TONY VAUX

'It is refreshing to see an aid insider approaching these problems with honesty and moral courage'

TIMES LITERARY SUPPLEMENT

The Selfish Altruist

RELIEF WORK IN FAMINE AND WAR

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Relief Work in Famine and War

Tony Vaux

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Foreword

In this book Tony Vaux speaks with disarming honesty about the dilemmas – personal and institutional – of 'aid management' in humanitarian emergencies. The guiding principle he proposes in dealing with these dilemmas is 'humanity', interpreted as 'concern for the person in need'.

The term 'humanity' is perhaps a trifle ironic, since humankind is unlikely to strike an independent observer (say a visiting alien) as a paragon of concern for human needs. More likely, it would appear as a species of exceptional brutality and cruelty. This feature is most evident in the history of war, which has no parallel among other species. During the last 100 years alone, more than 250 wars have been fought, with at least 100 million casualties. In contrast, war is virtually unknown in the animal world, notwithstanding metaphors such as 'fighting like cats and dogs'. One has to look far along the biological scale, for example among particular types of ants, to find anything resembling war among non-human species.

Nevertheless, looking to the future, there is some hope that humankind will learn to practice the values commonly associated with the term 'humanity'. Humanitarian work is an important part of this learning process. As this book shows, however, humanitarian work is fraught with dangers and dilemmas.

To propose 'concern for the person in need' as a guiding principle in addressing these dilemmas may not seem adequate. Indeed, it is easy to think of situations where this principle would offer insufficient guidance on its own. Consider, for instance, the predicament of aid agencies in Sudan in the 1980s where, as Tony Vaux observes, 'providing a few sacks of food was virtually the same as providing a Kalashnikov rifle [as] they could be exchanged for each other within hours of delivery'. Concern alone does not solve this dilemma. Similarly, concern alone does not tell us how to prioritize relief programmes in famine situations where resources are too short to ensure everyone's survival.

Yet, the more one becomes absorbed in this riveting book, the more one realizes that 'concern for the person in need' does have a sharp edge as a principle of humanitarian action. The reason for this is that, contrary to popular perception, humanitarian action is often compromised, or even corrupted, by very different motives. We are not talking here of humanitarian action on the part of national governments, which is quite often a thinly-veiled instrument for the pursuit of commercial, strategic and other interests. What Tony Vaux points out is that even the actions of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) of impeccable repute, such as Oxfam, are often influenced by motives and emotions far removed from humanitarian concern. These may include ideological prejudice, personal feuds or ambitions, institutional rivalries, fundraising imperatives, the intoxication of power and even racism.

It is disturbing, for instance, to read that 'the desire to help so easily becomes the desire for power'. Yet the author's account of humanitarian work in war-torn Mozambique provides telling illustrations of this elementary truth. As he takes us on his lifelong journey from emergency to emergency (in Sudan, Afghanistan, Rwanda, Kosovo, Azerbaijan, Somalia and elsewhere), many 'humanitarian dilemmas' come alive with a force that no amount of academic analysis can convey.

These revelations are bound to disturb those who are used to the fundraising-poster image of Oxfam and other humanitarian agencies as benign, concern-driven enterprises. Yet they are necessary to bring about greater accountability in this field. It is often said that humanitarian agencies should be more accountable to the people or communities they are helping. But the ground-reality is that the latter typically have no power whatsoever over the former, making it very hard to foster this kind of accountability. In practice, humanitarian agencies are accountable primarily to the donors, who hold the purse strings. In this situation, it is important to promote a better understanding of the dilemmas – and political economy – of humanitarian intervention among donors (and this includes the general public). That, to my mind, is one of the chief contributions of this book.

The book can also be read as a useful rejoinder to extremist critiques of humanitarian agencies. Exposing the 'disaster relief industry', as it is sometimes called, goes down quite well with sensation-hungry readers, and a little bit of sensation is perhaps necessary to draw attention to the issues involved. But this adversarial approach does not do justice to the complexities of humanitarian work, and also carries a danger of strengthening isolationist tendencies in Western countries. It is to

Tony Vaux's credit that he has presented his own critique in a constructive spirit.

I cannot resist mentioning a few specific themes of the book that have a strong personal resonance. One of them is the pervasive role of propaganda in contemporary Western societies, particularly when it comes to war situations. Based on my own experiences in Iraq in 1990–1992, I am not surprised to read Tony Vaux's impression of Bosnia in 1993: 'The difference between what the European public believes and what happens on the ground is extraordinary.' The same could be said, I am sure, of most of the other emergencies discussed in this book.

On a more positive note, the book has strengthened my conviction that the expansion of democracy (not only in authoritarian countries, but also in those that are perceived today as 'democratic') is, ultimately, the most effective way of defeating the forces of militarism in the contemporary world. It is often argued that people 'enjoy fighting', but this claim is at odds with wide-ranging personal testimonies from war zones across the world. As Tony Vaux wrote in Azerbaijan in 1993: 'When asked what were their priority needs, people invariably replied: "Stop the war. Stop the war".' In a community of genuinely democratic societies, this popular revulsion against war is likely to receive a much stronger hearing than it does today.

Finally, many stories and anecdotes in this book suggest that 'humanity' is a universal value. This, again, reminds me of the solidarity and compassion I have witnessed among disaster-stricken people in many different places, from the squats of London to Iraqi homes and Kashmiri villages. As I write these lines, a wave of solidarity for earthquake victims in Gujarat is sweeping across India and beyond – another demonstration of the pervasive role of 'concern for others' in social life. Of course, human beings are also capable of extreme selfishness and cruelty, as other stories and anecdotes in this book indeed illustrate. But there is hope in the fact that compassion and concern can flourish in very diverse environments, including the most trying. In this hope, perhaps, lies the answer to Tony Vaux's poignant question, 'how can an aid worker be happy?'

Tony Vaux has another reason to feel happy, namely that at the end of this arduous (even harrowing) journey he has been able to share his thoughts with the public in this highly enlightening book. That, too, is a contribution to the cause of 'humanity'.

Jean Drèze
Delhi School of Economics

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Underpinning this book are the thoughts of a remarkable group of academics (all of whom I worked with while at Oxfam): Alex de Waal, Mark Duffield, David Keen, Nick Leader and Hugo Slim. Throughout the book I find Amartya Sen's thoughts like a ghost at my elbow, starting with his breathtaking analysis of famine and leading on to the concept of development as freedom, which I have turned to in my search for an alternative to metaphysics in Chapter 9, where there are also strong traces of the influence of Richard Rorty.

Rather than clutter the text, I follow the lead given by Michael Ignatieff in *The Warrior's Honor* and offer a descriptive guide to the sources at the end of the book, rather than exact footnotes and references. This gives the opportunity to acknowledge influences even where there are no direct references or quotations. Anyone wanting exact citations can contact me by email at vauxt@aol.com.

Among personal friends who have helped and encouraged me I would like to equally thank Douglas Saltmarshe. This book would have foundered in confusion without the wise guidance of David Turton of the Refugee Studies Centre at the University of Oxford. For no good reason, he always believed that I had something to say, and made me believe so too.

Finally, I would like to thank the Earthscan team. Jonathan Sinclair Wilson for showing confidence and encouragement when there was little to justify it, Pascale Mettam and Martha Fumagalli for enthusiasm in the production process and Akan Leander for patience with my revisions and brilliance in reading my handwriting.

There are others who deserve thanks, too close to me or too numerous to mention.

List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

A-FOR	Albania-Force: NATO in Albania
AIDS	acquired immune deficiency syndrome
AGRICOM	Mozambique's state agricultural marketing company
CAP	Common Agricultural Policy
CDR	Coalition for the Defence of the Republic (Rwanda)
DPCCN	Departmento de Prevencao e Controlo das Calamidades Naturais (Department for the Prevention and Control of Natural Calamities)
DFID	Department for International Development (UK)
ECU	European Commission currency
EEC	European Economic Community
EU	European Union
FRELIMO	Frente para Liberacao de Mocambique (Mozambique Liberation Front)
GNP	gross national product
HDI	Human Development Index (UN)
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IMF	International Monetary Fund
KLA	Kosovo Liberation Army
MSF	Médecins Sans Frontières
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGO	non-governmental organization
ODI	Overseas Development Institute
PTSD	post-traumatic stress disorder
RAF	Royal Air Force
RENAMO	Resistencia Nacional de Mocambique (Mozambique National Resistance)
RPF	Rwanda Patriotic Front
RRC	Relief and Rehabilitation Commission
SABC	South African Broadcasting Company
SCF	Save the Children Fund

SPLA	Sudan Peoples' Liberation Army
TPLF	Tigrayan People's Liberation Front
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	UN High Commission for Refugees
UNITAF	UN Task Force (Somalia)
UNPROFOR	UN Protection Force (Bosina)
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
3WE	Third World and Environment Broadcasting Project
WFP	UN World Food Programme

Introduction

What are our feelings when we see the victims of famine and war: the starving child, the distraught mother, the old person whose way of life has been destroyed?

We experience not just one feeling, nor purely a sense of altruistic concern, but other feelings of which we would rather not be conscious. Maybe a little smugness because the same thing has not happened to us. Perhaps even a sense of superiority, crediting ourselves with cleverness because we have protected ourselves against such terrible misery. Such feelings give a pleasant sense of self-confidence and we feel even better as we roll out our prescriptions for solving the world's problems.

Having made a donation to charity or written to an MP, the viewer turns to other issues, while the aid worker is left with the task of converting public response into practical action. Yet the same mixture of motives and feelings persists. A feeling that 'I have been clever and they have been stupid' may convert itself into a tendency to treat people as if they have no worth or ability at all. It reinforces helplessness and makes those who are being helped feel all the more inferior and dependent. The victims of terrible tragedy, surrounded with loss and bereavement, are treated simply as bodies to be fed, nuisances in the global economy. They are not people worthy of concern – people whose thoughts and lives are valued in themselves. Disaster is compounded by a sense of being devalued. The body suffers physical want, while the mind suffers from a sense of worthlessness.

Most aid workers have learned to recognize this danger and avoid the most extreme behaviour. But the problem of selfishness still creeps in, perhaps in more subtle ways. Altruism is a difficult feeling to maintain and a shaky concept in a postmodern world, without given beliefs and morality. In any case, our natural tendency is to think of ourselves first and to bring our own perceptions, prejudices and principles into our expression of concern for other people. We feel that because they are powerless we have the right to impose, and enjoy, our own power.

One purpose of this book is to bring these issues into the open and to explore them dispassionately. For aid workers, there is plenty of scope to develop our own ideologies, to choose whom to help and whom to ignore, to enjoy a sense of power and to overlook the capacity of those we help. We may project our own sense of victimization onto those we are supposed to help and may fight our battles through their suffering. We boost our own confidence by being optimistic. But if we protect ourselves by simply believing that all humans are 'good', we cannot cope with what we then have to call 'evil' when we find it in ethnic cleansing and genocide. We try to separate ourselves from our altruism but our altruistic concern is an expression of our self and of our feelings.

For most of us there are no religious or social norms that fix our standard of response. We struggle with our selfishness, trying to find something outside to guide our response. It is not easy to have few moral values and plenty of wealth, relative to the rest of the world. We are free to choose whether to feel concern for another person or not. No one tells us what to think or to do. We are alone with ourselves and an aged concept of responsibility.

Personally, when confronted by someone begging, I rely on my feelings to decide whether and how much to give. The decision reflects my mood at that moment. I have found no rational way of doing otherwise. But I remain suspicious of my mood. If there were 1000 beggars and they all faced starvation, I would have to analyse my feelings.

This book is about the paradox of altruism as an expression of the self, and the consequences in humanitarian aid. It argues that altruism is not something we choose as an alternative to selfishness but a value that we aspire towards – an escape from the more selfish influences of the gene and the past. We have to learn how to understand and then make a proper place for ourselves, realizing that it is the same 'self' which makes the choice. I call 'concern for the person in need' the principle of humanity. It is not a simple concept. It is as complex as the person for whom we feel concern, and includes their entire social, economic and political context. To do justice to our concern we have to know everything, and because we cannot do this, altruism is an aspiration, not a fact.

The book also looks at the issues in a linear or historical perspective. It is about the shift in responsibility for humanitarian response from private aid agencies, which enjoyed their heyday during the Cold

War, towards Western governments which, free from the constraint of superpower conflict, are now much more active and influential in providing emergency relief and in searching for solutions to poverty and conflict. The problem in the past may have been the idiosyncrasy of aid agencies and their personnel. But what happens when the initiative switches to government? And what, finally, are the challenges facing humanitarianism today?

The book deals with assumptions and cultural norms. I will try to describe hidden biases and perceptions in the process of aid work, including my own. To some extent, these hidden biases refer to a specific set of people. But although I may often speak as a British person talking about British aid workers (usually working for a specific agency, namely Oxfam) and addressing a British public, I hope that other readers may be able to interpret what I am saying according to their own culture and set of assumptions. Indeed, the contrast may throw light on their own circumstances. This book is a kind of postmodern history in which the personal viewpoint interacts with the issues under discussion. I form my perceptions from the issues I deal with. Because there is no fixed morality that can be applied globally, this is inevitable when examining global issues; but it is especially appropriate today as we try to form new concepts about what people are and how they are affected by the principles of science, the spread of technology and the global economy. We are groping for a global culture to match our global economy, global science and global technology. The issue of care for others is absolutely fundamental to that culture. From the perspective of the reader, the question might be: 'Who am I today?'

* * *

As a preliminary question, we need to ask whether there is any agreed moral basis for modern humanitarianism? There may be little guidance (for most of us) from established religion and there is also a diminishing sense of fixed public morality. Old concepts of 'duty' and 'social responsibility', which perhaps reached their height (in the UK, at least) during World War II, have been deeply eroded. The socialist ideology of the 1960s and 1970s no longer offers significant numbers of people a philosophical basis for their relationship with the world's poor and suffering peoples.

Is there guidance from within the humanitarian tradition? Since the Crimean war, the issue has been dominated by the question (of concern to generals as much as to humanitarians) of how to limit the

effects of war to what is publicly acceptable. In the 19th century, and more famously during World War I, the levels of human destruction became so great that governments and military leaders feared mutiny and rebellion, and could not continue without making some concessions to the needs of their soldiers. After World War II, the effects of 'total war', including the mass aerial bombardment of cities, threatened to make civilians reject war as a solution to any political problem. Through a series of Geneva conventions and other agreements, the practice of war has just kept ahead of public acceptability.

The process was based on making a distinction between combatants and non-combatants and on agreements between consenting governments representing nation states (the 'high contracting parties' to the conventions). Wounded soldiers earned the right, in so far as the conventions were applied, to be treated as non-combatants. Methods of war that target civilians have been prohibited. But the process has begun to stall because combatants and non-combatants cannot be distinguished from each other in the wars typical of the post-colonial, post-Cold War era. Pressures that had been held in check by outside forces are now unravelling against a context of rapid global change. These wars are not between states or even between recognizable military entities, and they rarely have a recognizable objective of peace; they are chronic wars of political control, of marginalization and of access to resources.

The organization entrusted with upholding international humanitarian law is the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), which has recently tried hard to provide an ideological framework for humanitarianism, realizing that a chaotic situation will undermine even the most deeply held principles, such as the right to give assistance to those in need. For most of the last century the principles were considered self-evident; but in the 1960s the ICRC identified seven underlying principles: humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, universality, voluntary service and unity. Nevertheless, these have failed to make much impact on the ever-increasing numbers and ideologies of private aid agencies. One problem is that they do not clearly differentiate between important principles, such as 'humanity' on one hand, and those such as 'voluntary service' on the other, which appear relatively trivial. In any case, actions cannot be guided simultaneously by seven different principles.

Instead of simplifying the principles and exploring more fundamental values, the tendency in the last two decades has been to expand

and elaborate the principles, making them ever more pragmatic. In the late 1980s, several aid agencies (I admit that I was one of those involved in the drafting) worked together to produce the Red Cross Code of Conduct which listed 10 practical principles and 12 recommendations. In the 1990s, the Sphere Project laid down hundreds of professional standards for humanitarian responses. There are several other influential codes that aid agencies can sign up to if they wish such as the 'Providence Principles' drafted in the USA and individual sets of rules for other countries, among them Sudan and Liberia. But all of this obscures the fundamental question: what is humanitarianism? With the end of the Cold War, when Western governments began flexing their political muscle, it has become increasingly important to decide what is fundamental and what is peripheral. Or to put it another way, what are values and what are simply working mechanisms.

What I argue in this book is that the principle of 'humanity' represents the fundamental moral value of humanitarianism. It takes precedence over all others.

What does it mean? I define the principle of humanity as 'concern for the person in need'. Impartiality is an essential quality of humanity because it means that we do not distinguish between persons. In other words, we are fair. The experience described in this book demonstrates that we need to pare away personal prejudice and preconception in order to reach a comprehensive understanding of 'the person in need'. Otherwise, for the serious altruist at least, there can be no real concern, only a superficial and selfish relationship. This concern is an immensely demanding concept, requiring constant self-questioning, good communication and relentless analysis.

In my view, the other Red Cross principles, with the exception of impartiality are negotiable and must always allow for exceptions. For example, the objective of the principle of humanity is not served by remaining 'neutral' in relation to genocide (as the ICRC now acknowledges in the case of the Holocaust). I do not think it is necessarily true that voluntary action is preferable to the intervention of governments. Voluntary action has its place; so too does paid and accountable political action. The new world order in which governments now operate may be better at exerting greater political power upon humanitarian issues. What I have learned is that, in terms of helping people, all the wisdom of principles, codes and standards is superseded by the simple concept of humanity, applied impartially and to the best of

our ability. Governments will struggle to come to terms with this, just as aid agencies have done.

* * *

The fact that Western governments are now in the ascendant over voluntary aid agencies became clearer to me during 1993–1999 when I was regional manager of Oxfam's programmes in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union – especially when the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) intervened in Kosovo. NATO's intervention was performed in the name of humanitarianism, but was so obviously bound up in political issues and the personal interests of politicians that I felt the meaning of the word desperately needed to be clarified. If voluntary agencies are to hand over the torch of leadership to governments, let us at least take stock of what we have learned during the Cold War, and of our own failures and successes.

I realized that I had not yet thought through the issues because I had not needed to and had never been challenged. That in itself was a chilling revelation. Did no one actually care enough about humanitarian work to ask such questions? Was it all a conspiracy of silence with the aim of keeping the poor out of the minds and hearts of Western people who wanted to get on with their own lives? Suddenly I saw it all in a new light.

I was also alarmed that I too had been swept along on an uncontrollable tide created by NATO and the leading politicians of NATO states. It was as if I had suddenly become a part of NATO's agenda. Profound changes in Oxfam's own ways of working at the same time also demanded my attention. Oxfam was being reborn as a new organization; it was more business oriented, corporate and pragmatic than before. Was this good or bad? The 'old Oxfam' in which I had worked for over 25 years was being replaced and modernized. What was 'new Oxfam'? Was all this good or bad?

This book is the outcome of a year of catharsis and reflection at the Refugee Study Programme (later renamed the Refugee Study Centre) at Oxford University, under the kindly and encouraging guidance of David Turton. I asked myself what was the fundamental principle that had guided my better actions over the course of the years. I thought as deeply as I could about the ten years from 1984 when I had been Oxfam's emergencies coordinator, assessing humanitarian crises and organizing responses in conjunction with colleagues in field offices and in the Oxford headquarters, where I was based. I tried to make

sense of it by looking back at old records and my own reports. I read some of what others had written, especially those academics who had themselves been engaged with Oxfam and had similarly stepped back to think about what they had experienced. I began to assemble my most striking memories of Ethiopia, Sudan, Mozambique, Afghanistan, Somalia and the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. All of these recollections have been reworked and now form the chapters of this book.

I felt I could not ignore what had happened in Rwanda in 1994, the greatest and most shameful cataclysm of humanitarianism. I was not directly involved, fortunately, because I had already shifted responsibility and was dealing with Bosnia where – after three years of detachment by the West – ethnic cleansing had been stopped. In Rwanda, however, ethnic cleansing proceeded to the direst of all human consequences: genocide – the attempt to obliterate an entire race of people. Many of my colleagues working in Rwanda said they had lost faith in humanity and in humanitarian work. I felt an obligation to think myself into that event and to explore the capacity of the imagination to explain the unexplainable. The result is unsatisfactory, but my point is that it is better to try than to pretend it does not exist.

It is selfish not to think deeply about the person in need. It is selfish just to feed a few children and save their lives without knowing what else is happening, what others are doing, what happened in the past and what will happen in the future. In order to understand the person in need and his or her full social, economic and political context, we need to obliterate our own self. It is not a pleasant process because we have to question ourselves relentlessly. The advantage is that we will have a better chance of making the right decisions. If we allow ourselves to intrude on that judgement, we will believe that we know the answers before we really do, and mistakes will be made. Humanitarianism needs to move towards pure altruism. This applies to aid workers in voluntary agencies as well as to those in government who are now assuming greater power. The issue is about 'minimizing' the self and increasing awareness of the 'other'.

Humanity does not mean concern for physical well being only. Aid that simply provides calories for the stomach and water for the throat is a reduction of people to things. How can there be human concern for such a mean objective? 'Concern for the person' entails concern for the whole being, including a person's state of mind, sense of loss and the devaluation of life. The suffering of the body and the mind cannot be

distinguished from each other. It is concern for every aspect of a person including their loss of relatives and way of life, their disability, their love of children, their past and their future. Humanitarian concern is a demanding concept because it has no limit. It involves the aid worker infinitely in deeper and deeper understanding, and it is never satisfied. The aid worker constantly balances the physical and the emotional and can never reach a sense of perfect fulfilment. The aid worker is condemned to live with dissatisfaction and uneasiness.

One reason for this is that aid workers are not questioned generally by society at large and have to make up the questions for themselves. It would be better if people who saw others starve on TV and consequently sent in a donation were much more demanding about what should happen. The media generally allow aid agencies to get away with any sort of response on the premise that public confidence should not be undermined by criticism. But this simply allows for mistakes and sloppy thinking. The problem is not really the lack of reflection by aid workers, but the lack of genuine interest by the public. It is too convenient to just 'trust' the aid agency. But in cases where thousands of people are dying, is that really enough?

The great fault of aid agencies in the last 20 years has been the lack of introspection, or rather the inability to deal seriously with situations. This has allowed a superficial optimism to develop. In order to express concern for other people, we have to believe that they are good. In effect, aid agencies have preserved the concept of the 'deserving poor'. The idea is that people deserve our help because they are innocent victims. But this is not always true. And if it is not, are we supposed to withhold aid? The public response to the camps in Goma in 1995, which were full of people who had been involved in the Rwanda genocide, was exceptionally large, possibly because the public failed to appreciate that their aid was mainly going to those who caused the problem, and not to the victims themselves. But this self-deception was not possible for aid workers. The issue of helping murderers caused great stress to aid workers.

Aid workers began to wonder whether they had also become imbued with a notion of the 'deserving black'. It was hard to avoid the conclusion that aid agencies had protected African governments from criticism and allowed them to be considered part of the group that deserved humanitarian concern. Allied with the mistakes of humanitarianism is racism. Aid agency staff find it hard to accept that black people exploit each other and tell lies just as white people do, and

that greed is not the sole preserve of cigar-smoking white men who run the World Bank or are in charge of large corporations. The victims of tragedies in Africa are often the victims of African greed, of merchants and politicians who may be abetted by the West but who could have chosen to behave in other ways. Overlooking such facts is really an insult and shows no real concern for the truth about other people's lives.

A survivor of the Rwanda genocide told me that she felt insulted by Western people asking her to forgive and forget. What they mean, she said, is that they want to be able to forget their own failure and to ignore their reactions to an event that they felt unable to understand. They want to just carry on in their own way as if nothing had happened, and so, she said, 'They preach to me that I must forget also.'

There are no easy answers in this book, and certainly no recipes for simple changes that will put everything right. I am rather tired of glib pronouncements. Aid agencies are too fond of calling for minor adjustments as if proposing solutions were almost as good as achieving them. I lived in India for seven years and had to conclude that people were just as poor when I left as when I arrived. Every day as I stepped out of my house I had to walk past, and sometimes over, the bodies of poor people who might be either alive or dead. During 1984–1994 I worked as part of a huge team of aid workers, donors and celebrities on resolving famine in Ethiopia. Recently I returned to find another famine and people starving in the same way and in the same places as they did in 1984 – with the same arguments and discussions taking place about the solutions.

What have we achieved? There needs to be space and time, at least, for reflection, and yet aid managers, in my experience, do not have that time. They simply respond to a relentless sequence of events, which wears them out over time – just as I was worn out by my own experiences and inability to take charge of what was happening to me.

* * *

I am not sure whether we are born with a sense of 'concern for the person in need'. I suspect it is more important that we have the ability to sympathize with the emotions of other people; this develops as our experience of humanity widens. The difference in people's response is not necessarily a result of a 'caring nature' that some people have and others lack, but a difference of imagination – the ability to see into

another person's experience. I happen to have a strong imagination to which I largely attribute my humanitarian concern. This is not necessarily a good or bad thing. It just happens that way. I find it easy to think myself into the situation of someone in need, and can easily terrify myself by doing so. It is a powerful enough motive to have kept me in humanitarian work for nearly 30 years.

The level of imagination may be relatively fixed, but what varies over the course of time is our confidence that we can do something about our concern. Time and again I have seen hopefulness turn to despair and brilliant plans degenerate into muddled actions. But the determination never disappears, even though energy may be lacking.

The person telling this story needs a little introduction. When I came to Oxford University as a student in 1968, the 'buzz' was that the world could be a better place: more equal, more caring. Everything was going to be all right and we were going to have everything, whether we worked for it or not. We were shaking off the gloom and restrictions of the war years and the limited satisfactions of an older generation who still worried about switching off the lights and spreading the margarine a little more thinly. In our ears was the siren music of Joan Baez and Bob Dylan calling us to enjoyable protest. And to our surprise, the world told us we were good. The Beatles quietly made fun of the materialistic middle classes, and the middle classes enjoyed it, in a mildly embarrassed, suburban sort of way.

The message from the radicals was not to worry too much about silly foibles such as work and possessions. And having got to Oxford through a fierce process of competition, I felt that I could now relax. Optimism was bred into me by the combination of academic success and good company.

The ageing middle classes, still scared by the turmoil of war, were remarkably indulgent. Employers, still influenced by a touch of 1930s Woosterism, liked the idea of recruiting a young graduate who had had a fling or two, even if it was with socialism. On the streets of Oxford we met American students escaping the draft for the Vietnam war. They were escaping evil 'out there'. We were high without needing to take drugs. We were going to change the world by staying in bed. It was a great time.

But the attempt to caricature wears thin. My perspective changes as my mood changes, for there were both good and bad times, and my concepts were shaped by the impressions of friends, happiness and

state of mind. The point is that, to some extent, aid work in its heyday in the 1980s was an expression of that 1960s radicalism.

In the chapter on Ethiopia I explore how optimistic socialism, otherwise known as developmentalism, made us slow to respond to famine because we believed that poor people were so wonderful they could cope with anything. The mistake I now notice most is that we ignored the universality of the human desire for power. It was in ourselves, and in the poor, but we were only interested in people within certain limits and stereotypes.

I sometimes wonder if all idealism is a myth or a mistake. Sometimes the very notion of an ideal seems out of place in our modern world. But we cannot help trying to make order out of chaos. We have brains that have evolved to do little else, remorselessly converting visual images to meaning and experience to philosophy.

Why do we react to distress? As long as I can remember, I had a strong sensitivity towards suffering. The lingering death of a pet tortoise, decaying upwards from a maggot-infested leg, preyed on my mind as a child; and at school I was banned from blood donation after fainting at the sight of my own blood. Freud tells us that we build up our sensitivity in our formative childhood years. I cannot remember many of my early childhood experiences; but boarding school exacted a high price for A-level grades and developed my sensitivity towards suffering and violence. I form my objective opinions of the world from subjective experience.

I sometimes wonder if I became a humanitarian out of sheer pride. At Oxford a new organization had just formed called Third World First. I cannot remember how I got into it, but I do recall going from room to room collecting money to relieve starvation. I remember one scene vividly. I had fallen into a routine of jokingly saying 'I'm after your money' and expecting a polite and friendly response because it was a good cause. To my astonishment, someone told me to 'get out'. Even now I can picture my outstretched hand offering the covenant of charity which I expected the lofty young public-school man to sign. I don't remember which charity it was. All the charities were good, all the same. Practicalities were a rosy blur, and maybe that was the problem. I had assumed too much.

'Get out,' he said.

I can recall the white light falling like a slab from the window, which seemed to flatten me as he said those words. I did not know what to do. A young man of my own age, who seemed somehow older, superior,

lounging lazily with a friend, taking tea in his college rooms, was sitting higher than me, as if on a plinth – or maybe that is just a trick of memory. I hated snobbery.

The scorn in his eyes turned to disgust. My nervous optimism was suddenly converted to humiliation and anger. I was angry with myself for not being prepared, for not knowing what to do if someone did not smile. He seemed to tell me that I was simply buying a few signatures to save my own conscience. I was just as superficial and pretentious as all the rest. It was my 'road to Damascus' experience. I concluded that the issue of world poverty must be taken seriously or not touched at all. What I discovered, perhaps, was that for me the worst thing was to be called shallow and superficial. Was that pride? I ask because it is something I have often found to be a block to humanitarian aid. In Afghanistan, Oxfam staff declared that they would stop all aid programmes until the Taliban allowed women to participate in the programmes on a more or less equal basis with men. The Taliban would not give way, nor would Oxfam, and hundreds of thousands of people were affected because neither side would back down.

I hope that by exploring the way in which personal motive interacts with practical response, I will stimulate more self-awareness among aid workers. Recognizing our own internal bias enables us to suddenly see the world in a different way. In Rembrandt's portrait of the great King Belshazzar in the National Gallery in London, the king's fatty hand rests enquiringly on the flesh and luxury around him as he tries to comprehend the blinding light and the shadowy finger writing chill words on the wall. I still feel like that sometimes, almost absurdly exposed in a moment of ecstatic contemplation, with a sense of having to look at something that I do not want to see. What am I doing here? Where does the bright light come from? Can't I stay here and eat? Why the pull of the starving millions? Why humanity? Why should this obsession fall on *me*?

I learned recently and by chance that Rembrandt's portrait is not as Rembrandt intended. The way in which we see the king stare at the trailing finger spelling his doom in letters on the wall is itself a distortion. Someone in the past considered that the king was too defiant in his pose and decided to 'spin' the portrait anticlockwise so that the king appears to reel backwards from the writing on the wall. This involved cutting away triangular slices of the canvas and turning it in the frame. In Rembrandt's original, the king must have appeared to lean forward as if he wanted to drive his head into the pointing finger.

It would have been a far more disturbing painting. Man confronting God. Me declaring that I was going to have nothing to do with all these problems.

It is strange how big issues such the relationship of Belshazzar and God can be altered by a man with a pair of scissors. And for me the change was brought about by a sense of boredom and a bit of paper.

* * *

My life changed in a few seconds on a tube train in London in 1972. I was returning from work in the City during my brief spell as an international banker after leaving Oxford. My colleagues and I had been examining the prospect of making a large loan for a dam in Brazil. The room looked out directly onto the wedding-cake grandeur of the Bank of England and I kept a picture of the Lake District on my desk to keep myself sane.

We wrote a briefing for the regional manager. I never met him but imagined him as the archetypal businessman who would take the client out for lunch, and over brandy and cigars quietly offer a loan, on profitable terms, of course, before reverting to talk of the stock exchange and golf. Ironically, I became a regional manager myself many years later at Oxfam, not the bank, and found that staff viewed me in the same sort of way. I was a distant and wealthy eminence living in the lap of luxury and inclined to put on too much weight. Time holds the present as a mirror to the past and makes us learn what we have experienced all over again.

That evening, as the train darted to the suburbs between darkened walls, I watched as passengers clutched at handrails or hunched themselves over books, holding handbags and umbrellas, furling shoulders over their bodies protectively, as if each held a secret. My thoughts trailed over the map of the underground to an advert for jobs with the Brook Street Bureau. I was dressed in a pinstripe city suit, carrying *The Economist*. Bored, I opened it and saw that Oxfam wanted someone to write about world poverty. In a flash I realized that it was the chance to get serious. I applied for the job thinking that it was better to work as a packer in Oxfam than to be the most exalted manager in the City. I seem to remember that I read Matthew Arnold's poem the 'Scholar Gypsy' to reinforce my decision to give up the prospect of a conventional life. I was 22.

My boss asked me to write a two-page summary of world statistics on poverty and then tore apart what I wrote. It was not the cosy

friendliness I had expected. The exacting boss treated poverty seriously. It was a good lesson; good intentions are not enough.

* * *

This book may seem like a book about Oxfam because I have always worked with Oxfam (until this year at least), and it may be useful to indicate what sort of bias that may create.

Certainly, Oxfam brings its own set of expectations to the analysis. It still surprises me that Oxfam was founded as a response to problems in Greece and the Greek islands, where today people go for their holidays. During World War II, German-occupied Greece suffered a famine as terrible as the one in Ethiopia in 1984. In the winter of 1941, 2000 Greek children died every day and the final death toll is estimated to have been around a quarter of a million. The cause was an Allied blockade intended to weaken the Germans. Many people in Britain were horrified and protested to the government. There was a special resonance with classical scholars, one of the most prominent being Gilbert Murray in Oxford who became, in effect, the founder of Oxfam. A national famine relief committee was established to focus attention on the famine, and subgroups were subsequently formed in several cities, including Oxford, with Murray taking the lead.

For many months Prime Minister Winston Churchill held firmly to the view that winning the war was more important than anything else, including the death of the Greeks. The arguments in the House of Commons were eloquent and covered most of the moral issues which humanitarians still debate today. It set a standard for Oxfam of always being ready to challenge the government when it put political interests above humanitarian ones. That sharp political edge remains just as relevant today as aid agencies are challenged by the increasing involvement of government in emergency relief.

In this case, the Allies relented and allowed food to enter the famine areas. The Oxford Committee for Famine Relief (which became Oxfam) sent food and by a series of chances (connected with the determination and commitment of certain individuals) became the only committee to survive long after the war. The founders worked passionately until they had created an international aid agency, and ultimately the largest international charity in Britain.

During the 1950s, Oxfam was a tiny organization running a single second-hand shop in Oxford, where it gathered clothes and money to send to an office in Vienna. The focus was helping refugees after the