

# ***Doing Bad by Doing Good: Why Humanitarian Action Fails***

Christopher J. Coyne  
F.A. Harper Professor of Economics  
George Mason University  
Fairfax, VA 22030  
[ccoyne3@gmu.edu](mailto:ccoyne3@gmu.edu)

## **Book Description**

In 2010, Haiti was ravaged by a brutal earthquake that negatively affected the lives of millions of Haitian citizens. Yet two years later the humanitarian efforts of governments and NGOs have largely failed to alleviate suffering. Instead, humanitarian resources continue to be wasted or remain mired in bureaucratic red tape. How can efforts intended to help the suffering fail so badly? In this timely and provocative book, Christopher Coyne uses the economic way of thinking to explain why this and other humanitarian efforts to do good end up doing bad.

*Doing Bad by Doing Good* argues that an array of knowledge constraints and perverse political incentives contribute to the ongoing failure of efforts to alleviate suffering. The dilemma facing proponents of state-led humanitarian action is that the incentives inherent in political institutions encourage the expansion of humanitarian action beyond what can be realistically accomplished. The result is overly ambitious efforts which are likely to fail and impose significant costs on innocent people.

In addition to Haiti, Coyne considers a wide range of humanitarian efforts. He explains why the U.S. government was ineffective following Hurricane Katrina, why the international humanitarian intervention to remove Muammar Gaddafi in Libya may very well end up causing more harm than good, and why decades of efforts to respond to humanitarian crises and foster development around the world have resulted in repeated failures and harms to those who are already suffering.

In place of the dominant approach to state-led humanitarian action, *Doing Bad by Doing Good* offers a bold alternative focused on establishing an environment of economic freedom. In increasing the range of alternative choices open to people around the world, such an environment empowers individuals to improve their own lives, and the lives of others, through a process of experimentation and discovery. Also considered are alternatives to governments for delivering immediate relief to those in need following humanitarian crises. Scholars, practitioners, politicians, and those concerned with alleviating human suffering will find *Doing Bad by Doing Good* insightful and useful in reframing the discussion of humanitarian action.

## **Table of Contents**

Preface

Introduction: A Living Example of the Puzzle

I. The Here and Now

1. The Man of the Humanitarian System
2. The Evolution of Humanitarian Action

II. The Realities of Humanitarian Action

4. Adaptability and the Planner's Problem
5. Political Competition Replaces Market Competition
6. The Bureaucracy of State-Led Humanitarianism
7. Killing People with Kindness

III. Implications for Humanitarian Action

8. Solving the Puzzle
9. Rethinking the Man of the Humanitarian System

## Preface

*Doing Bad by Doing Good* builds on my previous book, *After War: The Political Economy of Exporting Democracy*.<sup>1</sup> In *After War*, I developed the economics of reconstruction to analyze the ability of foreign occupiers to establish liberal democratic political and economic institutions in post-conflict situations. My analysis excluded broader notions of humanitarianism (e.g., short and long-term aid and assistance, peacekeeping and security, etc.) to assist and protect those in need. Given my focus, I made only passing mention of state-led humanitarian action when I noted that the implications of my analysis did not “necessarily preclude the use of military force...for humanitarian reasons abroad.”<sup>2</sup> The purpose of *Doing Bad by Doing Good* is to pick up where *After War* left off by exploring the economics of state-led humanitarianism. The topics in the two books are clearly related, especially as humanitarian action has become increasingly intertwined with the broader military and foreign policy objectives of governments over time. As such, the two books should be read as complements for understanding the viability of state-led foreign interventions broadly understood.

I should provide a few caveats so as not to mislead the reader. For those looking for either a “how to” guide for carrying out humanitarian action or for steadfast rules of when governments should, or should not, assist others, this is not the book for you. Instead, the purpose of this book is to explore the ability of governments to assist those in need. Many discussions of state-led humanitarian action, especially those by politicians, focus on the moral responsibilities of governments to proactively aid those who are perceived to be in need. Consider, for example, the following from President John F. Kennedy in 1961: “...there is no escaping our obligations: our moral obligations as a wise leader and good neighbor in the interdependent community of free nations—our economic obligations as the wealthiest people in a world of largely poor people...and our political obligations as the single largest counter to the adversaries of freedom.”<sup>3</sup> More recently, in 2007, former British Prime Minister Tony Blair reiterated his belief in “...the moral power of political action to make the world better and the moral obligation to use it.”<sup>4</sup> And, in 2010, at the G-8 Summit in Italy, U.S. President Barack Obama stated, “We’ve got 100 million people who dropped into further dire poverty as a consequence of this recession; we estimate that a billion people are hungry around the globe. And so wealthier nations have a moral obligation as well as a national security interest in providing assistance.”<sup>5</sup>

However, in focusing on the normative aspects of the issue—what governments *ought to do*—the positive aspects—what *can be* done—of state-led humanitarian action are often neglected. This is unfortunate since understanding the feasibility of humanitarian action, as well as its limits, in practice ultimately requires positive analysis. Indeed, once we consider the relevant constraints and incentives at work it may turn out that governments lack the ability to actually deliver on what are determined to be their moral obligations. So while economics cannot provide normative answers regarding the moral responsibility to help others, it can provide crucial insights into whether state-led humanitarian action can succeed and, perhaps more importantly, avoid causing unintended harms to those in need. These insights can then inform subsequent moral discussions because unrealistic “oughts” can result not just in frustration, but worse yet in the very opposite of what was intended. When this happens obligations that may initially appear to have moral weight actually do not. In this regard, my hope is that the analysis that follows can contribute to our understanding of humanitarianism by delineating the limits of state-led humanitarian action to remove suffering and improve the human condition.

---

<sup>1</sup> Coyne 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Coyne 2008: 187.

<sup>3</sup> Kennedy 1961.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Blair 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Kellerhals Jr. 2009.