

Jessica Negin
Reading Reflection 4

The text “Cross Cultural Ethics” is quite lengthy, so I will focus on a few things that stood out to me. One line that I noted in the second paragraph states “Some philosophers believe a child is born with a natural predisposition to moral behavior.” As applied to cross cultural ethics, this idea reminds me of “The Damned Human Race,” an essay by Mark Twain. Therein, he posits that humans are evil by nature as we are the only species able to distinguish good from evil and still choose to do evil things; this is entirely at odds with the concept of intrinsic morality.

One example of Mark Twain’s perspective is humanitarian intervention and the politics involved in its enactment. Because cross cultural ethics are incredibly important when discussing international humanitarian intervention, this issue provides a good basis for comparative discussion. Though they are, by nature, not supposed to be, humanitarian interventions are highly political. This stems from the means by which NGOs acquire funding. Whether receiving capital from governments or people, there are expected results tied to those donations. Governments will usually push for a certain agenda, subtly couching this in rhetoric that obscures their true motives. And citizen donors will expect to see very public results in the crises they provide funds for. Most will not understand the complexity of humanitarian efforts and will focus in on a few key areas, feeling that their money should go towards this and nothing else. What happens behind the scenes because of this pressure politicizes the humanitarian actions taken by the organizations working there. It creates competition for certain high-publicity tasks, and this can leave other important tasks unaccounted for.

The reason this is pertinent when discussing cross-cultural ethics as well as innate morality is that humanitarian intervention is usually perceived as inherently “good.” They are also generally understood to be undertaken with the goal of helping people neutrally and without discrimination. Never mind that neutrality in international issues is impossible from a cross-cultural perspective. And never mind that due to the pressures explained above, humanitarian agencies such as the World Food Program (WFP) have willingly and consciously colluded with corrupt forces to facilitate their machinations.

In a paper titled “Against Humanitarian Impunity: Rethinking Responsibility for Displacement and Disaster in Northern Uganda,” Adam Branch writes about how the WFP had the option to aid Acholi people (who have been interned by the Ugandan government) without prolonging their internment, yet did the exact opposite by providing aid while working with the

Ugandan government. This aid was directly sought by the Ugandan government to keep the involuntary internment program alive. This program forces Acholi people to live in squalid conditions, away from their lands and homes. As another part of this program, resources are withheld from certain camps unless the people interned there agree to vote for specific political candidates. Furthermore, camp commanders are exclusively chosen based on their loyalty to the Ugandan government. The totalitarian hold the Ugandan government has on the Acholi people is something the WFP has been complicit in for years. These camps would not be able to continue running without the aid provided by the WFP. People are dying because of this “humanitarian” intervention, and that is a form of violence.

As Twain wrote in his essay, the WFP knowingly chose evil; they had the opportunity to help people and do some actual good, but instead propagated an evil they were aware of. Their own writings have indicated as much, and their statements have since admitted that they did not have to take the course of action they did. On page 3 of “Cross Cultural Ethics” Jerry Spoor writes “There are a variety of sensitive subjects that can be used to reveal our particular cultural preferences and human nature.” What do the WFP’s actions say about the parties involved? The UN sanctioned all of this, so while their role is to act in the best interest of every nation with complete neutrality, how can they be trusted to do this? This brings up another interesting quote from Jerry Spoor’s paper. “While absolute values seem distant there are universally held convictions that seem to be prevalent. Most people espouse the need to be mutually supportive and loyal to their fellow members of the group. They decry violence, betrayal and deceit practiced on members of the group. People demand a form of justice that distinguishes between right and wrong with respect to rules they understand within their group. Unfortunately they probably do not understand other groups.” With all of this in mind, how is an organization like the UN able to operate without causing international crises? The answer is, they can’t. And the complexity of all of this is exactly the kind of issue Jerry Spoor attempts to shed light on in his paper.

Humanitarian intervention undertaken by governments themselves are even more convoluted and problematic. These are often interventions that are violent, create humanitarian crises, and sustain systems of social injustice. The United States government has, on multiple occasions, used “humanitarian intervention” as a cover for NATO expansion, which is a glaringly obvious grab for power. Furthermore, in cases such as the “humanitarian intervention” in Afghanistan -- the supposed goal of which was to eliminate terror -- the United States instead perpetrated the very thing they were fighting, resulting in nearly 10,000 civilian casualties. This

is a perfect example of this concept: “Another predisposition to behavior would be the warring nature of humans and also our tendency to take sides. This predisposition might not be based on morality but it can be used by leaders as a control mechanism under the guise of morality.” (Spoor, Pg. 11)

I could continue writing about “Cross Cultural Ethics” for many more pages. It was a long, but fascinating read, and I kept finding more and more examples I wanted to use for my reflection. There are many more humanitarian issues (and other issues) I could relate back to the concepts in this week’s reading, but I will leave it here.