

Responsibility

A common key-notion in a world of diversity

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***“We are all Responsible for making sure that Human Rights
are affirmed in our ways of thinking and in our actions.”***

(1st of the 10 principles of the Charter of Human Responsibilities)

Building on the excellent presentation of the theme for the workshop on “*Uniting in Responsibilities in a Culture of Rights*”, this position paper does not need to emphasise any further the necessity of linking Human Rights with the notion of Responsibility. As a well-known Professor of law, François Ost, formulated it : “*Responsibility is the hidden face of Human Rights*”.¹

Rather, I would like to draw attention to the necessity of making explicit what exactly is understood by the idea of “responsibility”.

In a period of increasing international communication -which by its very nature is intercultural- there is a tendency to use concepts which are supposed to be understood in the same way by communities rooted in a great variety of different histories and cultural contexts all over the world. Notions like “democracy”, “(good) governance”, “transparency”, “solidarity”, “development”, “human rights”, “terrorism” etcetera are used carelessly *as if* they are culturally understood and practised in the same way everywhere. This leads to *numerous intercultural misunderstandings and conflicts*.

Cultural diversity of perceptions and practices

It seems that a sense of responsibility (grounded in parenthood) is found among all groups of human beings. However, *the way in which* responsibility is assumed and accounted for is deeply *embedded in each cultural context*.

Cultural / religious conceptions about the notions of the self, the other and the relationship between the two as well as the (inter)relationship between the human beings and the living world around them,

¹ F. Ost, H.Dumont, S. van Drooghenbroeck, et al. (dir), *La Responsabilité, face cachée des droits de l’homme*, Bruxelles, Bruylant, 2005.

differ. Highlighting these differences may be deeply revealing in the sense that they may provide a fundamental insight into the understanding of responsibility by human communities around the world. These varying conceptions are of essential importance to shed a light on questions like : where does the idea of responsibility come from ? Is it an inner attitude or is it imposed ? Does it come from a person's free will (his free choice, his autonomy) or is one simply meant to assume responsibilities ? Who assigns Responsibility to whom ? For what ? Who accounts to whom for what ? How does one determine whether someone has exercised her/his responsibilities successfully ?

In the European languages derived from Latin the notion of responsibility has two complementary etymological dimensions : the first one comes from the Latin verb "*spondere*" which means to *promise* to stand guarantor for something or someone or to take charge of someone or something, i.o.w. to be a "sponsor". Parents stand guarantor for their children while any kind of (social, political, religious) leader is supposed to stand guarantor for the well-being of the people they are in charge of. In other words they **assume** responsibility. The second dimension comes from the Latin verb "*respondere*" which implies to **account for** the way in which one exercises the entrusted tasks. Responsibility therefore is a **twofold commitment**. It is by definition a relational concept as it always refers to ways of behaviour between human beings, and by extension to ways of behaviour of human beings in relation with the wider world of living beings and nature.

While in the course of European philosophical history assuming responsibility has become a matter of the **free choice of the individual**, Tarek AL NOMAN² states that "in a culture dominated by a firm belief in fate and predestination as for instance the Arab Islamic culture, the extent of a person's responsibility for her/his choices and actions, indeed the whole idea of free will and the freedom of choice, is problematic."

Another remarkable difference between various cultures is that contrary to Western languages, an expression like : "*I take responsibility*" would not easily be used in African and indigenous cultural contexts like those of the Maori in New Zealand or the Andean peoples in South America. Why ? Because in these cultural contexts the individual "I" is subordinate and subservient to the community. So, there , people would ask an individual who says "*I will take responsibility*" : "Who do you think you are to "*take*" responsibility? Who then will define your responsibility? You yourself ? And to whom then would you account for that responsibility ?" In their cultural understanding, responsibility is defined by the group the individual belongs to or for particular things by God or the gods . It is entrusted to someone by that group or God and s/he will have to account to the group or God(s) for the way s/he exercises it.

² Tarek AL NOMAN, paper for meeting Intercultural Research Group on Responsibility, May 2005

In the book Genesis of the Christian Bible, God after having created the universe, the earth and the human being, passed on responsibility for the earth to man. Man was told to "master" (or "nurture" depending on the translation) His Creation. Indigenous worldviews, however, consider that humans are not separate from or above other forms of life (and so cannot possibly "master" them). They are a product and an expression of Mother Earth. Human beings are part of a "woven universe" in which all forms of life are interconnected. And so, responsibility cannot be a matter of choice; it is inherent to the human condition itself.

"Duty" as distinct from "Responsibility"

In some cultural contexts an important distinction is made between the idea of "responsibility" as a matter of *(free) choice* on the one hand, and "duty" as *an obligation* enforced by someone else's will, on the other hand : the will of another person, a group, an authority, fate or God himself.

This distinction became a crucial issue in Germany after the revelation of the crimes committed by Hitler's Nazi regime during the Second World War. Was passive consent or active participation a justification "*because we simply had to fulfil our duty*" ? Or did fulfilling one's duty not take away one's responsibility for the atrocities inflicted on millions of people, in particular the genocide of the Jews ? What about *personal vs. collective* responsibility ?

"Duty" not always distinct from "Responsibility"

A language "says" its culture. It reveals the "sense" (meaning and direction) of social practices. In the framework of our subject it is therefore interesting to note that while in many languages a clear distinction is made between "duty" and "responsibility" these two concepts are considered identical in many African languages.

For instance, in the perception of the Kabyè people of Togo, the notions of "duty" and "responsibility" are the same. They are represented by the word *suutu* which means "charge, load, burden" in the literal sense as well as in a figurative sense. There are no separate words for them. In practice the father or the traditional priest or the chief does assume tasks but does not account for the way he exercises his duty. The satisfaction of those for whom he is responsible, is what counts. The idea of duty or responsibility pertains mainly to the present time.

Makarand Paranjape ³ remarks that in the Indian context, duty and responsibility are closely related.

In India, duty does not have the negative connotation it sometimes does in the West. "To be responsible, for most Indians, means to do one's Dharma" (one's obligations towards oneself, one's family, friends, profession, the State, the ancestors, other forms of life, and the Gods). "Thus, starting from ourselves but eventually embracing the whole cosmos, we are *bound* in a complex interrelationship of duties and responsibilities that is encompassed by the word Dharma."

³ Makarand PARNAJAPE, preparatory paper for Meeting Intercultural Research Group on Responsibility.

This too is a far cry from the western idea of freedom of choice.

Similarly, though in the West *accountability* is mainly a matter between people, elsewhere it can be a matter between people and an environment that is *broader than the social*. In fact, while in the West the idea of accountability to other people is very much at the heart of the notion of responsibility, it does not appear to be that central in other cultural contexts.

The challenge of intercultural dialogue... ad acting

Thus, there is no way of avoiding the reality of diversity. At the same time this reality poses the challenge of trying to understand cultural specificities because we are living in a process of increasing globalisation which also entails increasing communication between people from different cultures. Moreover, international contacts are becoming less and less restricted to governmental and business elites. The advent of civil society at global level, an international society claiming its right to participate in vital decisions concerning the future of the planet and humankind, becomes increasingly manifest. And citizens of our planet do *not only* want to *communicate*. Above all, they want to *act together*. But too often, in the rush to act, it is taken for granted that everyone ascribes the same meaning to "common" words. Everyone knows : traps are hidden in communication between people from different cultures. But which ones ? Exactly ? Does everyone know them ?

One thing is sure, though : the experience of international life has at least shown that it may be more prudent to take up the challenge of intercultural learning than to ignore it. The effort of trying to make explicit the diversity which enriches us in order to discover the commonalities that bring us together, is worth its while. Intercultural dialogue is indispensable for acting together.

A common responsibility

The main challenge of the XXIst century is to face and deal with the threats to our common Planet. These will not only affect nature but human conditions of poverty, inequality, injustice, conflicts over unequal access to means of survival, in short Human Rights, as well.

In *pre-modern* times *ethics* was predominantly concerned with *the human being* and geared towards a *common present*: "Love your *neighbour* as yourself", here and *now*. Nature was supposed to take care of itself and the future was supposed to be always better thanks to human progress and the discoveries of the sciences. *XXIst century ethics* has to extend its concerns. It has to design modes of conduct which not only nurture humankind, but *nature* as well. It has to set norms which are geared not only to the present but to the *future* as well. Our newly gained freedoms must be guided by the principle of *precaution*. Despite our cultural specificities, this is the common responsibility each and everyone of us, individually and collectively, we have to assume, *and* to account for....

As Emmanuel Lévinas said : "I am responsible because you exist".
