

THE NEED TO REAFFIRM HUMANITARIAN VALUES

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I would like to begin this brief reflection by asking the following questions: what would the world be like if there were no humanitarian values? Is this such an absurd thought? I believe most of you would agree that it's not. We are reminded of this every day. When reading the daily papers, we are constantly faced with situations in which humanitarian values are *not* upheld.

While reflecting on this matter, another question came to my mind.

What kind of person does not support humanitarian values? The simplest answer is: potential or actual perpetrators. They are the people who commit atrocities, or those who condone them. Those who violate the values of their society or their own personal values, or those who simply do not believe in this concept.

However, I am afraid, this list is not complete: there are also all those, who out of indifference, out of a sense of false security think that there is no need to be concerned. Humanitarian crises and persecutions can only happen elsewhere and to others.

In the rest of this paper I will deal briefly with three key questions and issues: first the meaning of humanitarian values and action, secondly, the breakdown of humanitarian principles and third, need to reaffirm and strengthen our values.

Humanitarian values and humanitarian action

While today there is an instant recognition of the term humanitarian, or of humanitarian action, there is no generally accepted definition.

To begin with, the term "humanitarian" applies to three distinct but interrelated notions.

a) First, a whole range of actions (by States, their agents or by other groups) that are *contrary* to humanitarian principles, and thus are condemned or prohibited by moral, customary, domestic or international standards or laws;

b) A second set of notions has to do with positive actions or obligations of *solidarity*. This implies protection of and material assistance to actual or potential victims of man-made or natural disasters.

c) The third aspect is one that for multiple reasons is receiving today much greater attention than in the past. It is related to the *prevention and/or the sanctioning* of actions that lead to severe violations of humanitarian principles and consequently to the moral or legal obligation to exercise solidarity.

Humanitarian action thus aims at easing or correcting the intentional or accidental consequences of acts of violence, of injustice and persecution. It is motivated by humanitarian values: by a clear distinction between right and wrong and by the urge to do right, by the so-called *humanitarian imperative*.

Humanitarian values should be upheld to protect the victims. Those whose basic human rights have been violated, those who have become hopeless. Those whose lives are affected by sporadic injustices; but especially those who are perpetually subjected to mistreatment or systematic persecution.

There are two kinds of victims who in particular depend on the reaffirmation and upholding of these values: those who are attacked by a clearly visible and well-defined external enemy, and those who are aggressed by the very people who were supposed to protect them. Both situations can result from international or internal conflicts, or from persecution by governments or by private groups.

Providing assistance and protection for the actual and potential victims of violence, persecution or of other forms of calamities caused by nature or human action, means putting the interests of the victims in the center of humanitarian action.

However, this does not mean that humanitarian action must serve only the interests of the victims. The fundamental assumption for humanitarian action is that there is a convergence of interests broadly defined between the two sides: a convergence between the interests of those who carry out humanitarian action, and the interests of those who benefit from it.

What motivates or ought to motivate humanitarian action? Humanitarian action is and should be animated both by values and interests¹.

In fact, it corresponds not only to our moral and societal values, but it is also in the interests of our liberal, open societies. An international order where victims of persecution and violence receive no protection is a threat to our fundamental interests.

A society lacking humanitarian values is not compatible with our need for ethical and moral standards of behavior, nor with our society's interests.

Humanitarian values refer to society's minimum standards of behavior and obligations of solidarity. These obligations refer to specific areas, including dealing with the wounded in war; solidarity with the less privileged; enforcing rules of war; strengthening and enforcing international laws; and many other forms of collective togetherness. Humanitarian principles are not exclusive, but our experience shows that the systematic violation of these values is counterproductive, and results in war and useless suffering.

¹ Otto Hieronymi and Chiara Jasson, "Values and Interests as Motivation for Humanitarian Action". Paper presented at the International Studies Association Annual Conference, March 2002.

As a result of the end of the Cold War there is a much broader consensus in the world about the importance of human rights. Today, there is a general recognition that persecution and violations of humanitarian principles cannot be justified by ideologies on the Left or the Right.

Yet, Bosnia and Kosovo did happen, Somalia, Rwanda, Burundi, Sierra Leone did happen. Afghanistan, during more than ten years after the withdrawal of Soviet troops remained and still remains a terrain of suffering and "humanitarian crises". What is the difference between these crises (and the lengthening list of "forgotten crises" of the last ten years), and the holocaust, the gulag or the Cultural Revolution in China?

Technology and the media have spread awareness of the effects of the absence of humanitarian values. All sorts of horrific events reach the public as they take place. As we sit here today, we know that people are being persecuted and tortured. This alone, should be enough to remind us of the need for humanitarian values.

For the first time in history, we are aware of atrocities as they happen². Hence the importance of an adequate response. It is of vital importance to reaffirm a tradition that cannot and will not tolerate barbarity. It is essential to live in a society that renews its engagement to eradicate it. The existing system has shown its commitment to intervene and prevent atrocities of war. As Umberto Eco wrote in the last of his *Five Moral Pieces*, recent episodes of genocide and brutality have created a new "threshold of intolerability"³. While a lot remains to be done, society has acknowledged that accepting the unbearable means questioning our identity, our culture, and our values.

The breakdown of values

What happens when society as a whole lacks humanitarian values? What If the acts we define as evil and barbarian are seen as good or heroic in some societies? The presence or absence of humanitarian values and principles in a society determines whether an act is praised or condemned.

Human society is not homogenous. In all societies there is a minority of criminal elements. Yet, when massive violations of humanitarian values occur, it is rarely the responsibility of isolated individuals. In such situations, the individual along with his sense of humanity and values, are reduced to being part of the machinery of destruction⁴. Ultimately, instances of persecution and massive atrocities represent a situation in which the decision-makers, or important parts of society, do not believe in, have given up, or simply lack humanitarian values.

Despite the spread of civilization and the efforts of the international community to bolster humanitarian values, it is clear that there have been frequent and systematic violations of humanitarian principles throughout history, and in all parts of the world.

² Eco, Umberto. *Five Moral Pieces*. New York: Harcourt, 1997.

³ Eco, Umberto. *Five Moral Pieces*. New York: Harcourt, 1997.

⁴ Finkelkraut, Alain. *In the name of Humanity*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000.

Anti-humanitarian behavior has been as frequent and devastating in communities where this clearly represented a breach of accepted common values, as it has been at times and places where such moral principles had not been spelled out.

Plenty of examples can be drawn from 20th Century history: the range of totalitarian and oppressive dictatorships like the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia; the Rwandan genocide; ethnic cleansing in former Yugoslavia; and the recent manifestations of global terrorism. One of the worst examples of an old civilization with long humanistic tradition, unexpectedly taking a sharp turn and becoming blinded by hatred, fear, or extremist ideologies was Germany. In Hitler's Germany, the persecutors systematically "stripped their victims of their protective dignity. Jews were distanced and so pushed outside the boundaries of the moral community... that it denied them normal human claims"⁵. Goebbels wrote with respect to the National Socialist period, that it required "enough courage to destroy, laughingly to shatter what we once held holy, such as tradition, upbringing, friendship, and human love"⁶.

The fallacy of *force majeure*

The explanations or justifications invoked for the violations of humanitarian values include a state of emergency or *force majeure*; selfish human nature; man's inclination towards violence and cruelty; as well as national interests.

People who have been subjected to brutality for extended periods of time are exposed to a higher risk of becoming perpetrators themselves. Following the fierce German occupation of the Soviet Union, soldiers of the Red Army behaved in turn in barbaric ways during their occupation of eastern Germany. One could perceive humanitarian values as the fine line standing between a potential and an actual perpetrator. Living in a society that upholds humanitarian and moral principles, while condemning violence might serve as a deterrent for such actions.

However, humanitarian values could be much stronger if the belief in the unacceptability of war became intrinsic to our society, and was more profoundly embedded. The crimes we have been talking about do not just happen, but are committed by people, by members of our societies.

Man-made disasters can happen in the most unexpected places⁷. History has shown that a military coup in Argentina, or the death of a dictator in Yugoslavia can lead to sudden destruction and disintegration of once peaceful towns. Glover compares the efforts to develop a *humanitarian* climate of opinion that reduces the likelihood of such occurrences, to the payment of taxes to fund the fire brigade. "You hope you will not need it, and you probably won't, but if your house catches fire you will be glad of it"⁸.

⁵ Glover, Jonathan. *Humanity*. London: Pimlico, 2001, p. 339.

⁶ Goebbels. Quoted in Jonathan Glover, *Humanity* (Pimlico, 2001), pp. 340-341.

⁷ Glover, Jonathan. *Humanity*. London: Pimlico, 2001, p. 41.

⁸ Glover, Jonathan. *Humanity*. London: Pimlico, 2001, p. 41.

Humanitarian values are designed to protect individuals from the violation of their basic rights, and freedom. However, they should also serve as a moral guide for the individual. In order to serve as effective guidelines for conduct, moral resources need to be deeply rooted in the individual's mind and conscience and in society at large.

The need to reaffirm humanitarian values

Humanitarian values and principles have to be reaffirmed to meet our needs for ethical and moral standards of behavior. Both society as a whole and each of us as individuals need a shared sense of mercy and compassion to help and protect those who are in need.

Let me stress again, humanitarian values and action correspond not only to our moral and societal values, but are also in the interests of our liberal, open societies. An international order where victims of persecution receive no protection goes against our vital interests.

The incapacity of the international community to prevent the outbreak of armed conflicts in various parts of the world, the magnitude of the violence, and the number of victims involved clearly indicate the need to reaffirm and strengthen humanitarian values. Past and recent atrocities have shown the weaknesses of the system of ethical resources we depend on to control barbarity. The frailty of the system is coupled with the awareness that "we are jointly responsible" for the horrors of the past⁹.

It is true that progress has been made in bringing assistance to the victims of war and violence. However, emphasis should be placed on reinforcing humanitarian and moral principles, so as to reduce the likelihood of violations and injustices. Ideally, one should aim at solving the problem at its origins, by working on the weaknesses of the existing system of values.

As Glover wrote in *Humanity*, developing a climate of opinion in which the rejection of violence and abuse is deeply rooted would certainly make international intervention stronger¹⁰.

The willingness and determination to grow away from our inhuman and violent past must be made central to ethics and values if any concrete changes are to take place.

⁹ Eco, Umberto. *Five Moral Pieces*. New York: Harcourt, 1997.

¹⁰ Glover, Jonathan. *Humanity*. London: Pimlico, 2001, p. 42.