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Virtue Ethics and Organizational Culture Management in Humanitarian Assistance

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Abstract

Aim: The aim of the article is to investigate the validity of virtue ethics to humanitarian organizational culture management.

Methodology: The method applied is basically focused on the analyses of the relevant literature.

Results: The results of the paper show that a humanitarian virtuous agency conducted by innate moral qualities can employ standards that are far beyond formal code duties or effectiveness.

Implications and recommendations: Virtue ethics, by stressing the importance of motivational aspects, has unquestionable implications in analyses around humanitarian organizational culture management.

Originality/value: Motivational aspects become fundamental for relief workers, especially in situations where normality means lack of normality.

Keywords: virtue ethics, humanitarianism, management, values, moral excellence

1. Introduction

The most obvious phenomenon in humanitarian activity is that individuals, groups, organizations and governments try to respond to crises which usually stem from the lack of human welfare, social isability, natural disasters, and situations of war. Such crises make their victims unable to distance

themselves from their vulnerability which puts them at further risk. Humanitarian agents are generally understood as managers offering their time, energy and experience to help those victims, without expectations of getting any benefit in return. They are usually driven by moral motivation, whose source is grounded in an ethical concern (Komenska, 2017, p. 146).

Ethics deals with the evaluation of attitudes and behaviour based on variety of moral ideas relating to values and reality. There is a typical distinction into **meta-ethics**, **normative ethics**, **applied ethics**, and **descriptive ethics**. Meta-ethics deals with the theoretical foundations of ethics, for instance the origins of the prescriptive implications from the notion of humanity in humanitarianism. Normative ethics investigates the questions regarding ethical behaviour based on moral principles, such as the adequacy of humanity as a principle of action. Applied ethics refers to the practical application of moral considerations, such as the implementation of a principle of humanity in relief work. Descriptive ethics is the study of people's beliefs about morality without evaluating whether those beliefs are true or false, right or wrong.

This paper focused on virtue ethics and its benefits to humanitarian organizational culture management. Virtue ethics as a normative concept should encourage organizations and individuals to take a more critical look at the purpose and motivations of relief work. It should also inspire professionals to support a continual pursuit for moral excellence. This study is theoretical, and the method applied relates to the analyses of relevant literature.

2. Moral Principles and Values of Humanitarianism

The impulse to help those in need seems to be one of the most exceptional sides of human nature; J.J. Rousseau recognised it as a "natural" feeling, while A. Smith associated it with something inherent to human nature (Rieff, 2003, p. 57). Caring assistance to those in need is treated as a moral obligation in most of the world's religions. However, the origin of modern humanitarianism is associated with the activity of H. Dunant, a Swiss businessman, one of the founders of the Red Cross. During a business trip to northern Italy in 1859, Dunant witnessed the aftermath of the battle in Solferino that took place between the armies of France and Austria, in which some 300,000 soldiers were engaged, of whom more than 6'000 lost their lives, 40,000 were wounded, and 5,000 captured or missing. When the surrounding towns and villages were filled with injured soldiers and the army medical aid became insufficient, Dunant decided to organize female volunteers from the nearby villages to take care of the casualties left on the battlefield. Their plight made Dunant establish three foundational principles for the future humanitarian assistance, namely (1) negotiating access to the affected, (2) impartiality in providing care, (3) maintaining neutrality (Anderson et al., 2018, p. 11; Dunant, 1986).

It is worthwhile to emphasise that Swiss activist – Henry Dunant – created the needs-based approach of humanitarianism, represented, among others, by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and, in some sense, by Médecins Sans Frontières (Adami, 2021, p. 403). This paradigm of humanitarian assistance refers to four fundamental principles: (1) humanity, (2) neutrality, (3) impartiality, and (4) independence. In the opinion of J. Pictet, one of the first to give an extensive commentary on the principles of ICRC, humanity in this case is a value *per se* and should be treated as an aim of relief assistance. All the other principles play the role of means for achieving this aim (Pictet, 1956). On the other hand, H. Slim argued that ethical analyses of humanitarian principles should relate to a concrete practice and there is unquestionable need for relief workers to develop their own moral standards (Slim, 1997, p. 247). E. Wortel analyses moral dilemmas and tensions between different principles, such as humanity versus justice (Wortel, 2009, p. 787).

However, in the post-Cold War era much greater emphasis has been placed on the rights-based approach in the humanitarian sector. In the 1990s, when it was clear that many humanitarian crises had become more complex with evident political involvement, and the concerns of aid were rather related to development problems, the practice of humanitarian assistance inevitably had to be changed (Hilhorst, 2018, pp. 5-7). The shift towards new humanitarianism was associated with the

observation that ongoing wars in the 1980s and early 1990s did not always resemble humanitarian crises. Usually in such conflicts the engaged countries were more focused on strengthening their internal political positions while individual citizens suffered loss, injuries and displacements of their close family; this was typical of the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s (Ahmadi, 2023). A similar situation took place in Somalia, Sierras Leone, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Rwanda and other countries in the 1990s, when many humanitarian organizations were accused of being too silent and not fulfilling their function adequately. The assessment of the international community to the humanitarian response of those crises brought a mutually agreed conclusion that on the level of aid, the assistance was relatively effective, but on the level of diplomacy and military support it was completely unsuccessful. The present humanitarian environment has become more complex, with additional external impacts such as mass population displacements as well as social, economic, political and environmental outcomes of climate change (Clarke and Parris, 2020). These new factors led to considering the need for an adjustment to the wider societal transformation, in which humanitarian assistance could be grounded. It should remain beyond of any doubt that obscure socio-economic and political environments would always create and sustain additional vulnerability (Olsen, 2000).

Traditional principles such as humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence still shape the way in which contemporary humanitarian organizations should arrange their response to elevate human suffering, but the horizon of contemporary crises demands new reconsideration of the principles and values supporting the humanitarian responses. Any discussion on the ethical side of humanitarianism, especially related to human rights, humanitarian intervention, climate change, development etc., cannot ignore the normative optics of the research. It appears that virtue ethics is a very important foundation as a motivational force for relief workers, and a virtuous approach is strongly focused on human moral excellence.

3. The Basic Concepts of Virtue Ethics

Virtue ethics originated from the ancient Greek philosophers and also generations of Christian theologians, among whom were Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Saint Augustin, Saint Thomas Aquinas and many others (Athanassoulis, 2012). The role of virtue in the contemporary ethics was addressed by E. Anscombe (1958), Ph. Foot, (1978), B. Williams (1985) and A. MacIntyre (1985).

The exponents of virtue ethics focused on the importance of human character and practical wisdom. Their significant assumption was that virtue depicts a human disposition that makes moral agents react, feel, value, choose, respond in a certain characteristic way. The basic point of the virtue approach in ethics is the excellence that inspires oneself self as well as others (Lenka and Kar, 2021, p. 205). Hence, the cocept of virtue relates to the practical aspects of moral conduct including motivational factors. A virtuous act cannot be recognised apart from the person who is the possessor of virtue (Sison and Ferrero, 2015, p. 86). The basic question in the theory of virtue is “What kind of person shall I be?” rather than “What shall I do?”. Therefore, the perspective of the individual’s innate moral qualities become more important than ethics based on duties or consequences. Essential for virtue based ethics is the attitude of the agent who acts not only due to the accepted rules or principles, but rather due to his/her inner moral convictions in given situations. It does not matter *what* the moral agent does, but *how* he/she does it.

There are three main aspects in the discourse on virtue ethics: behavioural, cognitive, affective (Szutta, 2015, pp. 114-116). The behavioral aspect of virtue relates to a set of habitual reactions that support a specific type of behaviour. The key element of ethical behaviour is a specific individual’s motivation independent of any external circumstances. Virtue ethics holds the view that an individual’s ethical behaviour should be evaluated by trait-based characteristics such as courage, self-control, honesty, compassion, truthfulness, and fairness. A moral agent is always ready to act with the same attitude – for example a truthful person never lies, a kind agent shows kindness, and the one asked for help never

refuses it. The cognitive aspect of virtue deals with a development of practical wisdom. For Aristotle, practical wisdom (*phronesis*) played the role of *modus operandi* in making right decisions (Coope, 2012). It was the ability to do the right thing, at right time, for the right purpose in concrete moral situations. Practical wisdom was a kind of guide or regulator for assessing proper goals and appropriate means in constantly changing life contexts. Since virtue can become falsely understood and applied, hence practical wisdom requires day-to-day deliberative exercises to choose the best possible way of action in every given situation. According to Aristotle, correctness and appropriateness of a virtuous action remains always between two extremes, commonly called *the golden mean*. The affective aspect of virtue refers to the knowledge of moral good. Virtue involves emotions, especially one's feelings of pleasure and pain. Emotions in some sense help to recognise the right action (cognitive issue of virtue), but they also allow one to attain a virtuous life. A deep emotional inspiration fuels the intrinsic motivations which, as a result, stimulate autonomous individual's actions (Stohr, 2017). A virtuous person is not subordinated to the imposed set of rules or moral principles, but rather acts out of inner conviction. The affective aspect of virtue assumes that a virtuous person willingly and joyfully performs virtuous acts. The possessor of virtue has the wisdom of assessing the situational context that helps to recognise what to do "here and now" (Rachana, 2004).

Thus, what are the implications of ethics based on the concept of virtue for humanitarian aid management? How can a virtuous approach challenge ethical thinking in relief work? How can organizations use role models developed in virtuous behavior? Those are the main concerns of the next section.

4. Virtue Motivational Guidance and Humanitarian Aid Management

Humanitarian aid management is a diverse and complex process that regulates the humanitarian aid. It involves the coordination and supervision of activities providing assistance and protection to people affected by various crises, natural disasters and military conflicts. Globally there are many stakeholders, called humanitarian actors, divided into five groups: (1) non-governmental humanitarian organizations – local, national, international non-governmental organizations; (2) governmental humanitarian organizations – local authorities, governments, regional associations, intergovernmental organizations; (3) rescue and supportive organizations – rescue units, medical organizations, military missions; (4) supporters of essential products and services – manufacturers, service providers; (5) society – individual donors, recipients, church and other religious organizations. Although all major humanitarian aid organizations are governed by common principles such as humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence, the intersectoral coordination is lacking a mutual structure, functioning rather in chaos (Marcinkowski, 2022).

A discussion on the role of ethics in humanitarian aid management appears to be strongly connected with a reflection on the role of organizational culture for humanitarian operations. Every organizations creates its own specific culture, whether managers are aware of it or not. Organizational culture is a set of assumptions, values and attitudes that helps members of an organization understand what it stands for, how it operates and what it considers as important (Griffin, 2004, p. 178). There are several characteristics playing an essential role for an organization's culture, namely: (1) member identity – employees can identify themselves with the organization as a whole rather than with their job or a field of professional experience; (2) group emphasis – work activities are organized around groups rather than individual aims; (3) people focus – the management decisions take into account the impact of results on people in the organization; (4) unit integration – units within the organization are encouraged to operate in a coordinated and interdependent way; (5) control – rules and regulations are used to oversee employee behaviour; (6) risk tolerance – employees are encouraged to be innovative and overcome risk; (7) conflict tolerance – employees air conflicts and present criticism openly; (8) means-ends orientation – management is oriented on results or outcome rather than on

the techniques and processes engaged to reach those outcomes; (9) open-system focus – responding to changes in the external environment; (10) reward criteria – rewards such as salary increases and promotions are allocated according to employee performance, not according to seniority, favoritism, or other nonperformance reasons (Robins, 1993, p. 602).

Organizational culture plays a significant role in organizations, and it often determines the success or failure of the organization. According to Schein, organizational culture is "a pattern of shared basic assumptions, invented, discovered, or developed by a given group, as it learns to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration" (cf. Milošević et al., 2021, p. 61). Generally, organizational culture impacts on: (1) the way in which people make their mutual interactions; (2) the context within which knowledge is accumulated; (3) reactions people express towards certain changes; (4) the way people share knowledge.

Managers ought to have a clear understanding of their organizational culture. They should identify what components determine it and what role the value systems can play in managing their organizations – this becomes very important for managing humanitarian work. When dealing with the lack of normality caused by war or natural disaster crises, the main question is what might be expected from moral theory in managing relief work. It is clear that the ethical frameworks set up by humanitarian codes of conduct are very helpful for donors, humanitarian organizations and beneficiaries. The documents/charts containing basic principles and values viewed as **minimum standards** can help to avoid doing harm to people in need and to accomplish more ethical relief operation on both sides (Kalokajrinou, 2016, p. 27).

It is beyond of doubt that moral theory, if properly applied, can serve as something more than minimum standards, and can actually play **the action-guiding force** for relief workers. Therefore, what kind of guidance might be expected from the moral theory in given circumstances? First of all, it is important to explain what the moral theory is about. Generally speaking, moral theory is a set of statements that are used to systemize and codify our judgements relating to certain behaviour and standards of conduct (Resnik, 2018, pp. 52-84). Depending on the concept of moral theory, ethicists formulate different perspectives of moral guidance focusing on: (1) **action-guiding normative principles** (utilitarianism and deontology) and (2) **character traits** (virtue ethics). It appears that motivation of relief workers becomes the fundamental issue when talking about the role of moral theory in humanitarian aid assistance.

However, the emergence of virtue ethics in the sphere of contemporary moral discourse has raised some opposing voices challenging dispositional understanding of human behaviour. Serious opponents against the claims of virtue ethics included G. Harman (2009), J. Doris (2002), P. Vranas 2005), who argued that virtue ethics does not contribute anything meaningful to the empirical field of research. In their opinion, experiments conducted by empirical psychologists confirmed that human actions are primarily determined not by traits or character dispositions, but rather by situational factors. This concept has found strong support in the theory of situationism. According to the situationists, there is no such thing as moral character or its commonly understood global personal features that can be manifested in a constant, coherent, and integrated way in the actions of a moral agent. They believed that people generally act in variable and inconsistent ways, from case to case, depending on circumstances and situations brought by fate. Yet, the situationists do not have sufficiently convincing data against the claims of moral psychologists who emphasise the importance of inner human dispositions as motivational factors. Most of the data they refer to come from experiments undertaken in small and non-representative groups. Moreover, attention should be paid to one more factor here – the question of contextuality in the theory of virtue ethics. At present, dispositionists (virtue ethicists or moral psychologists) in their claims avoid constructing ethical theories based on the model of modern science in which a variety of different conditions are to be met, such as formality, rational decisions making procedures, answering moral dilemmas etc. Contextualism in that sense does not mean complete freedom of action or passive submission to situations. Moral agents in fact are aware that many external factors can influence directly one's course of action, but cannot prevent them from

pursuing moral goals at the same time, e.g. kindness, honesty, readiness to help, justice, faithfulness etc. (Szutta, 2017, pp. 179-211).

However, the claims of virtue ethicists have met with opposition from mid-twentieth century advocates of utilitarianism and deontology, who put strong emphasis on the importance of action, rather than on the role of the subjective aspect in morality; they were more focused on formulating universal principles and decision-making procedures. Utilitarianism as a normative theory recommended the actions that maximise happiness and well-being for the largest possible number of people, while deontology stressed the principle of universality, i.e. a set of many deontic rigors. These principles could constitute simple criteria for a moral evaluation which would allow the agent to distinguish the right action from the wrong moral behaviour. Both theories also formulate decision-making procedures in order to determine what the agent ought to do in certain circumstances. This is an ideal theoretical platform for the currently formulated procedures that regulate people's behaviour in various areas of life, especially in the professional sphere (Szutta, 2017, pp. 38-53). Contrary to both of those approaches, virtue ethics puts not only a strong emphasis on the motivation of action, but also suggests that the evaluation of moral motivation should take special account of the agent's thoughts, desires, feelings etc. (Tiberius, 2014, p. 108). Therefore, recent discussions between supporters of virtue ethics and defenders of utilitarianism and deontology resulted in a convergence of both approaches – at least in some aspects.

By integrating the notion of virtue with the motivation of action one might attempt to explore the role of individual characteristics (values) in promoting Corporate Social Responsibility. This becomes particularly visible in discussions around the idea of Socially Responsible Behaviour (SRB). Broadly speaking, SRB is defined as an ethical framework where individual decisions and actions taken in organizations result beneficiary to society at large. The identity or culture that organization represents are often the outcomes of individual decisions and shared values of leaders, managers or employees (Abizadeh, 2002). Therefore, while exploring the virtuous perspective related to an individual's socially responsible behaviour, four suggestions should be considered: (1) SRB assumes that notions of volition, or willingness, are essential in activities that benefit society – the moral agent contributes willingly the best of him/herself in order to assist the best in community; (2) SRB promotes intrinsic motivation – the source of motivation is not only something that was done well, and/or as self-esteem understood in the sense of competence, power or control, but rather as self-worth established on the grounds of virtue or moral worth; (3) SRB assumes that moral considerations are integrated with the agent's everyday decisions and actions; (4) SRB points at the importance of *practical wisdom* (the Aristotelian concept of *phronesis*) in order to act responsibly in specific situations – this is evident shift from universal rules or utilitarian approaches to a particular course of moral action (Schneider et al., 2004, pp. 13-14).

Such a perspective of virtue ethics appears to be a very important foundation as a motivational force for relief workers, especially when they feel they ought to intervene with humanitarian aid where the lack of normality is the only point of reference. In trying to find out how a virtuous approach can challenge ethical thinking in relief work, it is worth noting that virtue ethics is broadly focused on human **moral excellence** that is marked by such characteristics as courageousness, temperance, prudence, fairness. The idea of moral excellence plays a significant role in regard to inspiring both oneself, as well as others (Lenka and Kar, 2021, p. 205). In responding to crises created by wars or disasters, the **virtue of courage** seems to be one of the crucial values. Courage or fortitude makes people persist in conditions where their natural abilities and skills become too weak for overcoming difficult situations, a good example of which was provided by Aristotle. In his Nicomachean Ethics he wrote: "The brave man is as dauntless as a man can be. Therefore, while he will fear even the things that are not beyond human strength, he will face them as he ought and as reason directs" (Aristotle, 1999, III. 1115b, 10, p. 50). **Temperance as virtue** in its modern use is often described as moderation or voluntary self-restraint (Green, 2011, p. 769). Under certain conditions, relief workers have to know how to keep in balance their pursuits and goals. Temperance, moderation, self-discipline, and self-

-control, are the traits which play an indispensable role for making reasonable decisions in the circumstances lacking normality. **Prudence** is a virtue which helps people to distinguish their true good in all given circumstances, and what proper means are to be chosen to achieve the goal. In relation to humanitarian assistance, prudence is a special wisdom that provides proper understanding and answers how to respond to the suffering of others. This relates directly to the **virtue of humanity**. Humanity is a form of altruism with a special focus on helping and being compassionate with those in need (Lofquist, 2020, p. 208). **Justice** as a virtue should be a constant and perpetual disposition to render everyone's due. Such a virtue should be an indispensable character trait of relief workers. They always have to be guided on the basis of need alone, giving priority to the most urgent crises of wars and disasters, and never making choices based upon distinctions relating to nationality, race, gender, religious beliefs, social class or political orientation.

In recent years, the study of virtues has attracted a growing interest in research related to organizational aspects of management. In those studies there exists a mutual agreement that virtues are learnt best from the experience of observing others acting as examples of a profound and real excellence of character (Momberg, 2000, p. 675). According to Aristotle a person that is skilled at the experience of virtue becomes a **role model** for the other students of virtue (Aristotle, 2013, 1148b, 2, p. 13). The idea of a virtuous agent as a role model is widely recognised in many training programmes focused on such issues as the moral perception, moral imagination, emotional responses, moral judgements, and practical know-how that constitutes virtuous character etc. Many role models can be found in a variety of sources, e.g. biographies, films, tales, books etc. Assimilating virtuous role models provides an illustration of how one person can follow the action of others in such an inspirational way that the follower wants to reproduce their behaviour repeatedly. There are many training programmes used by different contemporary professional organizations that are intentionally thought to encourage worker's motivation in novel behaviour and inspire reaching ambitious goals (Oakley and Cocking, 2001). In the context of humanitarian aid, one can notice that relief work is well suited both for the analyses of various moral role models as well as different ethical standards.

5. Conclusion

Since the signing of the first Geneva Convention and the foundation of the RCRC movement in 1864, a large range of organizations has been established, yet the extent to which they identify with the basic principles varies, with the core values applying to the motivation of action regarding humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence. These have been found, among others, in Resolution 46/182 of the United Nations on the response to humanitarian crises in 1991, the NGO Code of Conduct from 1994, the Preamble of the Core Humanitarian Standards from 2014, and the key documents of the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016.

With the identity of humanitarianism, moral perspective seems to be fundamental in the study of relief work management. Humanitarian assistance is not axiologically neutral, it should be placed above any particular private or political interests, strongly focused on saving lives and eliminating human suffering. The virtue approach as a normative perspective plays a significant role in the management of the humanitarian aid sector because it provides useful solutions on how to cope with morally difficult situations. In relief aid training programmes it is important to remember that values are culturally specific, but virtues are universally valued by all cultures. Virtues as moral dispositions enable agents to pursue their ideals they adopted. Honesty, courage, compassion, generosity, fidelity, integrity, fairness, self-control, and prudence are the examples of virtues. A virtue perspective eliminates the evaluative understanding of standards, putting a strong emphasis on continual development of moral excellence. In fact virtue ethics does not provide simple answers to difficult situations, but supports inner motivation which could help a relief worker to attain sufficiently his/her stable moral character in order to act appropriately in various morally difficult situations.

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Etyka cnoty a zarządzanie kulturą organizacyjną w pomocy humanitarnej

Streszczenie

Cel: Głównym celem artykułu jest ukazanie istoty etyki cnót w zarządzaniu kulturą organizacyjną w działalności humanitarnej.
Metodyka: Metoda, którą zastosowano w przeprowadzonych badaniach, jest zasadniczo skoncentrowana na analizie dostępnej literatury.
Wyniki: Przedstawione badania sugerują, iż pracownicy humanitarni, odwołujący się do zasad etyki cnót, kierują się normami, które znacznie wykraczają poza formalne obowiązki kodeksowe lub skuteczność działania.
Implikacje i rekomendacje: Etyka cnót, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem roli aspektów motywacyjnych, powinna być częściej brana pod uwagę w analizach dotyczących zarządzania kulturą organizacyjną działalności humanitarnej.
Oryginalność/wartość: Aspekty motywacyjne stają się fundamentalne dla pracowników niosących pomoc humanitarną, szczególnie w sytuacjach, w których normalność oznacza brak normalności.

Słowa kluczowe: etyka cnoty, humanitaryzm, zarządzanie, wartości, moralna doskonałość