

MORAL MOTIVATION IN HUMANITARIAN ACTION¹

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Abstract: In humanitarian actions, people respond to crisis and disaster situations in which victims are unable to recover on their own and in which their vulnerability puts them at further risk. Individuals involved in humanitarian work are driven by strong motivation which source can be identified using an ethics-based approach. Moral motivation is the basis for the commitment to the moral course of the human agent's action. Humanitarian ethics shows us it is important to renew the discussion on the role of moral motivation in ethical decision-making. Some of the moral sources of motivation will be critically examined in this study—namely, the partiality, the popularity of ethics, the value declaration, and moral motivation based on moral obligation (according to the ethics of social consequences).

Key words: humanitarian crisis; humanitarian ethics; disaster ethics; volunteering; motivation.

Introduction

The past few years have brought a new challenge to Europe: a humanitarian crisis resulting from hundreds of thousands of refugees escaping war and seeking security and new lives in Europe. This has been a difficult and unprecedented experience for Europe and its citizens, and it has provoked many debates on the political, legal, economic, and humanitarian issues. There are different ways of responding to such humanitarian crises. These can be organized either at the political level, institutional (organizational) level, or at the level of individuals (individual volunteers). The latter has been widely discussed as the crisis has been accompanied by a wave of volunteering across Europe (e.g. the collection and distribution of clothing, the setting up of field kitchens at Rözske on the Hungarian-Serbian border, food being distributed on the Hungarian-Austrian border, off-duty Slovak doctors providing medical care in Austria, etc.). There is no doubt that the ethical aspects and considerations of all this should be considered. Nevertheless, the subject of humanitarian ethics (and

¹ This article is part of VEGA project 1/0629/15 *Ethics of Social Consequences in the Context of Contemporary Ethical Theories*.

volunteering as a specific kind of humanitarian action) has attracted little attention of academics in Central Europe.²

This paper will therefore offer some input into the debate on humanitarian ethics, while focusing on ethical reflections of the work and motivation of volunteers. In the final part, a specific approach to thinking ethically about the motivations of volunteers will be presented via the methodology of the ethics of social consequences (a type of non-utilitarian consequentialism).

Ethical challenges of volunteering in a humanitarian context

Volunteers are generally understood to be people who offer their time, energy, and expertise to help those in need without expecting any kind of benefit in return (financial, material, etc.). The United Nations lists three criteria for identifying such actions: “it is not undertaken for financial gain; it is undertaken of one’s own free will; it brings benefits to a third party as well as to the people who volunteer” (Musick & Wilson, 2008, p. 12).³ In recent years, volunteering has become an important way of promoting democratic values, social inclusion, humanism, and civic (global) participation. Its importance has been recognized by many organizations (WHO, United Nations, Transparency International, etc.), who have established their own programmes to manage and coordinate these activities.

But volunteering in a humanitarian setting often does not operate under such conditions. Humanitarian crisis and disasters naturally differ in their extent and in the suffering, insecurity and challenges faced by their victims on daily basis (Komenská, 2016).⁴ Decisions are then made in contexts which are more demanding—organizationally, psychologically, economically, politically, and ethically. However, volunteers often operate in humanitarian crises on their own without any (or with limited) coordination from the “big players” of humanitarian interventions (MSF, UNHCR, UNICEF, IRC, etc.). They are important and necessary agents; they are the most flexible of those involved, can easily adapt to new challenges and the burdens of humanitarian crises, and have the best starting position for interacting directly and gaining the trust of the victims of a humanitarian crisis.

From an ethical perspective, these volunteers have to deal with many challenges. This study does not aspire to presenting and analysing all of them, but proffers an initial list of such dilemmas and problems, which may illustrate some of the dominant ethical concerns. First of all, volunteers are not necessarily professionals (such as healthcare professionals, firefighters, the army, or members/managers of a disaster-relief team). This raises questions

² This should come as no surprise since disaster ethics is a new discipline (which puts humanitarian actions within wider contexts) and the role of moral theories within it is still often doubted. Nevertheless, the need for such a debate was voiced by participants of the *Workshop on Moral Theories and Disasters* organized by the Faculty of Arts, University of Prešov (Gluchman, 2016a, pp. 3-7).

³ This definition is rather simplistic and may lead to inconsistencies in the way volunteer work is understood (for more details see Musick & Wilson 2008), but it is sufficient for the aims of the present study.

⁴ It should be understood that volunteers on development aid projects are not considered to be humanitarian actors, since they provide assistance in stable (even if not perfect) environments and the aims of their work differ from those of humanitarian actions.

about their training or professional skills and also about their ability to recognize their responsibility for any negative outcomes of humanitarian action. In other words, if volunteers do not have prior the experience or skills to identify the needs of the victims or the need for triage, it is difficult for them to establish what the priorities of their actions are (this is due to a lack of moral sensitivity and moral judgment). Despite wanting to act on the best behalf of someone, their ignorance of the consequences and priorities in emergency relief may lead to more negative consequences.

The volunteers' lack of an organizational or professional background relates to another area of ethical challenges. Since volunteers in humanitarian situations face ethical dilemmas similar to those disaster-relief teams deal with (conflicts in the traditional ethical frameworks, emotional as well as physical exhaustion, cultural conflicts), they also need a model to deal with trauma (not just psychological).⁵ While members of disaster-relief teams can not only consult others but also attend debriefings on their experiences and the ethical choices they have made, this is not generally the case or may be impossible for non-professional volunteers who can easily become frustrated at the ethical compromises they have to make.

Besides ethical trauma and retrospective responsibility, another crucial question could be "How volunteers recognize their moral obligation to offer their work and energy to disaster-relief, to help the victims of disasters, etc.?" I have referred to this question in a previous study (Komenská, in press), in which I concluded that moral obligation stems from the values a moral agent has and an internal bond that motivates the moral agent into acting on these values. This internal bond is created through the formation and acceptance of (morally relevant) relationships⁶ with the person the moral agent's action is directed at. This makes the theory of right and the theory of good mutually compatible (Gluchman, 2008, p. 11), which not only helps moral agents to recognize what is good/right but also guides them in action. It assumes that there is a link between a moral obligation to disaster victims and the (moral) motivation of humanitarian actors. As a part of the ethical decision-making process, moral motivation is "the degree of commitment to taking the moral course of action, valuing moral values over other values, and taking personal responsibility for moral outcomes" (Armstrong, Ketz, & Owsen, 2003, p. 2). The present study considers the role of motivation in non-utilitarian consequential ethical theory, and looks at this aspect of humanitarian actions in particular.

Moral reasons of volunteer' motivation

People engage in humanitarian action do so out of a strong motivation. Differently from professional actions, it is fanciful to suggest that the motivation for doing so is financial (either for volunteers or paid professionals/experts). One can argue that sometimes the

⁵ The ethical trauma is caused by the compromises which need to be made in making ethical decisions in disaster settings (Lepora, 2000; Goodstein, 2000).

⁶ In the ethics of social consequences, morally relevant relationships are viewed within the context of conscious, cognitive and rational acceptance of the moral relevancy of others and their moral concern (see Komenská, 2014).

motivation comes from a person's desire to improve their professional expertise⁷ but, considering all the challenges and difficulties associated with humanitarian action, it is hard to see this as being the primary motivation (rather as an outcome/consequence of previous choices and motives). The reasons for this motivation will therefore have to be sought elsewhere. To identify them, we need to look at the moral sphere of those involved in humanitarian action and their willingness to do "good".⁸ Some of these moral reasons will be explored in the following section of the study.

Those who volunteer in humanitarian actions are mostly first responders.⁹ They are usually local people, who live and work in the area affected by the crisis. Whether they are ordinary citizens or professionals (firefighters, police officers, emergency medical personnel, for example), these first responders often have a strong emotional bond to the community and the affected place. They therefore feel obliged to protect it, what is considered as the first type of reasons of moral motivation for volunteering. This can be exemplified by the story of the Maketu community from New Zealand, whose beaches and shores were badly affected by the Rena oil spill in 2011. Shortly after the spill the local community (both Maori and non-Maori) began to volunteer for clean-up shifts. Authors of the study, Smith, Hammerton, Hunt, & Sargisson (2015) explore the cultural contexts, beliefs, and customs that informed the decisions of the locals and other volunteers to participate to the extent they did.¹⁰

The motivation of these volunteers was based on the special and close bond they shared with the community and their spatial partiality. Mary Midgley's definition of the moral community and its concentric circles may prove insightful here. She defines moral community by considering two main arguments. Firstly, members of the moral community are grouped in concentric circles (such as family, colleagues, social class, nation, species, and, most broadly, biosphere). Motivation to help/support other members of the moral community is affected by its belonging to a concrete circle and its distance from the main circle, which is a circle "self" (Midgley, 1998). Secondly, Midgley declares that concentric circles are not "impenetrable social barriers" (Midgley, 1998, p. 124) and can be modified by considering other, special moral claims. These often arise out of emotional experiences of social proximity and individual bonds (e.g. an emotional bond to the zoo from the moral agent's home town destroyed by floods).¹¹ For Midgley, the moral bond to protect those with whom we have a close emotional relationship is stronger and therefore morally acceptable.

⁷ For further reading, see Musick & Wilson, 2008, pp. 16-18.

⁸ Here, we need to understand the moral goal of the humanitarian action as well as the individual's conception of what is "good".

⁹ Besides local volunteers, there is another group of volunteers: individuals who (either on their own or as part of small non-governmental organizations) arrive on the disaster/humanitarian crisis scene to assist with the disaster relief. Only afterwards are the so-called big-players capable of and able to respond to the needs of those in the affected areas.

¹⁰ Another example of close community links is the story of Magdalena Verheyen, a nurse who responded to the tsunami disaster in Sumatra, Indonesia (Dawson, 2005).

¹¹ Of course, the other moral claims do not have to be only emotional motivated. Midgley understands good action to require the creation of a bond and an awareness of the needs of other members of moral community. But where emotional satisfaction is replaced by a rational acceptance of moral obligation

It may seem natural to view motivation for humanitarian actions in this way, but it is not a sufficiently robust definition. Local volunteers may be the largest group of responders in a humanitarian crisis but they are not (and cannot be) the only ones. It should not be forgotten that a humanitarian crisis is a form of disaster which, by its definition, requires support from outside the affected community or region (O'Mathúna, 2014). Gilly Green and John Silk claim that virtue ethics has the potential to significantly expand the spatial scope of partiality (possibly to a universal plane) so people will be “more willing to exercise beneficence with respect to those on another continent” (Silk, 2000, p. 306). However, if the emotional motivation for action is based only on sentiment and empathy then that will not suffice. At least a minimum attempt at impartiality is required in humanitarian actions; an impartiality which will enable non-affected moral agents to reflect rationally and responsibly on the needs of victims of humanitarian crisis. Also, being impartial would allow moral agents, volunteers, to objectively consider the need for triage, to make decisions on a cost-benefit basis, and consider the wider moral good of their actions.¹²

The second form of “ethical”¹³ motivation stems from the current status of ethics in society. On one hand, professionals, public figures, and politicians show limited interest in allowing ethics to become part of discussions on their conduct. On the other hand, a popular form of ethics has become fashionable in contemporary culture. Viera Bilasová talks about the search for new models in post-moral society and humanity (Bilasová, 2008, pp. 7-8), and a variety of such models have emerged (green management, ethical consumption, human rights groups, etc.). As positive as this trend might be, the fact that ethics has become fashionable raises many moral and ethical dilemmas.¹⁴ One such dilemma is that ethics has become a marketing tool and a key way for a person to obtain/preserve/increase their social status. This fashion influences moral agents’ choices—but not necessarily in an ethical way (ethical choices that are based on free, conscious, responsible decisions that are about doing what is good or right). Such decisions may be based on social expectations rather than on moral values and ethical considerations. This kind of “ethics” is just another form of external, anonymous authority, and there is no obligation for people to consider the consequences or wider ethical context of their actions.

Recently, humanitarian action (and humanitarian volunteering) have become a kind of fashion and business enterprise. This feeds into moral sentiment and the role it plays in contemporary culture—compassion and empathy for the suffering and vulnerability of others

is an area that deserves further investigation. This problem could be explored through the work of Mary Midgley and Peter Singer, especially his concept of effective altruism (Singer, 2015).

¹² In reflecting on humanitarian actions and the ethics of it, it is always important to formulate a value-neutral framework within which professionals can make effective decisions in humanitarian interventions (Leaning & Guha-Sapir, 2013). Because of the similarity of the challenges facing all humanitarian agents, this is not overlooked in discussions of the ethical norms and goals of humanitarian volunteers.

¹³ Ethics is in quotation marks to indicate that this is ethics in the popular sense rather than the philosophical sense.

¹⁴ This topic deserves wider discussion than the space allows. Therefore, further reading is recommended, e.g. Bilasová, 2008; Kalajtzidis, 2016, pp. 39-44; Kalajtzidis and Komenská, 2013, pp. 215-222.

are the driving emotions of volunteers who want to have direct experience of the suffering (Ryška, 2014, pp. 82-84) and, the media have an important role to play in this (Calain, 2013, pp. 279-281; Silk, 2000). Tomáš Ryška claims that these days volunteering is “a historically unique and popular face of humanism” (Ryška, 2014, p. 82). It can even be a product for which some people are willing to pay¹⁵ and, in the most extreme cases, leads to humanitarian tourism.¹⁶ Volunteering that is motivated out of popularity of ethics is easily identified in day-to-day volunteering (and in humanitarian action in general). There are numerous examples: the large number of volunteer blogs and (social) media coverage, volunteers pushing for morning/afternoon shifts which are busier and “more visible” than night shifts, avoidance of the hidden work, etc. These types of humanitarian actors often want to act like heroes and therefore attempt to work in the most “attractive” positions—saving lives on the beach, working in the camp, distributing food. In contrast to this heroism, they avoid other tasks essential to the operation of the system (more physically demanding work, cleaning, administrative work, etc.).

There is a practical ethical problem with this type of volunteer motivation as it often isn't interiorized (in its axiological forms) in the ethical decision making of moral agents. It is therefore difficult to sustain and as soon as the media coverage decreases so too does the motivation to help.¹⁷ Therefore, as in the case of partiality-based volunteering, popular ethics does not adequately explain the complexity of moral motivation for volunteering.

The third type of motivation for volunteering in humanitarian action discussed in this study is based on the axiological preferences of the moral agent. Those who take up humanitarian volunteering often do so out of religious belief (altruism and caring are core ideas in most faiths (Silk, 2000, p. 306)) or political ideology (for example as a protest against the political system or its failures, or against the system of humanitarian aid and the unjust distribution of aid). These volunteers see their motivation as value-based; it is based on values such as humanity, caring, altruism, democracy, empathy, and solidarity, which are then articulated in moral laws (e.g. categorical imperatives, commandments, etc.) and understood as the person's moral duty. This kind of motivation is deontological in the sense that the moral values are absolute and have to be fully respected. Interestingly, those who volunteer on the basis of this type of motivation not only accept that it is their duty to honour their moral laws but they are also obliged and motivated to promote their values/laws through their actions (de Colle & Werhane, 2008, pp. 753-754). It is an important shift away from the traditional understanding of moral duty in deontological ethical theories where *good* is defined as honouring moral laws (but there is no explicit obligation to act upon it).

¹⁵ Volunteering trips to the Global South where volunteers pay for comfortable accommodation, food, a cultural and social program, etc., while helping others is an example.

¹⁶ Humanitarian tourism refers to a type of volunteering which is motivated by the volunteer's desire to meet new people, get to know different cultures, improve language skills, visit new places, etc. These types of volunteers are often unaware of their duties and responsibilities in the field, what can lead to irresponsible behavior (not showing up for a shift, avoiding particular tasks, etc.) and result in a confrontational work environment.

¹⁷ However critical this sounds, the initial motivation might at some point (based on the experiences with their humanitarian work) develop into truly moral motives based on the values of humanity, dignity, solidarity, responsibility, etc., and the wider consequences of these actions may be considered.

Nevertheless, this is rather problematic in the humanitarian context, as Lepora (2000), Schwartz et al. (2012), Komenská (2014), etc., have pointed out. There are various cultural and situational aspects of humanitarian action that are reflected in ethical decision making. Volunteers motivated purely out of moral values are incapable of relativising or at least prioritizing them when they come into conflict in their day-to-day humanitarian work (e.g. the deontological values of humanity and refugee dignity may come into conflict where the obligation is to justly distribute limited resources, time, work) and these conflicts force volunteers to make ethical decisions which do not have to be morally justifiable.

Moral motivation in the ethics of social consequences

As we have seen, the moral basis of volunteers' motivations varies (value orientation, partiality, etc.)¹⁸ and should be considered by ethicists and philosophers. Moral motivation is of particular importance in a humanitarian setting as other sources of motivation are difficult to identify or sustain during humanitarian work. The role of moral motivation in ethical decision-making therefore has to be re-examined in humanitarian ethics as well as from the perspective of the ethics of social consequences (a form of non-utilitarian consequentialism).

In consequential ethical theories motives are usually considered to be a secondary factor in evaluating moral action. This is also the case of the ethics of social consequences, which defines good action on the basis of its consequences (the prevalence of positive consequences over negative ones). Despite this, Vasil Gluchman and Ján Kalajtzidis claim that the role of motives should be considered when evaluating individual moral actions. Motives, they postulate, are the intentions of a person's actions (goal-directed reasoning), and the evaluation criteria should be specified retrospectively. The motives can then be used to set the sanction or reward in relation to the responsibility of the moral agent (Gluchman, 2008, pp. 11-32; Kalajtzidis, 2012). The importance of motives increases in complex moral dilemmas in which neither a qualitative or quantitative evaluation of the consequences can clearly indicate whether the action was moral/immoral or right/wrong.¹⁹ In the ethics of social consequences, motives are therefore explained using the theory of right and are defined from this perspective.

But moral motivation is more complex than that. It is not only a secondary factor in evaluating moral action. According to James Rest, it is one of the four components of ethical decision-making used to create a model explaining the inner processes that lead to moral actions. This model includes moral sensitivity, moral judgment, moral motivation, and moral character (Armstrong et al., 2003, p. 2). Moral motivation then is the basis and commitment underpinning the moral course of the moral agent's action. Without moral

¹⁸ Also, different ethical theories define moral motivation in different ways. For the basic distinctions in the way motivation is understood in three traditional ethical frameworks (virtue ethics, Kantian deontology, and Mill's utilitarianism), see de Colle and Werhane (2008, pp. 754-764).

¹⁹ For example, in situations where the motive is to do a good thing but external factors lead to there being no (or limited) positive consequences. In the ethics of social consequences (despite the consequences) such an action will not be seen as immoral, because of the good intent and motive to do what is good/right, but it will be considered wrong.

motivation, ethical choices will not be made, good will not be put into action, and the moral values will not be promoted. In addition to asking “what is the right/good thing to do?”, we should therefore also ask “why should this be done?” and “what drives this action” (de Colle & Werhane, 2008).

If this line of argument is followed, the ethics of social consequences should explain moral motivation using the concepts of moral agency, moral obligation, and moral development. Firstly, only moral agents have the moral sensitivity to recognize the moral context of the world, interpret it and understand their role within it (as Rest says, they are morally sensitive). This means that moral agents are aware of their moral obligation: to recognize what is good/right in the given context. The theory of good (values such as humanity, dignity, moral right, justice, etc.) and the theory of right (evaluation based primarily on consequences) are mutually compatible, which is important in the context of humanitarian crisis and disasters. It creates a practical framework for ethical decision-making during humanitarian actions (rather than the formal and rigid criteria of traditional ethical theories).

Moral obligation is also what drives moral agents to act and to internally accept their responsibility for the good of others performed in concrete actions. According to the ethics of social consequences, what is *good* cannot simply be honoured but must be promoted through one’s actions (Gluchman, 2016b, pp. 56-60). The suffering a humanitarian crisis causes will never disappear on its own nor will it be relieved simply by feeling empathy for the victims. The only way to relieve suffering is for humanitarian actors to take action (by becoming either directly or indirectly involved in the humanitarian action). The importance of this aspect of a moral action can be seen in volunteering: volunteers who are able to leave their comfort-zones, postpone their personal agendas, and actively help others.

The third concept linked to moral motivation is that of moral development. Although this is not typically found in consequential ethical theories, it is essential to recognize its role in humanitarian settings. The extreme nature and instability of these situations means that the responders have to persist in their moral tasks, stick to their moral intentions, and be aware of and reframe their obligations even in chaotic and changing environments, and to recover from the overwhelming experience of ethical dilemmas and ethical traumas. The levels of moral development and moral motivation in volunteers are interrelated: in order to exercise a higher commitment to moral action, moral agents have to be willing to develop their moral skills and character.

Conclusion

Humanitarian ethics helps us to ethically reflect on the moral dilemmas and everyday challenges faced by the victims of and responders to humanitarian crisis. Tragic and critical situations (such as the current refugee crisis or the ongoing conflict in Ukraine) remind us of the need to discuss moral motivation in humanitarian settings. The present study has shown how one can approach this broad topic and it has indicated the potential non-utilitarian consequential ethical theories have to offer in this respect.

To summarize, in the ethics of social consequences, moral motivation is considered in terms of understanding what the right action is: whether the positive social consequences

prevail over the negative ones and whether it promotes the values of dignity, humanity, moral right, responsibility, justice, etc. But why should volunteers act in accordance with their moral obligations? What is their true moral motivation? According to the ethics of social consequences, moral agents (volunteers or other humanitarian actors) are driven by their reasoning and rational justification of the action (expecting positive consequences while concentrating on the good/right action) and by their internalization of moral obligation as the acceptance of morally relevant relationships with members of the moral community.

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