



The Ethics of Responsibility – Responsibility for Future Generations

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Abstract

The primary issue addressed in this paper is responsibility from the perspective of global responsibility and, within its framework, responsibility for future generations. In the face of growing threats and crisis phenomena, the category of responsibility has gained a fundamental meaning. Responsibility may be considered in the context of the past and presence, but it should also be analyzed as referring to the future. This paper will elucidate the central understanding of responsibility; the notion and value of responsibility will be analyzed in close relation to the notions and values of solidarity, justice, and community thinking and action.

Key words: global ethics, ethics of responsibility, future generations' interests, solidarity-commonality, justice, ecological threats and crisis

The notion of responsibility occupies a significant place in the history of European civilization, which means that in various epochs it was referred to with various intensity and that it has been located on different levels of the value hierarchy. This was well known in Antiquity which was best demonstrated not only in the reflections included in the works of the most outstanding creators of philosophical thought but also, and maybe foremost, in the great Greek epics and tragedies. Subsequent eras learned, in a sense, the notion and the value it designated, but they were not always sufficiently aware of its significance and meaning. Its true advancement has taken place relatively recently, i.e., in modern times. Hans Jonas notices that “responsibility has become the fundamental imperative in modern civilization, and it should be an unavoidable

criterion to assess and evaluate human actions, including, in a special way, development activities” (1984, p. 45).¹ One should, then, point at a few fundamental reasons why responsibility has become, in our times, a value with particularly significant meaning.

First of all, we are more aware of the fact that responsibility is one of the most constitutional and inalienable features of human beings in particular. A special significance and meaning of this value is confirmed by phrases expressed by distinguished thinkers: "to be human is to be responsible," "responsibility is testament to humanity", "I am so I am responsible," etc., which means that nowadays we recognize the importance and significance of responsibility to the degree that has not occurred in any era of human history.

Secondly, we deal, in our times, with the emergence of new threats and crisis situations that existed only marginally in the past. Our current civilization faces new problems (e.g. ecological crisis and its consequences – climate changes, demographic explosion, anthropopression, terrorism, migratory flows, unforeseeable consequences of technological development), which foster asking questions about the place, role, and importance of responsibility; not only of the individual, which was the subject of the main reference in the past, but foremost about responsibility in its collective, social, and global dimension.

Thirdly, the significance of that value grows with the level of complexity of various kinds of social relations, conflicts, economic processes, social and nature consequences. The increasing dramaturgy of these processes is not only the subject of many texts, but there is, nowadays, a significant part of many communities and whole societies on almost all of the continents. The prevalence of the experienced phenomena causes a change in the range of responsibility. Nearly throughout the whole conscious human history, one has been responsible for oneself, one’s own attitude and actions, the circle of the closest people, one’s territory and the community they existed in. Hence, the traditional subject of responsibility was, above all, the direct consequence of particular actions and decisions, and morally relevant were only those, which affected other people in the sphere of interpersonal relations. In time the scope of responsibility has broadened by entirely new areas and notably has gone beyond the problems referring to individuals, groups,

¹ It should be noted that in the Polish literature the issue of responsibility was analyzed by R. Ingarden, who points at four various situations, where the phenomenon of responsibility occurs: 1. Somebody is responsible for something. 2. Somebody assumes responsibility for something. 3. Someone is held responsible. 4. Somebody acts responsibly (Ingarden 1972, p. 78). A. Jedynak points out that responsibility is a multi-element relation – a. someone (agent) is responsible b. for something, c. to someone (instance), d. in someone’s interest, e. on some basis, f. in some way (Jedynak 2008, p. 12.). H. Jonas, on the other hand, points at the most fundamental conditions of responsibility, namely: a) agency – the agent influences the reality, b) the agent's possibility to control their actions, c) the ability to foresee the consequences.

small communities, or local situations. In modern times, responsibility for the country, the homeland has occurred. Today, many feel responsible for nature, the fate of the future generations and the planet earth. Of course, these traditional domains of responsibility are the subject of responsible actions as well, nowadays we also experience, quite intensively, such phenomena and processes, whose scope covers all populations and continents, and which by their very existence expand the range of that value. The growing ecological crisis, the suddenness of the climate change, demographic explosion, etc. has led to a situation where for the first time in history the problem of responsibility for the whole planet appears. That kind of responsibility, earlier not recognized, has gained fundamental meaning in the circumstances of the problems we see today. Responsibility, next to solidarity, has become the priority value in the face of the global threat of e.g., exponentially growing climate changes. We need “global climate solidarity and global solutions,” as Z.M. Karaczun and A. Kassenberg write (2009, pp.16-17) – without them, we will not leave a safe Earth for our children and grandchildren. The negative consequences of global change could have been seen, according to the authors of the article, in Poland already some years ago. The number of hurricanes and construction disasters caused by them have been growing. In the summer 2017, a hurricane unprecedented in strength swept through Poland, and was particularly destructive in the Pomorskie and Kujawsko-Pomorskie Voivodeships. Nature and people living in that region will deal with its consequences for yet some time. In a much larger scale, hurricane Irma brought destruction to the Caribbean and Florida, and hurricane Maria devastated the Caribbean islands, Dominican Republic, and Porto Ricco. These hurricanes reach the highest, fifth level on the scale, and other storms ravage those regions. Scientific research, Karaczun and Kassenberg continue further, leaves no doubts: adaptation to the changing weather conditions will be five times more expensive than actions undertaken to protect the climate. This should be the basic calculation, without which the state and international climate policy cannot be conducted in a reasonable and sustainable way (2009, pp.16-17). Climate, the authors argue, can be efficiently protected only in conditions of international solidarity, the sense of responsibility and cooperation between the developed and developing countries, but only if they are able to rise beyond their own particular interests and begin to think and act in the climate solidarity categories. The authors also call for Polish politicians to reject wrongly conceived isolationism and replace it with a policy guided by the need for action in the name of global responsibility and climate solidarity.

In light of this and other data, Jonas’ claim that ethics of responsibility, which emphasizes ethics of survival, has become a fundamental issue for the modern world and our civilization is completely valid. If we wish to provide the world with stable conditions for its

existence, then, according to the philosopher, ethics of survival should necessarily find its support in ethics of protection and prevention. Moreover, ethics of protection and prevention should refer to the world understood comprehensively, the globalized world. In ethics conceived in such a way, that kind of responsibility – responsibility for the planet becomes the cardinal value. As early as a few decades ago, Carl Amery rightly pointed at the need of constructing such ethics that go beyond human relations and promotes common responsibility as a responsibility not only for one's group or own species but also for the planet as a whole – the ethics of global responsibility. He believed that that kind of responsibility should be the first and the most real duty of humanity. That is why he suggests considering the category of responsibility with the future in mind. For responsibility occurs not only in the retrospective perspective but foremost in the prospective conceptualization. In other words, we are responsible only for what we have done, but we are also responsible for what we still can do in the future (Jonas, 1984, pp. 39-46). This task of, using Jonas' language, the ethics of prevention is a prospective thinking and acting that stands up against possible conflicts, crises, and disasters.

We should also note that the notion of responsibility appears in an inextricable connection with certain values, i.e. when the value is realized, when it is complied with, or when there is an instance of neglecting the value in the aforementioned domains, that is when nothing valuable is created, one does not behave in accordance with the given values and does not respect them. A particular obligation and readiness to bear the consequences of one's actions, attitudes, and behaviors is a constitutional aspect of that notion. Hence, in ethics of responsibility, the most fundamental value towards which one should adopt an obligation and bear the consequences of their actions are the interests and wellbeing of future generations. What has to be done, from the perspective of the ethics of responsibility, in order to make these values the subject of careful actions? There are at least a few answers. In the opinion of Dietrich Birnbacher, the author of the resounding publication *Responsibility for Future Generations*, educational actions aiming at changing mindsets and mainly developing the motivation for ethics of the future are necessary. It should refer, in the most general sense, to a community theories formulated by social philosophies. According to the philosopher, "it is important to develop a consciousness of one's own temporal position in the sequence of generations as well as a generation-transcending sense of community, if not with humanity as a whole, then with limited cultural, national or regional groups" (Birnbacher, 2009, p. 88).

The idea of commonality-solidarity so strongly emphasized by Birnbacher is especially highly located in the hierarchy of values propagated by global ethics. A crucial part of the commonality and solidarity notion is the obligation of expanding the meaning of "I," "we" so it

covers other human and non-human groups. It is a universal virtue because it actively includes new groups into the community and thus it makes such actions of clearly moral nature. It presupposes taking care of the commonality of values, and even the obligation of sacrificing for others. The commonality-solidarity principle reminds us that our duties towards others are not less important than one's own rights and claims, and in some cases, gives priority to the former ones. Satisfying one's own needs at the expense of other societies, including limiting the possibility of development and vital interests of the future generations is an evident negation of that solidarity. That is why the solidarity principle should be at the basis of democracy and the free market economy. Of course, Birnbacher points at other actions, besides educational, that aim at creating ethics of the future-oriented towards the wellbeing of future generations. The "representation of the (probable) needs and interests of future generations in present decisions, e.g., by appointing spokespeople or ombudsmen for future generations on a local, regional, national and international level" (2009, p. 88) would be such an action. Another quite significant move would be to extend the power of *Verbandsklage* – a judiciary institution dealing with issues related to nature and other commissions dealing with problems related to future generations, so they function similarly to the Human Rights Commission. It is also a way of managing, controlling, and sanctioning the county's policies and the government's work in order to be “able to make public and to denounce violations of the interests of future generations such as the clearing of rainforests, desertification and the emission of greenhouse gases” (Birnbacher, 2009, p. 89). R. Janikowski is right when he writes that the ethics of an open global society has to be based on dignity and refer to the future. There will be the next generations of people living in the future who, just like us, will want to live with dignity. However, it is us, who live here and now, and through our actions we may decide about their lives and development. It forces us to understand what living with dignity will mean for future generations (Janikowski, 2006, p. 36).

Also, in the context of the future generations' interests, one may talk about two kinds of responsibility. The responsibility of the first type is the responsibility borne for actions that have already taken place, for the occurrence or existence of a state of affairs assessed as negative; for the fact that a desired situation or state of affairs has not happened. A perpetration – guilt relation occurs here, and the latter, in consequence, becomes a reason, a justification of the demand to impose a punishment by the congruent people or institutions, or at least to publically deplore them. It may also be the basis for expectations of reparative or compensational nature. Moreover, it is emphatically stressed that the stronger driving factors and the ability to anticipate the consequences, the bigger responsibility. This kind of responsibility has a long-lasting

tradition. It is, let us stress it again, the analysis of acts that have already taken place, which in their long-term effects may turn out to be adverse for the interests of the future generations.

Prospective responsibility is directed towards the future, and then we talk about someone's moral responsibility for the occurrence and lasting of a positively evaluated state of affairs, or its positive, from our perspective, results; or to cancel out, when possible, negatively assessed effects of former acts or situations, e.g. results of nefarious acts, so the probability of the future occurrence that we see as negative is minimalized (Kiepas, 2000, p. 98). This is consistent with J.M. Bocheński's view, according to which, the modern understanding of responsibility is not pertinent to the present, but rather to the future state of affairs. The obligation is its constitutive element, and that clearly places it in the future perspective. An example of such reasoning is the responsibility for the fate of future generations, or in other words, the adoption of the obligation to do whatever possible to leave to the future generations the world is a state that would allow them to survive and develop. That kind of responsibility, one may say, is of a more preventive nature. It goes beyond agency so characteristic for the traditionally conceived responsibility. This notion is not so much about making people accountable for what they have done, but rather about what should be done in the future. On account of such understood responsibility I feel responsible, first of all, not for my actions and their effects, but for the affair that put forward certain claims regarding my behavior (Kiepas, 2000, p. 98). Hence, this kind of responsibility has a preventive nature and is pertinent to the future and future consequences of actions. This new type of human activity and related new type of subject of that activity correspond to the formulated by H. Jonas imperative, which may take the following form: act only in a way that the effects of your actions will be compatible with the continuity of the authentic human life. We are responsible not only for what we have already done, but we are also responsible in the future perspective – for what we can do.

Global responsibility covers many areas of human and communal activities. One of them is technological progress and biotechnological revolution. F. Fukuyama, among others, draws attention to the negative consequences of technological and biotechnological development. He is concerned with various negative outcomes of genetic experiments on people (as well as plants and animals), i.e., the neglect or even abuse of the autonomy and rights of people undergoing genetic manipulations, and more generally, the violation of the natural order.

Entirely new area of human activity, significant from the perspective of the discussed value, is the problem of responsibility for the knowledge delivered by science, and its practical consequences. We usually emphasize the individual responsibility of scientists for the effects in the area of scientific discovery, its results and usages. However, the contemporary science

develops mainly within the framework of scientific institutions and organizations. Today, the problem of responsibility of institutional science, especially in natural and technological sciences, has gained a special meaning, because it is not limited to the sum of individual responsibilities of the given scientific institution or organization. In such a situation the following question is entirely justified: what does the responsibility of a scientific institution or organization consist of, and how is it manifested?

Nowadays, a burning question arises, and it will become even more intrusive in the future, about responsibility in times of information society and information technology, which brings forth revolutionary changes in the intellectual, emotional, and social sphere. Great opportunities have occurred, but they are accompanied by great threats. The catalog of both of them is vast, and the scope of this papers does not allow to list them. However, there are no doubts that there is a need to establish and develop the sense and attitude of responsibility in case of negative outcomes and effects of the processes that are taking place (e.g., IT security threats, surveillance capabilities, cybercrime, addictions, alienation).

In times of a growing ecological crisis the certainty that our responsibility for the world of nature and using its resources is growing as well. Biological degradation of the space needed for human health and survival is happening at an unprecedented scale. As a result of the exceeding, rapid, and hence dangerous overuse of technological and industrial power, the human being not only destroys the natural environment, but also poses a threat to themselves, which we become more and more aware of. The ethical and aesthetical aspects of human capability and sensibility, which influence the formation of the attitude to respect the values of the world that surrounds us and the beauty of nature are also undergoing the process of destruction. In that context, the need for responsibility for future generations is evident. Because intergenerational responsibility, as an integral part of global responsibility consists of the fact that our common moral obligation is leaving the world and the natural environment in a state that it would not constrain the survival changes of the future generations. This idea is clearly uttered in many acknowledged statements and documents. In the so-called Brundtland Report we read that “Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (UN, 1987). A similar thought is formulated in the 1992 Rio de Janeiro Declaration on Environment and Development. The third principle of the Declaration reads: “The right to development must be fulfilled so as to equitably meet developmental and environmental needs of present and future generations” (UN, 1992, p. 2). The right of future generations to fair use of the common heritage, and the obligation of the current generation to secure for the future generations the fundamental natural resources and are

environmental assets clearly stated here. Therefore, we have no right, as R. Spaemann postulated, to solve our social and economic problems at the expense of future generations – “The riches of the world are the common patrimony of all, comparable with the capital which provides interest of people to live, in that they possess the usufruct until the inheritance is passed on further” (Spaemann, 2000, p. 177). J. Feinberg speaks out in a similar tone. He believes that the responsibility of the current generation is related to “our duty (...) [that] could be owed to our own posterity as *their* right. After all, our unborn descendants will have interests that can be represented by proxies now, so it makes good sense to speak of their rights to inherit a world of a certain kind and of our present duties to them to conserve that kind of world” (Feinberg, 1978, p. 68). On the other hand, according to J. Rawls, “In following a just saving principle, each generation makes a contribution to those coming later and receives from its predecessors” (1999, p. 254). The following situation may serve as an analogy: when parents are to decide how much they should save for their children, taking into account what they themselves got from their parents. That kind of reasoning, in Rawls’ opinion, allows to formulate a principle of just saving for the succeeding generations. It should be noted, however, that Rawls’ proposal of intergenerational justice principle is, in its essence, limited to mutual fulfilment of duties between directly succeeding generations, when their value scales are comparable. However, that way of thinking becomes problematic in the case of generations distant from each other in time, when it is not known what their value scales will be, and what they can perceive as good and bad, valuable and valueless, but – it should be added – they will probably also need resources – clean forests, healthy air, water, and soil.

Thinking in the spirit of responsibility, justice, communality has an additional but crucial advantage that, on the one hand, it induces the elimination of negative attitudes, and on the other, it facilitates the formation of the desired approaches and behaviors, which may be characterized by the following virtues: prudence, courage, consideration, independence, pro-social thinking, the aptitude for civil society actions. P. Krajewski points it out when he writes: “The ethics of justice and accountability is the opposite of a superficial, biased and incomplete reflection. It is the opposite of decisions made automatically, arbitrarily, recklessly, out of obedience or convenience. It characterizes the individual who is free, thoughtful, prudent, brave and resolute. To be accountable means to make decisions that are important, but above all, it means to analyze the actions taken, considering the specific situation and examining it with regard to various ethical points of reference according to their specificity” (Krajewski, 2012, p. 28).

In light of the modern era experiences, we know that our responsibility for the future generations and the state of the Earth consists of such our actions, on account of which the future generations will not have to use draconian means and methods to survive on this planet. Facing severe ecological problems, a change of our thinking about the future is necessary. Today, it is short-term thinking and acting that dominates the socio-economic policy. We think about the future in the scale of months, a few years the most. A longer perspective does not interest us, while, from the point of view of nature and life existing in it, such a long-term perspective is necessary, because only in a longer time horizon the issue of responsibility gains a particular meaning and sense. The problem becomes even more complex due to the fact that in thinking, and more so in acting directed to a rather distant future the category of responsibility loses its clear form; it somehow dissolves and becomes a fuzzy notion that loses its power to mobilize and impact. That, which effects do not directly affect us and does not tamper with our everyday life, becomes unrealistic, or abstractive. An extreme example of such thinking is a well-known, egoism driven slogan “after us the deluge.” It very often happens that indifference takes place of the sense of responsibility is declining. It seems that in such short-term thinking and acting should be firmly opposed, and ways how to foster the long-perspective model of responsibility, both in the minds of individuals and in social consciousness, should be searched for. In the long-term thinking model, the concern about the fate of future generations and the natural environment gains the priority.

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