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The moral sense of humanitarian actors: an empirical exploration

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This paper examines humanitarianism's moral positioning above private and political interests to save lives and alleviate suffering. It does not aim to assess the legitimacy of this stance, but rather to probe the way in which humanitarian actors relate to this moral dimension in their everyday work. It investigates empirically humanitarian ethics from the perspective of humanitarian actors, drawing on interviews conducted in Beirut, Lebanon, in 2014. As it is exploratory, three key conceptual innovations were required. The first of these is the introduction of the tools developed to consider a neglected reality: humanitarian actors' 'moral sense' vis-à-vis the humanitarian sector's 'moral culture'. Second, the study shows how the sector's moral culture is structured around the notion of 'concern for persons in need'. Third, it analyses the way in which the sector and its actors handle the asymmetrical relationships encountered daily. Ultimately this paper seeks to valorise humanitarian actors' creativity in their common practices and explore potential challenges to it.

Keywords: concern for persons in need, humanitarian actors, humanitarian ethics, moral culture, moral sense

Introduction

> *What is morality, if not the practice of liberty, the deliberate practice of liberty?*
>
> —Michel Foucault, cited in Fornet-Betancourt, Becker, and Gomez-Müller (1987, p. 115).

There is no axiological neutrality in humanitarianism. From the outset the humanitarian sector stands in the sphere of ethics: located above private and political interests, with the aim of saving lives and alleviating suffering in a time of crisis.[1] This paper is not concerned with assessing the actual morality of the humanitarian enterprise, but rather with exploring the way in which humanitarian actors relate to this ethical dimension in their everyday work. As such, it addresses an area of research that thus far has been left unscrutinised by contemporary studies on humanitarian action: the moral experience of humanitarian actors. It does so by investigating empirically humanitarian ethics from their perspective, drawing on 37 interviews conducted in Beirut, Lebanon, in June 2014.

This study on the ethical dimension of humanitarian actors' lived experience appears timely. Indeed, since the 1990s, the sector has been going through an immense process of professionalisation, contributing assuredly to the enhancement of its quality and effectiveness. Some of its associated challenges, though, are increasingly pressing

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today, such as the problem of 'proceduralization' (Anderson, Brown, and Jean, 2012, p. 65) and '"mechanization" of humanitarianism' (Brauman, 2004, p. 415). This context is making it crucial that humanitarian actors do not lose sight of the ultimate goal: the humanitarian *telos*—that is, to save lives, alleviate suffering, and protect and maintain human dignity.

In addition, at a time when the humanitarian sector is seeking to 're-inspire and reignite our common humanity' (World Humanitarian Summit Secretariat, 2015, p. iv) and to provide tools for an improved humanitarian ethics (Mattei, 2014; Slim, 2015), it is essential to appraise the meaning of these norms and moral aspirations in the actual motivations and experiences of humanitarian actors. To do so, this paper looks at ethics in humanitarian work in its experiential and subjective dimension, what is called here 'moral sense'.

As this is an exploratory piece of work, three key conceptual innovations were required. The first of these is the introduction of the analytical tools developed to probe this new research object, derived from literature in the realms of philosophy and social sciences. In addition, the particular aspect of ethics at stake is defined and 'moral sense' is distinguished from 'moral culture'. Next the study shows how the humanitarian sector's moral culture is structured around the key notion of 'care for people in need'. Finally, it analyses the way in which the sector and its actors handle the asymmetrical relationships encountered daily.

Conceptual framework

A customary notion of ethics

The ethics or morality at stake here originates in the Greek tradition and is increasingly attracting philosophers once again (Anscombe, 1958; Macintyre, 1982; Foucault, 1988; Glover, 2001). It is grounded in these two notions' common etymological root in the idea of 'customs'—that is, *ēthikos* in Greek and *moralis* in Latin. The etymology points to the fundamental embeddedness of morality in a particular cultural context, in the same way that it is recognised to be the case for eating and parenting habits. As a result, it can be analysed only from within a broader social environment. This conception of ethics moves away from the 'law conception of ethics' (Anscombe, 1958, p. 6) centred on the notion of justice (such as in the moral philosophy of John Rawls). In this legislative model, the 'moral philosopher proposes a particular point of view on a normative question, in the similar way as the lawyer does' (Reber, 2011, p. 10).[2] The present approach, by contrast, calls for ethics to be brought 'back to its own ground'—that of ordinary practices—and requires therefore an 'immanent examination of our moral practices' (Laugier, 2001, pp. 100–101).[3]

This empirical approach to ethics is at the core of Didier Fassin's demand for a 'moral anthropology', which 'explores how societies ideologically and emotionally found their cultural distinction between good and evil, and how social agents concretely work out this separation in their everyday life' (Fassin, 2008, p. 334). In the

context of this paper, the society is the humanitarian sector and social agents are humanitarian actors. Hugo Slim's research on humanitarian ethics is also a major influence on this study, in particular the idea that 'declamatory principles' are not sufficient; it is also essential to evaluate the sector's 'applied ethics' (Slim, 2015, p. 21). Consequently, rather than a prescriptive conception of ethics that seeks to determine the right way of applying rationally determined norms and values, this paper is interested in a notion of ethics that starts from recognition of one's practical and embodied engagement in the world. It draws from the social sciences to engage with the reality of the humanitarian sector in terms of its complexity and plurality.

Empirical material

The 2015 edition of the *State of the Humanitarian System* estimated that there were approximately 319,000 humanitarian workers worldwide in 2014 (ALNAP, 2015, p. 39). In light of the limited number of interviews conducted, this research does not pretend to be representative of the diverse humanitarian community as a whole. Rather, its intention is to open a field of research that has been neglected so far: the moral sense of humanitarian actors. Indeed, as anthropologists of aid work have shown recently, 'in applied and professional literature on development as well as critical anthropology, aid workers have largely been invisible' (Hindman and Fechter, 2011, p. 3). This can also be said of the literature on humanitarian assistance, aside from some noteworthy exceptions (Slim, 1995; Walkup, 1997; Hilhorst and Jansen, 2010; Barnett, 2011; Redfield, 2013). The agency of aid workers is an area that remains particularly unexamined in humanitarian studies.[4] It is nonetheless interesting to note the growing pool of research on humanitarian ethics founded on the experiences, perspectives, and practices of humanitarian actors (Hilhorst and Schmiemann, 2002; Schwartz et al., 2010; Hunt, 2011; Bouvier, 2012; Slim, 2015). This paper seeks to contribute to this body of work.

The present study is based, as noted, on 37 interviews with humanitarian actors conducted in Beirut in June 2014. Interviewees were recruited using snowball sampling, and interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes, were conducted in English or French, and were recorded when respondents agreed to it. The sample is composed of 16 nationalities, including 19 individuals from non-OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries, 14 of whom are Lebanese or Syrian. Men and women are represented almost equally. Within their organisations they hold roles at different levels of the hierarchy, from heads of regional or country offices to recently appointed assistants. The interviewees are from the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (13), international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) (11), United Nations (UN) or governmental agencies (10), and local organisations (3). Most of them (35 of 37) were working as part of the response to the humanitarian crisis caused by the conflict in Syria that followed the civil revolution in 2011. All but one were based in Beirut or in neighbouring areas—the exception was in Amman, Jordan, and interviewed via Skype. Interviews were

semi-structured and followed a series of questions around three themes initially identified as potentially ethically relevant: motivations; relationships; and decision-making. Interviews were transcribed and analysed with the help of NVivo[5] qualitative analysis software.

Spoken words versus speaking words

Some precaution was required in handling the material collected in the interviews. Since the interviews enquired about aspirations and experiences, they touched on personal matters—that is, aspects of us that are intimately tied to who we are. As the Austrian theorist Friedrich Waismann (2000, p. 262) warns, it is not possible simply to say: 'here I am, and here are my motives'. The content of what is expressed is always partial, not only because a person might wish to hide or modify certain elements, but also because there are features of experiences and motivations that one is simply not able to make the object of reflection. Furthermore, the field of experiences and motivations generally comes with a certain degree of vagueness. Yet, as Waismann (2000, p. 263) adds, 'by putting it into words – words that have a precise meaning', one might 'eliminate something of its own indeterminacy', and 'alter it' in that sense.

Nonetheless, many respondents appeared rather determinate and resolute in talking about their experiences and motivations. Most likely they had already had conversations on these topics with colleagues, friends, or relatives. It was indeed perceptible that many of the responses heard were a repetition of words already spoken before. One interviewee even acknowledged that, 'when I explain these things, I have two ways of explaining this . . . the simple answer . . . and the other one that has more to do with my personal experience'. What does this imply for the present analysis?

French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2002, p. 229) distinguishes between two different ways of expressing oneself that capture well the different nature of the answers of the interviewees: 'spoken words' versus 'speaking words'. Spoken words are those already *said* before; through their continuous repetition they eventually go through a process of 'sedimentation' (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p. 150). Speaking words, in contrast, reveal something that has never been said before. A new and untold meaning emerges in speaking words. The present tense reveals a language that is alive and creative, as opposed to the past tense that is a retelling of already existing meanings. This study pays particular attention to these two types of language as they help to identify two different aspects of morality defined below.[6]

Moral culture versus moral sense

Spoken words point to what is called here the 'moral culture'. This paper concentrates on the culture of the humanitarian sector more generally.[7] A culture includes a number of dominant characteristics of a particular environment that determine to some degree the behaviours of individuals. As such, moral culture refers in this study to a notion of morality that shapes the 'moral sense' of individuals. It shares some

similarities with what Hugo Slim (1997, p. 246) calls 'organisational conscience', but slightly differs from it as it comes with a certain degree of imposition by the organisation on the individual actor. It gives ground to prescriptive claims and expected behaviours, that is, what one *should* do and think. This manifested in the interviews when respondents did not answer from their own lived experience. While asked about what *is*—their actual feelings, aspirations, or relationships to others—they would rather say what they think *should be* in these matters: what one *should* feel, *should* aspire to, and how one *should* relate to others. All of the tensions and ambiguities of experience would be lost. A first intention of this paper is to render visible this moral culture to make sure it does not escape the scope of critique in an alleged '"sacred" realm' (Hopgood, 2008, p. 99).

The second notion of morality with which this study is interested is the one that emerges in 'speaking words' and which has been linked to 'moral sense'. This notion, borrowed from eighteenth century moral sense theorists (Adam Smith, David Hume, Francis Hutcheson, or the third Earl of Shaftesbury), points to the experiential level in moral life. Rather than being imposed on the individual, this aspect of morality is more aspirational, creative, and embodied.

These two different modes of expressing oneself were generally perceptible in the interviews. Through the use of this distinction between moral sense (in speaking words) as opposed to moral culture (in spoken words), this paper avoids at the same time the strictly descriptive 'mapping' of humanitarian morality on the one hand, and, on the other, the judgemental position of a 'rough normativism' distantly assessing the morality or immorality of particular practices and behaviours (Reber, 2011, p. 45).[8]

Having laid out the conceptual framework, two findings of particular interest are presented: the first relates to the humanitarian founding motivation identified as 'concern for the person in need' and the second touches on the question of relationships within humanitarian practices.

Concern for the person in need

Normative axis

The discourse of humanitarian organisations is essentially centred on a sense of 'concern for the person in need', an expression borrowed from Tony Vaux (2001, p. 2). According to Vaux (2001), 'concern for the person in need' is precisely the main objective of humanitarian aid; it constitutes its core principle: the principle of humanity. In the *Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability* (CHS Alliance, Groupe URD, and the Sphere Project, 2014, p. 2), this concern takes the shape of the 'humanitarian imperative – the desire to prevent and alleviate human suffering wherever it happens'.

The main aim of this section is not to evaluate the authenticity of the claim as to whether humanitarian actors are effectively primarily driven by concern for the person in need. Rather, it seeks to explore how actors relate to this first normative axis: an experience of concern for a person in need.

Motivations

Interviewees expressed a wide range of reasons that have led them to work for a humanitarian organisation. Motives mentioned included technical interests, in particular for specialists such as engineers, healthcare professionals, or lawyers. Humanitarians with a specific professional skill mentioned an interest in the challenges posed by the humanitarian context to these professions. Other actors referred to looking for an income-generating activity. This motive was preponderant for locally contracted employees. Among expatriates, the international environment was a frequently mentioned incentive. Many indeed showed interest in discovering new cultures, languages, and people. And of course, the desire to help people in need was also cited considerably.

For a number of interviewees, the possibility of actually doing something with their concern constituted in itself a strong motivational driver to work in the humanitarian sector. For some it was dissatisfaction with other forms of professional activities that did not respond to people in need that led them to engage in humanitarian work. One interviewee saw humanitarian work as a form of 'refuge' from the inaction and lack of real impact of his previous profession, and the deep frustrations he used to feel. Thanks to the shift to humanitarian work, he said:

> *I feel better, I feel much better. More useful, as simple as that . . . it is a matter of impact, it is not about the thrills of the adventure. . . . I am not interested in that at all . . . the idea is to do something that has an impact.*[9]

Another person described it as a way to respond to a widespread dissatisfaction towards the state of things in general and in particular in her own country Lebanon:

> *I see all my Lebanese friends being so provoked by everything that is going on, let's say, in terms of conflict. And then you know, one questions oneself, 'what can you do?'. I think I've chosen what to do, in order to answer this question somehow.*

It became obvious that respondents related to their various motivations differently. A majority of them assessed their motives on the basis of their specific moral worth, determined by the extent to which they would show concern for the person in need. This materialised, for instance, in the way in which some interviewees felt that they had to *confess* the fact that their choice had also been motivated by other elements than this concern. They pointed out, for example:

> *So basically,* to be really honest*, it was initially the desire to work abroad.*[10]
>
> *In my country, our job employment is very low, so* honestly*, I joined just to seek employment.*

They would also judge as unworthy motives that did not have the person in need at the heart. All other motivational elements were mentioned in comparison to this expected primary reason. They would refer to them as 'egoistic' or 'selfish', among other things. According to one respondent, senior in his organisation, motivations

become ‘healthier with time’, less ‘tied to your ego’ and hence increasingly more focused on the person in need.

The health or goodness of a motive has therefore to do with the way it is other-directed as opposed to fulfilling self-interests. In other words, actors *should* be primarily driven by concern for persons in need.[11] As Stephen Hopgood (2008, p. 113) puts it, ‘the self-interested, the nonsolidaristic, need not apply’. Only a few respondents did not refer to this concern for the person in need among their initial influencing factors. If it was not among an individual’s original calculations, it seemed as if a justification was required. For instance, one interviewee clearly recognised that it had played no role in her decision to apply for a position in a humanitarian organisation. This in itself was so special that it dominated a large part of the interview.

This trait of the humanitarian moral culture also became evident in the way in which some interviewees explicitly and forcefully rejected this moral expectation upon them. Some had a great reaction to it, if not repulsion. For example, one respondent stated that:

> *it was not the desire to help, I would not put it like this, the desire to meet and see how they live and eventually you can do something. But not to change the world. Stupid.*

Some respondents refused to comply with a particular culture of good intentions and took an opposite stance, that of cynicism or irony, as is perceptible in the quotation above. They claimed that this altruistic concern had played no part whatsoever and that it is actually hypocritical and futile.

Other respondents did not necessarily have a highly critical opinion of the humanitarian moral culture but underlined explicitly other motives than those rooted in concern for the person in need. In particular, they emphasised the specifically technical aspect of their role in the humanitarian sector. In several cases it was clear that this reason was given precisely to contrast with the dominant culture of concern highlighted above.

Evolution of motivations

The interviews made it clear that initial concern for persons in need (or its absence at first) evolves through experience of working in the humanitarian sector. One of the Lebanese interviewees became interested in working for a humanitarian organisation because she felt it would offer her a ‘normal’ working environment, as she put it, in contrast to her previous profession in the hotel trade in which she had particularly challenging hours of employment. While working for her humanitarian organisation, though, she developed a deep interest in and respect for the work done on behalf of the communities in need, and no longer sees it as a ‘normal’ job. She pointed out that:

> *actually now after a few years of working with [X] . . . you really get into the really humanitarian work, although I don’t deal with victims. . . . But from the programme that*

we have, and you see the suffering of the people so you really appreciate the work. . . . I usually stay over and over. And you are really happy to do this. Of what you can achieve. When you see this, it's really good.

Another respondent who initially became involved with a humanitarian organisation because he was seeking employment said that, after a few years of being a humanitarian, it is 'more than a job now'. He recalled in particular the strong impact that one of his first humanitarian missions had on him:

I was sent there to support some of the Afghan refugees, and they completely changed my approach toward my life, toward my work.

This change was prompted by contact with people in need who made him realise the value of the endeavour.

However, there can also be a move away from initial concern for the person in need. Such a testimony often was linked to a sense of 'losing one's illusions', as one interviewee put it, that one had on starting work in the humanitarian sector. In particular these illusions pertained to the nature of the initial motivation (such as by questioning its authenticity) or to the possibility of *actually* helping people in need. A certain degree of cynicism was pregnant in such a perspective. For instance, a staff member of an international organisation queried the very legitimacy of humanitarian aid:

we think that we are here to support and do something that is valuable, but really, we are not needed. If an agency is good, and if the work you are doing is good, you are supposed to decrease, no? But we are increasing budget, increasing staff, increasing number of people . . . there's something wrong.

Statements pointing to the fact that, ultimately, humanitarian action was simply a business like any other frequently accompanied this standpoint:

it's definitely a business and I don't like this. This is probably one of the things that I dislike most. . . . You see a lot of people with good will, and with good spirit, but, at the larger scale, it's really business.

Claiming that the humanitarian sector is a business like any other comes down to saying that self-interest, and no longer the person in need, is the core driver.[12]

As this section has shown, concern for the person in need clearly constitutes a moral point of reference for discussing the motivations of humanitarian actors. Humanitarian moral culture appears to be built on this concern; and it is around this concern that the moral sense of humanitarian actors is articulated.

On the basis of this identified expected concern for the person in need, the following section probes the various relationships that develop within humanitarian work. In particular, how is the moral sense of a humanitarian actor shaped by being in relation to people in need?

Humanitarian relationships

Moral culture towards vulnerability

The next element analysed pertains to dealing with a *person in need*. Also identified here is a particularly strong set of moral expectations regarding how a humanitarian actor *should* relate to and feel and think about crisis-affected people. When interviewees were asked about how they *actually relate* to these communities, their responses frequently were about how a humanitarian actor *should* relate to them. This is clearly an example of what is identified above as spoken words revealing a particular moral culture. The following quote points to this dimension precisely:

> *I think I have a lot of sympathy . . . because I'm trying to bear in mind always that even if it's not a refugee by definition that I would be talking to, it's still someone who has had some reasons to leave his or her country, which is normally the last thing that you do, if you are not forced to it. . . . So I feel it's very important to show that respect to persons. I think it takes a lot before someone approaches an agency to ask for assistance to be able to pay rent, or to buy food, so I think that in itself merits some respect from us.*

The extensive use of 'I think' in this quotation reveals that these words are more the products of a particular moral culture than the expression of lived experience.[13] In addition to this expected attitude on beneficiaries, the humanitarian sector appears to be characterised by a general discomfort of the power asymmetries within which it operates. This embarrassment is perceptible, for example, in a critique by Barbara Harrell-Bond (2002, p. 68) of humanitarian 'charity' and its 'power to decide who is deserving'. An approach towards power asymmetries in the sector actually entails simply denying their existence. CDA Collaborative Learning Projects (2010, p. 104) researchers noted, for instance, that:

> *We began this paper reflecting on the struggle of many dedicated humanitarians to address and overcome what they often see as an inevitable and inherent inequality between themselves and those they hope to help. From what we have heard through listening, however, it would seem that there is no inevitable and inherent inequality.*

On the contrary, this paper wishes to stress that there actually *is* an 'inevitable and inherent inequality' in any helping relationships. This inequality is composed of *capacities*, that is, humanitarian resources and competencies, to respond to the *needs and vulnerability* of crisis-affected individuals and communities. Indeed, any helping relationship is structured on the identification of needs on the side of the helped (*a minus*) and of skills and resources to respond to needs on the side of the helper (*a plus*). Frédéric Worms (2010, p. 19) describes this as the 'profound and constitutive asymmetry of the caring relationship'.[14] It is essential to underscore the existence of this capacity–vulnerability relationship to avoid the risks that this asymmetry poses to helping practices. In the following subsection this paper pinpoints the two main structural risks of the helping relationship and then assesses the way in which humanitarian actors respond to them.

Finally, it is important to note that this description of humanitarian relationships centred on two terms (humanitarians and beneficiaries) is a simplification of the reality. Actors such as donors, the national staff of international organisations, the personnel of national organisations, and refugee volunteers challenge this binary model. Further research is necessary to study how this more complex reality shapes the constitutive asymmetry of the aid relationship and its potential risks. Hilhorst et al. (2012), for example, point to the role of 'active beneficiaries'. However, the present analysis, based on the relationship between a helper and a helped and the potentially associated risks to this relationship, remains pertinent and useful in evaluating any activity of help, including humanitarian action.

The two risks of abuse

The humanitarian sector has produced numerous regulatory documents to frame its action and to avoid the risks inherent to its practice, in particular those related to the inherent power asymmetries between humanitarian actors and crisis-affected communities.[15] These normative documents are important and useful to the humanitarian sector and to the other actors with which it engages. A closer analysis of the intrinsic dangers of the relation of help in humanitarianism is necessary, though, to help the sector avoid the risks.

As Frédéric Worms (2010, p. 9) shows, the constitutive asymmetry of the helping relationship can lead to two different negative scenarios: (i) an abuse of power; and (ii) a lack of recognition. The interviews made it clear that these two risks posed continuous challenges to the moral culture and moral sense of humanitarian actors.

An abuse of power by humanitarian actors over beneficiaries is perceptible when actors lose the sense that humanitarian work is not addressed at an object, but at a subject, a human being. As Hugo Slim (2015, p. 213) underlines, 'the potential for humanitarian action to degrade into unethical authoritarian structures, insulting discourse and unfeeling managerialism is a constant challenge'. One interviewee feared 'mechanical' attitudes towards assisted individuals and communities, whereas another was deeply aware of the risk of relationships becoming only 'functional' or 'utilitarian'. A number of professionals interviewed mentioned their fears of losing track of the individual human beings behind the numbers that they were handling daily on their computers. Interviewees also identified the risk of showing disrespect in the delivery of aid. One of them expressed concern about potentially 'humiliating moments', especially during forms of assistance that aim to help a large number of people, such as food distributions. He said that these activities require much 'vigilance' by humanitarian actors. The fear of being 'patronising' was made clear too. An interviewee said that, in her experience, beneficiaries were not recognised and respected as 'human beings'.

The second form of abuse that Worms highlights, a lack of recognition of the role of the helper, is the opposite of the aforementioned abuse. One interviewee noted, for instance, a case of refugees questioning the legitimacy of his presence in a particular situation, as he could not do anything to help the people he was there to assist:

So I had a lot of complaints . . . people were asking me: 'So what can you do now? How can you help me now?' And I had to say: 'sorry, I cannot do anything at this particular moment'. But then they say: 'So why you are here?' [And I would be thinking:] 'Yes actually, it is a good question, I don't know why I am here', but you can't say things like that. So you try to be patient and explain it more.

In this case the humanitarian actor felt that his very function was being questioned. His role itself was unrecognised; he was simply useless in the eyes of the people that he was there to help. Furthermore, in this situation, he actually came to question himself his own legitimacy. To the question posed by the beneficiary, 'why are you here?', he admitted that, indeed, 'I don't know why I am here'.

Yet, when evoking experiences of a lack of recognition, respondents would mostly blame their management. Managers generally would be cited as those responsible for not acknowledging the work done. For example, one interviewee felt that the senior management did 'not care at all' about the quality of the work:

the senior management, they focus a lot on numbers and processes . . . and since they are not working with the persons of concern, it's easier for them to focus on these numbers.

Another interviewee, while discussing the organisation that she was working with before, pointed out that:

you feel your work here no one cares. I remember being in Pakistan and really pushing for something to happen for a massive Afghan population, and people were like, totally uninterested to hear what I had to say.

It is interesting to note in these two quotations the accusation of carelessness on the part of the managers. Although staff members are expected to demonstrate a sense of concern (as shown above), they would express resentment towards managers who would not exhibit the same degree of care and did not recognise the effort staff members put into their work.

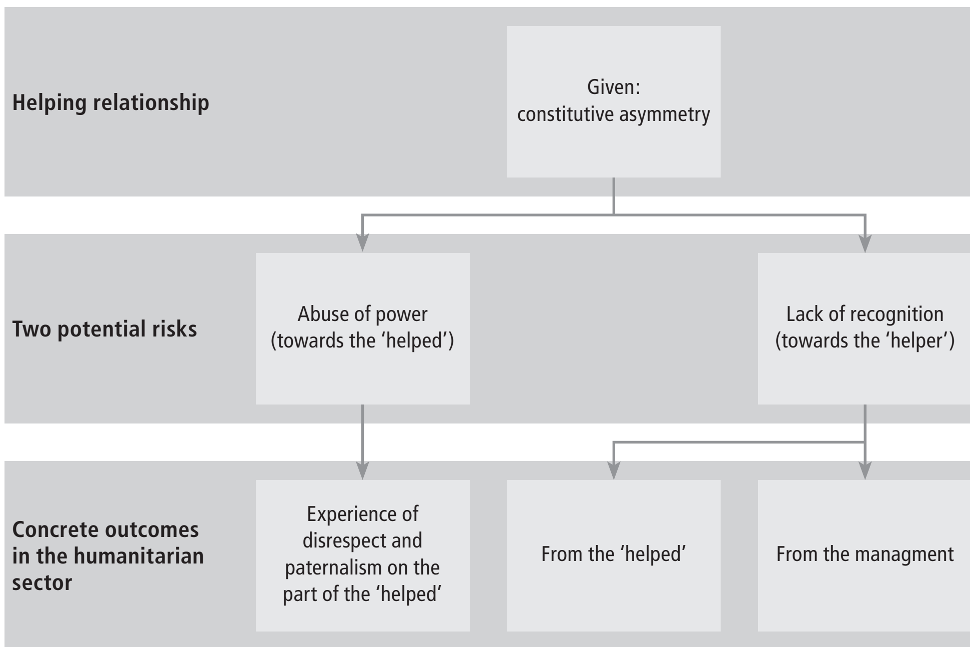
Furthermore, this sense of a lack of recognition of one's work was particularly present among national staff members. Some felt that the very structure of humanitarian organisations was 'discriminatory' towards nationally contracted personnel, in the words of a Syrian interviewee. She stated that:

The international staff is better treated. They are protected by the management. Lot of international staff don't go to the field. They don't listen. They just ask for information.

Such a perspective echoes that reported by Listening Program researchers with CDA Collaborative Learning Projects (Anderson, Brown, and Jean, 2012) and in a study of Lebanese national aid workers by Zakharia and Knox (2014).

Figure 1 summarises the risks in the relationship between humanitarian actors and affected communities.

Figure 1. Risks in the relationship between humanitarian actors and affected communities



Source: author.

Limits of one's power

The power–vulnerability dynamic in the humanitarian context also shapes the moral sense of actors. The majority of respondents cited having to refuse assistance to people in need among the most challenging aspects of their role. This is clear in the following quotation:

> *when you can't meet the needs, it's really difficult because you are close to them, you know names, you get to know families, the kids, you go to visit the camps, and they approach you. And you have to say I can't, that kills you, that kills you.*

The ability to handle the limits of one's individual and organisational capacity to respond to needs was a sign of professional maturity. As one experienced humanitarian actor put it:

> *you see that it is needed, but you cannot. But you learn, with experience, you accept.*

Another took a similar stance:

> *I think that difficult choices must be addressed in a constructive manner. There must be a questioning of the programme, of the validity of the programme and how we are going forward.*

Organisations have elaborated guidelines defining the target population or the particular focus of a specific mission. As one senior manager explained, these protocols

not only have a strategic function, but also they are essential for those in direct contact with the communities. In particular, they help to reduce stress:

> *it is extremely important for people in the first lines, in particular social workers, doctors, midwives, nurses that they have clear guidelines and procedures. . . . A doctor will always be in a particularly difficult situation toward a patient, he will always try to find a solution. That is very good but he has enough stress toward the patient that the protocol must be determined somewhere else.*

Another interviewee shared the profound frustration that she felt towards her organisation because it had not given her clear directions on the cases to include or exclude in the project. Her main dissatisfaction was that she felt that senior management was leaving too much decision-making to the implementers of the programme. She said that this 'made workers very nervous' in that regularly they had to decide themselves whether or not they should take responsibility for a particular individual in need. She added that:

> *I feel super angry. . . . Lack of support, lack of clarity internally, in the end my staff has to be the one to convene information to the people they work with and they don't feel solid about what their stance is. . . . I feel powerless. It is very frustrating.*

Another respondent also mentioned the importance of those implementing programmes being convinced of their value and knowing their limits. He emphasised that this is essential when explaining to people why they cannot receive assistance through a particular agency or programme:

> *the idea is to be the most transparent possible, explain the reasons, don't talk to people as if they were dumb. . . . The best way to convince them is to be convinced yourself.*

A senior manager highlighted the significance of obtaining 'buy-in' from his staff to ensure cohesion and trust within the organisation. It is vital for the organisation as a whole to adhere to the same objectives in such a way that its aims are not perceived as imposed from above; rather they are seen as the right thing to do. In other words, a certain degree of consensus as to the limits of one's capacity as an organisation to respond to identified needs and vulnerabilities is essential.

The above has focused on power asymmetry in humanitarian relationships, yet there is more to these relations than a power imbalance. This is the topic of the last subsection, which examines the sense of being useful.

Sense of being useful

Interviews pointed to the particular importance of the sense of being useful. What is at stake here is what Joan Tronto (1993, p. 108) calls the 'care-receiving' phase of the caring process, which is an essential element as 'it provides the only way to know that caring needs have actually been met'. Clearly there is a utilitarian value present

here, which is well recognised in the humanitarian sector as it provides feedback on the effectiveness and quality of the response. However, there is another aspect that goes beyond the strictly utilitarian level that deserves much more attention than it has received so far. It is the *sense* of one's efficiency and effectiveness. That one's actions actually make a difference indeed appeared to be particularly important to interviewees. One respondent stated that:

> *it remains a very positive feedback loop . . . you really felt in people's lives something positive happened for them, a very positive change and it was so obvious, so clear, so wonderful to be involved in someone's positive life change.*

The importance of this aspect was also made clear when interviewees expressed their frustration with the absence of a sense of usefulness. This appeared particularly problematic in large organisations, as can be perceived in the following quotation:

> *coming from a smaller organisation [and] going to the big, one of the things I completely felt frustrating is just the giant bureaucracy in which you feel like you can have wonderful ideas but you can't make changes. At the level where I was at, I was not listened to. . . . I would feel up against this massive bureaucracy and just ineffectual.*

The capacity to remain motivated without necessarily receiving feedback was a sign of professional maturity and a means of remaining continuously alert and critical of the system in which one is functioning. The same respondent added:

> *part of me [now] is comfortable enough with the idea that you are not going to do something awesome everyday, I would say [that I have this feeling of being ineffectual] once a week. . . . I'm kind of okay with that most of the time, because . . . if you think that you are doing something wonderful all the time, then you are not being critical enough of the system that we work in.*

Some activities, such as psychosocial support, appeared to provide a rewarding sense of having an effect more directly. One interviewee commented that:

> *you get almost immediate feedback, you don't have to wait for a few month or a year.*

Several respondents noted the link between the level of responsibility within the organisation and the possibility of receiving feedback on one's action. The fact that the higher one goes in the hierarchy, the less one engages with crisis-affected communities and individuals was mentioned several times as an issue for those who had acquired senior positions in their organisations. One interviewee said that:

> *unfortunately with time, the more you go up in an organisation, the further away you are from the field, which is really too bad because ultimately, we do this work to be close to people and it is true that we are less and less . . . and it is true that I miss it.*

Although missing contact with recipient communities and individuals, humanitarian actors at a management level appreciated that their activities had a wider bearing. There appeared to be challenges to one's sense of being effectual at each level of responsibility. As one interviewee remarked:

> *If you are working with individuals you feel like 'oh, I'm only helping one person, such a tiny drop'. . . . And then you work on a big scale and you don't feel the impact because you don't have personal contact with the people . . . feeling ineffectual on either end of the scale, that's really hard.*

However, people find ways to navigate this absence of relations with affected communities and individuals, which were, for many interviewees, part of their initial motivation for becoming involved in humanitarian activities. Some said that they would try to go to the field and meet the beneficiaries as much as possible, even though their role did not necessarily require it. In the words of one:

> *I do try to escape and go to the field sometimes. You renew your energies. You try to talk to your team, and let them tell you what happened, what they thought, what they felt. How are they doing. That makes you feel closer. . . . You see what they do and it's amazing. And you are like 'yeah, that's why I'm here'.*

Other respondents who did not have direct interaction with recipients of aid highlighted the importance of relations with colleagues in general. For instance, when asked what kept him motivated at work, one interviewee responded:

> *today, as a manager [of an international organisation], I am further and further away from the people we help, but to see my colleagues being enthusiastic, working together, doing things, succeeding, it thrills me, it really gives me enthusiasm . . . in the field you see people being treated, but that is not my daily environment, my daily environment is my team.*

The sense of being useful appeared not to be something extra, therefore. Actually it emerged as fundamental in acts of caring for others, both for utilitarian and non-utilitarian reasons.

Non-utilitarian reasons are close to what is meant when one talks about actions having a sense of meaning. A senior manager in particular emphasised the difficulty she experiences after spending time away from the children with whom she works. She said that when she has to spend a couple of days fulfilling only managerial tasks, such as attending meetings with various stakeholders or writing reports, at some point she feels 'disconnected' from the real issue. To counter this, she sits down with one of the children in her charge for a few minutes and listens to whatever he/she wants to share with her at this point. That is enough for her to recover a sense of connection and meaningfulness and to keep going. This example points up the fundamental value of a sense of connection with the people with whom or on whose

behalf humanitarian actors work, not only for utilitarian reasons, but also to acquire a fundamental sense of meaning and value.

Conclusion

By claiming to be free from any private and political interests, the humanitarian sector locates itself in the domain of ethics. The aim of this study was not to assess the authenticity or legitimacy of this assertion, but rather to examine what this ethical drive and positioning means for actors, that is, how they shape their motivations and experiences during everyday work. There is descriptive value in this analysis to understand better humanitarian morality, yet, although it did not intend to formulate prescriptive judgement on humanitarian action, this inquiry sought to go beyond mere description. To that end, the study introduced two different aspects of humanitarian morality: the moral culture of the humanitarian sector; and the moral sense of humanitarian actors. It evaluated these two sides of humanitarian morality with respect to two central elements: fundamental humanitarian motivation (that of concern for the person in need); and relationships within this realm.

The increasingly professionalised and bureaucratic humanitarian system makes this reflection particularly timely. The continuous trend of 'proceduralization' makes it increasingly difficult to engage creatively with the constantly changing environment and to confront potential risks of abuse. According to Fabrice Weissman (2015, p. 71), the 'real danger' for an organisation like *Médecins Sans Frontières*, much more than Daesh (so-called Islamic State) for instance, is the ever-growing bureaucracy. Furthermore, while one can praise the humanitarian sector for its production of normative documents, guidelines, and protocols to frame its practice and to improve its accountability, effectiveness, and quality, one may be concerned that they amount merely to rhetorical statements of beliefs and principles, or simply 'box ticking'. Even more worrying is that they might actually contribute to widening the gap between moral culture and the moral sense of individuals—that is, between discourses and expectations on the one hand and, on the other, actual practices and experiences.

This paper has sought to highlight the moral agency of humanitarian actors using the notion of moral sense in contrast to a moral culture composed of particular normative expectations. It has pointed out some creative ways of being a humanitarian actor today, of responding to the challenges of humanitarian work, and of engaging with people in need. The concept of ethics discussed here is not one that tells right from wrong, good from bad. Nor does it pretend to distinguish between what one should and should not do, and determine how one should behave. Rather, and as Michel Foucault powerfully asked in an interview a few months before his death in 1984, 'what is morality, if not the practice of liberty, the deliberate practice of liberty?' (Fornet-Betancourt, Becker, and Gomez-Müller, 1987, p. 115). Ultimately, this was precisely the object of this paper: the exercise of one's freedom, one's own agency, in the context of humanitarian action.

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Endnotes

[1] The notions of ethics and morality are understood differently in the English- and French-speaking traditions. As this paper navigates between the two, however, it makes no distinction between them and uses them interchangeably. Both are viewed as attempts to answer the general questions regarding how we shall live and what we shall do.

[2] The author's translation from French.

[3] The author's translation from French.

[4] For an analysis of this neglect in development studies, see for example Fechter (2012).

[5] See http://www.qsrinternational.com/nvivo-product (last accessed on 23 March 2017).

[6] This paper stresses the difference between them in order to distinguish them; however, a more nuanced analysis would be necessary to be true to the way in which 'speaking words' and 'spoken words' relate intrinsically to each other. Indeed, the latter constitute the set of already existing meanings with and through which the former emerges. There is thus a fundamental and mutually constitutive relationship between these two modes of speaking.

[7] The 2015 edition of the *State of the Humanitarian Sector* defines the humanitarian sector as 'the network of interconnected institutional and operational entities through which humanitarian assistance is provided when local and national resources are insufficient to meet the needs of the affected population' (ALNAP, 2015, p. 18). For a study of organisational culture see, for instance, the work of Hilhorst and Schmiemann (2002) on *Médecins Sans Frontières*.

[8] The author's translation from French.

[9] Unless otherwise specified, all quotes are extracted from interviews with humanitarian actors conducted in Beirut in June 2014.

[10] Italics are those of the author.

[11] It would be interesting to compare this humanitarian culture with other caregiving sectors, such as social work, or healthcare professions in national services and see if there is a similar dominating culture of concern.

[12] For a discussion of differences and similarities beween the business and humanitarian sectors see Hopgood (2008).

[13] It is not possible to provide evidence of this here, yet the tone of the voice when saying these words, particularly the emphasis on concern and empathy, is also revealing of the fact that they belong more to a particular moral culture than emerging from the individual's moral sense.

[14] The author's translation from French. It is interesting to note that this asymmetry has led to opposite analyses. In the North American context, these analyses were led by care ethicists studying activities performed primarily by migrant workers and women, such as cleaning, nannying, or nursing. These studies essentially aimed to revalorise these depreciated roles. In the French context, by contrast, analyses of this constitutive asymmetry mainly involved a Foucaultian lens and focused on appraising power in institutions of care, such as psychiatric or educative establishments. While the latter looked at abuses of power by the 'carer', the former examined these abuses on the side of the 'cared-for' (this abuse is identified in this paper as a lack of recognition).

[15] See, for example, the *Seven Fundamental Principles* of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) proclaimed in 1965, the *Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief* prepared jointly by the IFRC and the ICRC (International Committee of the Red Cross) in 1994, the *Code of Good Practice in the Management and Support of Aid Personnel* produced by People In Aid in 1997 (revised in 2003), the *23 Principles and Good Practice for Humanitarian Donorship* released by Good Humanitarian Donorship in 2003, and the *Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability* published by the CHS Alliance, Groupe URD, and the Sphere Project in 2014.

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