Chapter 14
Virtue Ethics and Disasters

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Abstract Virtue ethics studies the character traits of good persons. This includes analysis of how ordinary persons can emulate moral role models in order to improve their moral character. This chapter investigates the link between virtues and disasters by relating classic and contemporary virtue ethical thinking to the character traits of humanity and resilience. The article finds ample support for the claim that these two character traits can be analysed as virtues and that classical virtue theorists can help us articulate the content of these traits. The contemporary discourse about virtues and disasters includes the long-standing analysis of the role of reason and emotions in virtues but the discourse also considers what kind of virtues that are relevant in disaster situations. Two important examples of the latter are the virtues of humanitarian workers and the virtues of those who suffer disasters. The chapter conclude that that future research should consider how training can strengthen individual resilience and how the pursuit of moral excellence can be included in the humanitarian field as a complement to minimum standards.

Keywords Virtues · Ethics · Humanitarianism · Disasters · Humanity · Resilience

14.1 Introduction

Many philosophers have not been interested primarily in analysing the moral rightness of individual acts but instead focused on how a human life should be lead. This involves an analysis of what kind of personal characteristics are essential parts of a good life. Such personal characteristics can be categorized into those traits or qualities that are good, virtues, and those that are negative and harmful, vices. Virtue ethics in general is the study of these character traits.

Compared to consequentialist and deontological ethical theories, virtue ethics provide a distinct refocus on an actor's habits and motivation in general instead of

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D. P. O'Mathúna et al. (eds.), *Disasters: Core Concepts and Ethical Theories*, Advancing Global Bioethics 11, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-92722-0_14

his or her deliberation and acts on a single occasion. Virtue ethical theories often share a teleological character with consequentialism. Virtues are good for something, for living a good, full or flourishing human life. Even if there is much disagreement about the specific definitions of all character traits, it seems that a good life according to a virtue perspective should include development of character traits like bravery, industry, benevolence, integrity and friendship. But as with deontological theories, virtue ethics does not presume that ethics foremost concerns maximization of the good. Instead, the good life also might include protection of some values against other values.

The recent revival of the virtue ethical tradition adds a distinctive and thought-provoking perspective on disasters, whether natural or man-made. Authors such as Anscombe (1958) and MacIntrye (1985) have stressed that virtue ethics provides us with another understanding of human moral relations that is less reductionist than the alternatives. This chapter will provide a short introduction to non-religious Western virtue ethics, a historical overview of the relations between virtues and disasters, an analysis of the current debate and point towards several areas that are in need of further analysis.

14.2 Virtue Ethics

It is natural to start with Aristotle (384–322 BC) because he is perhaps the most famous of all philosophers who have thought about virtue ethics. His most famous work on ethics, *The Nicomachean Ethics,* provides a rich understanding about what a good life might be and how virtues figure as parts of this life.

All of Aristotle's thinking about virtues builds upon his philosophical anthropology about the nature of human beings. As a starting point Aristotle presumes that there are better and worse ways to live a human life. All things have a final end, a telos. This is true of knives and other tools, but is likewise true for human beings. The telos is what is the specific character of an entity. For a knife the characteristic is cutting. A good knife is then characterized as being good to cut with. Humans too have a characteristic trait, our capacity to reason. A good human life must therefore include the use of reason (Aristotle 2004, 1197b20–1098a1-20). Aristotle's analogy is plagued with strong assumptions that are not easy to accept. The knife is obviously made but that is not obviously true of human beings.

Aristotle claims that a good life is a life governed by reason, which is a distinguishing human ability and our highest faculty. This has two dimensions. First, that the best life is a life spent in continuous contemplation since that is the primary activity associated with reason. Contemplation is an activity we can practice by ourselves and it has its own value (Aristotle 2004, 1177a). Second, living in accordance with reason includes acting in a way that is appropriate to the situation at hand by using our intellectual capacity for *practical reason* (Aristotle 2004, 1140a25–1140b30). What is characteristic of a virtuous person is that he or she has a disposition to act appropriately in different situations. The person who has the virtue of bravery can avoid acting rashly but also avoid acting cowardly (Aristotle

2004, 1107a1–10). A virtuous person who possesses practical reason will also be able to give the right response to different situations; this can include emotional responses where it is fitting. For example, anger can be justified when a person is treated without due respect.

Another important thinker in the virtue ethical tradition is David Hume (1711–1776). In Hume's central work, *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751), he provides an account of virtues that shares some similar traits with Aristotle, specifically the importance of emotions and the social utility of virtues.

Hume's thinking on virtues is shaped by his general empiricist methodology in which he seeks the explanation of different phenomena, including morality. This means that Hume too sees emotions as a significant part of morality, even more fundamental than reason. Morality is not a matter of true of false nor reasonable or unreasonable; it is a matter of proper motivation, which can only be provided by emotions (Hume 1998, 1:6–8). Hume's core idea is that human beings are to a large extent governed by a wish to do good for others (Hume 1998, 2:5). In Hume's complex moral psychology, humans are driven by both egoism and sympathy to each other, but it is the latter that holds moral importance. This can be noted by the fact that we can even praise the virtuous character of an enemy (Hume 1998, 5:8).

It is noteworthy that Hume also sees a practical function for emotions. Hume claims that a virtue is a character trait which humans find agreeable or useful (Hume 1998, 7:19–25). A counter-argument is that humans might have different emotional responses to different character traits, and thus Hume's argument seems to lead to relativism. Instead of accepting this outcome, Hume argues that humans in general tend to like and dislike the same moral character traits. This *moral sense* is a feature common to all normal human beings even if not all have developed it to the full extent. He also claims that we tend to praise those character traits which in the long run are useful for both society in general and individuals in particular (Hume 1998, 2:22). Thus, Hume and Aristotle share the idea that virtue is beneficial and that a morally good life is the best way to live. This puts them in contrast to a common experience that acting virtuously is often not as successful as deceiving and maximizing one's egoistic benefits.

A modern day virtue ethicist in the Aristotelian tradition, Alistair MacIntyre (b. 1929), also describes virtue in relation to a good life. In his seminal work, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory,* MacIntyre argues that a virtue must be conceived as:

> ...acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods. (MacIntyre 1985, p. 191)

As such one cannot define a virtue without looking closer to a practice. Practices include many different forms of shared human activities that are identified by having internal standards of excellence; an example would be the game of chess. A good chess player has the virtues that makes it possible to excel in this practice. An excellent chess player gains goods that are internal to the game, for example strategic thinking and patience. In addition, the player might gain external goods such as money and fame. There can be a tension between these goods. In practice, internal goods might inhibit our ability to gain external goods (MacIntrye 1985, pp. 191–196).

In considering a good life, MacIntyre argues that one can only discern the content of this life in relation to the overall narrative (or moral tradition), which provides meaning for individuals (MacIntyre 1985, pp. 204–225). A person living in Athens 400 BC has another moral tradition than a seventeenth century New England farmer. This means that the virtues in respective traditions can be different (MacIntyre 1985, p. 220). Compared to Aristotle, MacIntyre does not present a specific teleological view of human existence and is open to different ideas of the good life. Different cultures can have different ideas about the good life, which makes it impossible to *a priori* identify the content of a specific virtue such as bravery.

Michael Slote (b. 1941) has elaborated Hume's ethics further. In *Morals from Motives* (2001) Slote defends Hume's, and others, case that the feeling of sympathy to others is a fundamental part of morality. He claims that benevolence as a moral ideal can provide the foundation for an understanding of virtues that is distinctively non-Aristotelian which also avoids the utilitarian focus on consequences (Slote 2001, p. viii). This position includes the idea that virtue ethics primary content is how our motivation for actions relate to excellence (Slote 2001, p. 4f). Cases such as the Good Samaritan show what ethical excellence mean by being paradigm and praiseworthy examples of benevolence (Slote 2001, p. 35f).

A reoccurring idea in the history of virtue ethical thinking is that human beings are not morally static creatures but can develop their moral virtues. Aristotle stressed the importance of proper moral teaching (Aristotle 2004, 1179b20–1180a30). Hume claimed that the natural virtue of fellow feeling can be strengthened with education (Hume 1998, 5:3–4). MacIntyre too identifies the importance of learning the internal rules of excellence in a tradition (MacIntyre 1985, p. 216) and Slote argues for extending our sympathy to others by moral education (Slote 2007, p. 290f). The idea of moral development has an important implication. We cannot be content with the current state of our moral capacity. We might be brave, just and humane but we have not achieved the final stage of these virtues. There is always room for improvement. Aristotle, Hume, MacIntyre and Slote all stress that it is only by learning from those who achieved a higher stage of virtue that we can become better persons.

Turning to the connection between virtues and disasters, we can note that disasters, in the sense of unforeseen radical events with significant negative impacts on many people, are linked to the idea of virtues in two ways. First, what is a morally excellent response to those disasters we ourselves might face? Second, what is a morally excellent response to disasters that others face?[1] I will discuss these two themes as representing two different virtues, first the virtue of resilience and second, the virtue of humanity. The main discussion partners will be classical virtue ethical thinkers. I will return to contemporaries in the section on the current state of virtue ethical research and disasters.

[1] This distinction between two types of virtues is methodological and not ontological. One can follow Aristotle and argue that a person who possess the virtue of practical reason also possess all other virtues (Aristotle 2004, 1145a0–5). The idea of "the unity of virtue" does not preclude that each virtue can be analysed in itself separated from the other virtues.

14.2.1 The Virtue of Resilience

Human life always has been, and still is, weak and vulnerable, it is to be expected that we can suffer in this life. Most humans have not had the tools or knowledge to do much about this vulnerability. Thus, suffering was simply considered to be a part of life. The primary philosophical question was not how to avoid suffering but how to relate to it. Should a proper response to this human condition be defeatism, fatalism and horror or self-control and gratitude for the fleeing moments we have? Resilience is one term that describes the later kind of response. Excellence in responding to disasters can be described as possessing the virtue of resilience.[2]

The Stoic intellectual tradition is popularly thought of as propagating an unflinching response to human hardship. The original sources do support this popular account. In his *Meditations*, the Roman emperor and Stoic philosopher Marcus Aurelius (121–180) contemplates the following:

> 'It is my bad luck that this has happened to me.' No, you should rather say: 'It is my good luck that, although this has happened to me, I can bear it without pain, neither crushed by the present nor fearful of the future.' Because such a thing could have happened to any man, but not every man could have borne it without pain. (Aurelius 2006, 4:49)

Aurelius accepts suffering as a human constant but instead of falling back to fatalism he argues that bad luck gives us the chance of developing and showing excellent character traits. This is not an attempt to redefine disasters – they are still something negative – but an acknowledgement that disasters make it possible to show sides of our humanity that are of moral worth.

The right response to disasters can also be discussed from the perspective of Aristotle. He wrote about disasters in his reasoning about bravery. He notes that a brave person governed by practical reason would not be broken down by the events nor would he or she simply shrug it off. Instead, the virtuous person would acknowledge the horrors of the disaster but would not dwell upon it forever (Aristotle 2004, 1115a5–1115b6). Compared to Aurelius, Aristotle's perspective is more in tune with the idea that some situations require a substantial emotional response, which is something that Aurelius rejects (Aristotle 2004, 1108a32–1108b6).

Hume also identifies the moral importance of perseverance and associated virtues such as resilience. He claims that there are four distinct categories of personal character qualities. There are those qualities that are agreeable for ourselves, those that are useful for ourselves, those that are agreeable to others and those that are useful for others. Perseverance (and resilience) then is something that humans in general approve of as a character quality that is obviously useful for ourselves and therefore a virtue (Hume 1998, 6:21).

[2] Fortitude is an alternative term. The term resilience is more inclusive since it can include both how a person withstands difficulties and how he or she recovers from them. Both groups and individuals can be resilient. However, since virtues are individual traits, I will focus on how a person relate to extreme circumstances such as disasters.

One can also argue that individuals with these qualities are useful for society as a whole since they can help rebuild the community after disaster has struck. However, for Hume this quality would fall under the more general virtue of humanity, which itself is useful to society. This makes Hume's position different compared to Aurelius' and Aristotle' who do not directly consider whether resilience has a good beyond the individual possessor.

14.2.2 The Virtue of Humanity

The other dimension of the human response to disasters that connects with virtue ethics is how to respond to the suffering of others. The primary focus for this response is helping other human beings in need, and doing good for fellow men. This disposition for doing good is referred to with many different terms such as beneficence, benevolence and fellow feeling. Humanity is part of doing good in general with the specific emphasis on helping those in need.

The idea that a good person will assist others is fundamental for all classical thinkers on virtue. For example, both Aristotle and Aurelius claimed that helping others was the key to the good life. Aristotle's analysis of friendship includes a detailed analysis of the relations between friends. A proper friendship involves appreciating one another because of each friend's inner character and not only the fact that both feel good in each other's company (Aristotle 2004, 1169b3–1170b20). In Aurelius's case, the emperor shows disdain for other humans but also keeps referring to the need to help his fellow humans (Aurelius 2006, 4:12) and strive to love them (e.g. Aurelius 2006, 6: 39).

That a virtuous person practices goodness towards his or her friends is not controversial. Humanity as a specific virtue, though, is not restricted to friendship but extends care to a much larger group, which in its most abstract form includes the whole of humanity. The determining factor becomes who is human and who is not, which can be restricted to one's own social group or universalized to include all members of *Homo sapiens sapiens*.

Both Greek and Roman philosophical traditions include such a universal idea of humanity. It is again relevant to consider a Stoic thinker. Marcus Tillus Cicero (106–43 BC) argued for the moral commonality between mankind. In his influential work, *On the Laws,* Cicero states:

> ...what nation does not cherish kindness, benevolence, or a soul that is grateful for and mindful of a benefit? What nation does not despise, does not hate the haughty, the nefarious, the cruel, the ungrateful? Since from these things it may be understood that the whole race of human beings has been united among themselves, the final result is that knowledge of living correctly makes persons better. (Cicero 2013, 1:32, p. 140)

According to Cicero this moral unity provides a foundation for extending humanity to cover every human in need. Hume also notes the universal aspect of humanity. He too stressed the centrality of helping other persons and made the capacity for

beneficence a central part of his philosophical analysis of virtue. Humans appreciate those character traits that motivate people to help others in need:

> ...no qualities are more entitled to the general good-will and approbation of mankind, than beneficence and humanity, friendship and gratitude, natural affection and public spirit, or whatever proceeds from a tender sympathy with others, and a generous concern for our kind and species. (Hume 1998, 2:5)

Since such different thinkers as Aristotle, Cicero and Hume, who all lived in different times and different cultures, have found grounds to claim that humanity is a good character trait we have reasons to believe that this is an important part of a good human life.

14.3 The Current State of Virtue Ethics and Disasters

A quick survey of the general research field of virtue ethics shows that the number of texts that explicitly discuss virtues and disasters are limited. But one can identify three specific research themes. The first theme involves general writings on the connection between virtue ethics and disasters. The second theme concerns the professional virtues of humanitarian workers, and the third theme concerns the virtues of those suffering a disaster.

14.3.1 General Writings on the Connection Between Virtue Ethics and Disasters

There are several examples of research that includes a general analysis of the relation between virtues and disasters. Slote (2007) argues for a virtue ethics based on Hume and Hutcheson as a response to the ethical challenges expressed by Peter Singer. Singer claims that the suffering of those with lesser means requires a significant transfer of resources of wealthy countries to poorer countries (Singer 1972). As a response to Singer, Slote points to the human feeling for empathy with other human beings. Empathy is directed to specific persons and cannot be understood as having humanity at large as its object. Instead, Slote claims that empathy is directed towards those we have a relation with, and this reduces the moral demand of helping all. A person who extends his or her empathy to include distant others simply extends this virtue more than is possible for most persons. Slote also argues that our empathy can be trained to include more and more people and that we have moral reasons to conduct such training (Slote 2007, p. 290f).

Naomi Zack (2009) discusses virtue ethics in relation to disasters and makes a detailed comparison between different ways of relating to disasters. She contrasts the character traits of such fictional reckless heroes such as Achilles and the modern day agent Mitch Rapp with the bonds between the boy and father in the novel *The Road*

(2006) and the real life description of Ernest Shackleton in his failed expedition to Antarctica. Zack argues that it is not the traditional heroic virtues such as fast thinking and bravery that are needed in facing disasters. Instead it is the virtues of integrity and diligence that makes it possible to rise to the occasion (Zack 2009, p. 52f). One of the chief points of integrity as a virtue involves staying away from the slippery slope of justifying extreme actions because they are unique (Zack 2009, 60f).

Zack notices how Shackleton rose to the occasion as a leader. When he and his crew got stranded in Antarctica, he took the lead in a situation of extreme hardship and became an example of a moral role model. Shackleton showed integrity in all small details ranging from food distribution to caring of the sick. Moreover, Zack also notices that Shackleton as an explorer went searching for challenges, which is an important difference compared to the life of many contemporaries. This raises the wider issue of how virtues and disasters should be interpreted from a political and institutional perspective (Zack 2009, pp. 61–64).

Sara Kathleen Geale provides an example of a more applied approach to virtues and disasters (2012). She argues that disaster management includes a wide variety of virtues such as prudence, courage and resilience. She also notices that it is difficult to formulate a finished list of virtues and that disaster response is an ongoing work process (Geale 2012, p. 460). This implies that new situations could accentuate other character traits of those who respond. Another issue she analyses is the virtue of justice and how a disaster can raise the need for applying a triage in resource allocation. This can be considered problematic for those who believe medical care is a right and will require that all people receive fair treatment. It is part of a virtuous response to balance these demands (Geale 2012, p. 450f).

14.3.2 Professional Virtues of Humanitarian Workers

Numerous authors have studied professional virtues. For example, the specific virtues associated with physicians has been analysed by Oakley and Cocking (2001) and the virtues of nurses and social workers by Banks and Gallagher (2009). Others have focused on the virtues of disaster relief workers, humanitarian workers, and how they need to be prepared to act in relation to moral dilemmas where every alternative action might include harming some persons or values.

Perhaps the most prolific current writer on humanitarian ethics is Hugo Slim (1997, 2015). Slim provides a broad discussion about the moral challenges for relief professionals and the ethical resources available to meet these challenges. He argues explicitly that virtue ethics provides the most integrated account of morality since it gives due weight to both reason and emotions. Moreover, Slim notes that ethical principles are just one limited part of ethics. An appropriate ethical response will often require good personal character traits, which can only be developed by experience (Slim 2015, pp. 126–133).

Slim also provide a list of possible professional virtues for a humanitarian worker. This includes the virtues of humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence which builds upon the established ethical principles of the ICRC and is sup-

planted by key parts of the *Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in Disaster Relief* (IFRC and ICRC 1994). The professional virtues should be complemented with everyday virtues such as courage and practical wisdom (Slim 2015, pp. 241–247). Slim also makes a compelling case for the importance of role models. Role models can be found in both international and local relief organizations and Slim argues for a larger role of non-western role models (Slim 1997, p. 255f).

A possible tension in Slim's account is the degree to which a good humanitarian relief worker must be a good person. For Aristotle, it was clear that a person could excel in technical skills such as shoemaking but fail to excel in goodness, in virtue. Similarly, must one be morally good to excel in disaster relief? The answer is not obvious since we can think of professions such as engineering and surgery where the professional virtues are distinct from the personal moral virtues. MacIntyre's perspective can offer support to Slim's. One can argue that there are internal goods in humanitarian work that can only be obtained by practicing certain moral virtues. Thus, in order for a relief worker to be good, he or she must show proper attitudes and actions, including humanity, towards people in need.

Other researchers have also noted the possible implications of a virtue perspective for professional humanitarian workers. Matthew Hunt (2011) analyses the different medical ethical frameworks that can help relief workers in morally challenging situations. Besides medical ethical codes, he too supports the importance of good role models but he does not provide a longer elaboration of what this means from a virtue perspective.

Eva Wortel (2009) makes a detailed analysis of different humanitarian principles such as humanity and impartiality and argues that these principles can be understood also as values and virtues. Wortel refers to Aristotle, Jean Pictet, and Thomas Aquinas, and defends the idea that humanity includes an emotional motivation to help those in need, which requires experience and practical wisdom. Trying to reduce both humanity and other ethical principles into a doctrine would then be a misinterpretation of their ethical meaning (Wortel 2009, p. 790). Wortel's analysis shows how the different humanitarian principles can be interpreted in different ways and demonstrates the need for a clear articulation of such interpretations.

Finally, I have analysed the implications of professional codes for relief workers from a virtue perspective (Löfquist 2016). Some of the findings are the need to retain experienced staff as role models, initiating training programs that support development of virtues and the need for an open discourse about the final aims of relief work professions.

14.3.3 Virtues of Those Suffering a Disaster

A third research theme that concerns the relation between virtues and disasters is the resilience discourse. Resilience, the ability to bounce back from a disaster, involves a broad discourse including sociological, economic and ecological dimensions.

Resilience as an ethical virtue focuses on what character traits is required to face, manage and overcome the shock, fear and effects of a disaster.

An example of resilience research relevant for a virtue perspective is provided by Alice Gritti. She studies resilience of individual aid workers and their organizational context from a psychosocial perspective. Noticing the difference in how women and men experienced stress she also identifies the institutional factors that reduce or increase stress. She argues for an increased focus on stress training for aid workers and claims that:

> ... resilience is not only about static personality traits owned by specific individuals; on the contrary, resilience comprises a continuum of qualities that can be possessed to varying degrees, and that can be built and enhanced by training. (Gritti 2015, p. 452)

From a virtue perspective it is relevant to discern that Gritti treats resilience as a good personal trait that can be supported and developed. Although she presents her work in the language of stress management and not philosophical ethics, this is a highly relevant insight. As with other virtues, resilience can be learned and can best be learned in a supporting context.

There are also examples of explicit analyses of resilience as a virtue. Craig Steven Titus (2006) is an example of a current researcher who relates psychosocial research on resilience to virtue ethical thinking. Titus argues that contemporary empirical findings on the human ability to adapt to disasters can be related to philosophical anthropology. He also provides a substantial definition of resilience:

> First, resilience is the ability to cope in adverse conditions; it endures, minimizes, or overcomes hardship. Second, it consists in resisting destructive pressures on the human person's physiological, psychosocial, and spiritual life; that is, it maintains capacities in the face of challenges, threats, and loss. Third, resilience creatively constructs and adapts after adversity; it implies recovering with maturity, confidence, and wisdom to lead a meaningful and productive life. (Titus 2006, p. 29)

The rest of Titus's work focuses on fleshing out what Aquinas adds to the resilience discussion and what resources that discussion can supply in order to reinterpret Aquinas. He notes that Aquinas provides a rich analysis of human nature, which provides for both reason and emotions (Titus 2006, p. 84). Titus relates Aquinas' virtues of fortitude, initiative and endurance to the concept of resilience and suggests several insights for the analysis. One interesting idea from Aquinas is that hope provides a powerful foundation for daring activities in face of fear and disaster (Titus 2006, p. 198ff).

14.4 Towards the Future of Virtue Ethics and Disasters

After this short survey of the field it is time to identify a few themes that can be the focus of future research. At least two issues about virtues and disasters stand out as requiring further discussion.

1. *Teaching resilience*

Conceiving resilience as a virtue is fruitful since it stresses human capacity for personal development. Instead of looking at resilience as a personal quality that is static and stable, one can see it as dynamic. Resilience training is obviously relevant for all those who face unsecure living conditions including both natural and man-made disasters. But when one looks at historical thinkers such as Aristotle and Hume it is clear that they do not believe that resilience is just a virtue for those who regularly face disasters. Instead resilience is part of a good human life in general since the lack of this virtue will have negative effects and make it more difficult for us to lead our life. Aurelius is one interesting example of a person who despite secure living conditions saw the benefits of learning to face adversity. Further research can provide greater insights into how the virtue of resilience can be taught as well as its relationship to other virtues such as bravery.

There is also room for caution in treating resilience as a virtue. Any focus on individual resilience risks devaluing the real suffering of those who face disasters. Despite the ideas of Stoics such as Aurelius, most of those who exhibit significant resilience would be better off avoiding the experience altogether. Making resilience an individual affair could place unjust responsibility on individuals and make them more responsible for their recovery than they should be. Aristotle claimed that a virtue is an ability to respond appropriately to different situations. One can therefore argue that a resilient person who had faced extreme horrors will need time to reconnect to everyday life. Resilience would need to include the strength and permanence of the recovery in addition to its speed.

2. *Ethical excellence in professional ethics for relief workers*

It is a challenge for the humanitarian profession to move beyond lists of ethical principles and systematically consider how such lists should function in the strive towards ethical excellence. Despite Slim's efforts, a significant part of humanitarian ethics is still about listing and analysing ethical principles. Documents such as *Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in Disaster Relief* (IFRC and ICRC 1994) and the *Humanitarian Charter* (The Sphere Project 2011) both list different ethical principles that should guide relief workers. The obvious benefit with the quasi-legalistic framework is that it can be adapted to project evaluations and the interests of different donor institutions. This can help donors, organizations and beneficiaries to accomplish more ethical relief operations and avoid doing harm to people in need. Viewed as a minimum standard the principles are fruitful but we must be aware of their limitations.

Virtuous behaviour is about moral excellence, and meeting minimum standards simply fails to achieve this goal. In the virtue ethical tradition, an individual is understood as a person in the process of becoming morally better. For example, to be "good enough" simply does not make sense from an Aristotelian idea of the good person. The risk with minimum standards is that one can believe that the quest for

moral improvement can be relaxed when one has achieved this standard. One can see this in the case of how humanitarian workers relate the idea of accountability to recipients. Is it enough to include the disaster-struck people's views in a needs assessment? From the perspective of minimum standards this might be adequate, but the virtue of humanity might demand a constant striving to find better ways to show accountability to those in need.

From this background, the humanitarian discourse would benefit from an ongoing explicit discussion of what excellence means. One can, for example, ask in what way partnerships with local humanitarian actors mean only that they should accept the priorities of the international organizations (and their donors)? Or does it mean that the international organizations accept revisions and even total reorientations based on the concerns of the local organization? The search for ethical excellence can have deep effects on the power between local and international humanitarian actors, which needs to be explored further.

14.5 Conclusion

From this short descriptive investigation it is clear that virtue ethics is an untapped philosophical resource for the analysis of human responses to disasters. A virtue ethical perspective can identify several promising paths for future research. Resilience is of general importance for a good life since every person would benefit in being able to come back to everyday life after an extreme experience. It is also clear that virtue perspective provides a more stringent moral ideal than traditional professional ethical codes. Virtues are not about meeting minimum standards but about actively pursuing excellence in moral matters. There is no room for complacency in such an ideal. Ethical standards will therefore need to be understood as pedagogical tools in the pursuit of excellence or to be set so high that they are seldom or ever achieved. The ancient and contemporary thinkers who analyse virtues does not believe that such moral excellence is beyond human ability. However, they do acknowledge that morality make strong demands on us and a general benefit of virtue ethics is to make this demand explicit.

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