Formation of Collective Responsibility Principles in Higher Professional Education

Anastasiya Platonova*, Maria Kokarevich*

Tomsk State University of Architecture and Building, 2 pl. Solyanaya, Tomsk, 634003, Russia

Abstract

The scientific problem of the paper deals with the formation of a “new” paradigm of responsibility in higher professional education. The problem of the individual’s moral responsibility in a complex structural, collective practice needs to be expanded; mechanisms of moral imputation of responsibility to groups should be developed. Commitment of higher education to the formation of a free, ready for the dialogue, individual can be considered as a paradigm which does not correspond to reality, requiring expansion or rethinking. Thus, the principles of individual ethics should be supplemented with the principles of collective responsibility. On the one hand, the emergence of new subjects of moral consciousness needs to be described; the mechanisms of their social interaction need to be revealed. On the other hand, conceptualization of the principles of collective moral responsibility, their use in practice of higher professional education become an important theoretical and practical task. In the paper, we turn to the concept of collective moral responsibility and consider the possibility of implementing the principle of collective responsibility in the society.

Keywords: Education; responsibility; collective ethics; vicarious liability.

1. Introduction

Nowadays the problem of tolerance of cross-cultural interactions has become one of the global challenges; as a result, the problem of the Earth's civilization survival.
Indeed, the modern era can be considered not only as the era of interaction among states, economies, but also as the age of individual cultures interaction. In modern education there are a lot of changes caused by various factors (worldview, economic, social).

In these conditions, higher professional education is facing new problems and challenges, the solution of which largely depends on development strategies that institutions choose. In particular, the emerging trend of introducing innovative practices in the educational space is an example of an initiative and alternative approach to education. However, the success of any change depends on many factors, including the executors of the innovation, as well as the understanding of what “innovative practice” is, which requires methodological and sociological explication. However, the most philosophically relevant problems are the formation of the civil society actor who is free and responsible; a search for non-repressive interaction between “individual” and “institutional”. Under conditions of the changing world, information revolution, imperfection of education and knowledge, various forms of repressive influence on the individual appear, that leads to the increase of violence, aggression and intolerance in the society. Therefore, other mechanisms are required, which allow forming a free, communicative, tolerant individual, able to communicate and negotiate. Formation of a free individual that is a civil society actor is impossible within the framework of the old “classical” approach to education.

2. Subject and Methods of Research

The methodological basis of the research is ethical, descriptive, historical and philosophical approaches. The use of the ethical approach is associated with the analysis of the normative content of social and ethical concepts such as responsibility and guilt. Due to the fact that the main task is substantiation and versatile characteristics of collective moral responsibility as a whole, it is important to analyze the mechanisms of admission of collective responsibility in practice and relate them to existing moral regulations and guidelines. This procedure allows eliminating the existing gap between theory and practice. The peculiarity of moral concepts functioning in the society requires constant verification of theoretical constructs for their compliance with the real processes. Today in the modern society this test is essential to understand how moral consciousness works in new conditions. It allowed analyzing the boundaries of individual ethics, softening the contradictions between individual and collective responsibility. Appeal to the historical and philosophical tradition is determined by the fact that collective responsibility has a number of negative associations defining the distorted image of the idea. The historical and philosophical analysis of the idea of collective responsibility assumes the use of the method of logical reconstructions of philosophical positions and a hermeneutical method.

Higher professional education becomes the topos which allows forming the civil society actor. We are talking about such education, which should ensure the conditions for the formation of a free individual. This education should not be a form of control over the individual and should not give rise to new forms of violence. In our opinion, the perspective development of such project is, firstly, the formation of the civil society, not subject to institutional intervention. We would like to dwell on the idea which is extremely important from a theoretical and practical point of view. Historically, higher professional education is crucial for the formation of the civil society principles, with its values of the individual, his/her rights and freedom. However, today the mechanisms of an embodiment of the individualistic ethical principles are not clear. The idea is that higher professional education should combine both individual and collective moral consciousness. Nowadays the paradigm of the individual act and response acquired a limited impact, while the group, collective entities are entirely outside the scope of moral judgment. In this regard, one of the objectives of education is to eliminate the gap, to form principles of collective moral responsibility. Earlier the idea of collective responsibility was not the focus of social and philosophical studies, due to the paradigm of methodological individualism and cultural and historical contexts that put a negative and distorted meaning in the idea. In this study, we will try to reconstruct the idea of collective responsibility in order to justify this discourse in higher education. The paradigm of individual morality must be supplemented by other forms of ethics, in this case by collective ethics.
Extreme urgency and complexity of the idea of collective moral responsibility is caused by a number of reasons, both theoretical and practical ones. The problem of imputing responsibility to groups, special importance of which occurs in the most difficult social and political conditions, as in postwar Germany, is not studied enough.

On the one hand, the actual life practice is faced with conflicts where moral responsibility is presented to groups in particular; on the other hand, the idea of collective moral responsibility is perceived in the context of negative judgment (Prokofiev, 2004). Morality of collective responsibility is not obvious, which caused a lot of arguments about its destiny in the ethical discourse (Jonas, 2004). It is believed that such moral feelings as guilt, shame, conscience, repentance appeal to the individual, his/her choice, action. The issue of imputing these feelings to groups seems pointless, since there is no cause-and-effect reason to feel guilty for other people’s actions. However, non-obviousness of the grounds does not cancel the fact that the person experiences and moreover, accepts the responsibility himself, which means that this kind of responsibility has both moral and metaphysical dimensions.

In the study, we are making an attempt to analyze the conditions of collective moral responsibility occurrence, and answer the question about the origins of such responsibility, its fundamental bases. Formation of the discourse of collective moral responsibility, rethinking of the “negative” status of this idea, attempts to give collective responsibility the ontological dimension, to justify its moral status are greatly determined by new social dynamics, namely, the formation of a global society.

In general, discussions on collective responsibility are polarized between those who accept it as a quite reasonable idea (French, 2009; Corlett, 2006; Resher, 1999), and those who deny its value (Hessle, 1993; Sverdlik, 1987; Narveson, 2002). In the latter case, if criticism occurs, it is based on the principles of individualistic understanding of morality, that is, collective responsibility itself contradicts the idea of the individual, his/her autonomy. Responsibility is understood as “special individual interpretation of duty” (Prokofiev, 2010) where a person accepts and understands the consequences of his/her actions in the situation depending on the moral choice. In this case, responsibility transforms abstract oughtness into an exact individual act.

Collective responsibility reduces, if not undetermines moral duty which is always individual. The reason for the individual’s choice is his/her ability to influence selectively and consciously on the environment, taking into account possible consequences of his/her actions, to understand correctly other people’s needs as well as his/her own ones. The sense of responsibility that the individual feels supposes feeling of his/her importance, impact on the situation, a certain feeling of power over events and respect of people. In case of collective duty the individual’s remorse decreases if he/she takes part in actions for which he/she does not have personal responsibility.

In this regard, attempts to impute moral responsibilities to groups as sources of emerging damage have certain difficulties related primarily to the lack of knowledge about collective responsibility and understanding of it as an outdated form of imputation, peculiar to archaic consciousness. Collective responsibility is understood as a system of its unfair distribution among the group members, that is, the individual is guilty regardless of his/her participation.

In the paradigm of the individual action collective responsibility is less inefficient to the extent that it reduces, if not eliminates the responsibility of the individual; when everyone is responsible, no one is responsible. “Maturity” of individual responsibility is based on the fact that it characterizes the internal component of the individual, so the logic of an individual action is not transmitted into the collective context. Moreover, the group is not analogous to the individual that is, it is not able to make a moral choice. This fact eliminates the importance of moral judgment for organized and disorganized collective subjects. However, today under conditions of complex system interactions and narrow specialization, where individual responsibility tends to decrease, a search for a guilty subject becomes unjustified if the consequences of his actions exceeded the possibility to foresee them. Today the classical understanding of responsibility when the individual who is able to act freely
and make decisions is in the center of it becomes invalid under conditions of a long system of interactions and set of solutions. It makes difficult to fix a single act and assess it within the framework of centralized and specialized practices.

The existing difficulties can be partly explained by mixing different levels of morality. Thinking within the paradigm of individual actions and intentions misses the fact that moral norms are addressed not only to the individual, but also to the society as a collective subject taking responsibility for the safe existence of the group members. Pointing to this fact, Apresyan (2006) underlines that moral regulations are not only for the individual, but they also express a social character.

3. Survey Results Analysis

The solution of the mentioned contradictions associated primarily with keeping individual measurement of morality and the possibility of taking collective moral responsibility can be vicarious liability. On the one hand, vicarious liability is a manifestation of collective morality; on the other hand, the space of its action is individual, internal space which is directed to each group member.

Vicarious liability (“vicarious” means “suffering for others”) deals primarily with moral feelings such as guilt, shame, remorse that the individual has due to other people’s actions. It is believed that the reason for such feelings is identification of the individual with the group due to national, religious, professional or other interests. According to Prokofiev (2010), the group can be considered generally as “...an organization, or union created by personal relationships as well as a disorganized community of strangers sharing the same beliefs who are involved in the operation of the same institute, finally, belonging to a particular nation or cultural tradition”.

Identification of the individual with the group and a feeling of belonging to the group are considered as factors generating or preceding vicarious moral liability identified in the literature as “qualifying action”.

Introduced by Mellema (1984) term “qualifying action” is considered as an act of the individual’s free choice making a person feel guilty for other people's actions. Thus, for vicarious liability it will be enough to join the group having the ideology which is dangerous for the society, despite the fact that the individual is not going to support any actions of this group. Joining the group as an act of free choice makes the individual co-responsible for the actions of others; absence of cause-and-effect links for responsibility does not become an obstacle for moral consequences. Within the framework of cause-and-effect links collective responsibility becomes an insignificant and even pointless phenomenon while the symbolic value of the action is no less important than the actual action (Mellema, 1999).

In this case, the individual's non-participation in the actions of the group can be regarded as a casual state; sharing common views and supporting dangerous ideology can possibly lead to aggression and violence. However, it should be mentioned that the individual’s immoral action which is a consequence of his/her individual characteristics can not be the basis for the emergence of vicarious moral liability that is emphasized in the literature (Prokofiev, 2004). Vicarious liability appears when there are actions that are causally connected to any extent with the peculiarities of the group ideology. It is more difficult in cases when the individual does not do the following: creates a “qualifying action”, clearly expresses his/her opinion, makes a free choice, wants to distance himself/herself from the group, but at the same time continues to enjoy some preferences of the existing unfair power. In this case, the point is that he does not have to share the worldview and ideological attitudes of the group, but he can use what is given to him by that group. Here a qualifying action can be understood as a failure to take measures for changing the position.

The situation is different when the individual feels himself/herself a part of the nation, accepts both positive and negative aspects of the history. In this case his/her desire to be a part of this culture, tradition makes him/her take responsibility for negative aspects associated with this group. Here a qualifying action is the individual’s aspiration to maintain the connection with the culture, tradition, to identify himself/herself as part of the whole, to
accept all achievements and values of the group, but at the same time to feel guilt, shame and moral regret for the dark chapters of history.

In general, for western normative ethics the issue of collective responsibility is solved within the framework of an individualistic approach that makes it difficult to understand such responsibility and mechanisms of its emergence. So belonging of the individual to the group from childhood, whose identity is formed by this group, does not allow him/her to make a free act, that is to distance, and therefore, he/she is deprived of the possibility to take freely the blame for the others. Identification of conditions for vicarious liability emergence through qualifying actions does not reveal the reason of such liability, since the scope of its implementation is not the cause-and-effect mechanisms but the symbolic significance of the act. A feeling of responsibility, shame, remorse, guilt for others cannot be explained by the principle of oughtness or legal regulations. Feeling guilty for the others is a metaphysical feeling rather than moral one. The ethics of the individual action is limited by the space of the person’s own intentions and actions, for which he/she takes responsibility that is the orientation of the western ethics.

To summarize, we can say that the idea of vicarious moral liability is quite acceptable and able to solve some of the contradictions associated with the concept of collective responsibility. First of all, vicarious liability does not eliminate the individual as a subject, actually, it strengthens his/her value, expands the scope of individual responsibility. From now on, even though the individual is not in the causal link between the action and result, his/her values and preferences are an expression of the group ideology; therefore as a representative of the group he/she takes moral responsibility for the actions of others. Belonging of the person to the group expands the sphere of his/her responsibility, transmits a feeling of responsibility to the sphere of collective actions. Moral feelings for the actions of others create different space, from now on not only my own actions are the basis for responsibility, but also the actions of other group members.

4. Conclusion

Today, the introduction of “collective moral responsibility” principles into the system of higher professional education is integrative, which is aimed at combining different levels of morality display in the society and allowing realizing moral judgment in the sphere of collective actions.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank National Research Tomsk Polytechnic University for the chance to participate in this useful, scientific and research forum.

References