

# CHAPTER 25 Humanitarianism

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What, if anything, distinguishes humanitarianism from charity? The question arises from an observation: many contemporary aid organizations do not define themselves as “charities” and indeed their workers actively avoid the term. Their heartfelt, emotional appeals for funds, however, clearly echo a much longer, plural lineage of solicitation extending from religious alms. Likewise their activities – feeding the hungry, caring for the ill, advocating mercy – are surely charitable in the large sense, if cast on a new scale and directed through novel forms. Nonetheless, these organizations generally prefer to cast themselves in other idioms, distinguishing their efforts from the longer lineage upon which they clearly draw. While an outsider might underscore continuities and dwell on familiar patterns of effects, those dedicated to these endeavors assert some degree of rupture from the past. What should an analyst do, in the face of such native insistence?

The ethnographic tradition suggests that such points of emphasis often prove revealing, indicating a specific architecture of anxiety and certainty. This essay pursues this perceived distinction between humanitarianism and charity as another opening into the contradictory logic of this contemporary form. My larger ambition is to examine the problem of situating moral action amid secular politics. In particular, I am interested in the suspect nature of action that does not claim a political rationale, or indeed opposes overt political status. “Antipolitics” is a thoroughly vexed term.<sup>1</sup> Framed negatively, it often arrives to discussion in an already deceased state, thoroughly buried by repudiation. Here I would excavate one corner long enough to consider what the term might look like when alive, and what it would reveal to an anthropology of secular morality. From the perspective of secular critical analysis, any apolitical – let alone antipolitical – stance may appear a mystified fiction. Nonetheless, it displays surprising resilience in actual human practice, where, like neutrality, it names a lively and unsettling knot of contradiction (Redfield 2011). For that reason my use of the term here will remain resolutely literal. By antipolitics I simply mean to recognize the inchoate and shifting claim that the realm of politics has a limit, beyond

which one should refuse political language and logic. Although rule-generating bureaucratic expertise can certainly work against political action, here I also want to acknowledge more passionate claims to moral value, as well as abiding tensions between ethics and politics in secular reason.

The line between charity and humanitarianism may indeed prove revealing, I suggest, inasmuch as the shift in vocabulary reflects an altered perception of what might legitimately claim to lie “beyond” politics. Contemporary international discourse recognizes “humanitarianism” as a justifiable form of moral concern, allowing it to serve as a point of reference and negotiation for a remarkable range of actors: NGOs, social movements, corporations, states, and military forces. While they may pursue different goals and exhibit different levels of sincerity, they share a common vocabulary of apprehension over human life and suffering. Claims of good and evil now find their measure in body counts, and the real or potential harms of ordinary people. Whatever the political question, bystanders should not suffer. A humanitarian sensibility thus both defines the proper mode of political conduct and suggests a limit to it.

The humanitarian view also proves particularly unsettling for anthropological sensibilities. Like anthropology, humanitarianism claims the human, but universally and in an expressly moral fashion. The discipline’s general discomfort with morality (Fassin 2008) here arrives home, as most anthropologists share a secular concern about human life and suffering. At the same time they remain dedicated to principles of difference as well as of equality and prefer to frame their statements about good and evil in the political language of social justice. Whether or not this ambivalence bears on the discipline’s belated recognition of humanitarianism as a force in the world (as opposed to its relatively long and varied engagement with development), it remains a significant and potentially revealing factor for present consideration. In recent years humanitarian action, like related topics of disaster, emergency, war, and the aftermath of violence, has appeared on the disciplinary horizon. Matters related to human movement, in the form of both individual asylum-seekers and huddled masses of refugees, elicit renewed attention (e.g., Malkki 1996; Ticktin 2006; Feldman 2007). With the rise of both global health as a primary area for international engagement as well as security concerns (Lakoff 2010), and expanded military operations “other than war” (Lutz 2000; Duffield 2007), humanitarianism frames both positive and negative poles of moral possibility. Although each may offer ample opportunity for denunciation, the larger whole has grown hard to escape.

If we do inhabit an era increasingly marked by humanitarian government at the level of state policy as well as international affairs (Fassin 2012), it would be incumbent on us to investigate the moral sensibilities informing it with greater care. The matter may not prove as simple as it might first appear. In contrast to views that presume a simple distinction between humanitarianism and politics, often denouncing the erosion of the former by the latter, Didier Fassin proposes a different problematic: “We should consider humanitarianism as a new repertoire for public action at both the international and local levels – in other words, not as something external to politics, but as something that reformulates what is at stake in politics. To paraphrase Clausewitz, one could say that humanitarianism is nothing but the continuation of politics by other means” (2010: 274). The point is well taken, adroitly bypassing the now familiar lament of “depoliticization” common in academic critique. Surely

there is more to say about contemporary forms than what they are not. Surely humanitarianism – like war – deserves recognition as a complex intersection of human discourse and practice, however unsettling. But even Fassin’s artful formulation ultimately leaves the category of “politics” itself comfortably secure. If focused less on the practice of government (in the broad sense of attempts to direct human affairs) and more on the architecture of sentiment and judgment (as the motive force and expression of deeply held values), then the wording requires further disruption. The “other means” for politics offered by humanitarianism presents a fundamentally apolitical face, after all. Humanitarians assert the primacy of moral concern above and beyond other interests, presenting their values of life and care as fundamental, elementary matters of human conscience. In doing so they recall not only the general legacy of belief beyond the secular domestication of religion, but also the ever unsettling root question of ethics: how best to live?

Approaching humanitarianism as a moral form of antipolitics as well as politics, then, brings the larger problem of secularism momentarily into view (Cannell 2010). Anthropology, of all disciplines, might recall the tenuous nature of any line dividing categories of politics and religion. Given that the human sciences emerged firmly on the side of Enlightenment reason, their analyses will inevitably apply the language of the polis to all phenomena. But when confronting the actions that display traces of other logics, the ethnographic gesture of hesitation serves to recall that the secular perspective too is an assertion of value, and a claim to truth and the real. The variety of love expressed by traditional acts of charity, or the deliverance of alms, explicitly extends into the divine. To the extent that humanitarian action echoes such practices, identifying something approaching the sacred in the form of a suffering human, it recalls the historical and conceptual possibility of not subscribing to secularism, or the “concepts, practices and sensibilities” that coalesce in secular sovereign self (Asad 2003: 14).

Nevertheless, contemporary humanitarianism operates in a world of secular reference. This is precisely how its moral claim acquires a sense of political negation, and where its conceptual terrain grows contradictory. For, as Fassin rightly notes, humanitarianism has indeed emerged as “a new repertoire for public action,” infusing state policies and offering another form of legitimation. Functioning as politics, amid political expectations, its moral force frequently erodes into reactive moralism, in the sense suggested by Wendy Brown (2001: 22). Tellingly, even the most pure of humanitarian actors, organizations self-designated through that cause, exhibit a desire for their actions as something other than – or more than – charity. Their antipolitics expects to touch the human world, and in some sense, however modestly, to improve it.

Over the ensuing pages I approach humanitarianism from the perspective of its most passionate adherents: transnational NGOs who explicitly define themselves through the term. They are far from the only entities to deploy humanitarian moral reasoning, given that states and military forces have invoked it to legitimate both foreign adventures (Bass 2008; Fassin and Pandolfi 2010a) and domestic policy (Fassin 2012). Nor are they the only contemporary inheritors of charitable work, given that Islamic aid networks now also extend worldwide and in some settings claim greater legitimacy (Benthall and Bellion-Jourdan 2009; Benthall, Ch. 20 in this volume). The history of humanitarian concern likewise extends into an older and broader tableau of sentiment about human suffering, stretching well beyond

emergency aid (Barnett 2011). Within this contested terrain, however, nongovernmental organizations face the problem of humanitarian identity most acutely. The term not only describes their action but also defines their essence; they have no other *raison d'être*. As a consequence, their claim to transcend or limit politics proves most central, and their resistance to charity most curious.

This essay emphasizes the aid world's current identification of humanitarianism with states of emergency, recalling the longer, heterogeneous use of the term primarily as a point of contrast. Focusing on a particularly fundamentalist sect of contemporary actors – Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders, or MSF) – it describes the group's back-and-forth trajectory around the fraught question of intervention and a full embrace of the surviving utopian ideal of human rights (Moyn 2010). How best to speak in the name of antipolitical moral values, and yet still signal political desire? My argument in a nutshell is that humanitarianism outlines a revealing frontier between modern conceptions of politics and secular morality. Within this moral structure of feeling (Williams 1977) good deeds must always affect the world; thus even antipolitics faces political judgment, under which mere charity can never be enough. Before expanding on this theme, however, I will first elaborate on the opening observation in order to lend it greater force of detail.

#### “NOT A RELIEF ORGANIZATION”

Like all specialists, aid practitioners have elaborated their own dialects, thick with acronyms and sensitive to residue of past debates. Just as in academic settings, apparent synonyms ring differently than they would in common speech. I became aware of the significance of such distinctions during one of my first forays into the aid world, at the Amsterdam office of the Dutch branch of MSF in 2001.<sup>2</sup> When I arrived at the director's office for an appointed interview, I found him with his latest cup of coffee in hand, studying my research proposal. To my surprise he had already gone through much of it, and continued to scribble marginal notes and impatiently cross out offending terms as we spoke. To start with, he asserted emphatically, MSF was “not a relief organization.” The comment baffled me, as it seemed thoroughly counterintuitive given their operational history. It soon became clear, however, that the director associated the term both with arguments in the now distant 1970s and 1980s, as well as with politically naive efforts to do good. “Relief is a dirty word,” he told me, “we don't do charity; we're here to foment radical change, not to keep the status quo.” Still recovering from the shock that he was actually reading the document with care, I dutifully nodded. I found the remark revealing and yet still puzzling, particularly given that he also stressed that the group could hardly oppose political sovereignty in any simple sense, since it was not in a position to “offer an alternative solution.” MSF's task, rather, was strictly to respond to the failures of the existing international system, providing people in crisis settings with medical care. Noting the organization's history of irritating ideologues on both political left and right with some relish, he assured me that “morality comes from action.” The group found legitimacy less in pure principles than in messy engagement. It conceived this engagement as simultaneously rebellious and politically attenuated. But whatever it was, it was not charity.

MSF represents a distinctive and extreme humanitarian perspective. Indeed, its position may prove ultimately revealing for this reason, given that the group balances on the edge of politics while focusing on issues of global health. With respect to its general dissatisfaction with the limitations of traditional charity, however, the organization has plenty of company. Indeed, many other major agencies proclaim far more ambitious goals. Oxfam, for example, may have begun modestly fighting famine during World War II, but subsequently embraced development. It describes itself as “an international confederation of 15 organizations working together in over 90 countries and with partners and allies around the world to find lasting solutions to poverty and injustice.”<sup>3</sup> Save the Children, an even older alliance with roots in combatting hunger after World War I, now sees its mission as “working together to inspire breakthroughs in the way the world treats children, and achieving real and lasting change in their lives.”<sup>4</sup> The American branch of Doctors of the World (which tellingly renamed itself HealthRight International in 2009) intends to “build lasting access to health for excluded communities.”<sup>5</sup> The International Rescue Committee claims to offer not just lifesaving care, but also “life-changing assistance.”<sup>6</sup> This pattern extends even beyond the secular quadrant of the aid sector. World Vision, a massive and explicitly Christian organization, embraces the term “relief,” but matches it with endeavors in “development” and “advocacy,” seeking to work “with children, families and communities to overcome poverty and injustice.”<sup>7</sup> For all these groups, charity alone does not seem enough. Even the president of the Catholic alliance Caritas – named for the very virtue itself – proclaims “Poverty and social injustice are the real weapons of mass destruction.”<sup>8</sup>

How to read such assertions? In light of the continuing state of the world and the projects such organizations sponsor, they appear poignantly aspirational rather than reflecting realizable ambitions. A dismissive critic might even call them delusional. Nonetheless the pattern runs deeply enough to raise a more fundamental question: Why is charity no longer enough? Why not accept the simple value of a “bed for the night” in Bertolt Brecht's telling phrase (Rieff 2002)? I suggest that if we treat these self-descriptions as symptomatic of secular expectation, then an answer may lie partly in the very symptom itself. To the extent that charity accepts the status quo as given, then a humanitarianism operating within a secular, modernist ethos of progress *must* be something more. Without claiming politics – indeed, while expressly asserting moral values – its practitioners retain a social conscience. The particularities of this conscience vary considerably, to be sure, as do the visions associated with it; to describe it as “social” holds true only in the widest sense. But even the conservative religious framing of World Vision is hardly quiescent about the current state of international affairs. The group's actions determinedly recall the possibility of another world in this one, whether or not they actually help achieve it.

As a point of partial contrast, one can turn to the venerable International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). Established in 1863 as a part of wave of reform in the conduct of warfare and treatment of wounded soldiers, the ICRC has greatly expanded its scope and reach, just like the Geneva Conventions with which it remains intertwined. Unlike the NGOs mentioned above, it occupies an official position within international law, and operates under a more formal mandate: “to provide humanitarian help for people affected by conflict and armed violence and to promote the laws that protect victims of war.”<sup>9</sup> The association with war is telling, since it demarcates a

clear boundary for action, and places humanitarianism within a state of exception. If a state of war suspends laws and norms, then the ICRC operates beyond ordinary conditions, reintroducing humanity into inhumane settings. To the extent that it ventures beyond such exceptional moments it does so through the promotion of laws that might affect them, preemptively responding to future ruptures. The Red Cross humanitarian legacy is clearly delimited, and stands strictly apart from political struggles. For this reason, and the fact that the organization follows a coherent and rigorous set of principles in its operation (famously including impartiality and neutrality), political scientists routinely position it as a classic form to calibrate other humanitarisms (Barnett and Weiss 2008). Moreover, the group's location at the border between religious and medical symbolism – its iconic cross, crescent, and neutral crystal seeking to mediate universal appeal through historical difference – can serve as a watershed for the emergence of contemporary secular order.

The Red Cross position is indeed rigorously focused. Its concern very much remains a matter of compassionate relief, if usually channeled in highly specific and attenuated ways around conflict and disaster. The ICRC, at least, is not likely to throw itself headlong into development projects or embrace human rights, let alone to disrupt the established order of nation states. Indeed, as early critics feared, by eschewing pacifism and spawning national societies that effectively served as medical auxiliaries, the wider Red Cross movement may have ultimately helped to normalize modern warfare (Hutchinson 1996). Yet the ICRC does display occasional traces of a “will to improve” (Li 2007), particularly in its patient nurturing of the evolving Geneva Conventions as the “core” of international humanitarian law.<sup>10</sup> The addition of civilian protection in the extensive 1949 revision serves as a watershed of sorts, recognizing the concerns of war beyond formal battle, and reaffirming noncombatant populations as third-party bystanders. The ICRC might not assert pacifism, but it does discretely dream of minimal civility.

With the emergence of Médecins Sans Frontières as the Red Cross's unruly offspring, this staid legacy acquired new passion. Part of a revivalist wave that swept through the aid world at the end of the 1960s and beginning of the 1970s, the group asserted an oppositional ethos and rapidly embraced a public role. Emphatically secular in the French republican tradition, it also incorporated legacies of Catholic activism and colonial medicine alongside post-Holocaust and postrevolutionary sensibilities (Taithe 2004). Indeed, during the 1980s the original French branch defined itself expressly against Third Worldist solidarity, accusing Parisian intellectuals of ignoring suffering in the name of Marxist doctrine. A number of its early champions had spent time as political activists, and a few would emerge as influential politicians. Nonetheless, MSF balanced at the edge of politics, defining itself through the figure of the ethically committed biomedical doctor. It stood for simple virtues: life, health, and – in an oft-repeated summation – the sense that people “people shouldn't die of stupid things” (see also Farmer 2003: 144). Rony Brauman, the influential former head of the original French section, once provocatively went further to define the human as “a being who is not made to suffer” (1996: 7). MSF would both claim its moral legitimacy and judge the actions of others in the name of such humanitarian virtues (Fassin 2010: 279). It thus recognized and articulated a limit to political justification. At the same time it loudly and repeatedly opposed any state of affairs it deemed undesirable. Contentious and contradictory, it saw itself as the antithesis of a

model charity, politically apolitical, if you will, or apolitically political.<sup>11</sup> No matter how much it might have defined itself around emergency care, MSF could never simply be a “relief” organization.

## HUMANITARIANISM BEYOND EMERGENCY

Both the contemporary, professionalized aid world and its division into discrete sectors are relatively recent phenomena. So too is the association of humanitarianism with emergency relief. As Craig Calhoun points out, the term emerged prior to the Red Cross, and only later shifted meaning: “Humanitarianism took root in the modern world not as a response to war or ‘emergencies’ but as part of an effort to remake the world so that it better served the interests of humanity” (2008: 76). The end of the eighteenth century in Europe, historians suggest, saw a revolution in sentiment as well as politics. Alongside liberalism and the new revolutionary vocabulary of political left and right, a transnational wave of reform sought to address the slave trade and slavery, to establish more humane punishments, and to improve the general human condition. Amid new conditions of market exchange and practices such as novel reading, both individual experience and relations with strangers acquired greater currency and value (Haskell 1995; Hunt 2007; Wilson and Brown 2009; Festa 2010). Humanitarianism, like philanthropy, designated grander attempts at promoting welfare, a more ambitious form of charity that sought to reach beyond the contingency of particular individuals. Simply put, it acted in the name of humanity (Feldman and Ticktin 2010).

Such historical observations matter less for simply complicating definitions than for suggesting that current moral desires may draw on deeper roots. Both the Red Cross emphasis on emergencies, and its model of operational restraint appear to be as much anomalies as sure foundations. Indeed, the long nineteenth century, and the vast complex of concepts and institutions inherited from it may represent a detour rather than a straight line of progress. Like modern states and their formalization of warfare the categorical sense of neutrality may be a relative aberration amid the longer sweep of human history (Nordstrom 2004; Redfield 2011). Medical conceptions of emergencies and accidents may prove more durable, but even they are hardly timeless (Cooter and Luckin 1997; Nurok 2003). From a historical perspective, then, it should be no surprise if anxieties over the value of good deeds waxed and waned not only with political affiliation, but also with shifting conceptions of what might constitute a proper sphere of political action.

Calhoun, we should not forget, situates humanitarianism firmly in what he calls the “modern world.” Like most analysts, he recognizes specificities of conjuncture, the reweaving of antecedent threads such as charity and cosmopolitanism into a new formation and project, if not an epochal transition. As a term “humanitarianism” is etymologically recent to be sure, appearing in English only in the early nineteenth century (Calhoun 2008: 77). Forms of feeling and action we might now identify as humanitarian likewise emerged rather suddenly, finding disparate expression as pious opposition to slavery and military intervention to support Greek independence (Haskell 1995; Bass 2008). Adam Smith (2009 [1759]) famously announced a natural theory not only of market reason but also of moral sentiment and benevolence. But

with regard to the sensibilities of the aid world, taking the designation “modern” to be a description of an attitude (Foucault 1984; Rabinow 2008) may ultimately prove more revealing. Whether or not those invested in it have ever *been* modern (Latour 1993), they have clearly thought themselves so in perceiving a break with traditional charity. Moreover, their desire to act on the world, and even more the language they use to express it, invokes progressive sensibilities. Whether or not the future actually yields a better world, those who allude to development believe their role includes attempting to make it so. Recognizing the larger historical arc of humanitarianism, then, highlights that its troubled relation to charity in the eyes of practitioners is a categorically modern problem.

A similar point can be made about politics. Although secularism and modernity are not synonymous, a modern attitude entails a particular emphasis on action as opposed to contemplation, and highlights tangible, material effects. The secular conceptual distinction between religion and politics thus resonated profoundly. To quote Calhoun again, “The increasing emphasis on the secular world did not imply irreligion, and indeed it was produced largely as a transformation within religious life and thought” (2008: 78). Efforts to affect human welfare should attend to the fate of bodies and the conditions that affected them. Even the overtly Christian aid of missionary medicine walked a line between sacred and secular care, removing tumors and cataracts in a public flourish, mixing treatment with prayer, and constructing clinics and hospitals (Vaughn 1991). To the extent that religion appeared a private matter, then, politics designated the legitimate space of public action. As a result, charitable deeds increasingly faced political judgment.

Liberalism (understood in the large sense) expects fundamental equality, as announced in its key assertions about natural rights (Asad 2003: 56–62). Liberal moral logic can therefore only accept inequality as either a temporary state or the results of an individual’s private failure, never as a natural condition. Permanent disparities such as a hierarchical ranking remain anathema, and even structural problems like multigenerational poverty fit uncomfortably into the framework of liberal sensibilities. This is not to suggest that liberalism worked against inequality in historical experience, any more than it did violence. Rather, the point is that the naturalization of a liberal subject – a self-governing person, born to equality – changed the terms through which inequities might be explained or justified. The moral reasoning of politics had altered. To the extent that charity addressed suffering without holding out the prospect of eventual change, or accepted nonfamilial relationships of open dependency, it would now appear “damaging to human dignity” (Calhoun 2010: 35). Just as liberalism developed rival strains, more radical or conservative in orientation, so too did modern efforts to undertake good works. But even lineages that derive from conservative paternalism rather than a vision of social equality, or that advocate spiritual development rather than material liberation still invest in a rhetoric of transformation (Pupavac 2010).

Amid this modernist sense of political evaluation, emergency can constitute an exception in more than one sense. Since a state of emergency, like a state of war, recognizes the suspension of political norms, it offers the comforting justification that any inequality is only temporary. For the duration of unusual circumstances urgent needs take precedence; once the moment of crisis has passed then one can return to the political project of remaking the world. As Calhoun notes: “Emergency” thus is a

way of grasping problematic events, a way of imagining them that emphasizes their apparent unpredictability, abnormality, and brevity and that carries the corollary that response – intervention – is necessary” (Calhoun 2010: 55). Thus the Red Cross, defined in response to the graphic carnage of modern weaponry, could establish a humanitarian tradition defined narrowly around rupture and exhibit only minimal ambitions of progress. It is precisely this tradition out of which MSF emerges, and its subsequent trajectory along the moral edge of politics renders it a particularly interesting case. In addition the group enjoys an unusual condition of relative financial autonomy, deriving the bulk of its funds from private contributions rather than state allocations. Unlike the largely state-subsidized ICRC, or its rivals who work largely on donor contracts, MSF reflects something closer to a truly “nongovernmental” expression of civil society, and its moral response to emergency.

### THE DOUBLE EDGE OF INTERVENTION

Médecins Sans Frontières began as an effort to create an independent form of medical humanitarianism, answerable to the conscience of private citizens rather than states. Although it would quickly acquire a reputation for publicity and subsequently a tradition of witnessing, the group’s founding dream was one of intervention: the provision of urgent care without regard to race, religion, or political belief. Its charter largely mirrored that of the Red Cross, but it sought to free itself from the unwieldy, cautious apparatus of older organization (Vallaey 2004). The founding generation, a loose coalition of doctors and journalists running a medical publication, drew their immediate inspiration from two defining events: the Nigerian civil war around the breakaway province of Biafra at the end of the 1960s, and the bloody birth of Bangladesh out of bifurcated Pakistan in 1971. Both were watershed moments for humanitarianism in general. Biafra marked a new intensity of media involvement and manipulation, the fertile mix of mass suffering and visceral imagery that would become a hallmark of the “humanitarian crisis.” The Red Cross responded with its largest relief operation to that point, counting some of the future founders of MSF among its volunteers. Oxfam likewise threw itself into the effort to feed the Biafran civilians, only to emerge deeply shaken. Bangladesh – where the foundations of MSF never actually arrived – saw both a military intervention by India justified on humanitarian grounds as well as a pioneering benefit concert (Fassin and Pandolfi 2010b: 11). In the wake of these events a second wave of media-friendly humanitarian organizations emerged, most famously MSF.

As indicated by its name, the new group carried with it an expansive suggestion of superseding sovereignty. It must be stressed that this was a suggestion rather than a practice; in the earliest days MSF remained emphatically French in personnel and language. Moreover, its members initially volunteered for other organizations and – on their first “independent” mission responding to the Nicaraguan earthquake in 1972 – even joined an effort from the French defense department, hitching a ride on a military plane (Vallaey 2004: 136). The implications of operating “without borders” only emerged later, in fits and starts amid a cycle of action and reaction. From the outset, however, the group faced a tension between the Red Cross tradition of emergency and the slower dream of development common to “Third Worldist”

solidarity movements of the time. Although urgency emphatically carried the day, the lure of development would remain as a persistent temptation even in this purist organization, surfacing every now and then in counter initiatives and alternative projects. At the level of practice, the collective trajectory proved rather more complicated than its official narration.<sup>12</sup> The individuals who joined MSF shared a medical orientation and a fierce desire to intervene in the world; they did not always agree how best to do so.

By the middle 1970s MSF was well on its way to notoriety, if not yet making much material impact. It launched a publicity campaign and began to make a habit of public agitation over humanitarian causes. The driving force during this period was Bernard Kouchner, who would become a charismatic force in international humanitarianism and French political life. Passionate and telegenic, he had already emerged as something of a public figure at the time. Although far from alone, he spoke the early vision most grandly and left an abiding mark. Decades after he angrily parted ways with the organization his name has remained attached to it, much to the frustration of his successors when their positions diverge.<sup>13</sup> Moreover – as one of these very skeptics admitted to me in 2003 – Kouchner displays the virtue of remaining remarkably consistent, a valuable characteristic for any project of analysis. Thus I will use his particular background and perspective to mark a more general point of possibility.

The child of Jewish doctor and a Catholic nurse, Kouchner entered the world during the uncertain lull at the onset of World War II. He grew up in a France shadowed by that conflict and infused with the cult of the Resistance. Haunted by the Holocaust, particularly after learning about the death of his own grandparents in Auschwitz, Kouchner easily gravitated into leftist politics, joining the communist student union, opposing the Algerian War and visiting Yugoslavia and Cuba. While studying to be a physician he nursed journalistic aspirations, writing, editing, and keeping an eye firmly planted on the public arena. Amid the tumult of May 1968 in Paris, he heard a different call to arms and departed for Biafra. The experience clearly consumed him. Kouchner would ultimately travel there three times, growing increasingly passionate. Back in Paris he campaigned for the Biafran cause, and together with other colleagues signed an open letter to diplomats attesting to the suffering they had seen, as well a testimonial in the French newspaper *Le Monde*. Although this was perhaps a more modest beginning than later myth might have it, his actions departed from Red Cross discretion in an echo of student activism. For Kouchner, humanitarianism was a naturally “militant” endeavor, to the extent that he announced himself as “a mercenary of emergency medicine” (Vallaey 2004: 46, 61, 75, 116). Politics and morality ran together. MSF would be the perfect vehicle for their union, personified by the figure of a crusading doctor. The medical student and journalist had found his calling: to intervene and speak loudly.

Kouchner’s stint with the organization he helped found lasted less than a decade. The moment of rupture is telling in several ways. The precipitating event came after Malaysia denied entry to a boatload of Vietnamese refugees in full view of the media. The image of thousands suffering aboard inspired a project in 1979 to create and equip a “Boat for Vietnam” to demonstrate solidarity. This appeal engendered a remarkable display of solidarity across France’s own political divides: most notably long-time opponents Jean-Paul Sartre and Raymond Aron both signed on, joined by a host of other intellectual luminaries such as Roland Barthes, Simone de Beauvoir,

and Michel Foucault. Such glaring human suffering appeared to stand beyond ordinary politics; humanitarianism offered the proper moral response. Naturally Kouchner played a leading role. To his surprise and outrage, the plan met with strident criticism from within MSF. Younger members, including those who had spent time working in refugee camps in Thailand, were skeptical, seeing the mission as more of a publicity stunt than an effective aid project. The disagreement precipitated an angry showdown, where Kouchner’s faction found itself outvoted. Announcing that MSF was now effectively dead, killed by “technocrats of assistance,” he left to begin a rival organization (Vallaey 2004: 299). This latter group, called Médecins du Monde (Doctors of the World, or MDM), would remain a smaller, purer embodiment of Kouchner’s vision, moving over time into a warm embrace of human rights. MSF, by contrast, invested more heavily in developing technical capacity, and continued to insist on a more strictly humanitarian identity.

This well-known episode displays a number of competing moral claims: suffering should surpass ideological divisions; a response should be materially effective; humanitarian aid should remain an organic gesture. It thus suggests different variations of antipolitics as well as politics. A concern for human life stirs secular intellectuals beyond their political habits, even as a political struggle of sorts breaks out among agents of moral response. The latter accuse each other of false action in the name of competing priorities, even as they agree on the general humanitarian goal. From one position, public gestures in isolation risk empty conceit and political moralism. From the other, a focus on efficiency risks dehumanization and soulless bureaucracy. But in either case, intervention was a moral as much as a political matter. As a later president of MSF France put it, a humanitarian should always reject “the logic that divides humanity into those who may live and those who must die” (Bradol 2004: 4).

Despite personal animosities on the part of the protagonists and their shifting emphases, MSF and MDM would undergo a largely parallel evolution in their shared prioritization of suffering over other considerations. Shortly after the schism both famously intervened in Afghanistan’s civil war on the side of the mujahideen. The clandestine project was in this sense openly political. It was also a dramatic realization of action “without borders,” authorized by the moral conscience of citizens rather than states. For all that MSF remained a stricter humanitarian sect, in practice it retained a sharp public edge. Over time it retreated from open violations of state sovereignty, and avoided strong alignments with one side in a conflict, but it remained fiercely committed to independence. One defining moment came with the eviction of the French section from Ethiopia in 1985, after it denounced government resettlement policies amid the famine. Another came a decade later, when MSF called for military intervention amid its helpless frustration during the Rwandan genocide, and then, amid internal debate, withdrew from refugee camps in Zaire when it perceived blatant manipulation of its attempts to offer aid. Although the group may have retreated behind Red Cross insignia during the Rwandan crisis, its reputation for public speech was by now secure (Orbinski 2008: 193). At the same time it had greatly increased in size and amplified its technical capacity, while working to wean itself off state funding to realize financial independence.

Meanwhile, Kouchner had gone through his own evolution, becoming a significant, if unorthodox French politician. In 1988 he entered the cabinet of the then Socialist government, taking charge of social affairs and employment, followed by a novel

portfolio in humanitarian affairs. In 1992 he became minister of health before going on to serve in the European Parliament. Along the way he found a principle to champion: the *droit d'ingérence*, a sense of right or duty to intervene on humanitarian grounds (Allen and Styan 2000). The declaration of this right formalized the supremacy of moral concern over political sovereignty. Suffering was a human affair, and consequently a matter of responsibility that exceeded the authority of states. Should they fail to care for their citizens, then others had both license and obligation to intervene. Although implicit in the formulation of MSF, and a sometime article of faith for MDM, the principle now followed Kouchner into the sphere of formal politics. A vigorous advocate of intervention, he drew little distinction between governmental and nongovernmental actors when lives were at stake, pressing for United Nations recognition of such a principle and encouraging French actions abroad. In 1999 he headed the UN mission in Kosovo, and in 2007 crossed the political divide to become minister of foreign affairs in the new conservative government in France.

MSF, by contrast, never warmed to idea of a general "right to intervene," and as the concept took on an increasingly political cast Kouchner's former compatriots recoiled. Instead of asserting a positive right of intervention they defined their humanitarian approach around an "ethic of refusal," as they put it when accepting the Nobel Peace Prize in 1999 (Orbinski 1999). As "a citizen's response to political failure," humanitarianism should remain distinct from any state policy, free to protest and "push the political to assume its inescapable responsibility." Nonetheless, such distinctions grew murky on the ground. MSF found itself alongside Kouchner in the Kosovo adventure, and however much it endeavored to distinguish between political and humanitarian rationales, the group struggled within a "gray zone" of converging military and aid objectives (Pandolfi 2008). Following the events of September 11, 2001 and the subsequent declaration of a "war on terror" by the United States, MSF pivoted even further away from political invocations of humanitarianism and back toward the Red Cross tradition. Denouncing such "just" wars waged on behalf of states, the group distanced itself from any calls for violence (Weissman 2004). True humanitarianism should stand beyond politics, or at least at its very edge, saving lives and opposing any justification for civilian death.

I retell this familiar story in order to emphasize the degree to which humanitarian intervention tangles political and moral logic, as well as states and voluntary organizations. By the turn of the millennium both MSF and MDM had evolved into large, established international NGOs, running a wide range of projects worldwide. Only a few provoked dramatic contest or controversy. But in those that did, the question of political status arose in multiple ways, sometimes contradictory and frequently discomfiting. Kouchner's version of humanitarian reason offered clarity, consistently endorsing intervention in the name of life. The price, however, was an association with power that not everyone was willing to pay. Amid contemporary states of emergency, any sense of humanitarian moral purity grew harder to maintain (Fassin and Pandolfi 2010a). At the same time, aid organizations had found other engagements with the world. Even MSF devoted more time and attention to significant nonemergency projects; by moving considerable resources into long-term HIV-AIDS projects and launching a pharmaceutical advocacy campaign, it flirted anew with versions of development and human rights. Amid its own larger economy of morals,

the retreat from politics in one domain balanced an expansion in others (Redfield 2008; Fassin 2010).

#### CONCLUSION: THE SECULAR DISCOMFORT OF ANTIPOLITICS

For keen and casual observers alike, contemporary efforts to provide humanitarian aid summon up the specter of religion (e.g., Benthall, Ch. 20 in this volume; McFalls 2010). Certainly the devout desire of volunteers to engage in good works expresses something like faith, and contemporary concern for human life reaches spiritual intensity. Surely the regular outpouring of funds in response to natural disaster (particularly those featuring putatively innocent and photogenic victims) signals a desire to display virtue in the impulse of philanthropy (Bornstein 2009), and even the material donations of states and corporations – however riddled with self-interest – suggest something like charitable alms. The potential value of this allusion lies less in the question of whether this secular morality really counts as "religion," or indeed, whether it is altruistic or always fully sincere.<sup>14</sup> Rather, its contribution stems from recognizing a key form of public morality in secular society. To participate in the good, one expresses concern for suffering, and acts to save lives. This is not the only value, to be sure – beyond appeals to classic goods such as justice or truth, environmentalism clearly demarcates a fertile arena of contemporary conscience. But humanitarianism falls so close to the sacred as to appear untouchable (Fassin 2011).

When approaching aid as a form of "secular religion," we would do well to recall that the primary religious heritage in question is Christianity. This is not to ignore the charitable traditions of other religions, but simply to recognize the particular historical associations that frame dominant definitions of both aid and secularism (Benthall, Ch. 20 in this volume; Bornstein and Redfield 2011). As Hannah Arendt noted long ago, a Christian conception of the sacredness of life echoes in the modern tenet that life represents "the highest good," even without the promise of immortality, and amid a world of emphatically material values (1998 [1958]: 319). Similarly, contemporary humanitarianism retains a language of sacrifice and salvation, as well as an egalitarian sense of human worth and potential redemption. Medical care offers particularly suggestive resonances; although the biomedical body is emphatically not the Christian soul, both are individuated, noninterchangeable objects of value, and thus a point of focus for ethical concern. The pain and suffering of ordinary people matters. Absent spiritual benefit – or acceptable political rationalization – it demands physical rescue.

Humanitarianism identifies a fundamentally moral standpoint. At the same time, however, it prescribes instrumental action, and expects its practice of value ethics to be consequential. For contemporary humanitarians the defense of life remains a categorical good, anchoring a deontological logic of associated principles and duties. Without it charitable action cannot express virtue in and of itself (even if so registered in public evaluation), nor can one accept any utilitarian rationale that justifies death. At the same time, however, humanitarians retain a consequentialist conscience born of secular politics. From such a perspective it becomes harder to act on faith alone, without affirmation that one's actions have beneficial effects, or contribute to a larger form of improvement. In this sense it should come as no great surprise that the rhetoric deployed by aid organizations mixes transformational ambition into expressions

of moral outrage. Modernist in orientation, NGOs express their particular versions of "organized goodness" (Heins 2008: 159) amid historically liberal expectations of personhood, biopolitical norms of health, and secular understandings of the frame of moral action. An "antipolitics," after all, takes shape within a world that is politically defined. The case of MSF proves particularly acute in this regard. Moving along the sharp edge of morality, it confronts politics at every turn while seeking to stand against it. Frustrated by enduring conditions within which it works, the organization describes its endeavor as "not a contented action" and ultimately demands "change, not charity" (Orbinski 1999). Even this purist stance wants more, just like its academic critics.

If we are to consider our own "anthropological discomfort with morals as heuristic rather than paralyzing" (Fassin 2008: 342), then a reflexive start would be to acknowledge the deep commitment of social science to a secular perspective, in which political analysis defines moral – as well as an ontological and epistemological – truth.<sup>15</sup> In discussing the problem of moral standing and aid amid war, Hugo Slim (1997: 342) notes that Dante's vision of hell included a vestibule of sorts, reserved for the uncommitted. There the souls of those who never choose between good and evil mingle with angels who followed neither God nor Satan, chasing a fickle banner while being stung by hornets. Writing for an audience of aid practitioners, Slim presents this sin of moral vacillation in terms of political neutrality. The translation of categories, however, is even more apt than the author suggests. Viewed from the perspective of an anthropology of secular morality, it becomes clear that the primary judgment faced by aid agencies is a political one. When good and evil present themselves in terms of the politics of commitment, solidarity, and measurable outcomes, it grows uncomfortable to stand to one side. Even when resisting politics in the form of justifications of suffering, those invested in aid face their own political expectations and desires. The political quiescence associated with traditional charity – its implication that poverty and suffering may be an inevitable feature of human experience, its acceptance of inequality – disturbs modern, liberal sensibilities, including those of both aid workers and anthropologists. Within a secular cosmology one must claim political good or risk the torments of near damnation.

## NOTES

- 1 A full review of "antipolitics" lies beyond this essay. I would simply note that some authors (including Nietzsche) have claimed it as a field of open possibility, while others have deployed the term variously to indicate duplicity, technocratic rationalization, or reactionary closed mindedness (see, e.g., Konrad 1984; Bergmann 1987; Ferguson 1990; Brown 2001; Moyn 2007).
- 2 In organizational terms MSF is actually a federation of 19 national sections, plus several branch and international offices. Historically, five of these have been independently operational (France, Belgium, Holland, Switzerland, and Spain), and have not always seen eye to eye. Recent years have seen a greater degree of international harmony and involvement of "partner" sections in running operations. For the purposes of this essay I will generally treat the wider group as a single entity, in keeping with its public profile. For more on humanitarianism see Wilson and Brown (2009), Feldman and Ticktin (2010), and Bornstein and Redfield (2011).
- 3 At <http://www.oxfam.org/cn/about>, accessed Mar. 21, 2011.
- 4 At <http://www.savethechildren.net/alliance/index.html>, accessed Mar. 21, 2012.

- 5 At <http://www.healthright.org/who-we-are>, accessed Mar. 21, 2012.
- 6 At <http://www.rescue.org/about>, accessed Mar. 21, 2012.
- 7 At <http://www.wvi.org/wvi/wviweb.nsf/maindocs/3F50B250D66B76298825736400663F21?opendocument>, accessed Mar. 21, 2012.
- 8 At [http://www.caritas.org/about/Caritas\\_Internationalis.html](http://www.caritas.org/about/Caritas_Internationalis.html), accessed Mar. 21, 2012.
- 9 At <http://www.icrc.org/eng/who-we-are/index.jsp>, accessed Mar. 21, 2012.
- 10 See <http://www.icrc.org/eng/war-and-law/treaties-customary-law/geneva-conventions/index.jsp>, last accessed Apr. 27, 2011.
- 11 See Renée Fox's (1995: 1609) gloss of the French humanitarian position as "nonideological ideology." As Fassin (2010: 277) observes, one must attend to the factions and divisions that open within it in practice.
- 12 The point is also true at the level of national sections. For example, the branch of MSF that emerged in Belgium in 1980 remained more enamored with development than their French cousins. The two quarreled bitterly over a number of key issues in the ensuing years, to the extent that Paris sued Brussels over the use of their common name.
- 13 Although consistently popular with the French public, Kouchner has long been a controversial figure. For a caustic assessment of his trajectory as a generational icon – as well as a dismissal of "ambulance politics" – see Ross (2002: 147–169). See also Taithe (2004) and Bourg (2007) for wider context, as well as Caldwell (2009), for an account of recent controversy. Within MSF, his public legacy has proved a source of continued frustration, such as when the organization won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1999 and found itself misidentified in the press with his positions (Vallaey 2004: 749–750).
- 14 See Hans Blumenberg's (1983) emphasis on "reoccupation" rather than transposition when comparing secularism with Christian theology.
- 15 As Talal Asad notes, whereas the opposition between sacred and profane may have found "no place in premodern writing," it became foundational in social science (2003: 32).

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