

2008

**Eric A. Heinze on Humanitarianism and Suffering: The Mobilization of Empathy** edited by Richard Ashby Wilson & Richard D. Brown. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2009. 328pp.

Eric A. Heinze  
*University of Oklahoma*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/hrhw>



Part of the [Human Rights Law Commons](#), [International Humanitarian Law Commons](#), [International Law Commons](#), and the [International Relations Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Heinze, Eric A. (2008) "Eric A. Heinze on Humanitarianism and Suffering: The Mobilization of Empathy edited by Richard Ashby Wilson & Richard D. Brown. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2009. 328pp.," *Human Rights & Human Welfare*: Vol. 8: Iss. 1, Article 18.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/hrhw/vol8/iss1/18>



All Rights Reserved.

This Book Notes is brought to you for free and open access by the Josef Korbel School of International Studies at Digital Commons @ DU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Human Rights & Human Welfare by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ DU. For more information, please contact [jennifer.cox@du.edu](mailto:jennifer.cox@du.edu), [digitalcommons@du.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@du.edu).

---

**Eric A. Heinze on Humanitarianism and Suffering: The Mobilization of Empathy edited by Richard Ashby Wilson & Richard D. Brown. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2009. 328pp.**

**Abstract**

A review of:

Humanitarianism and Suffering: The Mobilization of Empathy edited by Richard Ashby Wilson & Richard D. Brown. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2009. 328pp.

**Keywords**

Human rights, Humanitarian intervention, Humanitarian relief

**Copyright Statement / License for Reuse**



All Rights Reserved.

**Publication Statement**

Copyright is held by the Josef Korbel School of International Studies, University of Denver. User is responsible for all copyright compliance.

**Humanitarianism and Suffering: The Mobilization of Empathy** edited by Richard Ashby Wilson & Richard D. Brown. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2009. 328pp.

The idea of humanitarianism is one that is often invoked but rarely scrutinized. While the “humanitarian” dimension of activities and institutions like humanitarian intervention, humanitarian law, and humanitarian relief are all manifestly political in nature, a fundamental theme of this volume is that humanitarianism is an ethos that is not simply embedded in political and legal institutions. The editors have thus assembled an impressive set of essays that collectively address the various ways in which narratives of suffering are embedded in civil society, religious and social movements, as well as in political and social institutions at all levels. Its method is truly multidisciplinary as the contributors to this volume come from a variety of fields, including history, political science, anthropology, sociology, and literature. Adding further dynamism, these authors are not only academics, but also practitioners in various sectors of the global humanitarian enterprise. The result is an eclectic, yet surprisingly coherent, set of essays that analyze how and why narratives of suffering help humanitarian movements to catch on among the broader publics, and also how power-holders have abused such humanitarian ideals for more self-aggrandizing political ends.

Humanitarianism and Suffering begins by setting out the “boundaries of humanitarianism,” wherein authors Wilson and Brown help to untangle the idea of humanitarianism from its constituent components of the secular and religious, the legal and the moral, and further, by describing how these distinctions frequently result from a different view of the “agency” of the recipients of collective humanitarian impulses. That is, are recipients of humanitarian assistance more passive recipients than, say, recipients of human rights, who may possess a more assertive form of political agency? Indeed, the distinctions between the origins of and narratives about both humanitarian aid and human rights are critical in the developments of narratives of humanitarianism, which are critical for what the authors call “the mobilization of empathy.” Exactly how these narratives help to mobilize empathy—which is to say, the techniques used to generate compassion, such as emotional engagement, sympathy, and guilt—help lay the groundwork for the subsequent chapters. While several chapters of the volume demonstrate that many of these narratives become casualties of political manipulation, others highlight the resort to “sad sentimental stories” that are frequently taken out of context as a means to mobilize empathy. Yet the volume as a whole seems to advance a sort of middle ground between these two extremes. As the editors themselves say, “[n]arratives of suffering draw upon surrounding cultural and political codes and are constituted by them” (25).

The chapters of this volume explore a number of different cases at various levels of social organization (e.g. the local vs. the international), and explore the role of different institutions (e.g. the media, the courts) as both causes and consequences of humanitarian narratives. The thirteen substantive chapters are divided into two parts. Part I is on “Histories and Contexts,” and includes chapters that locate the origins of these narratives in political and social thought, and examines how local discourse can shape global movements, while also looking at cases such as the response to the 2004 Asian tsunami, the abolition of slavery and slave redemption, and the Armenian genocide. Part II is on “Narratives and Redress,” and contains chapters that explore themes about victimhood, the humanitarian “appeal” of children’s suffering. It also has chapters

that critically examine topics like refugee resettlement, the politics of human rights reporting, financial reparations, and a particularly interesting analysis of narratives of suffering in Rwanda's post-genocide *Gacca* courts.

Humanitarianism and Suffering is an important book that will be of great interest to scholars who teach and do research in the multi-disciplinary fields of human rights and humanitarian affairs. As such, professors of political science, law, international studies, ethics, literature and anthropology will find this book to be of great interest. Likewise, those working as practitioners in the humanitarian assistance/aid industry will find useful the book's lucid analyses, and its attempt to untangle the multi-faceted subject of humanitarianism. The book is easily compared to David Kennedy's The Dark Side of Virtue (2004) and is, in the view of the present reviewer, the most systematic and attentive treatment of humanitarianism since the publication of Kennedy's 2004 book. However, this book is probably not as accessible as The Dark Side of Virtue and seems to be primarily written for an audience of academics who already possess a general familiarity with some of the themes addressees therein. The book would nevertheless be appropriate for use in graduate seminars, and perhaps in advanced undergraduate courses. I will use selections from this book in a graduate course on international human rights, but would recommend it to anyone who is interested in issues concerning humanitarian affairs and human rights.

*Eric A. Heinze*  
*University of Oklahoma*