

Antinomies of generosity Moral geographies and post-tsunami aid in Southeast Asia

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Abstract

The Indian Ocean Tsunami on Boxing Day 2004 generated a wave of private donations from Western countries – a paradigmatic case of generosity. However, more than a year after, a number of evaluation studies conclude that post-tsunami aid has achieved ambivalent results and that recipients of aid felt excluded from the reconstruction process, reduced to passive observers. This paper argues that there is a link between the abundance of generosity and the practices of aid: the practices of gift giving after the tsunami have developed a humiliating force for those who were at the recipient end of the gift chain, because the marketing of Western generosity by media and aid agencies reinforced those affected by the tsunami as “pure” victims, as “bare life” – passive recipients devoid of their status as fellow citizens on this planet. In a second step, the paper discusses the meta-ethics of these practices of generosity, thinking about the ambivalences inherent in bridging distance in encountering the “distant” other in our aid practices. Various forms of virtue ethics reflect this emphasis on the generous person, while neglecting the perspective of the person in need, and therefore implicitly reproduce those asymmetries of gift giving. In contrast to these conceptions, I want to argue that we need to ground our duty to help distant sufferers in *their* moral entitlement to be aided. This requires a meta-ethical approach that seeks a combination of a theory of justice with virtue ethics.

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1. Vanishing distance?

Three weeks after the Indian Ocean Tsunami devastated the coasts on Southeast Asia and East Africa, Ulrich Beck wrote in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* that “distance” was among the first casualties of the tsunami (Beck, 2005): cosmopolitanism and global mobility, especially in the form of global tourism, made the tsunami a personally experienced event beyond all geographical and social scales and borders. In our “World Risk Society” (Beck, 1999), Beck suggested, everybody tacitly knew that the face of this tragedy could have been mine. The enormous press coverage of the disaster brought Westerners (“us”) closer to the distant strangers in the tsunami affected areas (“them”). The large

number of European victims made a distant catastrophe “our” own one and brought it closer to “our” attention. The tsunami attracted incredible attention and concern precisely because Westerners were affected and the media effectively communicated this affectedness to the Westerners at home. This “vanishing distance”, it appeared, nurtured an all-encompassing desire to do something – to show generosity and as a result, unprecedented amounts of private donations and public pledges for aid were given for the tsunami.

More than a year later, the Tsunami Evaluation Coalition (TEC) – a consortium of aid agencies – published various reports, which enumerate a number of failures in the delivery and practices of post-tsunami aid (Cosgrave, 2006; Telford et al., 2006). In its preliminary report, it is written that “the international aid community as a whole undervalues the very important contribution of local

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communities to their own survival and recovery... The international media also overlook local actors and focus on international actors” (Cosgrave, 2006, p. 9). The report also found that it was television coverage rather than any more formal assessment of needs that provided the basis for funding decisions. Funding decisions were largely taken in response to domestic political pressure in donor countries rather than on the basis of formal needs assessment (p. 11). The report further notes a lack of involvement and consultation of people receiving aid. This is by no means a minor deficiency in the delivery of aid: other reports mention that important affected groups have been left out from receiving assistance, that compensation, construction work and livelihood support packages have been inadequate (ActionAid, 2006). “Eye on Aceh” reports that beneficiaries in Aceh felt excluded from the reconstruction process, reduced to passive observers (Eye on Aceh, 2006). This has created anxieties and frustration and fuelled jealousy and social conflict (Eye on Aceh, 2006; Korf, 2005).

The tsunami was often considered as a “pure” force of nature – creating innocent victims regardless of age, class and ethnicity.¹ As Margalit (2000) has argued, Nature does cause misery, but it can’t humiliate. Aid – gift giving – has the potential to humiliate. In German, the word “gift” means “poison” – gift giving can be a double-edged sword, if it is primarily driven by the self-congratulatory discussions of those providing generosity to others. I want to argue that the practices of gift giving after the tsunami have developed a humiliating force for those who were at the recipient end of the gift chain. It was humiliating, because the marketing of gift delivery by media and aid agencies reinforced those affected by the tsunami as “pure” victims, as “bare life” – passive recipients devoid of their status as fellow citizens on this planet. Gifts provided to “victims” of natural disasters, appear to be unconditional gifts, since the recipient is unable to reciprocate and thus cannot enter into gift relations. Gift giving, in this sense, can become an asymmetric, ambiguous relationship. At the same time, the donors still expected something in return – the expression of gratefulness from the recipients for their generosity. This was the breeding ground of what I have called the “tsunami after the tsunami” (Korf, 2005) – the global aid wave that hit the affected areas that attempted to translate Western generosity into practices of aid.

In this paper, I want to do two things: first, sketch out the “moral landscape” (Driver, 1991; Philo, 1991) – a descriptive ethics – of gift giving in the post-tsunami context and second, reflect upon the meta-ethics of these prac-

tices of generosity and what they contribute to debates on caring at a distance (Silk, 2000; Silk, 2004; Barnett, 2005b; Popke, 2006), the spatial scope of beneficence (Brock, 2005; Chatterjee, 2004; Smith, 1998), moral geographies (Lee and Smith, 2004; Proctor, 1998; Proctor and Smith, 1999; Sack, 1997; Smith, 2000) and geographies of responsibility (Massey, 2004). The central problem is that of bridging distance in encountering the “distant” other in our practices of post-disaster aid. Let me briefly sketch the argument: *empirically*, the “poisonous” gift of post-tsunami generosity has emerged from the over-attention towards the virtues of Western generosity, which has produced humiliating force upon the recipient of aid. *Theoretically*, this is reflected in various forms of virtue ethics that ground ethics in virtuous behaviour (which is by nature the behaviour of those who have the capacity to help), but not of the person in need. These ethical theories implicitly reproduce those asymmetries of gift giving. In contrast to these conceptions, I want to argue here that we need to ground our duty to help distant sufferers in *their* moral entitlement to be aided. This requires a meta-ethical approach that seeks a combination of a theory of justice with virtue ethics.

2. Generosity and the antinomies of gift giving

Nigel Clark has observed the incredible hospitality extended by local people to their foreign visitors in the immediate aftermath of the tsunami – remarkable small acts of kindness and unconditional generosity: “a kind of give without take, generosity without expectation of any return, hospitality without limits and conditions” (Clark, 2005, p. 385). Iris Marion Young has developed the notion that it is in relations of asymmetrical reciprocity that ethical commitments reside (Young, 1997). For Young, it is those relationships that escape the logic of contracts and exchange altogether and by this the antinomies of (mutual) obligation. A number of scholars writing on ethical geographies have followed her Lévinasian conception of ethics as unconditional responsibility for the other, defining asymmetries as a *condition* for ethical practice (Barnett, 2005a; Diprose, 2002; Howitt, 2002; Popke, 2003). Generosity, gift giving after the tsunami, could then be understood as a paradigmatic act of an a priori opening, a radical receptivity to the alterity of the other – a questioning of one’s own self because of the shock presented by the experiences of the other which are so divorced from our own ones. “Disasters and unconditional generosity, then, are both ways of being thrown off course, of being wrenched out of circuit...” (Clark, 2005, 385). In this sense, those local acts of hospitality and generosity may be considered truly ethical commitments – the experience of disaster threw lives together (Clark, 2005, p. 385). But does this receptivity also apply for the generous donations from the West?

The unconditional generosity of the other – the distant others in the localities affected by the tsunami – moved quickly out of sight in the media reporting and public discourse in Western countries. The attention shifted to *our*

¹ This perception is, of course, contestable in view of the political economy of the tsunami (Keys et al., 2006) – the tsunami did discriminate (Frerks and Klem, 2005): most affected were poor fishing families and especially women who stayed at home during the disaster. This relates to the exposure to the disaster. But equally, the survivors of the tsunami had different capabilities to cope with the disaster: foreign tourists received much more support than local fishermen and foreigners did not lose all their livelihoods as many fishing families did.

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