Responsibility and integrated thinking: Thoughts from a new centre

Simon Robinson

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Integrated thinking is very much in vogue now, academically, with several PhDs around the globe looking critically at the ideas and values behind it, and in practice, with businesses trying to address how financial, social and environmental reporting can embody such integrated thought.

Like all interesting ideas, though, once we reflect on them we see that there are different views about what they mean. We should not be surprised. In some research I was involved in about ethical frameworks and universities (CIHE 2005), it turned out that only a small minority of universities who fed back could agree on what ethics was. There are, of course, all kinds of reasons for such responses, from intellectual disagreement to cussedness – 'you are not telling me what I should think', and that is all good. If integrated reporting were simply a matter of following a formula then that would show no signs of personal engagement – shades of the debate in King III about 'compliance'.

Maybe then, one mark of integrated thinking is in taking responsibility for that thinking. This might suggest that responsibility is central to this practice. Of course, responsibility is another one of those words that we might want to debate. However, we can at least take a cue from Aristotle, who suggests that it is made up of attributability; accountability to and liability for.[1]

Attributability

This is about moral agency, being able to attribute ideas, values and actions to a person or group. The strongest version of this suggests a rational decision-making process. Taylor[2] argues that this decision-making constitutes a strong valuation that connects action to deep decision-making. This owning of the thoughts and related decision-making is what constitutes the moral agency of the person or group. Hence, this process of decision-making becomes key to the development of a sense of identity.

Closely connected to this is the concept of moral or retrospective responsibility that focuses on blame for actions. This seeks to identify the person or persons responsible for actions. Key to this is either intentionality or role. The first determines if an action was intended, and thus who was responsible. The second, role responsibility, suggests that certain roles are focused in purpose (notably leadership; professional or family roles) and thus may apportion blame even if consequences were not intended.

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[1] S Robinson, 'The Nature of Professional Responsibility' (2009) 88(1) The Journal of Business Ethics 11-19.

[2] C Taylor *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge University Press, 1989).

A medical practitioner, for instance, may be deemed to be responsible for a patient's death, even if he did not intend it.

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Ideas

This demands clarity about the concepts that are used, and the capacity to justify them rationally. We can hardly be said to be responsible for our thoughts if we cannot provide some account of and justification for them. Core to this is some understanding of purpose. Any account and justification of thoughts and actions also demands openness to critical intellectual challenge. In the credit crisis of 2008 this was illustrated by the use of CDOs (collateralised debt obligations) involving the repacking of mortgage debts and selling them on. As Lanchester[3] notes, those who pursued this policy based it on a mathematical formula none of them understood. Their focus was purely on the profits that this action would make. And this in turn was based in values which radically affected how they saw the world.

Values

This demands the capacity to appreciate values underlying thoughts and action. This is not just that they are coherent, it is also that they have distinct meaning and value, such that one prefers one practice to others. Even at this stage, responsibility involves a comparison with other practices and their values.[4] Hence, deciding upon one's own values or the values of the organisation does not take place in social isolation,

or apart from the core relationships to the social and physical environment. This also engages feelings, not least because values connect to purpose and identity and thus any sense of self-worth. This requires taking responsibility for feelings as they emerge in decision-making and ultimately for the underlying world views and related values that may be responsible for keeping those feelings in place.

Practice

At the heart of the third focus is awareness of one's actions and the effects of those actions on the social and environmental context. In business, for instance, if you are a board member, do you fully understand how the organisation makes its money and the impact that this might have on the wider social and physical environment? None of this prescribes a particular response. What it does demand is awareness of what one is doing; how that fits into the purpose of the organisation and how that affects the internal and external environment.

This first mode of responsibility, basically moral agency, sounds very simple but in practice is very difficult. There are many examples of very able board members who do not actually know about the area they are governing, such as bank board members with mostly retail experience.[5] Other research shows that whilst many boards spend time identifying core values, there is little evidence that these values are actually engaged in major decision-making. Research also suggests that values are often not critically tested, inside or outside the board. A great deal of the work in developing corporate and public service governance over the past decade aims to address this. The simple

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[3] J Lanchester *Whoops!: Why everyone owes everyone and no one can pay* (Penguin, 2010).

[4] See above n 2.

[5] House of Lords, House of Commons, Parliamentary Commission on Banking Standards, '"An accident waiting to happen": The failure of HBOS', Fourth Report of Session 2012-13, <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/jt201213/jtselect/jtpcbs/144/144.pdf> accessed 11/6/2014.

action of ensuring that CEO and chair of the board are roles fulfilled by different people, for instance, aims to ensure good critical reflection.

Two broad points are worth making here about moral agency and integrated thinking. First, bringing ideas, values and practice together in everyday conversation is itself key to integrated thinking. The impetus of academic and practical specialism is to pull these apart, developing different vocabularies. Second, integration of these three areas is not the same as 'easy fit'. On the contrary, as I suggest, it demands critical reflection, engagement of complexity and the awareness of and the capacity to respond to the relationships which constitute our social and environmental context. That is difficult and about ongoing dialogue, focused in support and challenge.

Accountability

Accountability is in one sense another aspect of moral agency. A lot of the stress in moral agency is about making sense to oneself. Accountability is about making sense to others. Typically, we will have different kinds of accountability depending on the kind of relationship we have to people or groups. This is focused often in contract relationships, formal or informal. The contract sets up a series of mutual expectations. At one level, these are about discernible targets that form the basis of any shared project, and without which the competence of the person cannot be assessed. At another level, there will be broader moral expectations of how one should behave in any contract. This would include the importance of openness and transparency in relationships and other such behaviours that provide the basis for trust.

The debates about accountability are many, especially around who we are actually answerable to – the basis of any sense of obligation. Three things, however, can be said. First, accountability is always multiple and can never be summed up completely in contract or law. The professional 'model' of accountability minimally

suggests accountability to clients; the profession; the particular institution/organisation one is based in; wider society (in relation to provision which is focused in service, such as the law or medicine) and future generations (who may use the bridge you have built). Secondly, giving an account always involves, implicitly or explicitly, a presentation of the identity, and thus values and ideas, of the person or group who gives it. It communicates action and its meaning in a social context. It is thus a key part of an ongoing dialogue with different 'players' in that social context. If accountability is based on dialogue this suggests that the related idea of transparency is less about the 'presentation' of reports and more about an openness to critical dialogue, precisely what was missing in all the major governance disasters of the last two decades. Thirdly, integrated thinking is essentially focused in dialogue and communication. This is partly because relationships and related purpose focus on action, which itself acts as a means of integration, and partly because critical dialogue enables better, more responsive, integrated thinking and action. Where accountability is focused primarily on re-presentation, with little reference to critical dialogue, internal or external, or in narrow relationships we run the danger of an unthinking report, and with that inability to see the wider social and environmental context. The Mid Staffs Hospital case[6] showed governance focused on narrow reporting and obligations, with the result that highly skilled professionals could not see the need that was under their collective nose.

Liability for

Moral liability (as distinct from legal liability) goes beyond accountability, into the idea of wider responsibility for projects, people or place. Each person or group has to work these out in context, without necessarily an explicit contract. Working that out demands an awareness of the limitations of the person or organisation, avoiding taking too much responsibility, and a capacity to work together with others and to negotiate and share responsibility.

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6 S Robinson and J Smith *Co-charismatic Leadership: Critical Perspectives on Spirituality, Ethics and Leadership* (Peter Lang Pub Inc, 2014).

Most relationships involve a mixture of accountability and liability. A good example is a doctor, who is both accountable for and to the patient. Once again this can have a strictly legal sense or a wider moral one encompassing the broadest possible view of stakeholders, from those directly affected by any business or project to the social and natural environment in which these operate. Like accountability, this often involves multiple responsibilities.

ultimate accountability to and responsibility for future generations and the environment, a secular analogue of the ultimate accountability to God and for His creation. The idea of universal responsibility does not involve literal individual moral responsibility for everyone and every act. But its power is in engaging the moral imagination, focusing back on our ideas, actions and values with a bag full of questions. For instance, do we take full responsibility for what we say? One Turkish thinker[8] argues that whatever is said individually, or in the role of leader or board may have

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This is the most difficult of all the modes of responsibility, partly because of the difficulty in determining just what we are responsible for. At one extreme of this responsibility lies the constant denier, always finding ways of avoiding responsibility. At the other extreme sits the person or organisation who knows no responsibility. Aristotle suggests that disaster lies in both those extremes. In the middle lies a view of liability, again based in dialogue, where responsibility is negotiated. This moves to the idea of shared responsibility for people, project and planet. It focuses on shared creativity and responsiveness and once more acts as focus for integrated thinking. Like accountability it has to link to moral agency if it is to make sense – in this case – shared sense.

Once again this aspect of responsibility does not allow us to sit back uncritically. There will always be healthy questions about how responsibility might have been better fulfilled (as distinct from neurotic questions that allow no rest). Some of the great post-Holocaust thinkers, such as Arendt, Levinas, Bauman and Ricoeur, argue for a sense of universal responsibility – shared responsibility for everything. Jonas[7] takes this further by arguing for a sense of

unintended consequences, if not immediately then over time. It may influence the tone of a corporation or the aspirations of a community negatively or positively. Gülen's point is that the sense of wider responsibility forces us back to the immediate responsibility for how we perceive the world and communicate the associated values and ideas. In a personal context, is what you say to your 10-year-old grandchild what you want them to hear in 20 years' time when they are in a tight corner and think about what you said that day? This invites us also to view dialogue not as a neat activity, with shared rules and a starting and stopping point, but which can span long periods of time in different ways. As Shakespeare's *Henry V* vividly shows, before and after Agincourt, such dialogue is 'in the air', with people joining and leaving as worthwhile action is discussed and developed.

Even a brief reflection on the idea and practice of responsibility suggests that it is central to integrated thinking – focusing such thinking on: critical reflection on ideas, values, value and practice in our social and environmental context; the development of critical and mutual dialogue and the development of dialogue which negotiates shared responsibility.

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[7] H Jonas *The Imperative of Responsibility* (University of Chicago Press, 1985).

[8] J Esposito and I Yilmaz 'Gülen's Ideas on Freedom of Thought, Pluralism, Secularism, State, Politics, Civil Society and Democracy' in J Esposito and I Yilmaz (eds) *Islam and Peacebuilding: Gülen Movement Initiatives* (Blue Dome Press, 2010) 25-38.

We can and should develop tools of integrated reporting, but alongside that integrated thinking demands the exercise of responsibility in these and other ways. Integration then becomes a function not of bolting financial, social and environmental reports together, but of how we look our different stakeholders in the eye and communicate what we believe, how we account for ideas, values and practice, how we share responsibility, and how we develop cultures of critical dialogue and creativity – not smooth integration but messy integrity.

The new Centre for Governance, Leadership and Global Responsibility aims to explore with practitioners and other academics how this can be achieved. We will focus on action research with practitioners, the meaning and practice of responsibility and the development cultures of responsibility. We will also focus on our own practice as teachers. Just how can we enable integrated thinking in curricula in order to show its worth? (http://www.leedsmet.ac.uk/research/centre-for-governance-leadership-global-responsibility.htm)

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