

From Intuition to Reflection... and Back unto a Deeper Intuition

The first edition of this book about the discussion, analysis and evaluation of business ethics cases (Siebens, 1994) was our first publication on corporate responsibility and the first initiative of the Flemish Network for Business Ethics, which aimed to promote and support business ethics (also called corporate responsibility, sustainable entrepreneurship, professional ethics, deontology, etc.). We are pleased that in the meantime talking about responsibility in the context of a profession and an organisation has become out of hand. It is even 'in' to confess to 'sustainability', 'corporate social responsibility' and 'corporate governance', as business ethics are often referred to these days. In this respect we still have our serious reservations concerning window-dressing but we are pleased with the increased attention. Integrity, corporate social responsibility, spiritual leadership, stakeholder dialogue, ethical leadership, social contract, values, code of ethics, sustainability, virtues,... so many elements and designations that indicate the implementation of the ethical aspect in the daily operation of someone's profession or professional organisation. Anyone who brings these terms into the Internet search functions is amazed of the massive amount of information.

Thinking about responsible behaviour in its present form may only recently be 'in' in the professional and business world but it is of all times, as you will experience further in this book. Apparently it seems to belong to everyone as well: whether educated or not, everyone seems to think he can form an opinion about everything and also thinks this opinion is well-founded (often even the only one well-founded). On the contrary, the number of academically educated people working on professional ethics is rather small. Personally, I experience this as a frustrating situation, because it only leads to 'cafe-discussions' without any prospect of real insight, just based on nothing more than intuitions and perceptions. This is a dangerous situation for democracy as a whole, while the CEO/director/manager, the trade union delegate, the accidentally elected

politician, the ordinary citizen ... think they can express their opinion on any act, decision or situation in whatever style they want and in increasingly very complex dossiers. That way we risk to fall into ethical relativism – everything being possible, because ultimately all opinions seem equally correct/incorrect – and into a society in which power coincides with getting right at one's side. Facts-free opinions, alternative facts and fake news then suddenly become acceptable opinions and strategies.

We must therefore always pay attention to the construction of a justifiable and manageable method in order to build up a reasoned opinion about a situation or decision or deed... The aim is to use such a step-by-step plan to deepen our spontaneous ethical intuition – the 'reflex', formerly known as our 'conscience' – into a full-fledged reflection, which means analytical, thus methodical and clearly argued. In this respect this method it is not just about business ethics as a mere ethics about doing business, but clearly about business ethics based on reflection. If this can 'wear off', i.e. develop into a deeper, more solid intuition, then business ethics judgments, decisions and actions may survive a less generous economic situation. This will in fact encourage a more experienced ethical conviction, integrity and spirituality and a structural anchoring, embedding ethics in the strategy and policy of the organisation.

However, it is not our ultimate intention to reduce professional and business ethics to a purely mechanical thinking process, to a box of tricks. Contrary to the moral working method, we hope that a more reflective and inductive ethical working method may contribute to a deepening of the ethical sensitivity. Ultimately, ethics remains primarily a matter of emotions, of solidarity, of anger and also of deep accountability, of conviction, of empathy and emotional intelligence. A matter of being personally involved. And of joint dialogue.

We want to offer organisations, managers (managers, board members, etc.) and employees, but also teachers and students, the necessary insights, a framework and a working procedure to efficiently and thoughtfully tackle ethical dilemmas and make choices in daily professional and business life. We believe that this is still a necessity in many organisations, especially in smaller companies (SME's). Too often people (as CEO's) have to rely solely on a purely personal and unfounded intuition to determine whether situations and decisions in the area of responsibility can be defended. This is increasingly risky. Employees, consumers, pressure groups such as trade unions, consumer organisations, environmental and neighbourhood action groups, and governments are using modern ICT

tools, especially social media, to inform themselves in detail about what the organisation does and does not, and do not refrain from using the same tools to mobilise other citizens. In short, the risk of damage to the trust and reputation of the organisation is more real than ever. And as we all know from experience a good image is quickly lost. It takes years of effort (costs, people and resources) to rebuild. Reputation goes on horseback, but comes on foot. That is why risk management was given a twin brother: reputation risk management.

With this publication we therefore aim at the following groups of readers:

- all readers who are interested in the phenomenon of corporate responsibility and are looking for an introduction to the theme that is not too extensive and is easy to read;
- managers and directors, but in fact all employees, in whatever organisation, who are looking for a first exploration of the theme of corporate responsibility and are looking for a handy working procedure to tackle their daily dilemmas in a consistent way;
- readers who are already used to asking ethical questions about responsibility but who are looking for insights and a practical procedure to analyse situations (cases) more objectively and arguable.

Of course, this publication is not an exhaustive and complete, let alone a definitive answer to the question of responsible professional conduct by individuals and within and by organisations. The domain of responsible professional conduct is too extensive and still too much in evolution.

It does not want to be a compendium. It is not an encyclopaedia of ethical themes in professional and business life. After American authors in the seventies and eighties of last century tried to realize such comprehensive books, it has now become clear that such an initiative has become completely outpaced and hopeless.

Nor is it a profound philosophical work. First and foremost, we want to bring a clear story about the what, how and why of responsible professional behaviour, i.e. what it is, how to tackle it, why to apply it. It is just a flavouring and a guide. Nevertheless, we will base our 'story' on a few clear philosophical principles, such as the philosophy of Lévinas (1971, 1974, 1985, 1991, 1993 and 2003) and the stakeholder thinking of Freeman (1984). We will experience that behaving responsibly and doing business in a responsible way is much more complex than anyone can think.

That is why we gave this book the designation of ‘a primer’, referring to ‘primus’, first. It is meant to be a first exploration for those who want to get to know and think enriched about the issue of responsibility in their professional actions, whether alone, with their team or within their professional organisation.

I would like to thank Frans De Smedt for the linguistic correction of this book.

I dearly want to dedicate this book to my grandchildren Alexander, Matthijs and Florian, because in the end that is what we are striving for: a better world for our grandchildren.

Herman Siebens

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