly attributable to anyone.[22] This means that whereas there is ample room to improve the foundations and working principles of the global institutional order to lessen the active harming a la Pogge, there is also still room for humanitarian sentiments to address suffering that is not directly the fault of those who are in a position to help.

Particular Theories for Particular Problems

The problems of global poverty and of humanitarian crises are diverse, their causes disparate, and their solutions complex. Any theory of justice that tries to respond and offer adequate solutions would have to be hugely complex to be able to motivate those who feel responsible for the plight of the poor, as well as those who do not, to cater to those who feel that every single human being has a duty to help ease suffering as well as to those who think that taking care of this is the duty of institutions and states, not individuals. All of these sentiments and arguments have a grain of truth in them, but it is not likely that such a theory-of-all-theories is forthcoming any time soon.

Perhaps it is not needed. Michael Walzer has argued that instead of a comprehensive "single philosophically grounded" theory, what is needed is a minimalist one with three major components: "the recognition of people like ourselves, concern for their suffering, and a few widely shared moral principles. If these three amount to a theory, it is, so to speak, a 'little' theory, one that is incomplete in much the same way that global society is incomplete."[23] Amartya Sen has asserted that in their quest for a perfect theory of justice that is fully comprehensive and consistent, philosophers have ended up with something quite impracticable, and perhaps even harmful.[24] Sarah Clark Miller's work has drawn attention to the fact that for human well-being, much more than justice is needed, and that a feminist

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ethics of care is a useful starting point to raise the importance of dignity, trust, and relationships, even in humanitarian contexts.[25]

I think that criticisms pointing to the inadequacies and the often-unfounded premises of largely idealized theories of justice are substantial,[26,27] albeit not always charitable. Academic philosophical work should not be mistaken for a specific "to do" blueprint. But I disagree with the view that looking for systematic and abstract principles is an unnecessary or even unethical endeavor in itself. It is obvious that abstractions rarely manage to do justice to the complexities of real life; however, they also sometimes succeed in providing a systematic, structural perspective. My view is that what is perhaps needed (and even better, may already exist) are theories of justice in the plural. Pragmatically speaking, the already-existing theories of justice offer very useful insights and tailored answers to the numerous yet disparate problems of global suffering and well-being. The fact that none of the theories is perfect enough to adequately deal with all the problems, and their causes and solutions, is perhaps not a problem at all. Pogge's account should and could be utilized for initiating a fairer global institutional order, Singer's account should and could be utilized for dealing with lack of funding, and Martha Nussbaum's capabilities account could and should be utilized for normative guidelines in assessing social policies.[28] Military-humanitarian interventions could be an appropriate tool for certain circumstances; in others, traditional humanitarianism and the nonprofit sector are capable of responding as needed.

Conclusions

I will conclude with some further arguments in favor of complementarity of humanitarianism and theories of global justice. *Theories of justice cannot succeed on their own.* It is no secret that theories of justice tend to be emotionally unappealing and incapable of generating action, in comparison with humanitarian relief messages. Many may still remember how one photograph of a drowned little Syrian boy managed to upend European refugee policies, a feat that the thousands of drowned refugees who remained but abstract numbers did not succeed in accomplishing.[29] Pictures work, and emotional messages work, this is how humans seem to be built to respond. Rational arguments about what ought to be done often succeed in making us feel bad but do not change our behavior, as Jonathan Wolff has diagnosed.[30]

Humanitarianism can also play an important role when there is no easily detectable causal link between human suffering and somebody's undoing. Theories of global justice (with the exception of Singer's) tend to let us off the hook if we can argue that we are innocent of others' suffering. Tom Campbell has drawn attention to how claims of justice often depend on "dubious factual claims" about responsibility and causality, and here, uncomplicated principles of humanity are well suited to fill the gaps.[31]

Humanitarianism cannot succeed on its own. The other side of the "efficient emotional messages" coin of humanitarianism pertains to its unfortunate arbitrariness. In our unconscious, the "pure victims" of tsunamis and earthquakes tend to triumph over the victims of famine or civil war who are "contaminated by human evil,"[32] yet people die and suffer in those situations as well. The media coverage tends to focus on certain topics and locations over others for no morally solid reasons; domestic political arguments and branding interests of humanitarian agencies have trumped actual needs assessment in funding decisions.[33] A total of

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273,000 people died in the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004, and consequently, the world's largest humanitarian relief operation attracted 10 billion United States dollars in aid. In the same year, 3,100,000 people died of HIV/AIDS, and the funding was less than half of what was necessary; the mortality rate of HIV/AIDS was equal to that of one tsunami a month.[34] The more systematic focus of theories of global justice can help to alleviate the often fickle reactions of the humanitarian approach, pushing the latter toward more well-justified and fair consideration of the numerous crises.

Leaving aside those who are saints, there is a limit to our personal pool of compassion toward the suffering of others, especially if they are far distant from us; and even the most perfectly calibrated donation campaigns cannot address all of the serious needs in the world. Humanitarian reasoning on its own lacks the firepower for large-scale institutional change, and this is where "boring" theories of justice can do their work in routinely highlighting the problems and proposing policy changes that will, it is hoped, diminish the future need for humanitarian aid.

Fundamentally, there is a fair amount of overlap between humanitarianism and justice-driven arguments. Helping those in need can be convincingly argued for through compassion, through our duty to help because we can, or because we have caused the misery. The world is too complex a place to fit comfortably within one particular theoretical frame. Therefore, the various immensely challenging practical worries of humanitarian work can justifiably reach out for the most suitable theory. The potential inconsistency of it all is a problem for a philosophy colloquium; but luckily, it often is not a problem outside of one.

Notes

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17. Therefore, I disagree with accounts that group Singer's position under charity. Charity pertains to something that one can do and that is good to do, but a person is not immoral for not doing it. Morality and requirements of justice pertain to what one has to do. Singer, at least in his original work (1972), argues for the latter. On the other hand, I agree with some critics that Singer's individualist approach (even if successful) is not sufficient to introduce sustainable long-term change in global conditions. See, for example, AJ. Langlois Charity and justice in global poverty relief. *Australian Journal of Political Science* 2008;43(4):685–98.
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21. See note 19, Pogge 2008, at 310. Lowry and Schüklenk, however, have argued that it is much easier to demonstrate causal links within one society and political system than globally; therefore, responsibility for a compatriot's bad health might still be easier to prove. See note 2, Lowry, Shüklenk 2009.
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