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From responsibility for oneself to shared responsibility*

Abstract

The article presents various links between business and ethics. The idea of responsibility, used to describe legal, economic and ethical aspects, forms the main, unifying thread. The author employs it to analyze three spheres of human activity. The first sphere, the subjective one, concerns self-responsibility, when individuals are striving to satisfy their own needs and to achieve happiness. The second, the encounter with the Other, embraces two meanings: responsibility for and towards the Other. The third sphere, the social one, extends the idea of responsibility onto the historical community we belong to. The concept of co-responsibility is not confined to our life span, but it embraces the future generations as well. The author pinpoints an important element in creating the foundations of a given community, i.e., regulations that form its basis, especially the principle of justice, encompassing the distribution of goods. Many contemporary authors underline this ethical, political and economic aspect (Rawls, communitarians, Ricoeur, Habermas). The main thesis the author would like to substantiate is as follows: in business activities, the ethical conduct of an individual is not sufficient. It needs to be broadened to encompass other perspectives since contemporary societies are based on the multidimensional idea of co-responsibility.

Keywords: ethics, responsibility, co-responsibility, community, justice

JEL Classification: Z1

* The article is an updated version of the paper published in Polish in the *Annales. Ethics in Economic Life*, 15, 171–180.

1. Preliminary remarks—theories of responsibility in the context of three spheres of human activity

The concept of responsibility is ambiguous; over the centuries, the sense of the word itself has changed and has gained a new depth of meaning. Its ambiguity results from, among other things, the fact that it refers to numerous spheres of human activity, in which various aspects of the concept become apparent or significant to a greater or lesser extent. There is a number of ways to define responsibility, and while its definitions frequently fall within the same scope or have overlapping areas, there are also those that have only a few points in common. Hence, difficulty arises in capturing the wealth of meanings inherent to this concept. It is also due to the fact that in modern times, many previously unnoticed or overlooked elements were included in the reflections on responsibility. As some contemporary ethicists note, responsibility has taken the place of obligation, duty and value as a more expressive idea, apt to illustrate various relationships that a person has with the Other, the community, the environment or the world. Johannes Schwartländer (2004, p. 174) maintains:

Responsibility clearly takes this place in the general moral consciousness that until now was occupied by duty. And probably nowhere else is the change in historical ethos as evident as in the fact that the notion of duty is being gradually narrowed down or even discredited, whereas the concept of responsibility is being emphasized and expanded.

The very notion itself began to be identified with the trait that embodies the essence of humanity, or as Antoine de Saint-Exupéry famously stated: “to be a man is, precisely, to be responsible” (1964, p. 117). What is more, the concept of freedom, which was formerly often treated as the opposite of responsibility, has now become a condition for its occurrence. Roman Ingarden (1987, p. 122) rightly pointed out that “[a] person who is to take responsibility for his own action must be free in his decisions and actions.” Therefore, there is no responsibility without freedom.

Many philosophers, aware of the complexity of the matter, try to analyze it from various perspectives: legal, moral, political and economic. According to the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur, the broad sense of the concept of responsibility is associated with the ambiguity of the verb *respond*. It turns out that a person may, as also evidenced by the Polish equivalent of the word, be responsible for something [here, as an adjective—translator’s note], respond to an order or a call, but also to respond to or towards someone, or be responsible for someone, to the extent that the idea of responsibility for someone extends literally to every person. Paul Ricoeur works on an analysis of the Latin word *imputare*, which means to attribute an action to someone as its actual author, making this person responsible for it. This initial meaning of attributing the agency of actions to a person relates to legal and criminal liability, and entails the obligation to make amends for the damage inflicted through his or her own fault (cf. Ricoeur, 1995, pp. 45–60).

Considering the responsibility of an economic entity as well as its ethical dimension—which, over the centuries, was sometimes overlooked—economic responsibility was significantly expanded and gained a depth of meaning with the emergence of the concept of stakeholders. The term was introduced by the Stanford Research Institute in 1963 and stands for a person or entity that has an interest in the company's activity and faces various types of risks connected with its functioning. Unlike shareholders who are mostly interested in profit from the activity of the company, stakeholders are a much larger group that includes employees, customers, creditors, suppliers and even local communities, and it is to them, and not just the investors, that the company should be held accountable.

An example of political responsibility may be a situation in which a politician of the ruling party resigns after acknowledging his or her own guilt, even though this politician may not be a direct agent. Thus, even if not directly responsible for a given act, the politician assumes responsibility for someone who is a subordinate, and does it taking into consideration the fact that the subordinate's act is, in a sense, an extension of his or her responsibility and affects people whom he or she had never met in person, frequently in a negative way.

The significance of responsibility in the area of ethics goes far beyond the legal understanding, to which it is frequently reduced. Moral responsibility can express a willingness to be held accountable to oneself (self-responsibility) as well as to others. We will discuss such cases later in the text. Especially in contemporary ethical discussions of such authors as Emmanuel Levinas or Hans Jonas, the concept of responsibility takes on a completely new meaning. In the view of the author of *Totality and Infinity*, it refers to responsibility for the Other, whereas the author of *Principles* understands it as responsibility for all people, including future generations.

It clearly follows from the above considerations that we are dealing with a multitude of meanings of the word *responsibility*. One may try to grasp this ambiguity by looking at its three separate fields of application in which the scope and way of understanding the concept gradually extend. First, it is the subject area, concerning an acting subject. The second is the intersubjective sphere, frequently discussed in the 20th century. The third is the area characteristic of a human community. We can also try to adopt a slightly different perspective, which originates from the responsibility that is imposed (by law), forced (by society), or voluntary (in the proper, moral sense of the word). This approach involves breaking away from, or at least softening, the meaning of the word responsibility that is imposed by law. It enables a broader, richer understanding of the concept, which is better adapted to the contemporary awareness. The broadening sense of the concept, from subjective to intersubjective and the one universal to all humans, is linked to a qualitative element, owing to which responsibility becomes the decision of a conscious subject, and not the result of legal or social pressure. Thus, let us conclude by stating that in order to become responsible, a human must become an autonomous subject by choice.

2. The subjective sphere

In the introduction of his book entitled *Filozofia odpowiedzialności XX wieku* [The Philosophy of Responsibility in the 20th Century], Jacek Filek (2003, pp. 5–13) proposes to split the history of philosophical thought into three eras: ancient, with the Aristotelian paradigm, in which the third-person singular reigns; modern, with the Cartesian paradigm and the dominance of the first-person singular; and contemporary, with Levinas' paradigm, in which the second-person singular comes to the fore. Clearly, as the author explains himself, it does not mean that the paradigms fell one by one with the passing of their era, but rather that the emphasis has been shifting. What can be observed in Filek's extraordinarily interesting division is that all paradigms complement each other, and each of them brings a different perspective to the analysis of the responsibility topic. In the following considerations, the author will seek to demonstrate that a communal perspective, not included in the proposed classifications, may additionally enrich the analysis of the notion of responsibility.

Let us start with the analysis of subjectivity and, going through the intersubjective sphere, we will reach the communal sphere. The subject is a being that we can talk about from the standpoint of the first- or third-person singular. From the third-person perspective, it is someone to whom we attribute agency. We say that someone did something, and thus we also make him or her responsible for the consequences of this action, e.g., this person ran the company well or badly, or acted morally or not, in accordance with the law or against it. From the perspective of the first person, the same acting subject is someone who – speaking and acting as “I”—points to himself or herself as the performer of his or her own actions, and therefore turns into someone who can, should or wants to be responsible. For example, I, of this name, by virtue of my own decision, want to pursue this and not a different goal, to live my life adhering to the letter of the law. In this sense, responsibility boils down to the responsibility for oneself. The Other is not present here. The subject understood from the perspective of the first- and third-person singular is placed in a specific historical community, acts or is subject to the action of others, strives to meet his or her own needs, pursues his or her own goals, and strives for happiness, i.e., the good life, as Aristotle would say. From the viewpoint of an individual subject, these actions seem to be sufficient. Such a state can be compared to Levinas' ontological subject; we reach the peak of activity in happiness, satisfy our own needs, care for our own person, ensure our own existence, but are still not open to the Other. This way, our selfish identity is created, detached from the Other, for whom we do not feel responsible. However, the care for oneself may be questioned, and then another, more important care will take first place—the care for the Other, or the responsibility for the Other. Our sole existence is not enough anymore. We cross the boundaries of our own egoistic identity and open ourselves up to a dialogue. What pulls a person out of the circular motion of satisfying his or her own needs is, as Levinas (1998, p. 19) puts it, “a desire that cannot be satisfied [...] It is like goodness— the Desired does not

fulfill it, but deepens it". The desire goes beyond the identity and feeds on its own hunger. It does not want to return to its own self; moreover, it transforms the subject. It becomes ready to accept what comes from the Other.

3. The dialogical sphere

A person is put in a situation where someone asks him or her a question and waits for a response, and he or she cannot avoid responding. This is what makes a person responsible in a different way than when responsibility means bearing the consequences of his or her own actions.

The philosophy of responsibility, recognizing its dialogical structure, understands being a human as being talked to. (Filek, 2003, p. 11)

In the I-you relation, there is a response to the one who addresses me. It is evidenced in many languages by the connection between responding and responsibility, e.g., Latin *respondere*, French *répondre—responsabilité*, German *antworten—Verantwortung*, English *respond—responsibility*, Polish *odpowiadać—odpowiedzialność*. Responsibility in this meaning is closely related to a situation where we respond to someone's appeal. Levinas (1998, p. 235) points out:

The being that expresses itself imposes itself, but does so precisely by appealing to me with its destitution and nudity—its hunger—without my being able to be deaf to that appeal.

We break away from loneliness and enter into a relationship—we encounter another human being. This relationship is irreducible to the essence of the subject him or herself. We depart from our selfish identity and open ourselves to the Other, to others. The outward movement, towards the Other, outlines the deepest structure of subjectivity, its uniqueness and exceptionality. The face of the Other, unique and extraordinary, speaks to us in a categorical way: *Do not kill me*, and we are to respond to this call. It is also a call for responsibility. We go beyond the ontological order and enter the ethical dimension. Philosophers of dialogue, and Levinas in particular made a great contribution by drawing attention to the irreducible role of the Other when it comes to responsibility.

It was philosophers of dialogue who asserted that responsibility is materialized most fully in the direct I-you relationship, and maybe exclusively in this relationship. (Schwartländer, 2004, p. 181)

Being responsible towards the other gives us an opportunity to notice people who are fearful, excluded, disabled, struggling to cope with life—in a nutshell, all these forms of otherness that call for our responsibility. Therefore, it is necessary

to acknowledge them and try to respond to their poverty, including them in the life of the community. In *Myślenie według wartości* [Thinking in Values], Józef Tischner refers to such people as people from hideouts and emphasizes that we must help them to come out of those hideouts so that they could meet another human being “[...] others are allowed to be. What occurs is a sort of ‘evening-out of the space.’ Stages of theatres, docks for the accused, and pedestals of prosecutors— all of it disappears and hope gives rise to a new community” (1982, p. 433).

The presented philosophical considerations can be practically applied in numerous spheres of human activity. Due to the fact that, nowadays, economic activity permeates all other forms of human activity and often comes to the fore, it is crucial to define an economic entity as responsible, not only in a legal but also a moral sense. In economic life, there is an observable need to take into account the needs of the Other, even if it is not an obligation arising from legal provisions.

Responsibility should be understood as being the-one-for-the-other, which is essential to humanity. (Schwartzländer, 2004, p. 183)

The other person and his or her needs are noticed, and they have to be answered, by, e.g. creating jobs for people with disabilities, or organizing nurseries and kindergartens on the premises of a company. In business, the care for the Other can be implemented in various aspects of the activity of a company, for instance, improving working conditions, providing employees with opportunities for education and growth, or helping in difficult life situations, such as illness or the death of a family member. Importantly, it does not have to lead to a decline in profitability. In 2006, the work of Michael Porter and Mark Kramer entitled *Strategy and Society: The Link Between Competitive Advantage and Corporate Social Responsibility* was published in Harvard Business Review. The article focused on the role of corporate social responsibility (hereafter: CSR) in strengthening the competitive advantage of a company. Porter and Kramer offered a new approach to describing the relationship between business and society. It would allow companies to contribute to social well-being without limiting its corporate success. In order to analyze the effectiveness of their CSR policy, companies would have to use the same tools as the ones they use to evaluate the profitability of specific business ventures. Then, it would turn out that corporate social responsibility could be something more than just a necessity imposed by social pressure, a one-time act of charity or a generator of extra expenses. It can prove to be a source of new opportunities and help the company to gain a competitive advantage. The main financial benefits associated with establishing a specific CSR policy include increasing brand recognition, making more effective long-term decisions, being more attractive to employees as well as responding effectively to the growing expectations of clients, who are monitoring more and more closely the “ethical standing of the companies” in which they invest their money. Some financial analysts believe that looking at the quality of a CSR policy of a given company may be useful in assessing the quality of its management in general terms. Even investors themselves are more interested in companies that are able to reconcile their economic, social and environmental ambitions.

In all the above points, the Other occupies a central role, while the often-mentioned disjunction: profit or care for the Other, takes the form of the conjunction: profit and care for the Other.

4. The social sphere—responsibility for the community here and now and responsibility for future generations

When exactly does the responsibility for the Other become our shared responsibility? In the social sphere, as already stated in the introduction to our considerations, next to the paradigm of “antiquity” and the paradigm of “modernity” stands the extremely important paradigm of “contemporaneity,” referred to as dialogical (cf. Filek, 2004, pp. 5–7). It seems, however, that apart from the dialogical paradigm, one can distinguish a separate communal paradigm based on the first-person plural. It goes beyond the second person and extends to other members of the community. The *I-you* relationship, understood as the face to face relationship, expands into the *we* relationship, understood as a community which strives to take everyone into consideration. While analyzing political life, Nicolai Hartmann (2004, p. 44) justly observed that:

Responsibility [...] extends to all spheres of life. The same principle of spiritual heritage applies everywhere; the same historical continuity is secured. [...] In every cultural reference, an individual perceives him or herself as part of yet another community, the community of successive generations, which teaches the person to understand himself as a short-lived link in a chain. [...] Here, the present-day human feels solidarity with the human from the future, who will not know and will not be able to stand up for him or her.

We can clearly hear the echo of the passage from Dostoyevsky’s *Brothers Karamazov*, which says:

as soon as you make yourself responsible in all sincerity for everything and for everyone, you will see at once that this is really so, and that you are in fact to blame for everyone and for all things. (1984, p. 379)

Positive responsibility, as opposed to negative (restrictive) responsibility that primarily focuses on the past, is not only a responsibility towards stakeholders here and now, but it becomes a responsibility for the generations to come. According to the German philosopher Georg Picht, the concept of responsibility has a temporal dimension and, above all, relates to the future effect of our actions (cf. Picht, 2004, pp. 142–146). Therefore, when it comes to companies and managers, it is about assuming responsibility towards future generations and enabling them to enjoy all the goods that our planet has to offer, in their unchanged condition. We are all responsible for the future as we all participate in the history of

humankind, and its characteristic feature is “the unity of time” (Filek, 2004, p. 215). Responsibility can be compared to a plant tangled around the timeline, constituting an integral, inseparable part. As the Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland aptly put it in the 1980s while defining the principles of sustainable development, it is “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Porter & Kramer, 2006, pp. 78–92).

Apart from the temporal dimension, proponents of procedural ethics draw attention to yet another dimension of communal responsibility. John Rawls introduces the so-called *difference principle*, which applies to the just organization of society. It may involve various types of distribution of goods, but in each case, it ensures the equality and freedom of all parties to the system. In line with Rawls’ thought, with different arrangements in the distribution of goods, an effort should be made to maximize the minimum. The above procedure is aimed at avoiding two threats to social life. Firstly, the excessive accumulation of wealth in the hands of the few should be prevented as it excludes and marginalizes others, and this may result in social unrest. The second is the danger of egalitarianism, which in the name of the equality principle, undercuts and limits the freedom and creativity of the most talented. It leads to a well-known mechanism from the countries of real socialism. Rawls’ principle concerning the maximization of the minimum part can be interpreted as a form of responsibility for all community members; it provides the opportunity to grow rich and develop, and at the same time it makes it possible to bring aid and attention to—recalling Levinas’ words one more time—the Other in need.

Such shared responsibility is also apparent in the discourse ethics of Jürgen Habermas. The German philosopher asserts that only those standards that would receive approval from all interested parties participating in the discussion can aspire to be of universal validity. In other words, everyone has the right to express their opinion. The mutual understanding of the interests that can be universalized is reached in intersubjective discussions. To Habermas, the principle of social solidarity—the equivalent to Rawls’ principle of maximizing the minimum—has strong moral roots that stem from the fragility of the human condition. We can find our intuition telling us how to proceed to counteract this extreme fragility and helplessness of people. From an anthropological point of view, morality is a protective disposition compensating for humanity’s essential fragility that is inscribed in a specific sociocultural context. There are two resulting tasks related to the moral views: the first is to add the value of inalienability to the rights of individuals who demand equal respect; the second, related to the first one, involves bringing people together to form a community based on solidarity. We can, therefore, speak of two complementary principles: justice, which calls for the respect and equality of rights for everyone, as well as the universal, shared responsibility for one another among the members of a broadly defined community. Morality cannot safeguard the rights of individuals without taking into account the good of the

community to which they belong. It is not a purely ethical postulate, but it penetrates all spheres that are important to contemporary communities, such as the law, economics or politics. An example of such activities may be the redistribution of income, which ensures the equality of opportunities, rights and access to education, health care, and the operation of companies that take into account the rights of all stakeholders. In the view of both Rawls and Habermas, what comes to the fore is the aspect of responsibility that is absent at the level of face-to-face relationships. Another question is whether these principles, on the basis of which a fair, well-organized society is to function, have a universal application, or—as communitarians suggest—no single principle of justice can be applied to all aspects of social life. Thus, as Michael Walzer, the author of *Spheres of Justice* would say, it is necessary to adapt our way of thinking about justice to the sphere it refers to (e.g. health care, education, economic activity) and to the historical community that is being considered, along with its specific circumstances.

5. Different levels of responsibility in business

In the final part of the article, we will go back to one of the main spheres of human activity, namely economic activity. In her description of corporate social responsibility, Janina Filek listed six stages of its construction. In the initial stage, i.e., the pre-legal and pre-ethical stage, we cannot speak of any responsibility as an entrepreneur simply tries to avoid it. In the first and the second stages, responsibility is imposed by law and equals the punishment for wrongdoing and the compensation for the damage caused. This negative, very restrictive understanding of responsibility means that the economic entity is legally obliged to comply with the principles and norms of community life, and that at this stage there is no question of the conscious implementation of CSR principles. In the third stage, where the idea of CSR starts to take shape, responsibility is enforced by society, but it is the entrepreneur who makes an effort to develop proper relationships with stakeholders. In the fourth and fifth stages, positive responsibility replaces the negative, which happens when an entrepreneur consciously and voluntarily assumes social responsibility, which is meant to bring improvement in the quality of life in a particular community (cf. Filek, 2006, p. 8). Although this classification distinguishes and clearly differentiates various types of responsibility, and while one may agree with this division, it might be a good idea to present it somewhat differently, less dichotomously, making reference to the comparison from the field of geometry in which overlapping circles have some areas in common. An illustration might be the evolution of the legal concept of responsibility, which Paul Ricoeur convincingly demonstrated in his article on responsibility. Starting from a highly restrictive notion of responsibility, the philosopher noticed its evolution towards a more positively understood responsibility that allows the existence of solidarity between people. New articles appear in the code of law, and they are

established not under the penalty of punishment, but their guiding idea is the idea of solidarity. The meaning shifts away from guilt, from which the concept of responsibility is to originate, and towards the affirmation of solidarity with others (cf. Ricoeur, 1995, pp. 57–61). Thus, legal responsibility begins to go beyond its own framework and extend its scope to positive responsibility. Out of a sense of solidarity and bearing in mind the good that depends on their company, global business entities set higher standards for themselves, even though in a given country they do not have to stick to such restrictive regulations regarding, for example, environmental protection as in their home country. Janina Filek notes that “more and more frequently, the ethical and business reflection brings into focus the issue of self-regulation, i.e., an ethical, economic activity based on self-control, not necessarily resulting from external control” (2002, p. 211). In view of the complexity of problems occurring in the global world and in view of an enterprise entering the general social bloodstream through the inclusion of external shareholders—customers, suppliers, contractors, and even competitors—the famous statement of Milton Friedman, that the sole responsibility of business is to increase its profits, ceased to function as the only paradigm in use. Increasingly, it is believed that the pure profit orientation, which takes no heed of other important social and moral circumstances, does not safeguard the public interest.

There is another reason why business entities should feel morally obliged to apply CSR principles. In order to illustrate it better, we may employ the concept of the social franchise as opposed to the commercial franchise, with its literal meaning broadened and used to define social responsibility in the fifth, advanced stage of development. Unlike a commercial franchise, the actual social franchise (the franchise model that is very uncommon in Poland) allows the transfer of all knowledge without charging license fees, which should constitute the income of a franchisor. However, it imposes an obligation on franchisees to dedicate part of their profits to social causes. While broadening the basic meaning of the social franchise, one may be tempted to compare a joint-stock company to a franchise in which society is the franchisor and an enterprise is the franchisee. An entrepreneur must bear in mind that society has a moral right to demand something in exchange for the privileges that come from conducting such a business activity (e.g. for the fact that the legal personality of the company is separate from the legal personality of the owners, and the resulting benefits for entrepreneurs). Entrepreneurs, aware of their social role, not forced by the law and, at a later stage, not subject to social pressure, respect the need to implement corporate social responsibility policies of their own accord, including them permanently in the costs of running the business. Thus, even in the system of social and economic interdependencies, there is room for voluntary responsibility, which—overcoming the desire to make a profit at all costs and the fear of criminal responsibility or social ostracism—becomes a relevant factor contributing to the creation of the common good. It grows from the conscious and free will of the entrepreneur, aimed at improving

the quality of life of the communities in which he or she lives and conducts business.

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