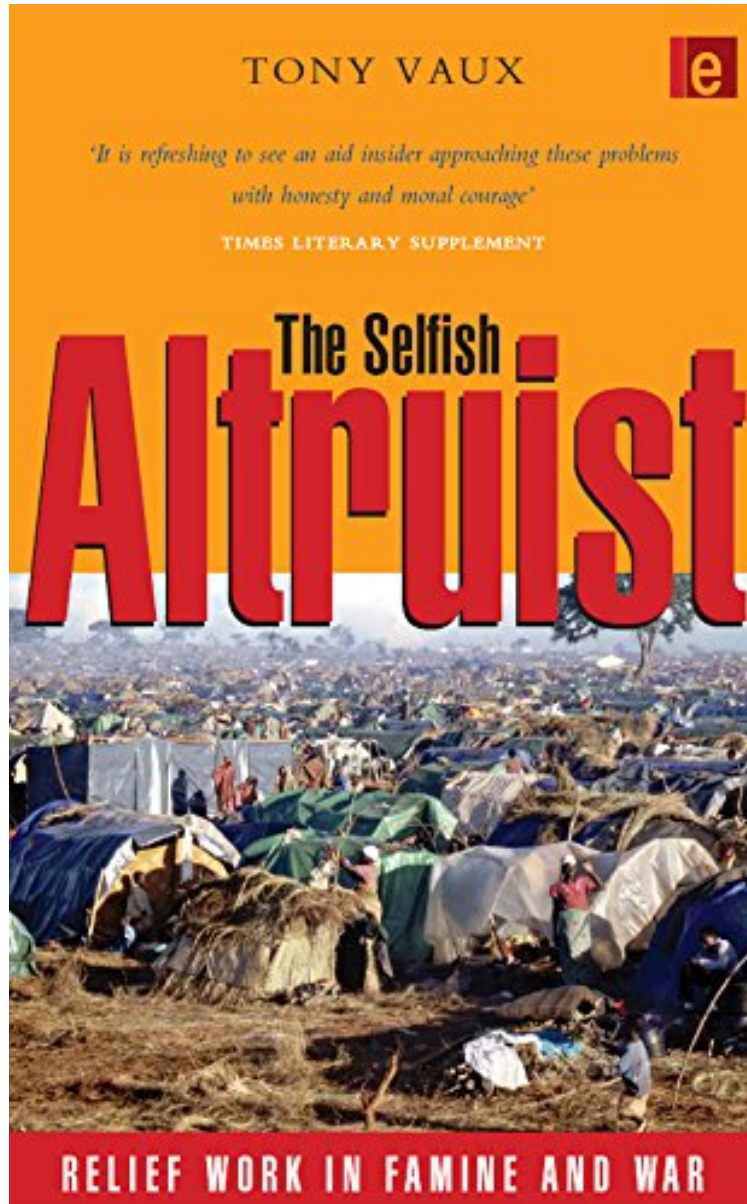


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The Selfish Altruist: Relief Work in Famine and War

Tony Vaux

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Tony Vaux : The Selfish Altruist: Relief Work in Famine and War before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Selfish Altruist: Relief Work in Famine and War:

16 of 17 people found the following review helpful. self-recognitionBy edward j. santellaTony Vaux took a job that landed him in Kosovo, Ethiopia, Sudan, Mozambique, Afghanistan, Somalia, Bosnia, Azerbaijan and Rwanda. He worked for Oxfam, one of the world's premier development and relief organizations. In his work, he helped some of

the poorest and hungriest people on this planet. He believed his work vital, but he observed and raised questions. He saw that what needed to be done frequently did not get done. Vaux and his associates, over stressed and under funded, decided sometimes who would live and who would not. Food and medical aid became entangled with politics and military action. Many of the people helped were less than innocent and sometimes guilty of horrific crimes. Helping the vulnerable, the most laudable of tasks, he found, can itself be corrupting. What saves this book from becoming another "realist" tome about how awful and hopeless we humans are, is Vaux's willingness to probe his own psyche as well as others'. We're often able to make ourselves quite comfortable with the assessment that the human race is, as Vaux states, "a species of exceptional brutality and cruelty" (page iv). We object only when the accusation is made against ourselves. If our accuser presses on and places before us our own behavior, we may admit that, yes, sometimes we have, under certain circumstances, acted brutally. But, we hasten to explain: circumstances forced us to act so. We had our reasons. They made us do it. It's a cruel world. Vaux rejects this sophistry. He admits, "the possibility that I too could be a killer." (184) By "killer" he does not mean that he could serve in a UN peacekeeping force. He means he is fully capable of having been on the wrong side in Somalia, Bosnia or Rwanda. From this non-privileged position, Vaux recounts debates among Oxfam staff about the identity of the organization: will it aim to promote development or be an emergency relief action? Should Oxfam deliver aid to a society that oppresses women to the point that women will not benefit from the aid - or should the organization try to save as many lives as possible, even if most of them will be male? Will accepting help from one side in a conflict - in this case trucks with armed soldiers to deliver food - compromise Oxfam's neutrality and its future effectiveness? It is also from this position that he raises his most fundamental issue. Vaux points out that aid workers are in positions of power and that power corrupts. Aid organizations and workers develop interests, organizational and personal, in seeing that acts are done in a certain way and that they receive credit. "Saving lives," he writes, "can be intoxicating, especially when people are weak and vulnerable." (94) "The motive of pity so easily interacts with the motive for cruelty, and the desire to help so easily becomes the desire for power. Managers in the 'disaster relief industry', like those in charge of homes for children or the elderly, have the opportunity to abuse power because they are dealing with vulnerable people." (95) Pity becomes contempt. But, Vaux argues, "Self-knowledge is the prerequisite of humanity." (72) "(T)o be happy requires a(n) ... abandonment of self - an ability to rejoice in other's success and in the formation of their altruism." (180) As another person has pointed out, aid may be something done to people. Better is to do something for people. But the best is to do something with people. Only the worker who has abandoned "self" is able to work with people. 4 of 4 people found the following review helpful. Why do we do it? By S. Alex One of Vaux's clear intentions when constructing the questions throughout this work is achieving a personal catharsis. The motivations and decision making apparatus of himself and the aid community come under mercilessly objective evaluation. The graphic nature of the situations may tempt the reader to give in to the hopelessness that front line aid workers experience, though dwelling on the situations described in this book would be, in my opinion, missing the point. The point is understanding why we do the things that we do. Can an aid provider (NGO) overlook causality and bring aid to the person in need? Will attempts to affect causality do more harm than good? Do underlying motivations exist that influence the manner in which aid is provided? The answers to these questions are not simple or finite. This book forced me to be introspective in ways that few others have. If you want a true lesson in disciplining your objectivity it's definitely worth the time.

Provides an analysis of some of the most traumatic situations involving famine and war of the last two decades, helping us to understand what it takes to be an aid worker and how important humanitarian action is today. Famine and war evoke strong emotional reactions, and for most people there is a limited amount they can do. But the relief worker has to convert emotional responses into practical action and difficult choices - whom to help and how. Their own feelings have to motivate action for others. But can they separate out their own selfish feelings and prejudices in such an emotive climate? How do they avoid being partial among those they are helping? Are they motivated by altruistic concern, or the power they experience or the attention they receive? Tony Vaux brings over 20 years experience as one of Oxfam's leading emergency managers to the exploration of the conflicts between subjective impulses and objective judgements and the dilemmas relief workers contend with.