

Note: this is not the final version of this review. The definitive version is forthcoming in *Political Studies Review*, and would be available on SAGE online public platform from October 2016

***Humanitarian Ethics: A Guide to the Morality of Aid in War and Disaster* by Hugo Slim. London: C Hurst & Co, 2015. 224pp., £18.99 (p/b), ISBN 978-1849043403**

***Between Samaritans and States: The Political Ethics of Humanitarian INGOs* by Jennifer C. Rubenstein. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. 252pp., £55.00 (h/b), ISBN 9780199684106**

These two books are a welcome addition to the literature on Humanitarian INGOs such as Oxfam and MSF. Until recently, there has been little rigorous discussion of the ethical and political implications of these organisations' actions. In this sense, they both follow the trajectory of Lepora and Goodin's recent book *On Complicity and Compromise* (OUP 2013), which discussed the Rwandan refugee camps as a case study of the general theoretical framework. Rubenstein and Slim, employing the tools of normative political theory and moral philosophy respectively, analyse the multiple dilemmas, trade-offs and compromises INGOs routinely face when acting in the real world. Despite sharing a research interest, however, these are two very different books – in their method, in their tone, and in their intended audience.

Slim's book, as its title indicates, is explicitly meant as a guide for moral action in challenging contexts. In the first brief part, Slim discusses the moral foundations of humanitarianism, drawing on various philosophical sources from Hume to Levinas, as well as recent neuroscientific research on empathy. The second part provides a rational reconstruction of humanitarian principles traditionally shared and espoused by most INGOs. Slim divides these principles into five thematic groups: Humanitarian Goals (Humanity and Impartiality); Political Principles (Neutrality and Independence); Dignity Principles (Respect, Participation and Empowerment); and Stewardship Principles (Sustainability and Accountability). The third and final part turns to the application of these principles in practice. As Slim points out, humanitarian aid is difficult, and because it is difficult, it can go wrong despite best intentions (p.2). His discussion of the practice of humanitarian ethics belies this statement, as Slim analyses and provides responses to the myriad of ways in which aid goes wrong: from paternalism towards aid recipients, through complicity in genocides, to overzealous humanitarian workers risking their own lives unnecessarily. Nonetheless, against critics of aid – the background villain of the book - Slim remains adamant: when approached in an ethically principled way, aid does more good than harm.

In comparison, Rubenstein's book analyses the predicaments faced by Humanitarian INGOs as a distinctively *political* problem. Limiting her scope to large, mainly Western INGOs, she argues that these organisations should be understood as (in some sense) governmental, political and, in many cases, second-best actors. Rubenstein thus positions herself both against moral philosophers who view INGOs as 'do-gooding' machines (Peter Singer, and more recently advocates of effective altruism), and against Foucauldian critics of aid who see it as an instrument of governmentality. Interestingly, she points out that humanitarian INGOs often engage in conventional forms of governance, extending well beyond humanitarian assistance. Based on this analysis, Rubenstein draws four exemplary ways in which INGOs (*qua* political actors) struggle to reconcile their guiding norms and the effects of their actions: service provision in contexts of conflict ('The Problem of Spattered Hands'); INGOs as unaccountable political advocates ('The Quandary of the Second-Best'); effectiveness in resource allocation ('The Cost-Effectiveness Conundrum'); and dilemmas of visual representation in mobilising support for aid ('The Moral Motivation Trade-Off'). The final chapter of the book brings these different predicaments together, calling for a *political* political ethics of humanitarian organisations.

Both books are very well written, and benefit considerably from engaging with a first-hand experience with the real practice of humanitarian aid. This is particularly worth noting in Rubenstein's book, as the idea in fieldwork in normative political theory (even 'non-ideal' theory) is sadly far from being common practice. The two books have very different goals, and each is successful in achieving them. Slim accomplishes the difficult task of discussing complex moral problems in a way that is both accessible and challenging. Although at times the coherence of the different ethical positions he draws on may be somewhat suspect, the

book is a rich exploration into the ethics of humanitarian practice, and as such would be of great interest and use for practitioners and general readership. Rubenstein's book is less prescriptive, and thus is less a work of applied ethics. Nevertheless, the analysis it provides is an exemplary work of political theory which is at the same time realistic and normative. Unlike many 'non-ideal' political theory, it is noteworthy that Rubenstein does not concern herself merely with questions of feasibility, but with the particular political nature of these non-state actors. Hers is thus a significant contribution to the literature on political ethics, and could potentially inform normative political theorists working on global justice as well.

(730 words)

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