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## Kurt Mills on The Dark Sides of Virtue: Reassessing International Humanitarianism by David Kennedy. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005. 400 pp.

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**The Dark Sides of Virtue: Reassessing International Humanitarianism by David Kennedy. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005. 400 pp.**

In The Dark Sides of Virtue, David Kennedy attempts to reflect upon and problematize what he calls international humanitarianism. By humanitarianism, he does not mean international humanitarian law or the provision of humanitarian assistance (e.g., food, shelter, medicine) in the midst of conflict, though the practice of each of these activities would fall within his definition of the term. Rather, he means something much broader: the general practice of human rights. The closest we get to a definition of humanitarianism is on page 236: “to refer very generally to people who aspire to make the world more just, to the projects they have launched over the past century in pursuit of that goal, and to the professional vocabularies which have sprung up to defend and elaborate these projects.” In other words, his goal is to look at how the “do-gooders” attempt to “do good.”

The book starts with a not-so-short list of what he calls “pragmatic worries:”—“human rights promises more than it can deliver;” “human rights generalizes too much;” “human rights particularizes too much;” or “human rights views the problem and the solution too narrowly.” Each of these “worries” is broken down into a number of what might be called “sub-worries:”—“strengthening the state;” “encouraging conflict and discouraging politics among rights holders;” or “‘refugees’ are people too.” He raises valid points and concerns, although the reader is left wishing for much more elaboration on each point (8, 10, 13, 15-17).

After raising the question, “human rights: part of the problem?” the author launches into a vignette in which he describes a human rights mission to Uruguay to interview political prisoners, which provides insights into the reality of such human rights work “on the ground.” This description is interspersed with reflections on his role as a human rights lawyer interviewing, and supposedly speaking for, those who have had their human rights violated in a foreign country. Kennedy’s description raises questions that include: Can he really represent people who he has met for perhaps an hour? Can he also represent global norms and opinions to elites, who hold the power? Does international law have enough authority in this context? Is he actually doing good for these victims of human rights abuse, or is he himself getting more out of the interaction—adventure, professional satisfaction, self-approbation?

In this discussion, similar to other issues he addresses, such as dealing with refugees and the laws of war, the author investigates the professionalism of “do-goodism,” dissecting the terminology used, the ways of interacting with each other and the adversary (i.e., human rights abusing governments or the military) and asking whether the professionalization of human rights work has divorced it from broader realities. He also questions whether the particular human rights constructs used might actually make problems worse by giving governments greater latitude—particularly in the realm of international humanitarian law—or by divorcing human rights work from politics. He seems to castigate “do-gooders” for not wanting to dirty their hands in the muddy waters of politics. In this articulation he is calling for a much more pragmatic approach to conceptualizing and addressing human rights issues than many “do-gooders” might be comfortable with—but he also wants them to realize that such pragmatism may be little more than a realism that undermines their ultimate goals. And this is where the value of this book lies—challenging those who engage in human rights work to open their eyes to the real world,

engage in the political process, and reflect much more deeply upon how they go about their work and the possible consequences of their work— both good and bad.

There is no theory here, and in a sense this is a good thing, because it allows Kennedy to investigate the “do-gooder” milieu without trying to shoehorn their actions into particular theoretical constructs and agendas, which frequently have little to do with an on the ground reality. This lack of theory is also, in a sense, one of its greatest drawbacks because it makes it difficult for the reader—whether they are “do-gooders” themselves, policymakers, or others—to draw any lasting conclusions about how to “do good.” Yet the challenges it poses should be taken seriously—particularly, perhaps, by bright, enthusiastic undergraduates who want to change the world but have no idea what that might actually entail.

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