

## Ethics and the Future Generations - Intellectual solidarity as an ethics of commitment

Gaston Meskens

*Science & Technology Studies Unit, SCK•CEN (Belgium)*

*Centre for Ethics and Value Inquiry, University of Ghent (Belgium)*

[gaston.meskens@sckcen.be](mailto:gaston.meskens@sckcen.be)

*Second European Workshop*

*on the Ethical Dimensions of the Radiological Protection System*

*Madrid, 4 – 6 February 2015*

## Ethics and the Future Generations - Intellectual solidarity as an ethics of commitment

---

- 1 A theory of ethics (in face of complexity)
- 2 Intellectual solidarity as an ethical commitment towards the future generations

1 A theory of ethics (in face of complexity)  
The social problems we face today are ultimately complex



1 A theory of ethics (in face of complexity)  
The social problems we face today are ultimately complex

complexity of social organisation

**different perspectives:**

- 1 the confrontation with 'complex problems'
  - 'complex problems have no simple solutions'
  - 'every complex problem is a symptom of another complex problem'
  - complex problems are adverse effects of specific (often 'simple') practices (e.g. climate change caused by burning coal to generate electricity)
- practice an industrial practice, a societal use of a specific technology, a policy measure
  - ↘ because these practices may cause complex problems, their justification is essentially complex; therefore, they are hereafter called 'complex practices'
- 2 the justification of specific 'complex practices'

© 2014 SCK•CEN

'Ethics and the Future Generations - Intellectual solidarity as an ethics of commitment',  
Second European Workshop on the Ethical Dimensions of the Radiological Protection System,  
Madrid, 4 – 6 February 2015,

1	A theory of ethics (in face of complexity) A characterisation of a complexity (judging on a complex practice)	
1.	<b>interdependence</b>	The practice is influenced by or influences multiple social and technical factors and relates itself to other practices; The context of concern becomes global.
2.	<b>diversified impact</b>	Individuals and/or groups are affected by the practice in diverse ways (diverse positive or negative, positive↔negative).
3.	<b>organisational complexity</b>	Due to the <b>interdependence</b> and <b>diversified impact</b> , practices cannot be 'isolated' but need to be judged 'together' in a coherent and 'holistic' approach.
4.	<b>relative responsibilities</b>	Due to the <b>interdependence</b> and <b>diversified impact</b> and the <b>organisational complexity</b> , responsibility wrt the practice cannot be assigned to one specific actor.  <b>Responsibilities are relative in two ways:</b> (1) the possibility for one actor to take responsibility can depend on the responsibility of another actor (2) our collective responsibility is relative in the sense that we need to hand over control to next generations.
© 2014 SCK•CEN		

1	A theory of ethics (in face of complexity) A characterisation of a complexity (judging on a complex practice)	
1. / 2. / 3.	<b>interdependence / diversified impact / organisational complexity</b>	
4.	<b>relative responsibilities</b>	
5.	<b>knowledge problem</b>	Analysing and 'controlling' the practice ( <b>interdependence, diversified impact</b> and <b>organisational complexity</b> ) is complicated due to the existence of uncertainties and incomplete or speculative knowledge.
6.	<b>evaluation problem</b>	Evaluation of <b>interdependence, diversified impact</b> and <b>organisational complexity</b> and of subsequent <b>relative responsibilities</b> is complicated due to (1) the knowledge problem, (2) different visions based on different worldviews and (3) the fact that consensus is needed among actors with different interests.
7.	<b>authority problem</b>	The authority of actors who evaluate and judge the practice and rationalise their interests and responsibilities is relative, which gives other actors the opportunity to question the credibility of the judgement and the legitimacy of the authority.
© 2014 SCK•CEN		

'Ethics and the Future Generations - Intellectual solidarity as an ethics of commitment',  
Second European Workshop on the Ethical Dimensions of the Radiological Protection System,  
Madrid, 4 – 6 February 2015,

1 A theory of ethics (in face of complexity)  
A characterisation of a complexity (judging on a complex practice)

---

characteristics

- interdependence**
- diversified impact**
- organisational complexity**
- relative responsibilities**
- knowledge problem**
- evaluation problem**
- authority problem**

} 'factual' complexity  
 } complexity of responsibility  
 } complexity of interpretation

© 2014 SCK•CEN

1 A theory of ethics (in face of complexity)  
Why this specific characterisation of complexity?

---

characteristics

- interdependence**
- diversified impact**
- organisational complexity**
- relative responsibilities**
- knowledge problem**
- evaluation problem**
- authority problem**

} 'factual' complexity  
 } complexity of responsibility  
 } complexity of interpretation

→ Because it can 'appeal' to everybody concerned with the envisaged problem/challenge/practice

while allowing normative conclusions that, at the same time, may inspire practical measures (in the sense of 'interaction methods')

© 2014 SCK•CEN

'Ethics and the Future Generations - Intellectual solidarity as an ethics of commitment',  
Second European Workshop on the Ethical Dimensions of the Radiological Protection System,  
Madrid, 4 – 6 February 2015,

1 A theory of ethics (in face of complexity)

What conclusions can be drawn from this characterisation of complexity?

- There are **no privileged positions** to make sense of this complexity (no specific scientific, cultural, religious views, no specific political ideologies)
- Taking this complexity serious, the idea is that our traditional governing modes of our society (representative democracy, the liberal market and objective science) **are not longer able to grasp the complexity** of our global social challenges
- Any meaningful approach to complexity starts with a demarcation of a 'neutral' thematic application context  
  
in the case of judging on the use of nuclear technology: 'energy', 'medical'  
(in this sense, it is meaningless to think of the ethics of nuclear energy 'as such', but only of the ethics in the context of energy governance)
- A **fair dealing** with the practice implies a fair dealing with its complexity, which implies at first instance a fair dealing with **the complexity of interpretation**
- ↳ In this sense, a fair dealing with complexity informs a specific **right** and a specific **responsibility** for everyone concerned

© 2014 SCK•CEN

1 A theory of ethics (in face of complexity)

A fair dealing with complexity informs a specific right for everyone concerned

- The **right** of those concerned **to co-decide on the eventual justification** of the envisaged practice, taking into account its characteristic complexity and (potential) adverse effects (risk, burden)
- the notion of informed consent seen as a human right
- notes
- ↳ As there are no privileged positions to make sense of the complexity, this right can be understood as **'the right to be responsible'** for everyone concerned.
- ↳ Ensuring this right enables **'the ultimate criterion of democracy'** in decision making (democracy in societal context at large, or the seeking of agreement in local public or occupational contexts):

*'the outcome of this decision making process is not what I hoped for or wanted, but I accept it as I trust that the method used to make the decision was fair'*

© 2014 SCK•CEN

'Ethics and the Future Generations - Intellectual solidarity as an ethics of commitment',  
Second European Workshop on the Ethical Dimensions of the Radiological Protection System,  
Madrid, 4 – 6 February 2015,

1 A theory of ethics (in face of complexity)  
A fair dealing with complexity informs a specific right for everyone concerned

---

note on risk

- A risk is not a mathematical formula; it is a potential harm that
  - you cannot completely know and
  - you cannot fully control.
- Acceptable risk?  
People will accept a risk they cannot completely know and that they cannot fully control simply when they **trust** that its justification is **marked by fairness**.

Fairness 'the right to be responsible'

risk taken by society	↑	the right to co-decide	→	from a joint decision follows
		<b>the right to be responsible</b>		<b>the right to be protected</b>
risk taken by an individual	↓	the freedom to hurt yourself		↓

- For a collective risk, 'the right to be responsible' = 'the right to co-decide'

Enabling this right is a principle of justice.

© 2014 SCK•CEN

1 A theory of ethics (in face of complexity)  
A fair dealing with complexity informs a responsibility for everyone concerned

---

- A fair dealing with complexity implies
  - an **attitude of reflexivity** of those concerned
  - with respect to the own position, interests, hopes, hypotheses, believes and concerns 'in that complexity'
  - in any role or social position (as scientist, politician, manager, mandatory, medical doctor, citizen, civil society representative, activist, citizen)
  - ↳ this attitude of reflexivity can then enable a **sense for intellectual solidarity** with the others concerned

© 2014 SCK•CEN

'Ethics and the Future Generations - Intellectual solidarity as an ethics of commitment',  
Second European Workshop on the Ethical Dimensions of the Radiological Protection System,  
Madrid, 4 – 6 February 2015,

1 A theory of ethics (in face of complexity)  
The idea of intellectual solidarity

---

- In face of complexity, to be jointly prepared
- 1 to organise **intellectual confrontation** with respect to
  - the ratio's we use to defend our position, interests, hopes, hypotheses, beliefs and concerns, and
  - the ratio's we use to relativise our uncertainties and doubts;
- 2 to organise **intellectual emancipation** (and thus ensure intellectual capacity to cope with complexity) by providing every human being with the possibility to develop a (self-)critical sense and to be a (self-)critical actor in society
- 3 to think responsible towards the next generations
- notes
- ↳ Confrontation would enable transparency and stimulate reflexivity  
Emancipation would enable reflexivity and stimulate transparency
- ↳ In practice, the idea of intellectual solidarity informs deliberation methods that **generate trust by their method** instead of by their envisaged outcome.

© 2014 SCK•CEN

1 A theory of ethics (in face of complexity)  
The idea of intellectual solidarity

---

- In practice, the idea of intellectual solidarity informs deliberation methods that **generate trust by their method** instead of by their envisaged outcome.
- In a societal context, this implies
  - Open pluralist education for all (fostering reflexivity as an intellectual skill of the capable citizen in addition to analytic, synthetic and practical skills)
  - Transdisciplinary and participatory research to advice policy
  - Deliberative democracy

© 2014 SCK•CEN

'Ethics and the Future Generations - Intellectual solidarity as an ethics of commitment',  
Second European Workshop on the Ethical Dimensions of the Radiological Protection System,  
Madrid, 4 – 6 February 2015,

1 **A theory of ethics (in face of complexity)**  
The idea of ethical experience / ethical commitment of concerned actors

---

- There is a **need for a 'performative' understanding of ethics** in order to give ethical values or virtues a practical meaning in a socio-political context:
- ↳ For every concerned actor, being it the scientist, politician, manager, mandatory, medical doctor, citizen, civil society representative, citizen, ...  
  
the values of dignity, autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, justice, prudence, precaution, transparency, accountability, honesty, truthfulness, empathy ...

**only receive practical meaning** through

- reflexivity as an **ethical experience**
- intellectual solidarity as a joint **ethical commitment**.

© 2014 SCK•CEN

1 **A theory of ethics (in face of complexity)**  
Philosophical features of intellectual solidarity as an ethical commitment

---

- The relativity of autonomy (of moral authority)  
  
Due to complexity, I cannot be my only source of moral authority, and I need to act on norms I have not chosen myself (↔ Kant).
- The inconvenience of tolerance and practical solidarity  
  
Tolerance for the otherness of the other or practical solidarity with the other always implies renouncing a bit of my own 'comfort' (but not of my integrity).
- The fundamental of **moral reciprocity**  
  
The practical of my moral motivation cannot be stimulated 'by myself', but only in 'equal worthy' reflective moral interaction.  
(the practicing moral individual does not exist).
- The fundamental of **moral complementarity**  
  
We can only know, think and evaluate 'together'; if nobody has the truth, then the simple conclusion is that we *need* each other to make sense of (and give meaning to) our society and our personal life.

© 2014 SCK•CEN

'Ethics and the Future Generations - Intellectual solidarity as an ethics of commitment',  
Second European Workshop on the Ethical Dimensions of the Radiological Protection System,  
Madrid, 4 – 6 February 2015,



1 A theory of ethics (in face of complexity)  
Meta-values relevant to a fair dealing with complexity

---

The proposed characterisation of complexity does not imply that 'everything is relative'. Intellectual solidarity informs a number of 'meta-values':

- ↳ equality, as well in human dignity as in the potential of contribution  
  
equality as 'meta - point of departure' doesn't relativise or ignores diversity of views, capacities or willingness to contribute
- ↳ the precautionary principle
- ↳ transparency wrt motivations and acts
- ↳ the potential of critique towards delegated power

© 2014 SCK•CEN

1 A theory of ethics (in face of complexity)  
Relevance of to the principles of the radiological protection system

---

- The justification principle remains the point of departure for any evaluation of *a concrete case* of possible application of a risk-inherent technology, but the character of complexity of this evaluation exercise informs the necessity of inclusion of those potentially affected in deliberation on that justification.
- A fair approach to a concrete case of justification starts with inclusive deliberation on the 'why' of the justification but logically includes deliberation on the practice of optimisation and dose limits, and also on questions such as
  - ? whether the radiological risk should be 'central' to the justification principle, or that other factors may be taken up in the evaluation on 'equal footing'
  - ? whether optimisation and dose limits serve as 'corrections' to or rather as optimisations of the utilitarian principle of justification
  - ? what would be ethically justified personalised dose limits
- ICRP recommendations would of course not need to be reconsidered in every concrete case. They would serve as reference, but it is important that they can be *confirmed or questioned* in a concrete participatory setting every time again.

© 2014 SCK•CEN

'Ethics and the Future Generations - Intellectual solidarity as an ethics of commitment',  
Second European Workshop on the Ethical Dimensions of the Radiological Protection System,  
Madrid, 4 – 6 February 2015,

2 Intellectual solidarity as an ethical commitment towards the future generations  
What is the problem?

- Traditional questions:
  - What is our responsibility / accountability towards the next generations?
  - What is intergenerational equity?

problem Also ethical thinking towards the next generations is complicated by moral pluralism. The problem is that it is a pluralism among ourselves, while 'they' are missing. There is an unavoidable intergenerational democratic deficit.

e.g. the problem of radioactive waste: retrievable? non-retrievable?

- We can overcome a 'moral stalemate' due the intergenerational democratic deficit by reformulating the question:

*What does a fair dealing with complexity (by enabling reflexivity as an ethical experience and intellectual solidarity as an ethical commitment) mean in our relation to the next generations?*

© 2014 SCK•CEN

2 Intellectual solidarity as an ethical commitment towards the future generations  
The idea of reciprocity in our relation with previous and next generations

- Negative and positive visions

	inherited from the previous generations	forwarding to the next generations
'negative'	limitations, burdens	limitations, burdens
'positive'	resources, opportunities	resources, opportunities

- Idea of reciprocity *in the now*:
  - our responsibility towards them / their expectations towards us
- There is a need to distinct **practical reciprocity** from **moral reciprocity**

© 2014 SCK•CEN

'Ethics and the Future Generations - Intellectual solidarity as an ethics of commitment',  
Second European Workshop on the Ethical Dimensions of the Radiological Protection System,  
Madrid, 4 – 6 February 2015,

2 Intellectual solidarity as an ethical commitment towards the future generations  
Traditional theories of justice may apply to practical reciprocity

- Theories of justice applicable to the idea of intergenerational justice with respect to a specific 'good' in society ('good' can be well-being, but also something material, an opportunity or the capacity to fulfil a 'need'):

aggregative promoting the largest possible aggregated 'good' in society (utilitarianism)

intergenerational meaning: sacrificing our benefit from the 'good' to the benefit of the next generations (can be compatible with intragenerational aggregative justice)

distributive promoting distribution of the 'good' in society ('fair', 'equal'), often (but not always) inspired by the argument that the totality of the good is 'fixed' (global commons)

intergenerational meaning: distributing the benefit from the good between generations (can come in competition with intragenerational distributive justice)

commutative promoting for every distinct actor the balance between contribution (effort) and reward with respect to the 'good' in society

intergenerational meaning: problems of application: no possibility to mark the beginning and ending of a generation, next to the abstract and thus unpractical notion of the character of contribution and reward

© 2014 SCK•CEN

2 Intellectual solidarity as an ethical commitment towards the future generations  
Problems with traditional theories of justice for the intergenerational

- If we want to meaningfully apply those views on the issue of nuclear technology and radiological protection, we understand that these theories remain at least abstract if not applied to a concrete thematic context of social organisation: ('energy', 'medical').
- ↳ However, even when applied to a concrete thematic case, we have to conclude that none of the theories are helpful to judge on our responsibilities towards next generations *in the concrete setting of today*.
- Common sense tells us that we should not put a burden on next generations, but none of the theories helps us to understand what 'intergenerational equity' means.
- Therefore: can we learn something from the idea of moral reciprocity in intergenerational justice?

© 2014 SCK•CEN

'Ethics and the Future Generations - Intellectual solidarity as an ethics of commitment',  
Second European Workshop on the Ethical Dimensions of the Radiological Protection System,  
Madrid, 4 – 6 February 2015,

## 2 Intellectual solidarity as an ethical commitment towards the future generations

### Moral reciprocity

- As we cannot reason and deliberate with the next generations, there can be no moral reciprocity or complementarity in interaction with the next generations.  
Our ethical experience can never be a joint experience with those generations.
- ↳ This implies that we have to think 'Kantian' towards the next generations, from out of an intragenerational *inevitably autonomous* moral authority.
- But the idea of intellectual solidarity as an ethical commitment is still valuable.

© 2014 SCK•CEN

## 2 Intellectual solidarity as an ethical commitment towards the future generations

### The idea of intellectual solidarity with the future generations

- In intellectual solidarity with the previous generations, we can try to understand what they did (deliberate or not) and why
- In intellectual solidarity with the next generations,
  - we can 'promise' to carefully deliberate our acts by caring for the precautionary principle, intragenerational intellectual solidarity and the principle of trust in decision making
  - we can reflect on what it implies to leave options open and act accordingly
  - we can give account of our deliberate reflections and consequent actions by explaining them why we thought this was the best we could do
  - we can accept the limits to our own means and power of control (resignation)
- Next generations may then use the principle of trust in decision making in judging on our acts.
- There is no 'intergenerational continuity' here, as we are at a turning point:  
Today, we don't live in a world inspired by intellectual solidarity, but we have the capacity to put it into practice and foster it.

© 2014 SCK•CEN

'Ethics and the Future Generations - Intellectual solidarity as an ethics of commitment',  
Second European Workshop on the Ethical Dimensions of the Radiological Protection System,  
Madrid, 4 – 6 February 2015,