

## **PHILOSOPHICAL CONCEPT OF RESPONSIBILITY – THE KEY FEATURE OF THE IDEA OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

Izabela MARSZAŁEK-KOTZUR

Politechnika Śląska; Izabela.Marszalek-Kotzur@polsl.pl, ORCID: 0000-0002-8426-0170

**Abstract:** Sustainable development when understood as a process of social, economic and environmental change that ensures a balance between profit and development costs, is a kind of ethical project. The fundamental assumption behind the implementation of the idea of sustainable development is, therefore, the awareness of holding responsibility both in the context of actions of whole companies as well as individuals. The issue of responsibility covers many aspects and problems, hence, it is worth considering the concept of responsibility in its theoretical and practical dimension. The aim of this article is to present selected philosophical concepts of understanding responsibility.

**Keywords:** responsibility, human, drama.

### **1. Introduction**

There is a growing interest in the idea of balanced development. Indeed, for some time now in business, it has become a kind of ethical project, and the strongest social pressure is exerted on the activity of enterprises that have not yet implemented it. Enterprises, both large and small, in different dimensions affect humanity. They influence the natural environment, causing climate warming or pollution of the air that a person breathes. They influence human rights, safety, local communities, and, finally, human behavior.

Sustainable development is based on a few specific principles. One of the keys is the idea of responsibility, more precisely, the idea of social responsibility. The term “social responsibility” defies attempts to define it unequivocally, because this cannot be done in relation to the concept of general responsibility. The aim of this paper is, therefore, an attempt to interpret and outline several philosophical interpretations of the question of responsibility.

## 2. Responsible action

Roman Ingarden carried out an interesting analysis of the issue of responsibility in his treatise 'On responsibility and its ontic foundations'. This was placed in a small volume titled *Little Book on Man*. As R. Ingarden notes, responsibility is not only moral, because moral responsibility constitutes only its special case. Ingarden distinguishes four situations in which we deal with the phenomenon of responsibility. First of all, someone bears responsibility for something, that is, someone is responsible for something. Secondly, someone takes responsibility for something. Thirdly, someone is held accountable for something. Fourthly, someone acts responsibly. According to Ingarden, the first three situations are different from the fourth. They are independent of each other, although some kind of meaningful relationship occurs between them (Ingarden, 1987). That means that you can be responsible for something, but you cannot be held accountable for something, you can be held accountable without incurring it, etc. The fourth situation is different from the others, because it concerns taking a responsible action.

Responsible action is fulfilled when the individual is fully aware of both the given situation and the value of the motives that lead to action. Values seem to be an important element in understanding the concept of responsibility. As Nicolai Hartmann claimed, values cannot come to fruition on their own, they need a real, rational and capable vessel, and this is merely a man. This man takes on the role of being the "manager of values and duties in the world (...)" The powerlessness of values is a condition of human strength. Thanks to it, man gains space for his freedom, he becomes a creature capable of acting in a responsible way" (Hartmann, 1994, p.120). It is worth mentioning that Hans-Eduard Hengstenberg questioned Hartmann's concept, stating that moral commitment is generated in us not only by means of moral values, but by interaction with living, concrete people (Galarowicz, 1997).

## 3. Responsibility and freedom

Nevertheless, in the field of Hartmann's deliberations, the problem of freedom remains essential to the issue of responsibility. Hartmann writes: "(...) the sense of the ethical privilege of a being lies precisely in freedom, in the fact that it can opt for or against some self-existing duty. This is where the capacity for responsibility and guilt is rooted (...)" (Hartmann, 1994, p. 121). In fact, one can say that responsibility and freedom are inseparable concepts. It is widely believed that the determination of the degree of responsibility is closely related to defining the scope of human freedom (Bok, 1998).

Barbara Skarga makes an important distinction between freedom and negative freedom – “freedom from” and positive freedom – “freedom to” when we are free to do something (Skarga, 2007, p. 168). Kant called this freedom absolute independence (Skarga, 2007). Positive freedom allows a man to give himself the right to think and act, to make sometimes very difficult decisions, entailing both practical and moral consequences. Such freedom implies full responsibility for the deeds committed. For Jean-Paul Sartre, Skarga reiterates that a man doomed to freedom is also doomed to responsibility. He believes that man “must know, therefore, that there are no innocent thoughts and actions, that every action sometimes brings significant consequences, (...). What is more, this freedom means that man becomes responsible not only for himself, but for others, for the community, history, culture, for our entire world” (Skarga, 2007, pp. 170-171).

The issue of freedom, closely related to the notion of responsibility, was an area of special interest for Józef Tischner and it was present in many of his works. J. Tischner, like many other thinkers, claimed that freedom is the space where responsibility comes to the fore, because “thanks to freedom, we can say that we are the perpetrators of an act. We are responsible for this act” (Tischner, 2000, pp. 13-14).

However, when interpreting Emmanuel Lévinas’ texts, Tischner makes a specific discovery. He realized that “Lévinas reverses the order, which even in philosophy had become schematic. Until now, we thought that freedom is the basis and source of responsibility. Lévinas shows that the opposite is true: it is responsibility that is the basis, source and nest of freedom. We make our choices, make our decisions, possess ourselves only within the limits that our sense of responsibility imposed on us” (Tischner, 2000, p. 146). The Cracow philosopher, therefore, accepts that Lévinas is responsible for recognizing the “hidden presence” of another man who is inscribed in us deeper than freedom, and who had his beginning long before we experienced his existence by way of our senses (Tischner, 2000). Hence, “The Other obliges, everything starts with commitment, responsibility” (Tischner, 2001, p. 246). This idea is confirmed by Zygmunt Baumann: “Responsibility is the absolute beginning” (Bauman, 2012, p. 113). Thus, responsibility appears before the other person has the opportunity to demand anything.

Is freedom, then, a condition of responsibility, or is it the opposite, is responsibility a condition of freedom. As noted by Kazimierz Wolsza, the relation of responsibility to freedom is the subject for discussion on the grounds of both philosophy and ethics. Because this issue seems to remain unresolved, Jacek Filek proposed, that in describing the relation of freedom to responsibility, we should abandon the one-way relationship of conditioning and replace it with correlation (Filek, 2003). In his opinion, both concepts point to a complete unity, which when seen from the side of the acting person, reveals itself as freedom, and when perceived from the side of the experiencing person, is seen as responsibility (Wolsza, 2016).

#### 4. The unconditional nature of responsibility

According to Lévinas, responsibility for The Other is neither a matter of decision, commitment or even freedom, but it results from something that precedes all memories (Lévinas, 2000). Man becomes something special, irreplaceable when he opens himself up to another man. As Lévinas points out, “I support The Other, for whom I am responsible (...). My responsibility is irremovable. Nobody could replace me (...) Responsibility is what only falls on me and what as a man I cannot refuse (...). I am a irreplaceable ‘I’ only as much as I am responsible” (Lévinas, 1991, p. 57). According to Lévinas, and Tischner in following him, the authentic: “I” is the “I” responsible, meaning “The word ‘I’ means: here I am, responsible for all and for everything” (Lévinas, 2000, p. 145). Lévinas calls this “I” a hostage because a hostage by definition does not choose the one he is the victim of, rather he is elected. Therefore, a man cannot dispose of his responsibility, because it is the responsibility that controls the man. This kind of responsibility is completely different from that resulting from a sense of duty, notes Z. Baumann. It is a responsibility that makes man free. Paradoxically, when a man becomes a “hostage” of The Other, he experiences the act of complete liberation (Bauman, 2012). Bauman holds that taking responsibility for another human in such a way as if it “has always been taken” constitutes some kind of an act of creation (Bauman, 2012). In this perspective, the world is a world of values defining the area of what is possible to do. It is also a world of obligation in which one can develop and improve (Zuziak, 2001). Following this path, Tischner states “(...) We are responsible, that is, we are ready to accept part of his guilt, punishment, part of fate” (Tischner, 2000, p. 147) and even the entire surrounding world – adds Władysław Zuziak (Zuziak, 2001). “I am for the Other” means that “I accept responsibility for him”. This responsibility is unconditional, notes Z. Bauman (Bauman, 2012, p. 112) This unconditionality of responsibility, according to Z. Bauman, involves the fact that it is independent of both the circumstances of the event and the properties of the other person. Self-responsibility is neither a reward for the Other nor something that he could claim. Nor is it something that a person would owe to the Other, it is neither a payment nor a reward. Our responsibility is much more than that, it is about being ourselves. And being ourself means that we cannot lose the burden of responsibility (Tischner, 1990).

This approach can also be traced in Jean Nabert, to whom a man is responsible for absolutely all that he does, and consequently, the responsibility for his own actions is total in every case. Tischner radicalized the matter even more and, according to Lévinas, he said that responsibility for one's neighbor is synonymous to responsibility for everything in such a way as if the fate of the world depended on us. Briefly, we are responsible for everything or for nothing.

## 5. The drama of responsibility

Such an attempt to describe the problem of responsibility entails placing it in the space of human drama. Not only Tischner, but Romano Guardini, too, spoke about the “drama of responsibility”. What this drama is all about was something Jean Greisch tried to explain. In his opinion, in looking at the phenomenon of responsibility, one should consider it against the background of the multi-level and complex phenomenon of responding. Responsibility does not become a drama solely because of specific contexts and situations in which it is subject to realization, but also because it puts us in the face of a confrontation of granting the priority of freedom or responsibility in the area of morality (Isaac, 1996). This phenomenon has a drama of its own because it requires us to reflect “on the inevitability of conflicts in the field of moral action and, consequently, on the connections between tragic and moral wisdom” (Greisch, 2013).

Guardini views the “drama of responsibility” in relation to the figure of Socrates. Herein, a responsible man is a person capable of accepting and bearing responsibility when doing something, instead of standing separately and aloof. The tragedy of action lies in the fact that it is never possible to predict the effects of anything undertaken until the end. Tragic, therefore, is the fate of man because man cannot evade a sense of responsibility (Greisch, 2013).

It seems that this tragedy is also manifested in the fact that the space of responsibility is a place where man can experience illusion. For example, as Bauman observes, “The area of responsibility is both – and in a way that is difficult to avoid – a field of violence and cruelty” (Bauman, 2012, p. 135). One man’s responsibility can become an instrument of oppression when he wants to protect another and take that other’s fate into his own hands according to that first man’s own interpretation (Bauman, 2012). Man can also experience various illusions resulting from a temporary expectation of own pleasure, or to pursue his own interests by allowing the egotism to speak. Nevertheless, as Jan Galarowicz emphasizes when interpreting Dietrich von Hildebrandt’s text, the unconscious does not absolve from bearing responsibility for one’s own actions (Galarowicz, 1997). According to Zuziak, being responsible means being able to answer the question: “Who did it? I. It is irrelevant whether one was working in full awareness of the consequences of their actions” (Zuziak, 2001, p. 50).

## 6. New dimension of responsibility

The variety of descriptions of the concept of “responsibility” and the inability to grasp its essence, according to K. Wolsza, results from the fact that “responsibility” as such is an abstraction and should be replaced by the term “responsible”. “Someone” is responsible for

something, “towards someone”. This triad, says Wolsza, is not only a precise characteristic of the responsible person, but also describes the situation in which the responsible person is (Wolsza, 2016).

The problem of responsibility analyzed in various contexts and on many levels leads the reader to link it with the concept of time. Responsibility applies to both the past and the present and the future. Responsibility “towards the past” assumes taking on the account of the past that affects us, and although it is not entirely our work, we take it as our own account. “Present-oriented” responsibility presupposes a certain way of understanding oneself (Ricoeur, 2005). Responsibility in this context, says Paul Ricoeur, means being ready to be regarded the same as the one that I have become in the meantime (Ricoeur, 2005). I am responsible for myself and The Other, for whom I am also responsible, is present in this responsibility.

The type of responsibility that is the subject of our present considerations concerns the present and the future, and perhaps above all the future. Sustainable development is directed towards activities for future generations. A responsible action “for the future” means readiness to accept the consequences of own actions and behaviors. As Hans Jonas notes, this is not only about civil law space, but also about the reference to technological activities, the consequences of which are distributed over many generations.

Jonas tried to include future tasks of the ethics of responsibility for technological civilization in his work “The principle of responsibility: ethics for technological civilization”. Herein, he states “Technological action confronts us with completely new areas of responsibility, which constitute a new challenge for our sense of responsibility (...)” (Greisch, 2013, p. 49), in this way Greisch interprets the thought of Jonas. Jonas believes that we are now facing completely new dimensions of responsibility that are related to this elementary feature of human action that brings to the world something new, unexpected, surprising and, therefore, unpredictable (Jonas, 1996). Jonas tries to capture the essence of this responsibility by pointing out that such responsibility is primarily the responsibility of people for people, and thus, its subject is characterized by a peculiar modality of transience, common to all people. Above all, Jonas sees that man alone, out of all living beings, is able to bear the burden of responsibility.

In reference to Kant, Jonas sets two assumptions based on the so-called “Heuristics of fear”. The ethics of responsibility in the sense of Jonas, notes Greisch, confronts us with the problem of learning fear in a dual sense. First, gaining recognition of a real threat and finding feelings related to it (Greisch, 2013). As Jonas holds, “responsibility is accepted as an obligation to care for another being, which in the face of its fragility and in the case of danger becomes anxiety” (Jonas, 1996, p. 391). The fear is already slumbering, Greisch notes, in the question: “What will happen to him if I do not take care of him? The more gloomy the answer, the more clearly the responsibility becomes” (Greisch, 2013, p. 57). Active responsibility is, therefore, for those who are ready to arouse in themselves the imaginative insight and sensitivity to become discoverers of new forms of responsibility (Greisch, 2013).

Jonas emphasizes the importance of the obligation to think. This, accordingly, surpassing any predictions about the future and risk calculations. The risk factor is in this case unpredictable due to human unpredictability – nobody knows what people are capable of doing rightly or wrongly (Jonas, 1996).

## **7. Escape from responsibility**

It seems that the risk of being a responsible person not only confers a dramatic character to responsibility, but it is often the reason Man escapes from responsibility. This escape takes various forms. Tischner a little humorously stated that in a human attitude one can see a certain paradox: man willingly fights for his freedom, but he is not so eager to fight for being responsible (Tischner, 1996). Responsibility implies the consequences of the choices made and also requires some kind of effort and sacrifice. It is easier and more convenient for a man, as Barbara Skarga notes, to blame the need to take on responsibility on external conditions, namely to look for justification in history or in perceived social norms (Skarga, 2007). It is easier to say: it is not my fault, I was brought up this way, the ones to blame are my family, society or history.

## **8. Summary**

The foregoing brief summary surely does not bring us any closer to explaining the essence of responsibility. It also has not made use of all the examples of interpretation of this problem. It only brought to light the variety and complexity of the issue we are interested in.

Responsibility as such is always present in our lives, whether we like it or not. After all, as noted by Wolsza, all attitudes involving manifestations of personal life entail a sense of responsibility. Tischner's dramatic "being yourself" also means that one cannot abandon one's responsibility. Responsibility develops and describes us, because, as W. Zuziak notes, it makes man achieve greater self-perfection, more deserving of the name 'man' (Zuziak, 2001).

It seems, therefore, as rightly stated by K. Wolsza, that the scale of philosophical considerations on responsibility may on one hand, bring us joy, and on the other, induce a kind of embarrassment. It should be appreciated that philosophers and ethicists have appreciated this important ethical category, but because of the growing number of considerations on this subject, there is a risk of trivializing it through the abuse of the term "responsibility" (Wolsza, 2016). Nevertheless, reflection on the issue of responsibility is necessary today, and despite the fact that it has become the focus of philosophers due to the dramatic events of the 20th century, it seems that the topic is still open for discussion and study. Such activity is necessary especially

in the contemporary situation of systematic implementation of the idea of sustainable development and care for the lives of future generations.

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