

Disaster ethics

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One of the first disasters to thoroughly stir the intellectual world was the Great Lisbon Earthquake in 1755. It had an in-depth effect on Enlightenment intellectuals, triggering a wide array of theological, philosophical and scientific debates. Today we definitely have better scientific theories about disasters. Also our theological and philosophical understanding of catastrophes has evolved quite considerably. However, more academic attention for these issues is most welcome for at least three reasons.

First, though our thinking about disasters has developed since the Great Lisbon Earthquake, there are still many open questions. Just to mention a few examples, it still challenging for scientists to predict particular earthquakes in terms of time and location. For theologians the problem of the theodicy is still very much around. Assuming God is omnipotent, omniscient and omnibenevolent, how come we have to deal with disasters at all? Why would God allow disasters to happen? Philosophers are still debating what exactly the concept of disaster involves, and how so-called human-made disasters can be distinguished from natural ones. Moreover, the extent of our humanitarian obligations is still very much on the agenda, both philosophically and politically.

Second, our power to cause human-made disasters has immensely increased over the last two and a half centuries starting with the industrial revolution. Due to the accelerated rise of modern technology both intentional and non-intentional anthropogenic disasters of immense scale are now

possible. Examples that are currently being discussed are, amongst others, the possibility of nuclear accidents and/or war, the risk that artificial superhumanly intelligent beings might turn against us, potential mishaps with geoengineering, and the threat of terrorists using biotechnology and cyber attacks to disrupt large parts of modern societies. These are all potential threats that have appeared relatively recently, or have not yet materialized at all, but might very well do so in the near future. The disconcerting aspect of these risks is that they are all human-made. We have been exposed to (the threat of) natural disasters since the beginning of humanity without—obviously—having been erased by them. However, the abovementioned anthropogenic disaster risks are novel. We cannot reassure ourselves with the idea that we—as a species—have survived them since the beginning of humanity. How clement these novel human-made disaster risks will turn out to be, is still very much an open question (Bostrom 2013, pp. 15–16).

Third, compared to the eighteenth century, people in present-day rich countries seem to have enhanced moral responsibilities with regard to disasters, wherever on earth they happen to occur. Both our knowledge about and our control over actions regarding faraway disasters have substantially increased. Thanks to the immense development of information and communication technologies, disasters are being better reported nowadays. Therefore, it is much more difficult to remain blissfully ignorant about them. Moreover, due to the rapid progress of transportation technologies, it is nowadays possible to organize a rapid international response when disasters occur, no matter where on the planet. This also means that it is more imperative than ever to sort out the difficult ethical issues that might occur when healthcare professionals are going to do research or provide care in disaster situations (O’Mathúna et al. 2014).

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Against this backdrop a COST action entitled “Disaster Bioethics: addressing ethical issues triggered by disasters” (COST Action IS1201) was formally launched 2 years ago. The project has four working groups. The first focuses on ethical issues that occur when health care is being provided in the aftermath of a disaster. Another one tackles the ethical challenges involved in doing research in disaster arenas. Yet another group attempts to develop a more philosophical analysis of issues to do with moral theory, cultural diversity and gender in relation to disasters. The last group aims at the development of policy recommendations and guidelines.

The action endeavours to develop an international network of academics, policy-makers, healthcare professionals and relief workers in order “... to improve ethical decision-making for disasters by identifying ethical issues in disaster preparation and response, proposing guidelines, and developing training materials and other ethics resources” (MoU 2012, p. 2). In line with the ambitions of the project Pierre

Mallia kicks off the current issue with his exploration of ethical theory in disaster situations (Mallia 2015).

References

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