Towards a history of humanitarian experiences

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Introduction: Towards a History of Humanitarian Experiences

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Abstract

This special issue explores the evolving history of humanitarian experiences by bridging emotions, senses, and lived realities with broader social and political contexts. It challenges conventional definitions of humanitarianism by reframing it as a 'cultivated feeling' and examining its diverse embodiments across history. Contributions analyse how artists, children, volunteers, and professionals have shaped humanitarian actions, from anti-slavery movements to modern refugee aid, addressing ethical dilemmas, emotional dynamics, and systemic inequalities. By intertwining memory, imagination, and bodily practices, this collection reexamines humanitarianism's roots and its transformation into a global movement. It critically interrogates the roles of emotions, offering a nuanced perspective on their historical intersections with senses and experiences. Ultimately, the issue advocates for an experiential turn, enriching the historical understanding of humanitarianism and its implications for contemporary and future practices.

Keywords

history of emotions – history of experience – humanitarianism – memory

1 Feeling the Pulse of Humanitarianism

This special issue originated from discussions initiated during the conference 'Humanitarian Experiences: Ethical Conflicts in Historical Perspective', which we organised at the Brocher Foundation (Hermance, Switzerland) in November 2022 with financial support from the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF). This meeting brought together scholars from the Universities of Geneva, Florence, Manchester, Paris-Saclay, Southampton, Tampere and Zürich to explore the potential of the new history of experience to feel the pulse of humanitarianism: an elusive phenomenon which has been associated with both 'an ideology, a movement, a profession and a compassionate endeavour to provide assistance and protection to populations at risk', as well as 'a set of institutions, a business and an industry'.[1]

Echoing our conversations along the shores of Lake Léman, this special issue frames the history of experience as being 'strictly connected to recent developments in the history of emotions and the senses' which have stressed the necessity of analysing their entanglements with the history of the body, as well as with memory, visual and material culture studies.[2] By exploring 'how far a history of emotions is also a history of the body and the five senses',[3] our aim is to de-essentialise present-day conceptions which associate humanitarianism with emergency relief operations conducted by medically oriented organisations to assist populations affected by human-made and natural disasters. This is important, as such definitions often obscure the origins and complex evolution of humanitarianism. Due to this, in this special issue, we have adopted a loose conception which understands humanitarianism as 'a cultivated feeling' that does not necessarily require 'recourse to the direct experience of assisting or relieving other humans'.[4] This broad characterisation allows the authors of the articles to examine how a diverse range of social agents has actually lived humanitarianism by actively contributing to human welfare through ameliorative actions aimed at mitigating pain, suffering and death.

Conceptual definitions falter when we examine humanitarianism through the lens of the history of experience, as this perspective enables us to

1 Antonio Donini, 'The Far Side: the Meta Functions of Humanitarianism in a Globalised World,' *Disasters* 34, suppl. 2 (2010): S220–37 (S220).

2 Rob Boddice, 'What Is the History of Experience?', *Alusta!*, 18 April 2019, https://www.tuni.fi/alustalehti/2019/04/18/what-is-the-history-of-experience/.

3 Piroska Nagy, 'Historians and Emotions: New Theories, New Questions,' Les émotions au Moyen Âge, carnet d'EMMA, 24 October 2008, https://emma.hypotheses.org/147.

4 Rob Boddice, *Humane Professions: The Defence of Experimental Medicine, 1876–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 2–3.

acknowledge how shipwrecked people, artists, experimental researchers, children, delegates, volunteers and refugees have negotiated the 'conventional limits within which' people have felt 'the responsibility to act' by advocating for an ever-evolving vision of humanity.[5] Examining disparate environments – oceans, ateliers, laboratories, primary schools, desert war zones, developing countries and refugee camps – this special issue demonstrates that humanitarianism has been reimagined through a wide array of causes. These causes included – amongst others – the abolition of slavery, lifeboat movements set up to save lives from shipwrecks, psychiatric reform, the defence of animal vivisection or the nation in wartime, the protection of populations threatened by armed conflicts, as well as development programmes in the so-called 'Third World' and providing aid to refugees in camps. By interrogating 'who or what' constitutes 'the humanity of humanitarianism',[6] contributors uncover how this movement has been oriented by a shifting 'politics of pain' which has determined whose suffering has counted and whose has been invalidated.[7] Investigating which pain actually hurts and whose feelings matter when responding to others' suffering, this special issue shows the complex historical processes of social remembering, public negotiation, contestation and validation through which humanitarian experiences have been shaped so as to provide future generations with a nuanced and historically informed knowledge.

To this end, the authors draw on a substantial body of scholarship which has stressed the crucial role played by emotions in the making of the humanitarian movement. As the political scientist Michael N. Barnett observes, we should understand the rise of humanitarian sensibility as the emergence of 'a culture of compassion' within the public realm which transformed 'the alleviation of suffering' into 'a defining element of modern society' from the late eighteenth century.[8] This 'passion for compassion' which united early humanitarians stemmed from a significant shift in the emotional life of Western societies, wherein the infliction of unnecessary suffering – whether upon 'animals' or 'other types of despised persons' including 'slaves, criminals and the

5 Thomas. L. Haskell, 'Capitalism and the Origins of the Humanitarian Sensibility, Part 1,' *American Historical Review* 90, no. 2 (1985): 339–61 (356).

6 Costas Douzinas, 'The Many Faces of Humanitarianism,' *Parrhesia* 2 (2007): 1–28 (1).

7 Rob Boddice, *Knowing Pain: A History of Sensation, Emotion, and Experience* (Cambridge: Polity, 2023), 35; Rob Boddice, 'The Politics of Pain,' *Aeon*, 3 January 2023, https://aeon.co/essays/pain-is-not-the-purview-of-medics-what-can-historians-tell-us.

8 Michael N. Barnett, *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011), 49.

insane' – began to be perceived as a form of cruelty.[9] As an expression of 'moral outrage', cruelty functioned as a fundamental pillar in 'the building of a moral and sensible response to the aesthetics' of 'pain' as this term came to signify 'a lack of feeling' or 'callousness' which characterised the 'uncivilised' behaviour of those people who acted like barbarians.[10]

Aligned with the global expansion of the capitalist market, compassion became the driving force of the humanitarian movement in its effort to combat 'humanity's capacity for cruelty'.[11] Although compassion has been widely celebrated as 'the humanitarian feeling par excellence'[12] due to its association with alleviating others' suffering, it has often been reified by organisations such as the Red Cross movement and Doctors without Borders to present their actions as 'apolitical, disinterested and independent'.[13] Despite it being considered to be the most perfect expression of altruism, historians have critically examined the compassionate spirit of humanitarians, demonstrating the extent to which this has reinforced gender, class, racial and religious power relations.[14] For instance, many anti-slavery activists experienced their humanitarian engagement as a spiritual mission which sought redemption for colonial subjects through 'a language of salvation' that asserted 'the sacred character of life'. This rhetoric echoed the religious roots of compassion as they had been articulated by Tertullian in the second century when he associated this feeling

9 Barnett, *Empire*, 50; Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (London: Penguin, 2006), 175; Karen Halttunen, 'Humanitarianism and the Pornography of Pain in Anglo-American Culture,' *The American Historical Review* 100, no. 2 (1995): 303–34 (303); Margaret Abruzzo, *Slavery, Cruelty, and the Rise of Humanitarianism* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), 1.

10 Rob Boddice and Mark Smith, *Emotion, Sense and Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 11.

11 Barnett, *Empire*, 1.

12 Bertrand Taithe, '"Cold Calculation in the Faces of Horrors?" Pity, Compassion and the Making of Humanitarian Protocols,' in *Medicine, Emotion and Disease, 1700–1950*, ed. Fay Bound Alberti (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 79–99 (79); Rebbeca Gill, *Calculating Compassion: Humanity and Relief in War, Britain 1870–1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013); Dolores Martín-Moruno, 'Crisis? What Crisis? Making Humanitarianism Visible through the History of Emotions,' in *Making Humanitarian Crisis: Emotions and Images in History*, ed. Brenda Lynn Edgar, Valérie Gorin, and Dolores Martín-Moruno (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 1–28 (7).

13 Silvia Salvatici, *A History of Humanitarianism 1755–1989: In the Name of Others* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019), 6.

14 Davide Rodogno, 'Certainty, Compassion and the Ingrained Arrogance of Humanitarians,' in *The Red Cross Movement: Myths, practices, turning points*, ed. Neville Wylie, Melanie Oppenheimer, and James Crossland (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), 62–89; Dolores Martín-Moruno, *Beyond Compassion: Gender and Humanitarian Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

with 'the suffering that Christians shared with Jesus Christ'.[15] However, rather than challenging hierarchies, compassion has often reinforced the asymmetry between benefactors and beneficiaries, defining, thus, humanitarianism as 'a moral relationship with no possible reciprocity'.[16]

Besides compassion, the historical vicissitudes of humanitarianism have also been analysed through the virtues of sympathy. While pity and compassion refer to 'our fellow feeling with the sorrows of others', sympathy was theorised by the Scottish moral philosopher Adam Smith as the affective mechanism through which humans can feel what their fellows are experiencing as if they were in their own skin.[17] In his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), Smith described sympathy as a kind of mirror that allows an impartial spectator to feel the agonies and calamities endured by others through their imagination, so as to denounce such suffering as an injustice by evoking a wide range of emotions varying from compassion, horror and indignation to resentment. More recently, Smith's theory has inspired numerous publications which have examined how humanitarian narratives and imagery function as advocacy tools, shaping, thus, audiences' affective responses – ranging from sympathy, compassion, pity, indignation and solidarity to empathy – when they are confronted with distant suffering.[18]

While we welcome the growing interest in 'humanitarian emotions',[19] we invite readers of this special issue to remain cautious vis-à-vis overly

15 Diana Barnes and Delia Falconer, 'Compassion, a Timely Feeling …,' *Emotions: History, Culture, Society* 4, no. 1 (2020): 91–108 (93); Dolores Martín-Moruno, *Beyond Compassion*, 10; Alan Lester and Fae Dussart, *Colonization and the Origins of Humanitarian Governance. Protecting Aborigines across the Nineteenth-Century British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 9.

16 Didier Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 3.

17 Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (London: A. Millar, 1761), 7; Rob Boddice, *The Science of Sympathy: Morality, Evolution, and Victorian Civilization* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016), 9.

18 See Thomas W. Laqueur, 'Bodies, Details, and the Humanitarian Narrative,' in *The New Cultural History: Essays on the History of Society and Culture*, ed. Lynn Hunt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 176–22; Luc Boltanski, *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Lilie Chouliaraki, *The Ironic Spectator: Solidarity in the Age of Post-Humanitarianism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013); Emma Hutchison, 'Humanitarian Emotions through History: Imaging Suffering and Performing Aid,' in *Emotional Bodies: The Historical Performativity of Emotions*, ed. Dolores Martín-Moruno and Beatriz Pichel (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2019), 219–41; and Edgar, Gorin, and Martín-Moruno, eds, *Making Humanitarian Crisis*.

19 On humanitarian emotions, see Bertrand Taithe, 'Empathie, soins et compassions: les émotions humanitaires,' in *Histoire des émotions: De la fin du XIX^e siècle à nos jours*, vol. 3,

anachronistic accounts that assume the continuity of people's identification with others' suffering over the *longue durée* through the mobilisation of emotions such as empathy.[20] The overemphasis on empathy in humanitarian studies – a notion which only came to mean 'our capacity to grasp and understand the mental and emotional lives of others' after the Second World War[21] – remains problematic, as it has led scholars to project our 'twenty-first century world' onto the past, neglecting the fact that its 'realities were inevitably more complex and more foreign' than our own.[22] Relying solely on empathy, we risk rendering past humanitarian experiences – which we cannot readily identify with today – irrelevant.[23] Humanitarianism cannot be reduced to empathy or any single emotion, as it inevitably encompasses 'the complex array of feelings that comes into play when making moral judgements' about vicarious pain.[24]

The study of humanitarianism highlights the difficulties of analysing feelings 'that incorporate many separate and even competing emotions' without separating them from rational thinking, memory, imagination and intersubjective rationality.[25] These sorts of challenge have led an increasing number of scholars to reformulate 'the tools and the concepts' developed by historians of emotions and the senses 'over the past 30 years' within the framework of the history of experience.[26] Although the history of experience has become an institutional initiative spearheaded by the Centre of Excellence in the History of Experience (HEX) hosted by Tampere University, other researchers – mainly

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ed. Alain Corbin, Jean-Jacques Courtine, and Georges Vigarello (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2017), 364–81; Katie Barclay, *The History of Emotions: A Student Guide to Methods and Sources* (London: Red Globe Press, 2020), 140–41; Dolores Martín-Moruno, 'Crisis?,' 7–10.

20 See for instance, Richard Ashby Wilson and Richard D. Brown, eds, *Humanitarianism and Suffering: The Mobilization of Empathy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); and Jane Lydon, *Imperial Emotions: The Politics of Empathy across the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

21 Susan Lanzoni, *Empathy: A History* (New Haven, NJ: Yale University Press, 2018), 3.

22 Abigail Green, 'Humanitarianism in Nineteenth-Century Context: Religious, Gendered, National,' *The Historical Journal* 57, no. 4 (2014): 1157–75 (1160).

23 Boddice, *Knowing Pain*, 162; Jo Labanyi, 'The Touch of the Image: Affect and Materiality in Photojournalism of the Spanish Civil War,' in *Making Humanitarian Crisis*, ed. Edgar, Gorin, and Martín-Moruno, 79–100 (99–100).

24 Barclay, *The History of Emotions*, 141.

25 Juan Manuel Zaragoza Bernal, 'A Change of Pace: The History of (Emotional) Experiences,' *History of Psychology* 24, no. 2 (2021): 130–35.

26 Josephine Hoegaerts and Stephanie Olsen, 'The History of Experience: Afterword,' in *Lived Nation as the History of Experiences and Emotions in Finland, 1800–2000*, ed. Ville Kivimäki, Sami Suodenjoki, and Tanja Vahtikari (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 375–83 (376); Boddice, 'What Is the History of Experience?'.

from Canada, Italy, Spain and Switzerland – have also contributed significantly to its development in recent years.[27]

Building on these works, we argue that feeling the pulse of humanitarianism involves not only scrutinising the 'emotions that direct our attention to the suffering of others and make us want to remedy them', but also exploring their interactions with the 'embodied practices, sensory perceptions, thoughts and ideas' which have given meaning to the experience of others' pain.[28] Mobilising 'experience' as a category of historical inquiry opens new exciting theoretical and empirical avenues for analysing how humanitarians have recast 'their memories' through the creative powers of imagination as 'ways of feeling and understanding the world through practice, rather than contemplation'.[29] By reassessing social experiences as powerful human resources for acquiring new knowledge(s), the main objective of this special issue is to shed light on 'the lessons learnt' from humanitarians' pasts.[30] In doing so, we advocate for an experiential turn that could allow future scholars to comprehend how socially shared experiences have shaped 'common knowledge and collective practices' which – in turn – have contributed to the development of 'policies, norms, ideologies' throughout the long history of humanitarianism.[31]

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27 For some relevant publications, see HEX's *Digital Handbook of the History of Experience*, accessed 8 November 2024, https://sites.tuni.fi/hexhandbook/; Javier Moscoso, 'From the History of Emotions to the History of Experience: A Republican Sailor's Sketchbook in the Civil War,' in *Engaging Emotions in Spanish Culture and History*, ed. Elena Delgado, Pura Fernández, and Jo Labanyi (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2016), 176–91; Dolores Martín-Moruno, 'Faut-il brûler l'histoire des émotions?,' *Traverse* 2 (2020): 147–57; Dolores Martín-Moruno, 'Introduction: Feeling Humanitarianism during the Spanish Civil War and Republican Exile,' *Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies* 21, no. 4 (2020): 445–57; Piroska Nagy and Xavier Biron-Ouellet, 'Introduction. Pour une histoire de l'expérience: le laboratoire médiéval,' *Memini* 28 (2022), accessed 14 April 2024, https://journals.openedition.org/memini/2058; Brenda Lynn Edgar and Valérie Gorin, 'Afterword: Humanitarian Visual Practices: Emotions, Experience,' in *Making Humanitarian Crisis*, ed. Edgar, Gorin, and Martín-Moruno, 171–75; Marie Van Haster, 'Both Meaningful and Embodied: Moving towards Dynamical Approaches in the History of Experience,' *Emotion Review* 16, no. 4 (2024): 211–23.

28 Boddice and Smith, *Emotion*, 23.

29 Dolores Martín-Moruno, 'Pain(ful) Experiences as an Archipelago of Knowledge(s),' *Digital Handbook of the History of Experience*, 24 March 2023, https://sites.tuni.fi/hexhandbook/theory/painful-experiences-as-an-archipelago-of-knowledges/.

30 Bertrand Taithe and John Borton, 'History, Memory and "Lessons Learnt" for Humanitarian Practitioners,' *European Review of History* 23, no. 1–2 (2016): 210–24.

31 Johanna Annola, Hanna Lindberg, and Pirjo Markkola, 'Experience, Institutions, and the Lived Welfare State,' in *Lived Institutions as History of Experience*, ed. Johanna Annola, Hanna Lindberd, and Pirjo Markkola (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024), 1–24 (6).

2 The Essays

Humanitarian experiences are often depicted in autobiographies, films, pamphlets and media using established structures or tropes that typically emphasise heroism and self-sacrifice. While these narratives can be vivid and moving, they often present an atomised view of humanitarian work, confining it to the biographical genre rather than situating it within a larger collective history of humanitarian experiences. Additionally, such ego-documents are frequently overshadowed by hegemonic institutional representations.[32] To transcend such representations, the contributions gathered in this special issue draw on a wide range of sources, including autobiographical accounts, letters, films, drawings, paintings and illustrations, journals and oral history records. These materials allow the authors to explore the diversity and granularity of humanitarian practices, focusing on the lived experiences of social groups or individuals.

Contributions are divided into two periods that witnessed significant changes in humanitarian history: the era of imperialist expansion and the decolonisation wars. The first three essays explore the 'revolution in moral sentiments' that has been instrumental in shaping humanitarian feelings since the late eighteenth century.[33] Using the case of the shipwreck of the French frigate *Medusa* (1816), Dolores Martín-Moruno discusses the role of artists – such as Théodore Géricault and Banksy – as humanitarian agents within the context of slavery abolition and lifesaving movements. Thus, she considers how ateliers and murals function as laboratories where pain has been studied to transform the experiences of shipwrecked people – slaves and migrants – into a humanitarian cause. Analysing the artistic techniques which Géricault employed in *The Raft of the Medusa* (1819) to convey the pain of the shipwrecked enables her to establish a comparison with those mobilised by Banksy in *We're Not All in the Same Boat* (2015), so as to interpret the raft as the ultimate humanitarian theatre for representing migratory experiences at sea. Calenture – a fever characterised by disorientation and delusion that challenges the reality of sensory perceptions, emotions and thought – is highlighted as the essence of shipwreck experiences. As she argues, reframing these two artworks within the long history of humanitarianism provides us with a deep knowledge of the enduring legacy of colonialism in present-day maritime migration routes. Additionally, Martín-Moruno's contribution demonstrates the fluctuating experiences felt

32 Myfanwy James, 'Humanitarian Fables: Morals, Meanings and Consequences for Humanitarian Practice,' *Third World Quarterly* 43, no. 2 (2022): 475–93.

33 Barnett, *Empire*, 49.

by audiences. While solidarity emerged in the nineteenth century as a political concept rather than an emotional one – connecting shared responsibility with collective action for justice and equity – modern audiences often act as 'ironic' spectators, driven by cynicism, detachment or self-reflection rather than genuine solidarity.[34] This evolution illustrates the non-prevalence of empathy and highlights the necessity to adopt a more critical and reflexive approach to engaging with distant suffering, emphasising the importance of understanding the root causes of this suffering beyond the emotional reactions that it provokes.

In the second contribution, Rob Boddice examines the trial against the University of Pennsylvania Medical Faculty (1914), which faced significant scrutiny and public outcry due to allegations of vivisection practices. This controversy was part of a broader ethical, intellectual and affective debate around the elimination of human and animal cruelty which ran from the 1870s until the First World War. Thus, this essay considers medical experimentation as a conflicting humanitarian practice designed to reduce suffering. Accounts of the trial, which pitted scientists against anti-vivisectionists, highlight the contested experience of humanity or what is considered to be human. Scientists – such as John Sweet – viewed human suffering as an abstract feeling associated with the urban poor and the image of social medicine. These scientists contended that such experiments were conducted for the ultimate goal of advancing human health, thereby associating the privileged experience of humanitarianism with those conducting the experiments. Conversely, the prosecution, which represented humane societies, was not concerned with human suffering but rather that of animals. They argued that these experiments were inhumane because they inflicted unnecessary pain on animals. This contested experience of humanity underscores the inherent divide between experiments in laboratories and experience in the *Lebenswelt* – the world which we experience in our daily lives before we apply any scientific or analytical abstractions to it.[35] However, in the laboratory universe, what seemed to be a sign of pain did not objectively indicate the presence of pain, as chloroform was often used during these experiments. The humanitarian knowledge produced in this context stemmed from the medical knowledge which was gained to combat suffering in society.

Contextualising her article in the First World War, Stephanie Olsen explores the 'vast extent of the humanitarian challenges' which were posed by this

34 Chouliaraki, *The Ironic Spectator*, 2.

35 Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, trans. David Carr (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1954).

global conflict in everyday life.[36] In this new era of total war – where militarism, patriotism, peace activism and humanitarianism often intersected – citizens were called upon to support war efforts.[37] Olsen unpacks the experiential and emotional roles of children in the British Empire who were encouraged to perform as humanitarians. They raised funds and contributed to the emotional effort of the war through numerous artistic and literary creations such as selling handmade goods and writing letters to soldiers. Schools, relief funds and communities fostered this formative experience of humanitarianism, serving as laboratories for good citizenship. Children often mobilised sentiments of hope for the future by demonstrating humanity towards Belgian refugees and British soldiers. Thus, the history of emotions and the history of experience provide valuable frameworks for understanding the process of making humanitarians, as in the case of children being moulded into future citizens. The knowledge that they gained through these formative experiences was also instrumental in fostering a sense of national belonging.

Moving to the decolonisation period, the last three essays in this special issue discuss the overseas experience of expatriate workers and their engagement with the Global South. Volunteers and other solidarist movements brought about this momentum for Third World internationalism and 'post-colonial mobilization'[38] which was characterised by development discourses concerning poverty and inequality. First, Silvia Salvatici explores the embodied experiences and ideological commitments of young practising Catholics who joined missions in Africa or Latin America, contributing to the emergence of non-governmental humanitarianism in Italy during the 1960s. Their actions reflect a vision of engaged humanity that transcended traditional charitable aid and was driven by a desire for genuine connection and systemic change – one deeply rooted in solidarity and an active commitment to social justice in underdeveloped countries. Religion played a crucial role in their engagement, as faith fuelled their activism and forged an emotional community centred on Christian and humanitarian ideals. By analysing personal narratives, letters and testimonies, Salvatici underscores the significance of emotions in shaping the actions and motivations of these volunteers to stress the challenges they faced throughout their humanitarian journey. While their vocation was

36 Eleanor Davey, John Borton, and Matthew Foley, *A History of the Humanitarian System: Western Origins and Foundations*, HPG Working Paper (London: Humanitarian Policy Group, 2013), 7.

37 John Hutchinson, *Champions of Charity: War and the Rise of the Red Cross* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996).

38 Johannes Paulmann, 'Conjunctures in the History of International Humanitarian Aid during the Twentieth Century,' *Humanity* 4, no. 2 (2013): 215–38 (227).

bolstered by the cultivation of positive feelings for helping others during pre-departure training, their field experiences were often marked by loneliness, fatigue, trauma and the disillusionment of being unable to overcome systemic inequalities. Upon their return, these experiences prompted self-reflection which led to their emotions being processed into practical knowledge which gave meaning to their journeys.

Drawing parallels with the complex emotional landscape that is inherent to aid work and the enactment of humanitarian ideals on the ground, Valérie Gorin explores the moral, affective and sensory experiences of the International Committee of the Red Cross delegates and head of mission André Rochat during the Yemeni civil war (1962–70). Using memoirs, photographs and films, this essay shows how aid work was deeply intertwined with moral distress. Confronted by the hostile desert and mountainous environment of the laboratory that was the setting for their isolated mission, delegates experienced fear, anger, anxiety and guilt, as well as hope and pride, while struggling to reconcile their personal convictions with institutional mandates. These emotions shaped their ability to respond to ethical dilemmas and perform their duties in extreme conditions, such as navigating war zones to help wounded combatants or witnessing inhumane treatment of war prisoners. The concept of 'affective neutrality'[39] is discussed as an aspirational ideal for humanitarian workers, highlighting how emotions, though integral to humanitarian practice, are often repressed or silenced. While emotions can foster camaraderie among aid workers in challenging environments, field experiences may result in them feeling resentment towards the institution that they are working for. Thus, the ICRC's reluctance to act decisively amplified Rochat's internal conflict in Yemen, leaving him feeling unsupported and ultimately disillusioned. This resentment led to disobedience, framed not merely as a rejection of authority but also as a deeply human response to emotional struggles and a reaffirmation of humanitarian ideals and the knowledge gained when institutional approaches seem to be inadequate or misaligned with field realities.

Bertrand Taithe concludes by examining the legacies of the postcolonial period, focusing on the social gatherings of veteran field workers who reflected on their experiences in refugee camps in Thailand and Cambodia during the 1980s – a time of early reforms within the humanitarian system.[40] Organised

39 Liisa Malkki, *The Need to Help: The Domestic Arts of International Humanitarianism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 185.

40 Peter Walker and Catherine Russ, 'Fit for Purpose: The Role of Modern Professionalism in Evolving the Humanitarian Endeavour,' *International Review of the Red Cross* 93, no. 884 (2011): 1193–1210.

as informal 'get-togethers' during the 2010s, these encounters became spaces for collective emotional remembering, meaning-making and belonging among international humanitarian workers. Drawing on synchronous recordings of oral histories and recollections from both humanitarian workers and refugees, Taithe observes how joy, nostalgia, sadness and indignation emerged as emotions which coloured their memories. These emotions served both as expressions of narcissistic pleasure and as part of the process of remembering meaningful past experiences. As Taithe argues, this veteran group represents both an epistemic community, sharing informal norms and standards of humanitarian work, and a trauma community, as confronting genocide survivors and enduring traumatic circumstances firsthand was a defining feature of this group's identity. The essay ends by showing how the group's humanitarian experiences became an existential journey, involving normative and formative education that resists closure. This results in humanitarian knowledge emerging as a living archive of memories from past experiences.

The bottom-up perspectives provided in these different historical accounts open the door to contextualising how humanitarian agents reacted to the ethical dilemmas they experienced. Existing literature on humanitarian ethics has shown how ethical challenges encountered by aid workers often relate to tensions between the prioritisation of needs, political or social barriers, limiting aid policies or agendas, or humanitarian normativity.[41] However, such ethical considerations rarely consider – if at all – the experiential complexities that emerge from the embodied confrontation with the spectacle of suffering and how emotions and senses intersect with values and decision-making. By reframing the history of emotions within the history of experience, our ambition in this special issue is to offer new lines of inquiry to expand humanitarian history by adding new layers of thinking, feeling and expressing humanity.

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41 Lisa Schwartz et al., 'Ethics in Humanitarian Aid Work: Learning From the Narratives of Humanitarian Health Workers,' *AJOB Primary Research* 1, no. 3 (2010): 45–54; see also Katarína Komenská, 'Moral Motivation in Humanitarian Action,' *Human Affairs* 27, no. 2 (2017): 145–54; and Hugo Slim, 'Doing the Right Thing: Relief Agencies, Moral Dilemmas and Moral Responsibility in Political Emergencies and War,' *Disasters* 21, no. 3 (1997): 244–57.

'A Polyphonic History of Care: Gender, Experiences and Knowledge(s)', as well by the Brocher Foundation, which provided us with all of the necessary facilities to conduct this meeting. We would like to thank all of the colleagues who attended this conference, both those who have contributed articles to this special issue and those who participated in the seminar: Raphaële Balu (Sorbonne University), Rob Boddice (Tampere University), Brenda Lynn Edgar (Geneva Museum of Ethnography), Laure Humbert (University of Manchester), Marie Leyder (University of Geneva), Caroline Moine (Université Paris-Saclay), Stephanie Olsen (Tampere University), William Pons (United Nations), Silke Roth (University of Southampton), Silvia Salvatici (University of Florence), Bertrand Taithe (University of Manchester), Emma Tieffenbach (University of Zürich) and Minerva Rivas Velarde (University of Geneva) as well as the youngest participant at this meeting – Sébastien Boddice Olsen. Last but not least, we would like to dedicate this special issue to the memory of our colleague Emma Hutchison (University of Queensland), with whom we had the pleasure of working on humanitarianism and emotions for many years, who has unfortunately left us too soon.