



Provincializing empathy: Humanitarian sentiment and the Israeli–Palestinian conflict

Erica Weiss

Tel Aviv University, Israel

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Abstract

This article considers the role of the humanitarian sentiment empathy in peace initiatives in the Israeli–Palestine conflict. Recently, a sustained critique of humanitarianism has emerged. While many of these accounts focus on the ethical effects of specific manifestations of humanitarian governance, there is a significant strain criticizing the inherent logical structure of humanitarian empathy, and questioning the innate ability of the humanitarian tradition to understand ethical questions politically. This critique does not resonate with my fieldwork experiences with Jewish Israeli conscientious objectors, who are explicitly inspired by empathetic experiences with Palestinians, and interpret these experiences politically. Thus, following Dipesh Chakrabarty's example, I suggest that provincializing the humanitarian tradition is a more productive anthropological stance than critique, because it similarly allows us to criticize universal claims and abuses of power, while not subscribing to determinism, and not repudiating our interlocutors' core ethical beliefs.

Keywords

Critique, empathy, ethics, humanitarianism, sentiment

Israeli politics have undergone a strong swing to the right in recent years, reflecting a widespread loss of optimism, especially among secular Jews, as to the possibility of a peace agreement with Palestinians. This has brought figures like Benjamin Netanyahu and Avigdor Lieberman to power, politicians who are assertive in promoting policies of ethnic exclusion and Israeli settlement expansion. Polls show that young Jewish Israelis increasingly hold aggressive attitudes toward

Corresponding author:

Erica Weiss, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Tel Aviv University, Ramat Aviv, Israel.
Email: weiss.eric@gmail.com

Palestinians (Kashti, 2010a, 2010b, 2011). Though peace-building initiatives proliferated after the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993, today many in the region feel farther than ever from peace. I have often heard Jewish Israelis express the belief that there is too much of a gap between respective visions of a 'reasonable' resolution to sustain hope for peace in their lifetimes. How to best address this gap theoretically is the subject of this article. At one time, Jewish voices of co-existence turned to the Jewish tradition for ethical inspiration. The organization Brit Shalom, and thinkers like Martin Buber, Gershom Scholem, and Yeshayahu Leibowitz, eschewed the hegemonic trends of nationalism and explored Hasidic and mystic traditions as resources for cohabitation with Palestinians. However, for today's largely secular Israeli left, religion is usually considered a conservative and aggressive political force, and not seen as a resource for peace. Rather, the peace camp looks to the discourses and rationalities of secular humanitarianism to inform their political arguments.

Specifically, the humanitarian concept of empathy is used ubiquitously as a counter-discourse to right-wing politics. Humanitarian discourse dominates left-wing newspaper editorials, and constitutes the main methodology of peace-building initiatives and left-wing activist activities. Nearly all of the dozens of peace-themed cultural events I attended during my fieldwork – plays, films, and concerts – relied on humanitarian empathy with the other side as the ethical motivation for peace. Humanitarian empathy is a deeply entrenched value in secular Jewish Israeli society.¹ This is partially related to Zionism's historical and cultural overlap with the secular European development of humanitarian thought, which led to humanitarian empathy's codification in certain political norms. But also, humanitarianism is a normative ethical tradition with global scope, and Israel and Palestine have been targets of humanitarian discourse and initiatives, further instilling its values as those that define and represent the secular left. The left does not have a monopoly on this discourse, however. Humanitarian empathy is well represented in state discourse and initiatives in specific spheres, such as humanitarian relief, for Palestinians and populations internationally. In recent wars in Gaza, Israeli pundits across the political spectrum used empathy to appeal to citizens' sympathies alternatively for Gazans *and* the rocket-barraged Israeli residents of the south of Israel. Despite its appeal and persuasive power in secular Jewish Israeli society, the evidence suggests that humanitarian empathy has a very mixed track record of producing political change, often entrenching forms of power with the salve of moral sentiment. In addition, humanitarian empathy's hegemonic status and claims to universal applicability often silence alternative ethical approaches to peace.

Recently, a sustained and multi-vocal theoretical critique of humanitarianism has emerged within anthropology. Many of these accounts focus on the problematic ethical effects of humanitarian governance and its current political manifestations. Peter Redfield (2008), Ilana Feldman (2007), and Mariella Pandolfi (2010) have all contributed significantly to showing the ways in which humanitarian values have been made complicit in Realpolitik goals. There is also a strain within this critique that takes issue with the inherent logic of humanitarian ethics

itself. In his ongoing efforts to ‘follow humanitarianism to its logical conclusion’ (Fassin, 2007: 502), Didier Fassin takes issue with the way ‘humanitarian reason’ manifests itself in global governance to legitimize state violence through military intervention, as well as the ways in which the virtues of suffering and compassion come to replace justice and the rights of citizenship (Fassin, 2012). Erica Bornstein interrogates the logic of humanitarianism and finds it impoverished in its understanding of relationships, especially those of reciprocity (Bornstein, 2012). Miriam Ticktin offers perhaps the harshest critique of the ‘driving logic’ of humanitarian beliefs, claiming that the concept of compassion offered by humanitarianism implies a limiting notion of humanity (Ticktin, 2006: 39). The empirical research carried out in these accounts is indispensable in demonstrating the ways humanitarian politics have become hegemonic, imposing a culturally laden ethics on other cultures, and depoliticizing claims to justice. They are absolutely correct regarding the problematic depoliticizing effects of the cases of humanitarian governance they examine. However, I remain unsatisfied with the way some of these accounts present the political and ethical effects of humanitarian governance as outcomes of an inherent structural problem of humanitarian logic, suggesting that certain political manifestations (the maltreatment of refugees, militarized interventions, arbitrary and unjust distinction between worthy and unworthy victims, creation of ‘states of exception’) are the inevitable outcome of this ethical tradition. Not only is this type of critique more suited to philosophy than to anthropology but, more importantly, it does not reconcile with my fieldwork experiences.

Many humanitarian-based peace initiatives in Israel and Palestine make very problematic assumptions about the universality of humanitarian values, and also depoliticize claims to justice. Yet, my experiences with Israeli conscientious objectors suggested two factors that challenge the academic critique of humanitarian *values*, as opposed to critiquing current political *uses* of humanitarian resources. One is the ways my interlocutors used assailed humanitarian empathy to further radical political goals. The other is that an ethnographic examination of their experiences reveals humanitarian values to be more than an intellectual political commitment. Rather, it is a culturally embedded ethical tradition that structures emotional responses, as well as informing basic understandings of justice. This suggests values of empathy and compassion are too culturally deep to be easily substituted through intellectual critique, and anthropological understandings should reflect this reality, while not renouncing its critical faculty. My goal in this article is not to pathologize humanitarian empathy, as the above authors have done to varying degrees. Neither do I focus on the distance between rule and behavior. Rather, I suggest ‘provincializing’ humanitarian empathy, to challenge its hegemony and universalizing claims without dismissing the potency of this framework for those who have been socialized into this ethical tradition. In doing so, this article tries to offer an alternative to the hegemonic and universalizing ambitions of adherents of humanitarianism, and also the academic critiques of humanitarian empathy that see it as inherently problematic. In this, I follow the example Dipesh Chakrabarty laid out in *Provincializing Europe* (2001).

There, he makes clear that European culture itself – its traditions, worldview, and values – is not the problem as such. Rather, its hegemonic and imperial status are the appropriate objects of criticism.

This provincialization of humanitarian empathy is aided by recent developments in the anthropology of ethics that suggest a less teleological, more hermeneutical approach than the ‘genealogy of morals’ that has influenced the anthropological treatment of humanitarianism. This literature has demonstrated that people are constantly occupied with evaluating the good and attributing responsibility (Lambek, 2010; Keane, 2010; Robbins, 2013). In recent years, anthropologists have commandeered some of Alasdair MacIntyre’s ideas of ‘tradition’ (Lakoff and Collier, 2004; Lambek, 2008; Mattingly, 2012).² MacIntyre describes tradition as ‘an argument extended through time’ (1989: 12), a specific cultural system of justice that has its own logics and rationalities through which moral and ethical issues are thought and problematized. According to him, we should think about ‘justices rather than justice’ (1989: 9). Such traditions are largely incompatible with one another, though in reality through interaction and exchange they are subject to debates within and between traditions. What is appealing about this idea of tradition is the balance it strikes between continuity and change. It allows us to see how people are informed by disparate and incommensurable cultural ideas and ways of reasoning about ‘the good’, both at the level of habitus and at the level of reflexive engagement. At the same time, while recognizing that ideas of justice vary, it specifically allows for people to engage actively with their own tradition, recognize shortcomings, and try to correct them by engaging with interpretive traditions and other means of intervention.³

In *The Subject of Virtue*, James Laidlaw (2014) intervenes in a sociological program bent on demonstrating constraint, which he describes with Zygmunt Bauman’s phrase ‘the science of unfreedom’, and argues for the possibility that individuals are not wholly trapped in social and discursive structures, but rather may and do reflect and challenge their own traditions. In such a way, we are able to recognize the importance of culture without resorting to a genealogy of morals. I believe this framework allows us to avoid an exclusive engagement with the postulates and claims that humanitarian empathy makes, and examine the ways people use it in specific contexts, as well as the ways it conditions those people’s understanding of the ethical good and their perceptions of opportunities for ethical intervention. I hope to demonstrate that the progressive or regressive potential of this ethical tradition is largely in the hands of the interpreters of the tradition rather than any characteristic inherent to empathy’s specific rationalities and claims. However, as we will see, this does not imply that such attempts wholly escape inherited impasses and previous interpretations of the tradition, nor that such attempts are painless or without cost.

I begin the empirical section of this article by demonstrating the way empathy was revealed as a central ethical framework of my interlocutors, informing their decision to refuse their obligatory military service in Israel. The conscientious objectors I worked with refused to serve in the Israeli military because of a feeling

of ethical responsibility to Palestinians generated by feelings of empathy. Then I offer a preliminary demonstration of what it would mean to provincialize humanitarian empathy, the approach I advocate. In order to do so, I contextualize the empathy of my interlocutors on the larger scale of competing ethical traditions found among Israelis and Palestinians. Humanitarian empathy has been the hegemonic methodology of international and Israeli peace-building initiatives for decades, yet the academic literature suggests that the secular and Western appeal culturally alienates many involved in the conflict. I show that the hegemony of humanitarian empathy forecloses other possible traditions, not only those of Palestinians, but also of Israel's religious and Mizrahi (Jews of Middle Eastern origins) Jewish populations. In the final section, I return to my ethnography of conscientious objectors. Their struggles to negotiate between empathy's ethical demands on them and Palestinian critiques suggest that empathy's political failings should be considered the result of social practice rather than an inherent limitation of empathy itself.

Empathy as ethical inspiration

As a US anthropologist, I did my fieldwork with Israeli conscientious objectors, many of whom were members of a group called Combatants for Peace. Among the group are Israeli ex-soldiers from elite combat units who refused to continue their obligatory military service, and have since become activists encouraging military refusal and non-violence. All of these soldiers served in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, either Gaza or the West Bank, areas with large Palestinian populations seized by Israel in 1967. Many members became conscientious objectors during a wave of military refusals in 2002–3, during the height of the Al-Aqsa (or 'second') Intifada, the Palestinian uprising that signaled the end of the Oslo era. Nearly all of my interlocutors from this group served time in military jail for their refusal. Combatants for Peace emerged from this movement, and the Jewish founders decided to make overtures to Palestinian ex-combatants, inviting them to join their organization. The centrality of empathy as ethical inspiration for their refusal and activism was clearly evident from the beginning of my fieldwork. They credited strong emotional experiences of empathy with Palestinians they encountered during soldiering, especially young children, with an ethical epiphany that caused them great emotional pain and motivated them to refuse (Weiss, 2011). One of the members told me early in my fieldwork: 'No one in this group refused because of some intellectual decision, everybody has a story of empathy, a time that some kid looked them in the eye and reminded them of their kid, and challenged their self-image as a hero.' Dan, one of the first members of the organization, explained to me that part of the reason for the desire that the organization be both Jewish and Palestinian was to offer members of the group continued access to opportunities for empathy with the other side, to reinforce what they experienced while soldiering.⁴ One member of the group, Avi, explained to me that the idea behind this practice was to 'meet each other face-to-face, to expose ourselves to each other, to be

vulnerable. We thought if we share our personal experiences, it's a kind of catharsis, and we can feel deeper empathy for the other side.'

After one of the conscientious objectors I worked with Ami, finished high school with high grades in a suburb of Tel Aviv,⁵ he was drafted into the military, as was legally required of most young Jewish men. He joined an elite combat unit, because he wanted to, because his family encouraged him to, and because this was a long-standing method through which Israeli men could achieve high social status. He said that during his basic service he was 'poisoned'⁶ by a fog of hormones, state-sanctioned ideology, and bravado. He told me it was only years later, when he was older and serving reserve duty, that he began to think about what it was like to be a Palestinian child, born into such conditions, and completely unable to comprehend the complexities of the political situation. Perhaps, he thought, a 'child's simplicity' had more 'truth' than his ideological rationalizations.

I was imagining to myself what it must be like to be a Palestinian child, going to sleep when Israeli soldiers barge through the front door, yelling and waving guns around like assholes (*manyakim*), and separating your family. I won't even tell you what comes to mind when I think about that scene. The kid hears soldiers speaking to each other in a language he can't understand, imagining the worst about what is being said.

In his statement, Ami refers to a common IDF practice of home invasion, in which the military enters the homes of Palestinians in the Occupied Territories, usually at night, to find suspects or contraband, or to induce a feeling of disquiet in Palestinian communities. Military protocols sometimes include the separation and isolation of family members during these searches. Ami's experience is typical of other members of the group in the sense that he served for years before he experienced a crisis of conscience that caused him to refuse service, and because he attributed his ethical crisis and subsequent refusal of military service to strong feelings of empathy experienced as a combat soldier. This experience of empathy for those his society posed as 'the enemy' was unexpected and extremely disturbing.

Empathy, and its siblings in emotive politics, sympathy and compassion, have been the motivating ethical force behind international aid projects, peace-building efforts, and human rights crusades (Fassin and Pandolfi, 2010; Feldman and Ticktin, 2010). Empathy relies on an interpersonal encounter, and the feelings of commonality and compassion generated by the experience, to create responsibility. As an ethical practice humanitarian empathy is more specific than the universal definition of empathy, which is taking up another's perspective in order to decipher intentions without normative implications.⁷ Humanitarian empathy is not the only ethical use of empathy; it is also employed, for example, in the Islamic tradition. But specifically, humanitarian empathy generates responsibility to protect or intervene on behalf of the person perceived to be suffering. Several have traced this emphasis on suffering to the valorization and redemptive value attributed to the suffering of Christ on the cross (Redfield and Bornstein, 2011: 15; Fassin,

2012: 250), and Saint Augustine was a significant contributor to thought on ethical empathy (Pandolfi, 2010: 236; Fassin, 2012: 251).⁸ This cultural tradition emerged through a shift in public consciousness during the European Enlightenment that encouraged concern for the suffering of those far away, for whom Europeans until that point felt no particular moral obligation. Adam Smith (1976 [1812]), David Hume (1854 [1741]) and Francis Hutcheson (2003 [1728]) offered empathy (then called sympathy) as a natural psychological explanation for the origins of moral behavior and regulation.

Critiques of humanitarian empathy

Though in his book *Humanitarian Reason* Didier Fassin explicitly takes his object of inquiry to be the emergence of humanitarian governance at the end of the 20th century, and not the long-term development of humanitarian ethical tradition (2012: 4–5), he nevertheless looks at the genealogy and logical structure of humanitarianism as evidence of the inevitability of its current political manifestations. Fassin examines the logic of humanitarian thought, for example through a genealogical critique of the concept of hospitality (2012: 135–6) and sacred untouchability (*noli me tangere*) (2010: 37), to show how the implementation of humanitarian reason in politics has predictable and problematic outcomes. Erica Bornstein likewise perceives firm limits to the political potential of empathy with strangers (2012: 56), and is also troubled by the fact that empathy ‘does not guarantee benevolence’ (2012: 145), while I suggest that no ethical framework would offer such guarantees. Similarly, Miriam Ticktin on multiple occasions questions the concept of compassion, claiming ‘by its very definition, compassion is unable to generalize’ (2006: 44). She argues that the discriminatory and violent consequences of humanitarianism ‘are all the more striking because they are unexpectedly found at the very heart of the compassion that grounds humanitarian action’ (2006: 34). Ticktin (2011) holds suffering and compassion responsible for the discriminatory distinction between the sick as worthy of care and the poor as unworthy. She ultimately concludes that the humanitarian idea of compassion ‘encourages a limited and limiting notion of humanity’ (2006: 42).

Others challenge the inherent structure of empathy. Elizabeth Povinelli, in her book *Economies of Abandonment* (2011), argues that empathy is not a reliable basis for responsibility. She grounds this conclusion in her analysis of a fictional story by Ursula Le Guin called ‘The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas’. The story presents an ethical dilemma of responsibility for the residents of the utopian city of Omelas, where everyone’s health and wellbeing depend on a single child being locked in a dark cellar. Upon discovery of this fact, most residents are shocked by the suffering of the child, but are ultimately unwilling to relinquish their happiness and wellbeing. Dissecting the story, Povinelli concludes that empathy is unreliable since it requires us to distinguish our interests from those of others, which once accomplished, leads to us guiltily choosing our own interests (Povinelli, 2011). Several critics suggest that a gift that cannot be reciprocated is a structural

downfall of humanitarian reason (Fassin, 2010: 45; Bornstein, 2009), and imply, along with Giorgio Agamben, that the structural logic of the tradition flows inevitably to a state of exception (Fassin, 2012: 152–3, 181–9; Fassin and Pandolfi, 2010). These authors ultimately find the humanitarian ethical tradition uniquely impoverished and unfit for modern politics, preferring the categories of inequality, violence and justice to those of suffering, trauma and compassion (Fassin, 2012: 8; Pandolfi, 2010: 246; Ticktin, 2011: 3). Yet such arguments neglect the question of interpretation. References to philosophically manufactured dilemmas – like Luc Boltanski’s ‘spectator’s dilemma’ (Fassin, 2012: 9), or Le Guin’s fictional Olemas society (Povinelli, 2011) – in order to speak to the structure of humanitarian ideas evade the question of lived and negotiated ethical practices. Chakrabarty describes this as the difference between analytic social science and the hermeneutic tradition:

Analytic social science fundamentally attempts to ‘demystify’ ideology in order to produce a critique that looks toward a more just social order... The hermeneutic tradition, on the other hand, finds thought intimately tied to places and to particular forms of life. It is innately critical of the nihilism of that which is purely analytic. (Chakrabarty, 2001: 18)

Thus, I would like to suggest that these critiques, in their condemnation of the flaws and contradictions that would be present in any ethical tradition, reflect a misguided desire for a new universal ethics.

I take advantage of the theoretical position established by Clifford Geertz’s lecture ‘Anti-anti Relativism’ (1984), through which it is possible to reject something without thereby committing oneself to the opposite. I certainly do not want to argue for any exceptional potential of humanitarian ethics. Many of these accounts explicate the ways that the humanitarian tradition has been embedded in relationships of power and domination and regressive politics, which is an urgent anthropological task. While not asserting any necessity to accept the status quo, I believe that the ethnography I examine in this article gives us reason to believe that the social conditions of use are relevant to the effects of the tradition’s deployment. The critical accounts described above suggest that users of any ethical tradition of empathy cannot help but manifest its inherent contradictions and blind spots. But it is worth noting that not only a tradition is reproduced. As MacIntyre observes, ‘to be an adherent of a tradition is always to enact some further stage in the development of one’s tradition’ (1989: 11), and to ‘transcend the limitations of and provide remedies for the defects of their predecessors within the history of that same tradition’ (1989: 7). Soon, we will see such efforts being made among the conscientious objectors. Abdellah Hammoudi notes, in considering religious practice, that we should not focus exclusively on religious texts but on *how* men and women choose to put these traditions into practice to cultivate virtuous selves (2009: 29). Of course, it is also possible to do quite the opposite and create violent and exclusionary interpretations; the point is only that the meaning of the tradition is not teleological, and its truth cannot be established outside social context.

Towards provincializing empathy

In *Provincializing Europe*, Chakrabarty does not repudiate the European intellectual tradition, but rather resists its claims of universality, and shows it emerging from a shared cultural understanding that shapes understandings of both problems and their solutions (2001: xi). My argument is that provincializing humanitarianism, by casting it as an ethical tradition among many, is preferable to offering an intellectual or genealogical critique. This suggests the essential issue is how cultural traditions encounter one another regarding questions of the ethical good can be accomplished. Yet we should not be blind to the fact that encounters of traditions take place between people and groups meeting on radically unequal terms, where the ethical beliefs of one group can achieve hegemony and cause extreme violence in the process. I would like to outline what such a provincialization might look like in the context of my field site. Combatants for Peace's deployment of humanitarian empathy is not the only use of empathy in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Provincializing should include contextualizing the hegemonic peace-building initiatives that use people-to-people, empathy-based methodologies, which proliferated in the Post-Oslo era. Such reconciliation-transformation grassroots initiatives bring together Jews and Palestinians in order to inspire the trading of perspectives they believe will lead to peace (Maoz, 2004). Peace initiatives such as those that bring Israeli and Palestinian youth together for soccer games depend on the belief that responsibility is created by empathetic exposure. Dialogue groups, such as To Reflect and Trust, have used personal story-telling to try to break down existing collective identities ('us' against 'them'). They strive to facilitate changes in those identities, 'emphasizing the possibility that "we" have much in common, including pain and suffering, which we can accept in one another' (Albeck et al., 2009: 303). Such statements flatten the historical and the political, but the approach of such groups has achieved hegemonic status in large part because it represents the ethical assumptions of those who fund these initiatives. A recent volume featuring mostly Jewish Israeli contributors, *Beyond Bullets and Bombs: Grassroots Peace Building between Israelis and Palestinians* (Kuriansky, 2007), discusses compassionate listening, nonviolent communication, sharing dialogue and dinner, singing for peace, flying kites for peace, cooking, climbing, camping, teaching peace, and trust-building. Collectively, the volume advocates individual face-to-face encounters where cathartic empathetic experiences can take place the authors believe that this type of essential breakthrough is only possible once the facilitator is able to get the discussion past the point of arguing about justice, what they call the 'blame game' and 'venting' (2007: 22). This approach reduces grievances regarding dramatic acts of violence to the status of pettiness.

On further inspection, and despite claims of universal application, the empathy-based, humanitarian approach to peace-making excludes a number of groups who hold different ethical traditions. This is manifest in the near total absence of participation in these initiatives among Jewish Israelis outside the secular Ashkenazi group, along with diminishing participation and significant active

resistance to them among Palestinians. Empathy-based peace initiatives alienate Orthodox religious Jews to the extent that they are unable to address religious injunctions that structure daily life for religious Jewish communities and which, contrary to empathy approaches, set firm limits meant to prevent *avodah zarah* (idol worshiping) on the nature of the interactions between Jews and other groups. Indeed, limited, but significant examples of orthodox Jewish approaches to coexistence, such as those of Rabbi Menachem Froman, discuss their ethical obligations not in the language of empathy, but in that of the sovereignty of God over man, divine will, and terrestrial intervention by good and evil forces. Orthodox philosopher Yeshayahu Leibowitz was explicit that, in his understanding, an Orthodox Jewish ethics is not reliant on empathy or sentiment. He wrote: 'The Torah does not recognize moral imperatives stemming from knowledge of natural reality or from awareness of man's duty to his fellow man. All it recognizes are Mitzvot, divine imperatives' (Leibowitz, 1992: 18). Thus, the insistence on person-to-person individual encounters is not neutral, but reflects a specific ethical belief regarding the fount of responsibility.

Likewise, though members of the Mizrahi Black Panther movement were among the first Israelis to have contact with the Palestinian Liberation Organization (Chetrit, 2004: 273), Mizrahi Jews in Israel broadly decline to participate in (Ashkenazi-run) empathy-based initiatives. Such initiatives do not address their ethical concerns. Nissim Mizrahi has shown that the humanitarian and universalist ethical framework is in fact threatening in the Mizrahi worldview, and the community vigorously and consistently rejects it (Mizrahi, 2011). Moreover, the liberal grammar of the Israeli left is incommensurable with their political ethics. Mizrahi uses Charles Taylor's distinction between honor and dignity to illustrate the political stakes of the distinction between individual worth being attached to group membership, or inherent in every human being. The grammar of the politics of universalism, in which empathy is based, is not ethically satisfying to many Mizrahi who do not share the liberal tradition.

Many Palestinians, Israeli citizens and those in the Occupied Territories alike, have also become disillusioned with empathy-based initiatives, and there is a strong movement to boycott empathy-dialogue peace initiatives as being overly attentive to the goal of personal connection and inattentive to issues of justice (see Sheizaf, 2012). Justice is a central organizing principle in Islam (see Rosen, 2000) and one that defines Palestinian understandings of possible resolutions to conflict with Israel. Rouhana and Korper investigated a workshop designed with empathy-based goals of mutual acquaintance and 'knowing the other'. The researchers found that Jewish Israeli participants were 'largely concerned with their own intrapsychic ambivalence and anxiety about Arabs' and focused on interpersonal connections (Rouhana and Korper, 1997: 7). Palestinian participants wanted to discuss the vastly unequal distribution of resources and power and spoke in terms of group identity. Both sides found the other's approach to be a 'distraction from what they regarded as the real issues' (Rouhana and Korper, 1997: 7).

Anthropologists have likewise shown that Palestinians are increasingly dissatisfied with empathy and humanitarian frameworks (Klein, 2003: 567; Allen, 2008: 462–3). As with Orthodox Jews, there are those, likewise marginalized, who are trying to develop approaches to peace that would rely on sources of Islamic authority. For example, Sheikh Khalid Abu Ras has examined the Koranic distinction between ‘Believer’ and ‘Muslim’, and the ethical responsibilities attached to these categories. Only 44 percent of Israel identifies as secular, and Mizrahi Jews are about half of all Israeli Jews; Palestinians are 20 percent of Israeli society (45 percent of the region including Gaza and the West Bank). One million Russian Jews, who constitute a significant percentage of the remaining minority of Ashkenazi secular Jews, have also been resistant to participation. Put together, these groups constitute the large majority of participants in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and are not addressed by the current hegemonic peace initiatives.

The politics of empathy

Through their interactions with their Palestinian counterparts in Combatants for Peace, Jewish members of the organization have been exposed to some of the Palestinian objections to empathy-focused initiatives. Their relationship to this critique is complex. While recognizing some truth in the critique, they also know that empathy played a large role in their own radical political stance. Moreover, they still find empathy to be ethically ‘satisfying’. When I say Jewish members of Combatants for Peace find empathetic dialogue to be ethically satisfying, I mean that the practice of empathy is resonant with their cultural understandings of the ethical good. Though these encounters might be painful, they feel productive. At the same time, their interactions with Palestinians produced the recognition that empathy is not enough, and indeed, most of their activities are solidarity events in the Occupied Territories and activist meetings with Jewish Israelis.

Combatants for Peace recognizes that not only is empathy ethically satisfying for Jewish members of the group itself, but it is also satisfying for many in their own sector of secular Jewish Israeli society. And while I have mentioned this sector is a minority, it is at the same time a group with a large degree of political power and material resources, and many believe change lies to a large extent in their hands. Sociologist Baruch Kimmerling coined the acronym ‘Ahusalim’, standing for Ashkenazi, secular, old guard, socialists, nationalists, to describe this socio-politically dominant group. Since the early days of the organization, a great emphasis has been put on reaching out to this broader social group. For years, a few times a month members of Combatants for Peace have appeared before audiences of Israelis. They give these presentations in living rooms of friends or family members, in recreation centers, meeting halls, educational institutes, political headquarters, in schools, to youth groups and scouting groups. In these meetings they dramatically recount personal stories of their own experiences with empathy to great effect (Weiss, 2014). At the same time, in response to Palestinian critiques of

depoliticization and inattention to questions of justice, speakers explicitly connect suffering to responsibility, but actively avoid the discourse of victimization. One word that the speakers refuse to let the audience settle on is '*misken*', meaning miserable or wretched. The idea of *misken* allows Israelis to express pity for Palestinians, for example calling Palestinians '*miskenim*', miserable ones, without implying any claim to a more just situation, and thus reflecting a depoliticizing interpretation of empathy. But Combatants for Peace insist that the meaning of their ethical experiences is political and generates responsibility. For example, during one emotional retelling of an incident involving a child that occurred while soldiering, a woman muttered loud enough for the speaker to hear '*Oy, eizey misken!*', 'Oh, that poor [child]!' The speaker stopped his account to address the comment. 'He is not *misken*. He does not want us to think of him as *misken*. He was my victim and I was guilty, and we all are responsible.'⁹ In this, they arrive at the same critiques of empathy as the academic literature, though perhaps they do not have as fully realized an understanding of their ontological presuppositions. Yet, actually inhabiting the constraints of the ethical dilemma, they continue to use empathy and struggle through the pitfalls.

A few months before I arrived in Israel for fieldwork, the nine-year-old daughter of one of the Palestinian members of the group was killed by an Israeli soldier on her way home from school. When I arrived, significant distress was palpable in the group, and the girl's father, Yousef, was going through a personal crisis as well as a crisis of ideology. He was thinking about leaving the organization, so there were many visitations to his house and phone calls and back and forth. In the end, he rededicated himself to the organization, and became very involved in their non-violence activism. About a year later, one of the Jewish members of Combatants for Peace wrote and produced a play, in Hebrew, about the experiences of Yousef, his friend. The play had only one actor, a Jewish Israeli man representing Yousef. The play took the form of an internal monologue, Yousef talking to himself, regarding all the emotions that he went through as a man who lost his daughter to violence: sorrow, anger, guilt, conflicted feelings of revenge and loss. It was written for a Jewish Israeli audience – that is clear from the language, in Hebrew only, but also the universal framing of the tragedy of a parent losing a child – that encouraged the Israeli audience to empathize. The title of the play, which could be translated as 'Don't Act Miserable 'Round Here', or possibly 'Don't Make Yourself Out To Be The Victim' (*Al Tasey Li Misken Po*), is a phrase that, in real life, the soldier implicated in the shooting said to Yousef. The author explained choosing this title as an attempt to simultaneously note the lack of empathy of Israelis and at the same time to politicize the empathy experienced by the audience, with a call to break the cycle of victimhood.

As I sat about two-thirds of the way back in the theater in Jaffa, with about 200 other viewers, I watched both the play and the audience. The audience sat in absolute silence throughout the performance. Around me people brought their hands to their lips at especially difficult moments, one woman grasped the hand of her friend, a few dabbed at their wet eyes with the backs of their hands. It

occurred to me that they had come, and paid, to have this experience, this experience of empathy, because it was satisfying in some way even though it was clearly painful and difficult. After the play I circulated among the audience asking about their reasons for coming and their impressions of what they had seen. The audience was largely secular, Ashkenazi and bore the trappings of the middle-class. People told me they thought the play was ‘important’ for people to see. One woman told me: ‘It is good for people to see this. It’s really important, because only if you feel it, it becomes real for you what we are doing there . . . They did a really a great job.’ Many in the audience expressed the belief that the play offered an ethically meaningful experience. After appearing in this small theater, the play was selected for production at the Cameri Theater, Israel’s most prestigious performance center, attracting hundreds of thousands of spectators annually.

Above, we can see the struggles of both the spectators and the producers of the play. By going to this play the secular Jewish audience was experimenting with the degree to which they can feel for the Palestinian other. It is politically consequential that this takes place in a significantly depoliticized space. But also, here individuals are pushing themselves to explore the ethical boundaries of empathetic practice. Similarly, we can see the ambivalence of my interlocutors regarding their use and deployment of humanitarian empathy. They struggled with how to control the ethical effects of their deployment of the tradition of humanitarian empathy in a complex social environment in which other deployments of empathy were hegemonic (victim and *mishken* narratives). On the one hand, there was a recognition that empathy-based approaches are effective with their secular Jewish Israeli audience, a minority but powerful group in the conflict. At the same time, they have been exposed, through their Palestinian counterparts and in partial ways, to the failure of this approach to speak to Palestinian concerns of justice. The group is at pains to negotiate between the cultural importance of empathy for themselves and others, and the limitations and critiques of which they have been made aware. James Laidlaw (2014: 13) revives Kenneth Read’s work to highlight the necessary gap between that which is socially required and an individual’s moral obligations. This gap is relevant to both the audience and the producers of the play. The humanitarian tradition informs these individuals, the audience and the producers seek to fulfill their moral obligations as ends in themselves, and this may or may not take them beyond the contemporary limits and limitations of humanitarian empathy.

I believe this reflects how the ethical traditions are lived and practiced on the ground with all the human ambivalences and contradictions this entails. What has been perhaps the most surprising to me in the critiques is the ways the ambivalences and contradictions of humanitarian empathy’s practitioners are taken as evidence of the pathology of the ethical tradition itself. Several researchers view the inconsistent application of humanitarian standards to asylum seekers and the ambivalence of bureaucrats as evidence of disqualifying ideological incoherence (Fassin and Pandolfi, 2010: 16; Redfield, 2010, 2012; Fassin, 2010, 2012; Ticktin, 2006). One common example is ‘compassion fatigue’, through which bureaucrats become

desensitized to appeals for aid or from asylum seekers, and suspicious of the truthfulness of their need. This is indeed a problem, yet there are so many dynamics at work in addition to the ethical tradition brought to bear – a significant power differential and the nature of bureaucratic evaluation to name only two. Moreover, ambiguities and contradictions in practices have been the bread and butter of anthropological contributions and the feature that gives the discipline purchase relative to non-empirical disciplines. As Abdellah Hammoudi notes, exclusive focus on analyzing the inherent logic of a tradition misses what he calls its ‘practical application’, that is, how people actually practice a tradition, how they differ in interpretation, and how they work through ‘ambiguities, contradictions, absurdities, and paradox’ (2009: 32). In this context, a critical philosophical stance towards the values of our interlocutors feels awkward.

Conclusion

The variety of uses of humanitarian empathy in Israel, both politicizing and depoliticizing, suggests how we might think about ethical traditions and their deployments. Humanitarian empathy is used to justify military aggression, well-meaning yet imperialist peace initiatives, and the struggles of activists to find political justice through this ethical tradition. A tradition can authorize many different practices. It is a cultural resource precisely because it is deeply connected to structures of emotion, to understandings of good conduct, to beliefs about ethical responsibility. Thus, it is taken up and used by many different parties with many different goals and interpretations, all of whom make claims to the same tradition. The experiences and experiments of Combatants for Peace with the ethics of humanitarian empathy empirically reveal a number of important points that should inform our theoretical approach. One revelation is that, even when a cosmopolitan understanding of humanitarian ethics is achieved, even when conscientious objectors understood their ethical framework was limited and had limitations, it remains an important source of ethical inspiration and satisfaction for themselves as well as for other Israelis. The other point of note is their politicization of empathy. It was empathy that inspired them to take the dramatic political step of military refusal. And they continued to insist on the political implications of the insights of humanitarian compassion and empathy as they testify to other Jewish Israelis, spurning the depoliticizing rhetoric of *‘miskenoot’*, wretchedness, that allows people to avoid responsibility. This suggests that the political meaning of an ethical tradition can shift – that it is flexible and not determined by its inherent logical structure, conceptual genealogy, or the etymology of its organizing concepts. It is worth noting the impossibility of escaping such traditions. Even my own argument owes a great deal to the ontological claims of conscientious objectors regarding their existential need to live with their ethical decisions. Likewise, though individual critics of their own society would never entirely leave behind the social, discursive, epistemological and ontological structures described by studies of ‘unfreedom’, there is room for reflection and change.

Recently, there has been a huge amount of critical attention to the effects of humanitarian governance. This critique is important and points to the ways that humanitarian governance today often suppresses political ambitions, creates harsh imperialist exclusions, and runs roughshod over other forms of justice even when it is used sincerely, and is worse when used cynically as a cover for military intervention. Yet I believe this necessary and urgent critique is ill-served by an approach that focuses on the inherent structures of humanitarian reason rather than the historical and political contexts of the tradition's deployment. There is analytical utility in a genealogy of morals that uncovers the Western ethical underpinnings of practices claiming to be universal. Humanitarianism is absolutely a particular moral community. Yet ossifying the meaning of the tradition by interrogating a specific usage does not seem to be the ideal anthropological positioning. The meaning of 'politics of humanitarianism' cannot be determined a priori. As anthropologists we would not consent to an account that attempted to explain terrorism committed in the name of Islam as the inevitable outcome of the inherent logic of the Islamic ethical tradition. We would insist that the Islamic tradition is not singular, and that there are limitless ways in which such a tradition could be interpreted and used in a huge range of political manifestations. Truly, provincializing the European tradition would require us to take the same approach with humanitarianism, rather than critique it wholesale. Moreover, we should avoid arguing with the ethical resources of our interlocutors. Even ignoring the embeddedness of ethical traditions in worldviews and the self-making of our interlocutors, we are unlikely to offer an alternative whose ethical effects would hold up in the political contexts of imperialism and cynical deployment in order to legitimize other goals. In order to critique the violence and exclusions brought about by much of current humanitarian politics, I suggest provincialization as a substitute for philosophical critique. Thus, we might avoid the pitfalls of determinism, while not evading the problematic issues involved in current politics.

Notes

1. In Israel, like in many places in the world, most people do not self-consciously adhere to one particular tradition, but rather find themselves 'drawing in different areas of their lives upon a variety of tradition-generated resources of thought and action, transmitted from a variety of familial, religious, educational, and other social and cultural sources' (MacIntyre, 1989: 397), using 'different rationalities in different milieus' (p. 397). As such, I am by no means claiming that humanitarian empathy is the sole or dominant mode of cultural life in Israel, but rather that it is the hegemonic tradition in the Israeli peace camp, from which claims for peace and justice with Palestinians are most often heard.
2. I use the word *commandeer* because anthropologists have modified MacIntyre's idea of tradition and ignored the context of their assertion to such a degree that to say they 'use' his work is rather misleading. I do the same here.
3. James Laidlaw has pointed out that in order to use MacIntyre, anthropologists (e.g. Lambek, 2008; Pandian, 2009) must disavow a great deal of MacIntyre's program and his overtly normative stance, not only his Thomist convictions but also his proclamations

- about the failures of the Enlightenment and liberal modernity, his stance against syncretism, residue and fragments, and his subsequent writings that backtrack on the promise of *After Virtue* and seem to close off the level of rational reflection in tradition (2014: 55–91). These critiques seem completely correct, but I would suggest that the idea of traditions still has a great deal of potential in its commandeered form. I might also suggest that such adjustments would be necessary in many engagements with moral philosophers who rarely hold empirical evidence as their ultimate form of validation and accountability, as do anthropologists.
4. Members also frequently noted the conviction that any unilateral peace would not be long lasting.
 5. Tel Aviv is in both the physical and political-economic ‘center’ of the country. In local categories it is opposed to the ‘periphery’, which has less wealth and more people who belong to traditionally marginalized ethnic groups.
 6. ‘Poisoned’ (*me’u’ral*) is a commonly used adjective to describe soldiers who are gung-ho and ideologically convinced of the righteousness of their soldiering. Despite the apparent self-awareness of indoctrination in the term, it does not necessarily carry a negative connotation.
 7. For a discussion of this universal form of empathy see the Special Issue ‘Whatever happened to empathy?’ in *Ethos* (2008: 6(4)), edited by C. Jason Throop and Douglas Hollan.
 8. This scholarship is not primarily concerned with the early Christian church and the worldview of the Christian community in late antiquity (in contrast to the work of scholars like Peter Brown), but rather seeks to establish the early roots of current streams of humanitarian thought.
 9. This statement registered to me immediately as a reference to the American rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, who famously said: ‘Above all, the prophets remind us of the moral state of a people: Few are guilty, but all are responsible.’ When I asked about this reference, he recalled having heard the quote but did not know to whom it was attributed.

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Erica Weiss is an assistant professor of Anthropology at Tel Aviv University.