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An ethics of responsibility for our time: a proposal

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Abstract

We live in a time in which the way of life characterised as "ethical" or "moral" is under stress. The challenge we face is to take up responsibility for salvaging and enhancing the exercise of moral responsibility in all spheres of life. It is argued in this article that the ethical approach to be followed in facing this challenge is the ethics of responsibility. This ethics should, however, not be conceptualised as yet another *first-level* normative ethical approach vying to replace existing ones, but as a *second-level* one. Such an approach recognises the indispensable contribution of existing normative ethical approaches to the exercise of moral responsibility. At the same time, it provides guidance to these approaches on enhancing the exercise of moral responsibility in a contextually appropriate manner. In the article, a case is made out for the ethics of responsibility that is proposed, followed by a discussion of its profile and agenda.

Keywords

Contemporary culture; ethics; ethics of responsibility; modernisation; moral responsibility

Introduction

We live in a time in which the way of life characterised as "ethical" or "moral" is under stress. This poses a serious challenge to those of us who regard the ethical way of living as indispensable for both personal and social life worth living. The challenge we face is to take up responsibility for salvaging the ethical way of living, or to put it differently, for the exercise of moral responsibility in all spheres of life. We, however, need clarity on how this comprehensive responsibility ought to be fulfilled.

I am arguing in this article that one should not expect one of the existing normative ethical approaches to provide this guidance. The answer

also does not lie in designing a new first-level normative ethical theory to supplant the existing normative ethical theories and approaches. The answer rather lies in designing a second-level normative ethical approach that would provide guidance to the existing first-level normative ethical approaches on how they ought to take responsibility for enhancing the exercise of moral responsibility in our time. This would include, among others, guidance on the adaptations they need to undergo in order to fulfil this responsibility. An apt designation for this second-level normative ethical approach would, in my opinion, be "ethics of responsibility".

In the article I proceed by, first of all, making out a case for such an ethics of responsibility. Attention is then given to both the profile and the agenda of the proposed ethics.

The case for the proposed ethics of responsibility

The undermining influence contemporary culture exerts on traditional ethics has been a recurrent theme in philosophy and sociology since the 19th century. The views of the German sociologist, Max Weber, have been especially influential. He framed the discussion as one on the impact of *modernisation* on traditional ethics, particularly religious ethics. In his opinion processes of rationalisation, especially instrumental rationalisation, which make out the core of modernisation, brought about the "disenchantment" of Western culture, leading in turn to the loss of the dominant role of Christian ethics and the gradual demise of the Christian religion (Weber 1968a:105; 2004:244). It also brought about the differentiation of autonomous social orders like politics, the economy and science, each with its own set of social-order-specific values, in which moral values, as understood traditionally, have no place (Weber 2004:219; cf. also foreword of Weber 1968b). For Weber another offshoot was intensified bureaucratisation, which does not allow the individual employer in the ranks of an organisation to do her work in accordance with her own ethical convictions, but rather strictly in compliance with the orders of superiors (Weber 1968b:956-99; 1994:351). The overall result has been, in Weber's opinion, the loss of what he called "ethical meaning" and the pluralisation of conflicting value systems (Weber 1949:15–16; 2004:238).

With the benefit of hindsight, we can today say that the impact of modernisation on traditional ethics has not been as devastating as Weber predicted (cf. De Villiers 2018:156–185). In spite of the worldwide spread of modernisation, the Christian and other religions are surviving in most parts of the world and are even gaining followers in certain parts of the world (cf. Joas 2012:192–195). Millions, if not billions, of people still orientate their personal lives and conduct in accordance with the religious ethics they adhere to. It is also not true that ethical considerations are completely banned from social orders and that all organisations are strictly bureaucratically structured and leave the individual employer with no room for exercising ethical discretion (cf. Clegg 2011:221–223).

That having been said we must admit that contemporary culture in certain respects does have an undermining impact on traditional ethics:

(a) In most modernised societies religious moral values are, to a large extent, excluded from social orders. In many of them the separation of state and religion, which forbids privileging a particular religion and basing legislation on religious convictions, is constitutionally enshrined (cf. Monsma and Soper 2009; De Villiers 2018:159–160). Also, in the economic and scientific social orders a strictly secular approach dominates and only moral values of a secular nature are recognised.[1] Many religious people have to comply with the secular codes of conduct that are recognised in their workplaces. They often find it difficult to positively relate these secular codes of conduct with the moral values of the religion they adhere to.

(b) Since Weber's time the pluralisation of moral values and views has only intensified. This can be ascribed, among others, to large-scale immigration and cultural globalisation exposing people to the values and views of different cultures, religions and ideologies (cf. Berger 2014; Taylor 2007:473–504). The individuating effect of modernisation after World War II also contributed significantly. The "individuating

1 Peter Berger comes to the conclusion: "Modern science and technology necessarily operate within a discourse that is strictly 'immanent' – 'as if God does not exist' […] The secular discourse exists both in the subjective minds of individuals, who have learned to deal with zones of reality without any supernatural presuppositions, and in the objective order of society, in which specific institutions also function without such presuppositions" (Berger 2014:52).

revolution", as Charles Taylor calls it, on a mass scale brought about the severing of the social moorings of individuals in traditional ways of living in families and local and religious communities, as well as the steady spread of the "culture of authenticity" (Taylor 2007:473).[2] One today even finds divergent moral views within the same religious denomination and the same family. As a result, it has become more difficult to find agreement on moral issues and co-operate on the basis of common moral views.

(c) Weber, in his time, identified the so-called "power-politicians" (*Machtpolitiker* or *Realpolitiker*) as representatives of a purely instrumentalist, or functionalist, approach to politics (Weber 1949:23–24; 1994). Since then many "power politicians" have appeared on the political stage who have not allowed ethical considerations to hamper their militant efforts to achieve more political and economic power for their nation and/or for themselves. Many modern-day Machiavellian ideologues of "political realism", have been all too willing to legitimise the actions of "power-politicians", the American political scientist Hans Morgenthau being a clear example (Morgenthau 1954). In the field of economy, the influential school of "neoliberal capitalism", inspired by, among others, the Austrian economist Friedrich Hayek, propagated the idea that the economy fares best when the market is allowed to function on its own, without regulation based on ethical considerations (cf. Hayek 1976). The development of new technology during the last century has often gone hand in hand with one-sided "technicist" considerations bent on technological progress at all costs taking no heed of ethical reservations. Such purely instrumentalist, or functionalist approaches are still highly influential in contemporary societies.

(d) New lifestyles have emerged that have in more inadvertent ways contributed to the undermining of the guiding influence of morality. One of the results of economic globalisation has been the strong impact

2 Taylor provides the following definition of the "culture of authenticity": "[…] the understanding of life which emerges with the Romantic expressivism of the late eighteenth century, that each one of us has his/her own way of realizing our humanity, and that it is important to find and live out one's own, as against surrendering to conformity with a model imposed on us from outside, by society, or the previous generation, or religious or political authority" (Taylor 2007:475).

of commodification and consumerism on the lifestyles of people worldwide. Zygmunt Bauman, among others, demonstrated how patterns of consumer behaviour affect all other aspects of our lives, including work and family life. People are pressed to consume more, and themselves become commodities on the consumer and labour market. Busy striving to earn more to buy the things they feel they need in order to be happy; they have less time for expressions of empathy and for intense negotiation, let alone resolution, of their mutual misapprehensions and disagreements (Bauman 2009:59). The large-scale commercialisation of digital technology plays a significant role in this regard. Intense stimulation of the senses brought about by constant exposure to visual entertainment in the digital media distracts from ethical reflection; the repetitive portrayal of extreme violence in computer games and films numbs the sense of the ethically problematic nature of violence, and the exposure to one-sided information and news, often fake news, in especially the social media undermines critical moral thinking (Huber 2013:130–137). In many respects the dominant consumer culture in our globalised world has contributed to a widespread moral blindness or loss of moral sensitivity (Bauman and Donskis 2013).

(e) The introduction and implementation of new technologies as a result of rapid technological development during the last century or more are also in other respects presenting existing normative ethical approaches with serious challenges.[3] First of all, new technologies are introduced at such a rapid pace that they find it difficult to keep up with providing substantiated moral guidance. What adds to the problem is that ethical traditions from which the normative ethical approaches draw often do not have the necessary normative tools at their disposal to adequately deal with the moral evaluation of new technologies. The result has been a widening "moral gap" with regard to moral guidance on new technologies. Secondly, it has by now become clear that the

3 Hans Jonas already in 1984 asserted in his book *The imperative of responsibility: In search for an ethics for the technological age*, that existing normative ethical approaches are not geared to adequately respond to the ethical challenges posed by new technological applications. He found them wanting on account of their limited focus on the short-term consequences of human actions, rendering them unable to deal with the long-term consequences of ethical problems raised by genetic engineering and the threat of nuclear extermination (Jonas 1984:5–6).

> implementation of new technologies that initially seemed beneficial, have had unforeseen negative consequences that are even endangering future life on earth – for example, the use of fossil fuels causing global warming. Normative ethical approaches are faced with the difficult challenge of providing moral guidance on the use of new technologies that does not leave future consequences out of the equation. And lastly, the implementation of new technologies, especially those that make use of automation and artificial intelligence, often makes it difficult to ascribe moral accountability to human agents for damage caused as a result of system failure – for example, when an explosion seemingly spontaneously occurs in a fully automated and computerised plant (De Villiers 2002).

Where does the responsibility lie for tackling the challenges posed by contemporary culture and society for the exercise of moral responsibility? It would be difficult to deny that the responsibility in the first instance lies with the existing normative ethical approaches. They have the responsibility to effectively and appropriately implement countermeasures to both stem the tide of the undermining of the exercise of moral responsibility and enhance the exercise of moral responsibility in all spheres of life.

What complicates the matter is that a co-ordinated strategy is needed that proponents of the different normative ethical approaches would have to buy into and implement in their own spheres of influence. The question is: Who should take the initiative in drawing up such a co-ordinated strategy? There are a number of reasons why the initiative of identifying the normative notions on which the co-ordinated strategy should be based, and of designing such a strategy, should rather not be taken on the basis of one of the existing normative ethical approaches. None of the existing normative ethical approaches can justifiably claim universal recognition. The different normative ethical approaches rather tend to regard one another as competition and would not easily buy into an initiative of one of their competitors. Apart from that they are often part of the problem. I suffice with two illustrations. Many proponents of religious ethics, on the one hand, have a strong prejudice against all secular morality, and no appreciation for the indispensable positive role shared moral values play in wider society, while many proponents of secular ethics, on the other, have an equally strong dislike in all religious ethics and no appreciation for the

indispensable positive role religious moral convictions play in the lives of religious people. Both religious and secular normative ethical approaches often have little appreciation for the validity of social-order-specific values of a functional nature and tend to adopt a pan-moralistic approach in regarding the moral values they propagate as having sole validity in all spheres of life. The different existing normative ethical approaches would themselves in many respects need to undergo adaptations to enable them to fulfil their responsibility in enhancing the exercise of moral responsibility in all spheres of life.

I am of the opinion that guidance to first-level normative ethical approaches on how they ought to fulfil their responsibility in enhancing the exercise of moral responsibility in contemporary societies, should be provided by a second-level normative ethical approach. Where the first-level normative ethical approaches provide moral guidance to people on the moral problems they experience in their lives, such a second-level normative ethical approach operates on a different level in providing guidance to the first-level normative ethical approaches themselves. The benefit of such a second-level normative ethical approach is that it does not directly compete with existing first-level ones for recognition. It can recognise the need for different types of first-level normative ethical approaches, fulfilling different legitimate roles with regard to moral guidance: ethics attuned to the distinctive beliefs of an individual, providing moral orientation to her personal life; ethics based on the tradition of a particular cultural or religious community, providing a sense of moral identity to its members and moral cohesion in the community and ethics operating in a particular secular social context in which individuals from different cultural and religious backgrounds are involved, guiding them by means of shared moral values on the moral limits of their actions, and on the moral goals they should strive to realise. At the same time, as it does not align itself with any of the existing normative ethical approaches, such a second-level normative ethical approach could level unprejudiced criticism at any of them when necessary.

The designation "ethics of responsibility" would in my opinion be an apt one for the second-level normative approach I propose. A first reason is that linking the designation "ethics of responsibility" to a second-level normative ethical approach recognises a motif that was already part of

the very first use of the term "ethics of responsibility". Max Weber, who coined the term in 1919 in his famous speech "Politics as a vocation", in my opinion, used it to refer to a second-level normative ethical approach.[4] More importantly, the designation gives expression to the fact that the proposed ethics presupposes the enormous expansion of the scope of moral obligation that has taken place especially during the last two centuries. This expansion closely correlates with the increase of human power to transform the social and natural environments as a result of scientific research, and organisational and technological innovation. With the increase in power to transform reality, the responsibility to channel the exercise of power in accordance with appropriate guidelines also increased.[5] This responsibility does not entail only a moral responsibility, but also the responsibility to guide political, economic, scientific and technological activities in accordance with the functional norms applicable in these different social orders. It, however, also includes the moral responsibility to guide activities in all spheres of life in accordance with applicable moral norms.

One can, in my opinion, distinguish different levels on which comprehensive moral or ethical responsibility has to be exercised today. On the ground level of everyday life, individuals and organisations have the comprehensive moral responsibility to take decisions on the increasingly complex problems of modern life that lead to morally recommendable actions and policies. On the level of systematic reflection normative ethical approaches have the correlating comprehensive responsibility to provide moral guidance to those on the ground level by formulating applicable moral norms to facilitate such decisions. To counter the undermining impact of contemporary culture on the exercise of moral responsibility, we today have the added responsibility to also reflect on a comprehensive strategy existing normative ethical approaches should implement to counter this impact and on the adaptations they need to make to optimally contribute

4 In my book *Revisiting Max Weber's ethic of responsibility* (2018) I present a case for interpreting Weber's ethic of responsibility as a second-level normative ethical approach (De Villiers 2018:138–155).

5 Already in 1917 a contemporary of Max Weber wrote in his book *Politik als Moral* with regard to the correlation of specifically political power and responsibility: "The foundation of the state on the outside and on the inside is power and force. However, *power includes responsibility*; and the bigger the power, the heavier also the responsibility" (Franz 1917:39; translated from the German).

to the enhancement of the exercise of moral responsibility on ground level. While the ethics of responsibility operates on the last-named level it serves the enhancement of comprehensive moral responsibility on the other levels. The designation "ethics of responsibility" thus also refers to an ethics that is itself responsible in that it takes much needed responsibility on a second level of operation for enhancing comprehensive moral responsibility.[6]

One could on account of the different levels of ethical responsibility that are at stake provide the following definition: "The ethics of responsibility is a second-level normative ethical approach taking responsibility for providing guidance to first-level normative ethical approaches on fulfilling their responsibility to optimally enhance the exercise of moral responsibility in contemporary societies".

Profile of the proposed ethics of responsibility

In what has been said so far, some features of the ethics of responsibility could already be detected; foremost of all that it is a second level normative ethical approach. To provide a clearer profile I highlight in this section the most important points of departure of this ethics.

> A guiding formal criterion is *contextual appropriateness.* When normative activities such as making moral decisions on actions and providing guidance on applicable moral values or ethical strategy are undertaken, they should appropriately respond to the given macro- and micro-context. Given the drastically changed circumstances of today this would inevitably require certain adaptations to existing normative approaches. At the same time there should be adequate continuity with the way in which normative ethics was conducted in the past, in acknowledgment of the continuing validity of certain ethical insights of the past and the role traditional normative ethical approaches still today play in identity formation. The proposed ethics of responsibility therefore also recognises *adequate continuity with ethical tradition* as

6 From a different perspective Otfried Höffe in his book *Moral als Preis der Moderne: Eine Versuch über Wissenschaft, Technik und Umwelt* also argues for "[e]ine Ethik der Verantwortung, die selbst verantwortlich ist". In English: "an ethics of responsibility that is itself responsible" (Höffe 1993:20).

formal criterion standing in creative tension with the formal criterion of *contextual appropriateness*.

Having as goal the enhancement of moral responsibility the proposed ethics of responsibility has high regard for ethics or morality as a social institute. Ethics as a social institute comprising both prescribed moral values (including moral goals, virtues and principles or norms) and the reflection on these moral values, took a long time to take shape in different cultures and religions. On account of the close association of ethics with values that have priority some modern thinkers – Max Weber and H.R. Hare[7] for example – were of the opinion that a purely formal definition of "ethics" in terms of prioritised values would suffice. Providing a purely formal definition, however, ignores the fact that the social institute of ethics since its differentiation has also had a particular material purpose. This purpose is to provide guidelines on living a fulfilled, meaningful, or flourishing life. Some of these guidelines assist one in disciplining one's own desires and in shaping one's personal life in accordance with a particular ideal of the fulfilled life. As one of the fundamental tensions in human life is that between promoting one's own wellbeing and serving the wellbeing of fellow human beings, ethics also includes guidelines on curbing the natural egoistic tendency to serve only one's own wellbeing, on avoiding doing harm to others and on actively serving their wellbeing. The obligation to also serve the wellbeing of fellow human beings thus traditionally formed an integral part of the wider ethical obligation to strive to attain the goal of living a fulfilled personal life.

I do not agree with Kurt Bayertz that this wider concept of ethics or morality has been dropped in modernity and that only a narrow concept has been retained (Bayertz 2004:34–42). In his opinion the social institute of morality today has been reduced to a minimal morality with the sole function of minimising harm done to fellow human beings. Such a view completely ignores the fact that many religious

7 H.R. Hare defined morality in terms of the formal features of *prescriptivity, universalizability* and of having *priority* over other normative considerations when they are in conflict (Hare 1963:168–169). G.J. Warnock criticised Hare's formal definition of morality on account of the fact that it does not exclude values that in vernacular would not be called moral, for example values having priority for a sadist (Warnock 1971:131).

people still adhere to a wider understanding of morality in terms of striving to live a fulfilled personal life. It also ignores the strong revival of a secular virtue ethics in the "art of living" movement, which has the personal attainment of a fulfilled life as goal (cf. for a discussion of this contemporary variant of virtue ethics: Van Tongeren 2012:99–134).

This does not mean that we may today in all respects suffice with the traditional understanding of ethics or morality. We have to expand the ethical obligation to strive to attain the goal of living a meaningful live, to also include the obligation to preserve the natural environment. This expansion of the purpose of the social institute of ethics is of the utmost importance, as it has today become clear that the wellbeing of human beings and the wellbeing of the natural environment are inextricably intertwined.

It is ethics thus comprehensively conceptualised, that should be held in high esteem and served by the ethics of responsibility.

The proposed ethics of responsibility recognises that one of the results of modernisation has been the differentiation of separate social orders, each with its own distinctive set of functional values guiding the distinctive activities that are undertaken. The dignity and validity of these social-order-specific functional values are likewise recognised. At the same time the functionalist view that there is no place for moral values in the different social orders is rejected. Activities within social orders need to be guided not only by functional, but also by moral norms. It is, however, important to have a contextually appropriate view of the relation between functional and moral norms. Although it cannot be denied that moral values have a certain priority that should be recognised also in social orders, this priority should not be understood as an absolute one, in the sense that moral values totally override social-order-specific functional values. Such a misunderstanding of the priority of moral values had in the past often resulted in a pan-moralistic approach totally replacing legitimate functional considerations with moral ones. Expecting political decisions to be made in accordance with doctrinaire pacifist values and the economy to be run on the basis of a ban on interest, are examples of such a pan-moralist approach. We should rather depart from an *accommodative* understanding of the

priority of moral values in social orders that does not unnecessarily restrict the validity of functional values and disrupt social-order-specific activities. Applicable moral values – not the whole spectrum of moral values people adhere to – should be regarded as part of the normative framework, also including applicable legal regulations, within which social-order-specific activities take place. This normative framework channels the activities within a particular social order, and to a certain extent limits and steers them, but also allows a certain free play to activities in accordance with the functional values recognised in the social order (cf. Schwinn 2001:321–323; De Villiers 2018:170–171; 313–214).

The proposed ethics of responsibility takes an accommodative attitude over against the plurality of existing normative ethical approaches, in that it does not deny some of them a legitimate role in society. It rather takes it for granted that each one of them is regarded by the religious or secular community, the organisation or the individual person that recognises it as playing a valuable normative role in decision-making on actions and policies. The guidelines the ethics of responsibility designs for normative ethical approaches should thus not be regarded as criteria for establishing which of them pass the test and which not. They should rather be seen as normative aides to these approaches, assisting them in exercising self-criticism and in making the adaptations needed to enhance the exercise of moral responsibility in our time, among others by providing moral guidance

The ethics of responsibility, inter alia, recognises the legitimate role of both religious and secular normative ethical approaches. Unfortunately, adherents of both religious and secular approaches often tend to absolutize the moral tenets they proclaim. The problem is not so much that they believe that their own moral convictions have universal validity for all people, but that they regard them as infallible, and reject the moral convictions of other normative ethical approaches as totally false. The ethics of responsibility does not recognise such absolutist claims, first of all because they could have dangerous consequences. They lead, all too often, to religious or secular fundamentalism, fanaticism and authoritarian repression of groups and individuals with different moral convictions. Secondly, moral

absolutism does not adequately distinguish between convictional and epistemological certainty. A strong conviction that a particular moral value is true does not imply that the moral value is necessarily true. All moral convictions must in principle be considered open for correction. Likewise, the strong conviction that a moral conviction of someone with a different view of life is false does not imply that it is necessarily false. The proposed ethics of responsibility would therefore advise existing normative ethical approaches to guard against the temptation of moral absolutism and to appeal to their adherents to be more tolerant or hospitable over against people with moral convictions different from their own.

What also counts against ethical absolutism is that as a result of ethical pluralisation and the differentiation of social orders the view that one's own set of moral values, based on a particular religious, cultural or secular view of life, should guide actions and policies in all spheres of life, including the public sphere, has not only become out-dated, but irresponsible. Should we today want to enhance the exercise of moral responsibility in social orders like politics, the economy, science and technology we would have to accept that in such social orders no moral values distinctive of a particular view of life could and should be recognised, but only moral values that could be shared by people from different religious, cultural or secular views of life. The ethics of responsibility should, in my opinion, in this regard endorse Michael Walzer's distinction between "thick" and "thin" morality (Walzer 1994:xi). "Thick" morality refers to morality with strong life-view connotations, while "thin" morality refers to morality without such connotations operating in social orders. It is not that there is no resemblance whatsoever between the two moralities. The overlapping consensus of moral values between different "thick" moralities often serves as source of "thin" moralities, be it that resultant shared moral values are stripped of life-view connotations. It is the view of the proposed ethics of responsibility that normative ethical approaches should acknowledge the need to distinguish between these two types of morality and encourage their adherents to actively support "thin" moralities recognised in the social orders they are involved with.

The proposed ethics of responsibility recognises that the scope of the exercise of moral responsibility has enormously expanded and that normative ethical approaches have to make adaptations to adequately meet the challenges involved. Normative ethical approaches, first of all, have to find new ways in motivating their adherents to adequately fulfil their comprehensive moral responsibility without being overwhelmed and paralysed by the enormity of its scope. Adaptations also have to be made with regard to moral values prescribed to agents exercising moral responsibility. Normative ethical approaches cannot in all respects suffice with the moral values that form part of the moral tradition in which they stand. Some of these traditional moral values have to be scrapped, because they have become out-dated, while changes have to be made to others to accommodate new developments linked to, for example, the rampant ethical pluralisation and differentiation of separate social orders in contemporary societies. As already mentioned, there is also the urgent need in our time to design new moral values to, inter alia, meet the challenge of the many new ethical issues that crop up as a result of scientific discoveries and technological inventions and applications.

Max Weber already in 1919 argued that the traditional approach of making ethical decisions on actions and policy in the social order of politics without considering foreseeable consequences is out-dated and irresponsible (Weber 1994:359–360). In his opinion foreseeable consequences of action or policy options should always be taken account of when making such decisions in modern politics. Sixty years later Hans Jonas stressed that on account of the potentially devastating consequences of the implementation of modern technology, including consequences that cannot be foreseen, we have to adopt a new and responsible approach to ethical decision-making in which both foreseeable and unforeseeable consequences are not left out of the equation (Jonas 1984:6, 9). More adaptations to the traditional approach to moral decision-making are, however, needed. On account of the complex problems we face today, the German theologian, Eduard Tödt, convincingly argued that to reach a moral judgement on what ought to be done it does not suffice anymore to simply apply a general principle to a particular case as was the case in traditional ethics. Apart from

considering the consequences of action options responsible moral decision-making, in his opinion, also involves clear identification of the moral problem at hand, accurate analysis of the micro-situation of decision-making and the careful consideration of all the normative elements involved (Tödt 1988:21–48). The challenge of adopting a responsible approach to moral decision-making in our time is one with which all normative ethical approaches are confronted.

These points of departure form the basis for the creative formulation of guidelines of a more general nature by the proposed ethics of responsibility that could assist existing normative ethical approaches in optimally enhancing the exercise of moral responsibility in our time.

Agenda of the proposed ethics of responsibility

As the ethics of responsibility is attuned to developments in the contemporary world having an impact on the exercise of moral responsibility, no fixed agenda can be set. As new developments could bring about new types of challenges for the exercise of moral responsibility, the agenda must be left open. At this point of time the following are some of the important items the ethics of responsibility should attend to:

(a) On-going reflection on how the ethics of responsibility should be conceptualised. The ethics of responsibility is still not an established branch of normative ethics. One of the contributing factors is the lack of agreement among proponents on what it entails. At this stage the question of how greater consensus could be reached among proponents should be an item high up on the agenda of the ethics of responsibility. What is already clear is that proponents of the different proposals should be willing to actively and critically engage with one another and to learn from one another.

The ethics of responsibility could not only gain by engagement with the proponents of other versions of this ethics, but also by keeping abreast with relevant discussions in other sub-disciplines of philosophy on contemporary culture and its ethical implications. Of special importance is the vast body of research that took shape over the last fifty years or so on the emergence of "responsibility" as a key concept, not only in the academic

disciplines of ethics, philosophy, political science, sociology and economy, but also in wider contemporary culture.[8]

(b) Engagement with social scientific research to gauge the impact of developments in contemporary society and culture on the exercise of moral responsibility and to identify avenues for the enhancement of moral responsibility. The ethics of responsibility is strongly dependent on the results of social scientific research. To be regarded as reliable, its pronouncements on the impact of contemporary culture on the exercise of moral responsibility, and the avenues that are still open for the enhancement of moral responsibility, must be undergirded by the results of relevant social scientific research.

(c) Providing guidance to religious normative ethical approaches on how to deal with secular social contexts and secular ethics recognised in such contexts. Vice versa secular normative approaches should be advised on how to deal with religious ethics. Such advice is based on the point of departure that religious ethics do have a legitimate role to play in contemporary societies in providing moral guidance to many individuals and defining the moral identity of certain communities. Proponents of secular normative ethical approaches should be advised to acknowledge this role and to fully recognise the right to religious freedom. At the same time proponents of religious ethics should acknowledge that on account of the plurality of normative ethical approaches in contemporary societies, as well as the differentiation of social orders, religious moral values could not be introduced in politics, the economy, science and technology. Proponents of religious normative ethical approaches should be advised to not resist this restriction but accept it as a necessary safeguard against social strife and repression in society. They should in addition be encouraged to actively support the responsibility ethics initiative to enhance moral responsibility, not only within their own communities, but also in the wider local, national and global society. This would imply a shift in focus from exclusively working to strengthen the distinctive moral identities of their own religious communities, to also working to strengthen the moral

8 The publication in 2016 by Springer VS of a comprehensive handbook on responsibility (*Handbuch Verantwortung*, edited by Ludger Heidbrink, Claus Langbehn and Janina Loh) attests to this vast body of research.

fibre of society by, among other things, reaching agreement with others on "thin" moral values that should be recognised in social orders and the public sphere. This would, of course, only be feasible when they relinquish all claims smacking of ethical absolutism and adjust their epistemological and hermeneutical presuppositions accordingly. Should they refuse to do so their stance should be criticised as morally irresponsible.

(d) Providing guidance to existing normative ethical approaches on how to deal with rampant ethical pluralisation. No doubt the ethical pluralisation that has intensified since the World War II has made contemporary life more complicated. It is more difficult to find agreement on moral issues and to co-exist and cooperate on the basis of common moral views. The existing normative ethical approaches should, however, be advised to resist the temptation to, in an authoritarian manner, impose their own moral convictions on everyone else in society in order to bring about cooperation and social cohesion. The advice should rather be to accept that at least for the time being ethical pluralisation reigns. Normative ethical approaches should draw on their own resources to appeal to their adherents to respect and tolerate the views of individuals and groups that have moral convictions different from their own. This does not take away the task of seeking legitimate countermeasures to implement against the negative effects of ethical pluralisation. The "overlapping consensus" that often exists between the moral values of people involved in a particular social context, could be tapped as a source for identifying shared moral values. Intensive negotiation between groups from different cultural, religious and ideological backgrounds has in the past often resulted in the acceptance of a shared ethical code in, for example, a business company or a profession. Even the Declaration of Universal Human Rights was only accepted by the United Nations in 1948 after long and intense negotiation.

(e) Providing guidance to existing normative ethical approaches on how to resist functionalist approaches in social orders by insisting on the recognition of applicable moral values, without at the same time denying the legitimate role of social-order-specific functional values as a result of differentiation. The challenge to do justice to both the claim of the priority of moral values that has up till now been part and parcel of the social institution of ethics, and the validity of recognised sets of functional values in the different social orders and the organisations associated with it, remains

a serious one. Existing normative ethical approaches should, on the one hand, be advised on appropriate ways to publicly resist the propagation of functionalist ideologies, and to equip their adherents to effectively resist creeping functionalism in their workplaces. On the other hand, they should be warned against the temptation to favour the recognition of a particular set of "thick" moral values with strong cultural or life-view connotations in a particular social order or organisation within the orbit of the social order. The challenge is to identify "thin" moral values that are applicable in the context of a particular social order and could be shared, and to ensure the "buy-in" of all involved. In my opinion more work is needed, also by the ethics of responsibility, on how the priority of such "thin" moral values should be understood and enacted in the context of social orders.

(f) Advising existing normative ethical approaches on how they could assist their adherents in successfully resisting the grip of the consumerist culture and the digital media and their numbing effect on moral sensitivity in their personal and communal lives. There are different levels on which existing normative ethical approaches could contribute to such resistance and on which the ethics of responsibility could advise them. Proponents could contribute to the social criticism that is already publicly directed against the negative impact of the consumerist culture and excessive exposure to the digital media, as well as the manipulative manner in which the social media are misused to spread one-sided information and fake news. Adherents could also be equipped to, in their personal lives, better resist the grip of the consumerist culture and the digital media. One way to do this is to provide information on their morally negative impact. Another, and more effective, way is to hold up to adherents an attractive alternative lifestyle that is attuned to present-day circumstances. Adherents would only be able to sustain such a lifestyle if they acquire the necessary moral habits or virtues. Normative ethical approaches should therefore also be advised on how strong moral virtues could today be cultivated in their adherents. This inevitably also brings the topic of relevant and effective moral education to children and adults into the discussion.

(g) Advising existing normative ethical approaches on how to deal with the ethical challenges that go hand in hand with rapid technological development. The ethics of responsibility could in light of these challenges give normative ethical approaches advice on how to motivate people to

fulfil their comprehensive responsibility without being overwhelmed, on revising the depository of moral values that form part of the moral traditions they draw on, on designing applicable new moral values to deal with the introduction of new technologies and on the moral decision-making process that should be followed today. With regard to the last issue I would like to add that Hans Jonas did not only introduce the issue of also taking unforeseeable consequences into account when making moral decisions on new technology. He also proposed as general guideline that a "heuristic of fear" should lead decisions when the possibility of serious negative consequences cannot be ruled out for sure. In such cases decisions should preferably be based on a worst-case scenario (Jonas 1984:21–24; 201–204). Over the last decades much work has been done in fine-tuning the so-called "precautionary principle" that could provide general guidance in handling doubtful cases (cf. Huber 2012). Such general guidance regarding the right approach to follow in the case of uncertainty about unforeseeable consequences is, in my opinion, part and parcel of the task of the ethics of responsibility.

In discussing the challenges modernisation poses for the exercise of moral responsibility in our time, I mentioned another problem with regard to technological applications existing normative approaches need guidance on. This is the difficulty in ascribing moral accountability for damage as a result of system failure in plants that are fully automated and computerised. The ethics of responsibility should reflect on this quandary and provide advice on the best way to deal with it (cf. De Villiers 2002:16–21).

Conclusion

In this article I have made out a case for conceiving the ethics of responsibility as second-level normative ethical approach taking on the task of guiding existing first-level normative ethical approaches in fulfilling their responsibility to enhance the exercise of moral responsibility in our time. I have also attempted to present a clear profile of the proposed ethics of responsibility by discussing some of the most important premises on which it is based. Finally, an agenda of the tasks waiting on this ethics at this point of time has been drawn up. From what has been said it must be clear that the proposed ethics of responsibility is by no means intended

to replace or side-line existing normative ethical approaches. The aim is rather to serve and empower them. It is done by reflecting on obstacles to be overcome, practices to be resisted and avenues to be exploited, when enhancing the exercise of moral responsibility in contemporary culture and by advising existing normative ethical approaches on the basis of this reflection on adjustments they have to make to optimally enhance the exercise of moral responsibility. In the end, however, it is the existing normative ethical approaches that have to implement this advice, that have to take a responsibility ethics stance, and in this way ground the ethics of responsibility in present-day reality.

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