Response to Northwestern University IO/IL Working group book symposium on Between Samaritans and States

I’m grateful to Ceyda Erten, Joshua Freedman, Sidra Hamidi, and Swati Srivastava for their wonderfully rich and thought-provoking reviews of Between Samaritans and States, and for the chance to respond. Rather than try to address all of their excellent points, I will discuss four themes that open onto issues of more general interest: the role of case studies in normative political theory; the distinctive angle of vision offered by studying ethical predicaments; the relevance of scholarship about governance by states for studies of governance by non-state actors, and lines of future research suggested by studies of humanitarianism such as BSAS.

Cases and Political Theory

Deploying the vocabulary of social science, Erten discusses the relationships among the cases, “scope conditions,” and broader arguments of BSAS. While these are important issues, I wasn’t fully persuaded by all of her criticisms. For example, she acknowledges that the book’s scope is limited to “large-scale, mainstream, Western-based humanitarian INGOs” (2), but still objects that it fails to address “varying notions of humanitarianism” being developed by Turkey and “INGOs based in countries such as Brazil, China, South Korea and Saudi Arabia.” Likewise, she writes that “[w]hile focusing on Western INGOs provides multiple important contexts, a claim about universal ethical predicaments cannot be made given the reach of these Western contexts.” Yet I never claim that the ethical predicaments that I describe are universal. In addition to limiting my discussion to the aforementioned subset of INGOs, I argue that the predicaments these INGOs face arise out of their “activities, relationships, capacities, and effects” (54). It is precisely because I agree with Erten that there are many varieties of humanitarianism, and that the differences among them matter, that I do not try to address them all.

More generally though, I think that the broader concerns that Erten raises are important and difficult, and I struggled with them in writing BSAS. For example, I chose to focus on large-scale, mainstream, Western-based humanitarian INGOs so that my subject would be narrow enough that I could delve into the texture of particular ethical predicaments, but broad enough that I could offer insight into what is, by any measure, an extremely important strand of contemporary humanitarianism. Nonetheless, I recognize the tremendous value in both fine-grained studies of single cases, such as Sherri Fink’s magisterial study of Memorial Hospital after Hurricane Katrina, and scholarship that aspires to more generality, such as Erez and Dasandini’s excellent work on dilemmas in international aid.

I also think that we should not view the success and importance of works of grounded political theory such as BSAS as a direct markup on the range of empirical cases to which they apply. The relationship between theory and cases is not only a relationship of application. In offering conceptual re-descriptions of the kinds of ethical predicaments that (a subset of) INGOs regularly face, my aim is not only to provide baskets into which these predicaments can be sorted. It is also to invite the reader into a new sensibility, one oriented toward discerning patterns of moral and political complexity in the life of these humanitarian INGOs, including fragments, versions, and partial instantiations of the predicaments I describe—even in contexts
that extend beyond the explicit scope of my analysis. This is a humanistic endeavor, as much as a social scientific one.

Thus, although the ethical predicaments that I describe arise largely from large-scale, Western-based humanitarian INGOs engaging in governance of various kinds, being highly political, and/or being second-best, I didn’t mean to make a rigid causal argument that all entities with these features face these predicaments. The cases and examples in the book—some of which are extreme, others of which are exemplary in their ordinariness—are intended to clarify and make more vivid the ethical predicaments that I describe, not systematically reflect the full range of issues these predicaments present. That said, the overall thrust of Erten’s criticism—that theorists must attend carefully to the relationship between their arguments and examples—is exactly right. Indeed, I think a lot of work could be done to clarify the role of emotionally resonant examples (including but not only drowning toddlers) in normative political theory, especially in light of theory’s “sentimental turn” over the last 20 years.

Theorizing Ethical Predicaments

Erten is correct that strongly religious INGOs, of the kind that I exclude from my analysis, can carry out humanitarian action while upholding ethical principles such as egalitarianism. However, highly religious INGOs face different kinds of ethical predicaments than more secular humanitarian INGOs, such as how to balance commitments to religious and secular values. The scope conditions of the book are meant to identify a group of INGOs that tend to face similar ethical predicaments, not a group of INGOs to whom certain normative principles apply (23).

Likewise, Hamidi notes that I endorse the reasoning used by MSF-France and Oxfam in the Rwandan refugee camps in Zaire, even though MSF-France withdrew and Oxfam stayed. She asks: “[i]f the same ethical dilemma (that of spattered hands) can be used to justify two very different policies, then what is the purpose of using this ethical framework?” The answer is that both MSF-France and Oxfam justified their decisions based on the broadly consequentialist reasoning that I defend, rather than promise or duty-based arguments. Their different practical judgments about what to do can be traced (in part) to their different empirical predictions about the effects of withdrawing and different conceptions of appropriate time horizons for evaluating consequences (106-108). This divergence is not a problem for my argument because the primary aim of the book is to offer an account of humanitarian INGOs as political actors via an elucidation of the political ethical predicaments they face, not guide all-things-considered judgments about what specific INGOs should do in specific situations.

Srivastava argues that rather than focus on degrees of governance by single actors, scholars of humanitarian INGOs should adopt a “networked governance” approach. I agree that a focus on individual actors can distract from more structural and larger-scale dynamics (20, 220-222). However, the two approaches are not always opposed; in particular, studying ethical conflicts faced by individual INGOs can help reveal political shortcomings of networks and structures. For example, one reason why individual INGOs face “spattered hands” ethical predicaments—that is, one reason why they must sometimes choose between withdrawing aid and contributing to injustice perpetrated primarily by others—is because of the difficulty they face in overcoming collective action problems. That is, the ethical predicaments that individual INGOs face reveal
the political challenges created by larger social structures (see 206 for another example). This is no surprise: practical ethical conflicts often result from constraints on action, and those constraints are often shaped by politics.

The more general point here is that while the study of ethical predicaments is sometimes said to be—and sometimes is—biased toward the status quo, it has the potential to connect individual and structure, ethics and politics, and practical and principle in generative ways (221).

**INGOs and Conventional Governments**

BSAS assumes that theoretical models of conventional liberal democratic governance provide a useful critical vantage point for analyzing INGOs that engage in conventional governance. It does not assume that actually-existing conventional governments adhere to these models; this is why INGOs might be first-, second- (or third, etc.) best actors in any given situation. However, Srivastava points out that the very model of liberal democratic government that I draw on, for example the link between accountability mechanisms and governmental responsiveness, is actively disputed in the Comparative Politics and International Relations literatures (and, she might have added, the American Politics literature). Here I think Srivastava correctly identifies a limitation of the book: it engages relatively little with empirical literatures on democracy and governance. Her comment thus opens up a really interesting broader question: from what vantage point should normative critique of non-state actors that engage in governance proceed? Much of this critique uses models of conventional liberal democratic governance as a point of reference, albeit often implicitly. Srivastava’s comments suggest that normative theorists need to at the very least exercise caution in doing this.

**Implications for Future Research**

While Srivastava argues that future work on humanitarianism should focus on networked governance, Freedman thinks that my discussion of individual donors to INGOs “sets the groundwork for future research.” I hope he is right; I think that there is a lot of work to be done on donating, including work that breaches the practical ethics/theory divide. For example, I have begun a new project about what I call “intimate donating,” or donating in response to friends and relatives (e.g. the Ice Bucket Challenge, bowl-a-thons). I argue that donating to even seemingly apolitical organizations such as the American Cancer Society has political effects, maybe even more so than voting. These effects generate political responsibilities on the part of individual donors that seem quite demanding. The demandingness of these responsibilities suggests the need to critically examine how we “do” intimate relationships such as friendship and romantic love, in order to make enactments of these relationships more consistent with an adequately political orientation toward donating. And this critical examination, finally, invites a new way of understanding how intimacy mediates political action.

I also think that studies of humanitarian INGOs such as BSAS raise crucially important questions about emergencies more generally. In another new project, I examine the politics of what I call “emergency claim-making,” or claims that particular situations are and are not emergencies. The central question here is: are emergency claims especially vital for poor and marginalized people, because poor and marginalized people are disproportionately harmed by situations that are socially recognized as emergencies, or are emergency claims especially detrimental for these
groups, because even successful emergency claims merely return things to the status quo ante? If the latter, can we find or imagine alternative politics that might be better?

I mention these two projects partly to suggest where the study of humanitarian INGOs might lead, and partly because they invite further engagement with the issues raised by these excellent reviews: the role of cases and examples in political theory; the distinctive insights and issues associated with studying ethical predicaments, and how scholarship about governance by non-state actors can draw effectively on empirical research on conventional governance by states.