

## Suffering

Suffering points toward experiences of physical or mental pain. Suffering, and the act of reflecting on the nature of suffering, are central issues in philosophy, religion, psychology, and the social sciences. On the one hand, suffering is a deeply personal and individual experience that escapes easy definitions and representation (Wilkinson 2005). On the other hand, however, social suffering points to suffering as a societal experience, and in such instances it is the result of what political, economic and institutional powers do to people (or other sentient creatures) (Kleinman, Das, and Lock 1997). In humanitarian contexts, suffering is a mobilizing force: witnessing the suffering of others triggers compassion, empathy, and emotion-driven ethical responses, which sometimes leads to humanitarian responses and action (Wilson and Brown 2008).

Jeremy Bentham (2012 [1789]) identified the ability to suffer as the precondition for protection against exploitation and exposure to cruelty as a requirement for (human) rights. He famously proposed that the question is not “Can they reason? or, Can they talk? but, Can they suffer?” In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Adam Smith (2007 [1759]) described compassion for the suffering other as one of the “original passions of human nature.” Compassion towards the suffering of others is undoubtedly as old as human culture, but the idea of a universal humanity and a global human community with transboundary moral obligations—and, therefore, obligations to alleviate the suffering of others—is often traced back to the Enlightenment era. During the Enlightenment, a cult of sensibility and fascination with suffering prompted a surge in “humanitarian” thinking and action. At the time, the rise of secular thinking helped sow the seeds of modern humanitarian thinking and gave voice to the idea that people themselves could, and should, intervene in the suffering of others—even unknown, distant people who remain anonymous to us. The recognition of a shared human condition, one bound by bodily precarity and vulnerability to suffering, formed the basis for ideas of a common human community and the obligation of people to safeguard fragile humanity themselves (Sliwinski 2011; Wilson and Brown 2008).

According to Hannah Arendt, humanitarianism builds on a “politics of pity,” and it divides us into those who suffer and those who do not, those in need of help and those able to help. Therefore, humanitarianism is dependent on the spectacle of suffering, on mediating representations of the suffering of others in the awareness of distant, able-to-help spectators (Arendt 1963). Witnessing the suffering of another person, recognizing it as suffering, reacting to the suffering in a compassionate manner, and having the will to help are at the core of

humanitarianism. The evolution of transboundary humanitarianism, and its institutionalism and expansion, may be traced through episodes in which extreme suffering has been witnessed and benevolent, humanitarian responses to it have been organized (Kotilainen 2016; Sliwinski 2011; Wilson and Brown 2008).

The birth of modern organizational humanitarianism is often dated to 1859 and the aftermath of the Battle of Solferino. Deeply impacted by the suffering that he saw and heard during the battle, Henry Dunant wrote *A Memory of Solferino* in 1862. Inspired by the ideas presented in the book, the International Committee of the Red Cross was founded in 1863. Similarly, the anti-slavery movement led to recognition of slaves as humans capable of suffering and of their suffering (Sliwinski 2011; Hochschild 2005). Perhaps most famously, the horrors of World War II, and the witnessing of the immense suffering of those affected by the Holocaust, prompted the codification of international humanitarian laws and the implementation of conventions that aimed to protect humanity from future atrocities and rights violations. More recently, driven by the genocide in Rwanda and the atrocities committed during the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, the principle of the Responsibility to Protect was signed in 2005 by all United Nations member states.

A critical question arises about what it is that counts as a life able (in our understanding) to suffer, a life we feel compassion for, a life worthy of grief and mourning (Butler 2004). This question is pertinent today with respect to, for instance, the issue of legal, mass-scale exploitation of animals in relation to animal rights.

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## Technology

Technology can refer to at least two different things: a particular equipment/machinery or the application of knowledge. In the humanitarian realm, this implies that technology can refer both to the application of logistical, medical, or other expertise for practical humanitarian purposes, and to such things as off-grid solar power in refugee camps, humanitarian demining devices, or “Plumpy’Nut” (Scott-Smith 2017), to mention a few. Despite this broad meaning, in recent years the term has mostly been used with reference to new technologies, such as blockchain, drones (Sandvik and Lohne 2014), biometrics (Jacobsen 2017), satellites, and information and communications technology more broadly.

This current trend in usage of the term reflects the fact that numerous humanitarian actors have introduced a range of new technologies into different aspects of their work, examples being biometrics for refugee registration, satellites for crisis mapping, drones for the delivery of medical aid, apps for refugees, and mobile phones for cash transfers. These and other uses of new technology in humanitarian work have given rise to debates that mainly center around two core themes: (1) benefits versus risks and (2) agency, politics, and accountability.

(1) Benefits versus risks. Accuracy, empowerment, and the link between technology and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals are benefits that have been emphasized in discussions about the possibilities and promises of technology. For example, in response to allegation of fraud, the World Food Programme called for the use of new technology to reduce theft of food aid in Yemen. More broadly, debates have emerged about the potential of technology to revolutionize humanitarian action (Read, Taithe and Mac Ginty 2016). The numerous expectations invested in the use of new technology in various humanitarian settings have given rise to debates about techno-optimism in the humanitarian community, possibly involving the appreciation of potential risks (Duffield 2016). One of these is technology failure, and harm