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Professional ethics as “practical wisdom” and a source of professional engagement

After exploring the definition of ethics through an etymological study and semantic analysis, this article analyses the role and importance of ethics applied to the professional world. It offers insights into what is produced through such reflective and collective processes. Going beyond the idea of *practical wisdom*, so dear to Ricœur, ethics is approached here as offering a particular form of professional engagement, which is *de-liberated* and based on situated, shared values. In today's turbulent world of work, professional ethics may therefore prove to be an endogenous and particularly empowering process for professionalisation.

Keywords: ethics, deontology, code of ethics, professional engagement, values, social regulation, freedom and empowerment

Amidst increasingly exacting and complex demands for professionalisation, “ethical competence” is perceived as decisive in many professions (particularly in interpersonal professions). Monceau (2006) goes further by referring to an “ethical injunction as there is growing focus on this issue in professional conferences, training plans and the rhetoric of leaders in the education and health sectors,” (Monceau, 2006, p. 52). My goal is to consider a new, autonomous path for professionalisation, an innovative professional development opportunity for interpersonal professions in general, and those in the fields of education and training in particular.

As there can be no ethics without reflection, my research often provides an opportunity to initiate this kind of reflective process, which can only be collective. It therefore aims to gain theoretical and practical insights into what ethics is in general, but is also aimed at future professionals and at stimulating measures for ethical consideration, as proposed by Le Coz (2010).

After establishing the conceptual framework for ethics through a general approach, I will review issues specific to professional ethics, illustrating the transition from fundamental ethics to applied ethics, and will conclude by presenting future directions for my research.

General approach to ethics and etymological ‘wanderings’

Topics associated with ethics are wide-ranging and include: ethics and health, ethics and finance, professional ethics and codes of ethics, ethics and politics, as well as the sale of ethical products, ethical fashion etc. A search on the “OpenEdition” website lists 65,962 documents in over 31,000 publications. We can thus see that ethics raises questions in a wide range of fields. Such concerns are referred to by a variety of names, since when we discuss ethics, we also discuss commitments, charters, good practices, values, standards, morals and codes of ethics.

Here, I will outline the way I approach professional ethics, but before doing so, I will attempt to define what ethics means in broad terms. It is always helpful to explore the etymological origins of a word in order to understand its meaning. I propose such an exploration here, based largely on Rey’s historical dictionary of the French language (2000).

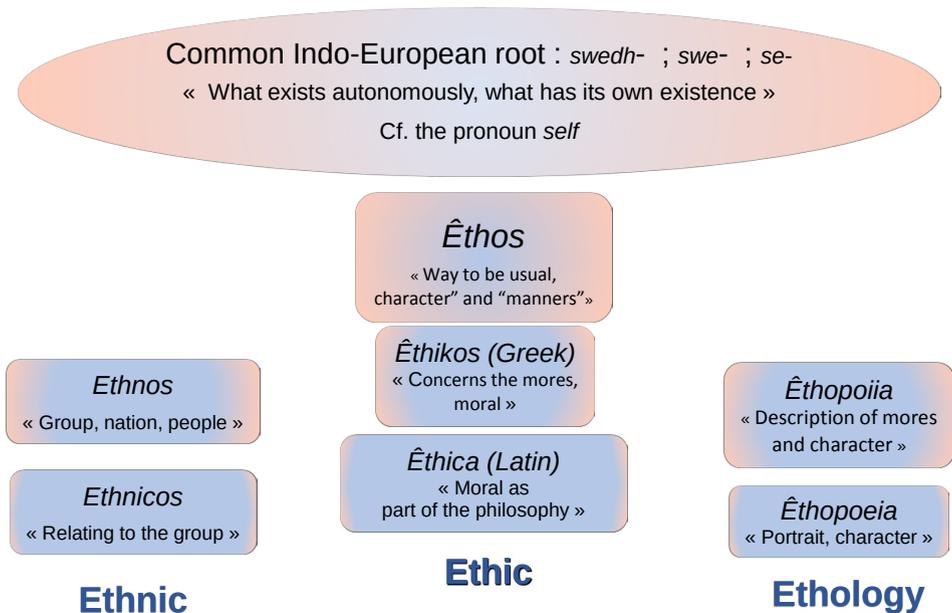


Figure 1. Etymological variations based on semantic cousins “ethnic, ethics et ethology” (Labbé, 2021, p. 174).

“Ethics” comes from the Latin *ethica*, meaning “morals as part of philosophy.” Here, we can refer to Kant’s moral philosophy, a practical philosophy that seeks to answer the question, “What should I do?” This term is itself borrowed from the Greek *êthikos* (relating to mores, moral), which is derived from *êthike*, meaning “relating to the way one behaves”: we observe a focus on behaviour, deeds, actions:

a meaning that has been retained in the modern term. This Greek term is itself derived from *êthos*, meaning “habitual character and mores.” *Êthos* refers to habits and an individual’s way of being habitual. For example, patience, courage, willingness and pride are *êthê*. But there are two other dimensions contained in *êthos*: I will explore them below in two sections.

The way we portray ourselves through our actions and attitudes

Rhetoric proposes distinguishing between *êthos*, *logos* and *pathos*. *Logos* corresponds more closely with arguments and logic and appeals to our interlocutor’s rational mind. *Pathos* and *êthos*, meanwhile, seek to earn the audience’s approval in two different ways: *pathos*, by playing on and expressing emotions, and *êthos* through style (way of being) to gain trust and sympathy. *Êthos* is the way we portray ourselves through our discourse, which by extension, has come to mean the way we portray ourselves through our actions and attitudes.

The inclusion of *êthos* in these etymological ‘wanderings’ is an important contribution as it allows us to perceive a certain quest for identity in this ethical focus (Dhondt and Vanacker, 2013, p. 5):

The consideration of *ethos* relates to the discursive level: *ethos* does not concern the primary and underlying instance of the orator’s person, but their discursive reflection, their “appearance,” the necessarily secondary way he presents himself through his discourse (...) Goffman returns to this idea of *ethos* – or rather “reorients” it, like Ruth Amossy – as he conceives of this self-presentation as an image, a construction that is created *in vivo*, as it were, through interactions with interlocutors in a given situation. Far from relating exclusively to oratory exchange, for Goffman the construction of an image of oneself is inherent in *every* daily interaction, “when [both partners] are in one another’s physical presence.” (...) In this model, *ethos* seems to be primarily shaped in an *ad hoc* fashion, without being compared to any pre-established image (cf. prior *ethos*).

For Jorro, “professional *êthos*” is expressed “in forms of language showing a degree of appropriation of a given professional culture” (Jorro, 2009, p. 14). Professionals therefore portray themselves *via* their discourse and attitudes which are constructed in the communication situation (verbal and non-verbal aspects). Here, we can see the importance of the link between an *individual* and his/her *actions* proposed by the theory of commitment (Kiesler, 1971). On this subject, Jorro presents “professional ethos as a set of values internalized by an individual, which are solidified through professional activity” (Jorro, 2014, p. 110). Here we are confronted with multiples dimensions of commitment (Labbé, 2021) to which we will add a further dimension: *acts of language*. Words and the act of “saying” are a commitment. Now let us look at the second dimension contained in *ethos*.

A way of inhabiting the world

There is also a notion of space contained in *êthos*, a dimension which refers to a way of inhabiting the world or the idea of “space for ethical reflection” (Le Coz, 2010). Le Coz starts with the notion of habitability contained in *êthos*: the ethical quest would therefore be to make a space *habitable* (Le Coz, 2010, p. 81).

We can see the spatial dimension of ethical reflection when:

- ◆ there is no answer to a given problem. The space can be represented by a *void*;
- ◆ we are confronted with a problem of limitations the notion of space is characterized by a search for *boundaries* between what we can and cannot do;
- ◆ we experience a *shift*, a change of perspective by taking the distance needed for reflection, a distance made possible through the perspective of peers or by gaining new insights.

In short, to some extent, the notion of *êthos* encompasses different ways of behaving at a given moment and in a given setting or society: this is indeed the *situated* aspect of ethics. These factors lead me to cite a definition that is widely found in French on the internet, although its author is never cited: “Ethics can also be defined as a consideration of behaviours to adopt to make the world more humane and habitable. As such, ethics is a search for an ideal of society and a guide for our existence.”

To continue our semantic exploration of etymological origins, in Figure 1, we can see an *etymological cousin*, “ethnic,” which also comes from the same Greek/Indo-European root. It is derived from “*ethnicus*,” which dates from the Christian period, and became *ethnikos* (from nation, race), which is also derived from *ethnos* (group, nation, people). The current definition of “ethnic” is “relating to an ethnic group, that which refers to a population, culture or social group.” This element of meaning is implicitly present in its cousin “ethnic”: ethics always applies to a group, whether a culture, community or professional group. Ethical concerns rarely involve a sole individual.

Another cousin, “ethology,” also appears in Figure 1. It is composed of *êthos* (discussed above) and *logie* (study). The term “ethology” was first attributed with the meaning “treatise on mores.” It was the descriptive study of mores, the set of rules of conduct considered applicable in an absolute way. Then, by borrowing from the English term “ethology” (1843), it took on the meaning of the science of character and its formation. Since then, ethology has come to be understood as the science of the behaviour of animal species in their natural environment. It contains one of the implicit meanings of ethics, which also seeks to study *behaviours in their natural environment*, within a *situated* perspective (as with ethology), in the here and now. Ethics does not aim for knowledge detached from action, but rather reflection on *behaviours* that are right (or wrong) to adopt in a defined space and given moment.

Lastly, if we wish to wander further into the search for etymological origins, Alain Rey’s dictionary (2010, p. 1325) suggests that these terms come from the same

Indo-European root, which is designated by the sign ~*Swedh-*, ~*swe-*, ~*se*, meaning “that which exists in an independent way and has its proper existence” (a meaning found today in the French terms *se* and *soi*, meaning “self”). This notion of *autonomy* vaguely contained in the ancient meaning of ethics, recalls the fundamental aim of all ethical reflection: a quest for autonomy, for freedom to take responsibility for one’s actions – the autonomy that is chosen, responsible and thought-out since the unreflective man cannot be autonomous, and it is through his capacity for reflection that he decides what is right or wrong to do. Spinoza said, “the free man desires that which is Good.” This may be seen as a quest for responsibility since a responsible being is empowered to act. Acting as a responsible professional is indeed empowering oneself to act “with the quest to empower oneself to act, meaning gradually becoming one’s own co-author, through forging social ties” (Ardoino, 1994).

To sum up, these etymological wanderings reveal various aspects that are important to retain for the notion of ethics. We can therefore tentatively suggest that ethics provides spaces for reflecting on behaviours that would be *good* for a group to adopt and aims for a certain degree of decision-making autonomy and empowerment, at a given time and in a given situation. But to better understand what ethics is, we may also seek to understand what it is *not*, by examining potential sources of confusion.

Distinctions between ethics and law

Ethics may be confused with law since they have the same aim: social balance. Yet, a distinction must be made between the two. Law also responds to the question, “What should I do?” But, unlike ethics, it refers to a specific, already-existing legal system, a standard of sorts. “The rule of law provides for punishment,” while “an [ethical] transgression does not lead to any punishment in the legal sense of the term, even if it may, in certain cases, lead to condemnation by society” (Prairat, 2009, p. 40-41).

Two other aspects help us distinguish between law and ethics. Ethics is based on discussions and is established within a situated group, whereas “the rule of law is provided by public authorities, the government. Multiple sources on one side; a single source on the other” (Ibid, p. 36). Similarly, Prairat opposes the *autonomy of ethics* (a rule we make for ourselves) with the *heteronomy of law* (a rule imposed by an external body) to distinguish between the two notions (Prairat, 2009, p. 37).

To conclude with Obin we can say that “ethics and law have a symbiotic relationship” (Obin, 2018, p. 2). Indeed, it is often when the law does not resolve an issue or presents a loophole that ethical reflection occurs. Once things become established, a law is enacted. According to the same author, the fundamental difference between ethics and law relates to the freedom of the parties involved (law does not provide freedom but an obligation). A paradox thus arises: when standards (or

laws) replace discussions, critical thinking and accountability may be stifled. Confusing ethics and law amounts, to denying our shared accountability for our everyday actions, in our political role and our place within the community.

Distinctions between ethics and morals

Morality is the science of Right and Wrong; it is the theory of human action as it is subjected to a certain duty and aims for that which is Right.

According to Mercier two traditions exist to differentiate between the term, *ethics* and *morals*:

- ◆ in the first tradition, ethics is a reflection on the foundations of morals;
- ◆ in the second, morals are universal while ethics are specific (Mercier, 2010, p. 4).

The author suggests that the second tradition better reflects the current meaning of ethics (furthermore, the term has fewer connotations than the term morals). I also subscribe to this second tradition. As such, ethics may be described as: a “set of rules of behaviour that are shared by and typical of a given society; these rules are based on distinguishing between *good* and *bad*” (Mercier, 2010, p. 4). And morals may be described as: a “set of principles with a universal, normative, or even dogmatic dimension, based on distinguishing between *right* and *wrong*” (Ibid.). In these two excerpts, the term *distinguishing* means recognising as “other,” as “different” and establishing a boundary.

In conclusion, to cite Ricœur this time, we can say that the nuancing of ethics and morals “depends on whether the focus is on that which is *thought to be good* [for ethics] or that which *emerges* as an *obligation* [for morals]” (Ricœur, 2010, p. 200).

Professional ethics approach and distinctions between ethics and deontology

There is little difference between the everyday meanings of ethics and deontology, but we can differentiate between the two in a number of ways. First, unlike ethics, which has an ancient etymological origin that I described above, the word *deontology* is recent, since it appeared in the work of Bentham (1834) in 1834. This term comes from the Greek *deon* meaning “that which should be done” and *logos* “discourse and doctrine.” The literal meaning of deontology therefore pertains to the theory of duty, and its French equivalent, *déontologie* more commonly refers to the set of moral rules that govern a profession, such as medicine, for example, and is closer to what is known as a “code of ethics” in English terminology. For Ardoino, deontology is different from ethics in that it is “limited to professional actions that are desirable, acceptable or objectionable, within a profession” (Ardoino, 1994)

whereas ethics extends far beyond a single professional field. The best, known code of ethics is that of physicians: “the Hippocratic Oath.” It is therefore a set of rules required by the practice of medicine.

Consequently, just as we can distinguish between ethics and law, we can distinguish a code of ethics by its standardised, pre-established and recorded character (a code of ethics is written down to serve as a standard for action and aspires for a sort of universality within a profession). Therefore, while ethics represents a process that is more reflective, situated and fluid (depending on groups and situations), deontology and codes of ethics provide set rules that are non-debatable. Similarly, whereas deontology has to do with standards, ethics is based more on values.

These same distinctions also apply to professional ethics: “when it comes to *professional ethics* and *deontology*, the colloquial meaning does not really make a distinction. To ensure clarity within sociological discussion, it must nevertheless be given a different meaning. The term *professional ethics* will therefore be understood to mean anything that pertains to ethical regulations within the framework of a given profession, whether it is partially or completely established, or has the means of becoming so” (Terrenoire, 1991, p. 10).

I therefore propose the following figure (Figure 2) to summarise the distinctions between ethics and deontology (more commonly referred to as a code of ethics in English terminology) and as a reminder that ethics and deontology are very closely connected.



Figure 2. Distinction and connection between professional ethics and deontology (Labbé, 2021, p. 181)

Deontology and codes of ethics are professional rules that have been written by the past (whether distant or more recent). They therefore take into account standards set by a historic entity. They aim to eliminate or change professional behaviour deemed to be inappropriate or enhance best practices. The risk here (since they are written rules) is that individuals will no longer allow themselves to question these rules, adjust these decisions to professional situations that are changing so quickly today or adapt them to the unique situations¹.

Like Obin (2018), who sees a symbiotic relationship between ethics and law, we can see a similar relationship between professional ethics and deontology/codes of ethics: when the results of ethical reflections become established, they are included within codes of ethics. The risk of seeing collective reflection disappear can be overcome, for example, by requiring codes of ethics to be revised as circumstances change.

Ethics, practical wisdom

Mercier (2010, p. 5), however, suggests “describing ethics as the reflection that occurs prior to action with the aim of distinguishing between good and bad ways of behaving” (Mercier, 2002, p. 34). Ethics thus establishes criteria for assessing whether an action is good or bad and examines the motives and consequences of a deed. The very purpose of ethics therefore makes it a *practical* science. The goal is not to acquire knowledge for its own sake, but rather to make us able to act responsibly. The philosopher Paul Ricœur proposes the idea of an “ethical aim.” He describes this as, “aiming for a good life, with and for others, within just institutions” (Ricœur, 1990, p. 202). And several factors characterise ethics in his view:

- ◆ the primacy of ethics over morals, meaning reflection that occurs *prior to* and potentially *above* the law;
- ◆ the need for the *ethical aim* to be examined in the light of standards, and therefore, by a *group*;
- ◆ taking *practical wisdom* into account to give special consideration to the uniqueness of situations.

Ricœur’s proposal assumes a great deal of humility; an aim is an ambition and by no means an obligation or duty. It is therefore different than a rule, as it suggests more than it imposes. This aim of a *good life* gives ethics an individual dimension, but also one rooted in identity, even if it is expressed and examined in the collective sphere. A *good life* also then refers to the self (and not “I”; the self

¹ In France for example, the National Consultative Ethics Committee (CCNE) issues advisory opinions based on very specific cases, the circumstances of which are studied in detail. This council does not claim to provide a rule set in stone that must be followed in every circumstance but provides guidance for a specific time and setting.

presages the Other) as an autonomous individual who is responsible for him/herself but also *with and for others*. The collective dimension is therefore present, but it is dialogical here. The idea of a space referred to as that of *just institutions* allows for discussions with the aim of creating structures for living together – various communities and interpersonal relationships with a sense of justice and collective responsibility. For it is interactions and exchange that establish values. In Ricœur’s view (1990, p. 238), therefore, ethics must be connected to a certain moral standard to overcome human violence through the golden rule: *do unto others as you would have them do unto you*. Ethics thus comes close to a sort of morality (which strives for Universalism) and which implies a principle of equity and treating man as an end rather than a means. He would say that ethics is “practical wisdom,” a term I frequently tend to use.

Drawing once again on Ricœur, I will sum up by saying that practical wisdom is a *caution* taken by a group and is public and equitable. For Aristotle, “this is the Nature of the equitable, a correction of law where law is defective owing to its universality” (Aristotle, 1959, p. 602). A caution so understood calls for assessing a situation and must overcome the conflict in morals connected to different cultures (this is tantamount to admitting that there are other universals in cultures that are alien to us). But there is no set rule, only public debate – the outcome of which remains uncertain – to establish a particular order of priorities.

Lastly, as I have already discussed, this order applies only to a group (an advisory group for example, a professional group or an entire profession) and to a given period of time. It is never decided on by a sole individual, but within “advisory committees where several viewpoints are weighed in friendship and mutual respect” (Ricœur, cited by Svandra, 2016, p. 25).

Organisational ethics and value-based engagement

While writing my thesis (Labbé, 2005), and working with companies who co-funded my research, I had my first experience setting up what I described as “organisational ethics” measures. I then had the opportunity to reproduce this kind of approach in the consulting firm I created just after completing my PhD. Here, I present some remarks that were largely elaborated on in my thesis to provide insights into the basis for my current thinking.

Today, companies who do not adhere to ethical practices risk being condemned by their employees, competitors – their entire environment! Their very survival therefore depends on considering these issues, even if well-meaning and nonself-serving intentions may also exist. In some cases, ethics becomes a strategic or even competitive element, “Without ethics, we may win in the short term but we lose in the long term,” writes Mercier (2004, p. 99), but it is undeniable that a movement has begun. And whatever its origin, its positive aspects must be recognised.

For several years now, this trend has included a major movement: “sustainability.” Sustainability is “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Brundtland, 1987; Brundtland et al., 1988, p. 43). The goal of this model is to promote a different development model than the one seen in industrialized countries in the past fifty years. This vision is based on the distressing observation of environmental damage. The Northern model, applied to the desired development of Southern countries would inevitably lead to the depletion of resources and serious social tensions. In this respect, the companies championing this ethic no longer think about the development based solely on economic terms, but associate it with development that addresses a threefold concern: economic, environmental and social. The philosophy of sustainable development is to meet the needs of today’s generations without compromising the future of generations to come. According to this movement, in order for the planet to survive, growth must bring together three conditions: environmental protection, economic prosperity and social well-being.

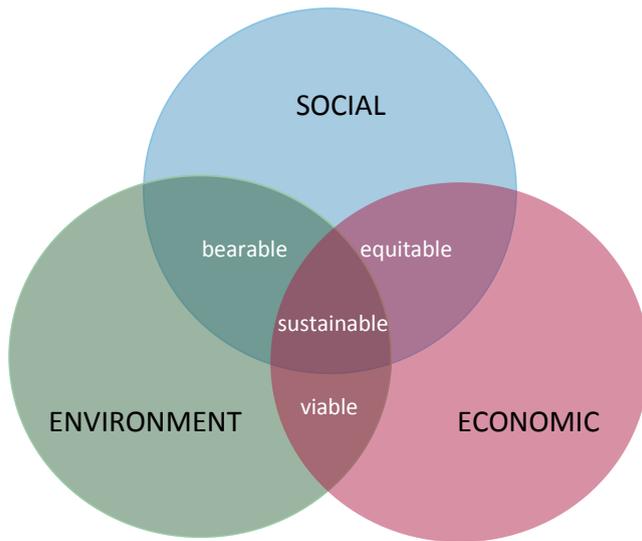


Figure 3. The three spheres of sustainable development

Source: Brundtland, G. H. (1987). Brundtland Report. Our Common Future. <https://www.pfi-culture.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/1052/2016/04/1987rapportbrundtland.pdf>

The ethical perspective that I am particularly interested in here is clearly the social aspect. This proposal for development (whether organisational, associative or political) is not only concerned with the environment, but with human beings too. The Rio de Janeiro declaration (1992) underscores this aspect as human beings are a central focus: “Social sustainability remains the subject of few investigations.

His analysis nevertheless implies a rather radical renewal of the modes of thought of development” (Ballet et al., 2004, p. 2). The social aspect is elaborated based on the ethics of preserving and respecting human rights. The world of work therefore possesses a highly valuable space for reflection and innovation. As such, companies would commit to creating a liveable environment. Moreover, there is not *one* kind of sustainable development: it is up to each group to select and develop its project by taking its environment into account. Its commitments must meet the three facets considering the constraints and opportunities provided by its environment, culture economic potential.

But sustainable development is not the only ethical concern in the world of work. I have also had the opportunity to help set up an *Investors in People (IIP)* program. Similar to quality certifications (I.S.O. 9001, 14000 etc.), this program supports (and assesses) companies who wish to “invest” in their workforce by helping them adopt an ethical approach that also aims to optimise their performance. As its name suggests, the I.I.P accreditation was created in England: it is more widespread there than the quality process and is a label attesting to workplace well-being. *Investors In People* is first and foremost a guide to human resource management that helps develop employees’ skills and motivation. It is a very formalised process that begins with an initial evaluation, then includes four phases with the goal of gaining accreditation: *commitment* (“An I.I.P. company makes a real commitment to supporting the development of its entire staff, to achieve their goals and objectives”), *planning* (“An I.I.P. company clearly defines its goals and objectives and what its workforce must do to achieve them”), *action* (“An I.I.P. company develops its staff in an effective way to improve their performance”), *evaluation* (“An I.I.P. company measures the impact of its investment in its workforce on their performance”). The slogan for this program sums up the idea behind it quite nicely. It is expressed like a Chinese proverb: “If you want to prosper for a year, plant rice. If you want to prosper for 10 years, plant trees. If you want to prosper for 100 years, invest in people.” Although there is a significant risk of this kind of process being used for business purposes, I have observed companies whose goal was to build employee loyalty and truly develop workplace well-being.

Lastly, I would like to discuss a third way companies seek to develop professional ethics. I will call this last approach “value-based engagement.”

Since the 1990s, management trends have championed employee empowerment, as employees view autonomy in the workplace as one of their company’s most important qualities. But this movement has also slowly led to a rise in individualism, an increase in self-centred behaviour (surface-level cooperation, superficial relationships) and therefore, diminished workplace solidarity.

In the early 2000s, a desire to recreate a sense of community within companies was reaffirmed and a new path for developing organisational ethics was thus proposed: “value-based management” (Claude, 2001, p. 22). The company of the future will benefit from creating an identity that is no longer determined solely by

its products, services, organisation or business, but will be more closely associated with the main unifying actions that encompass all of its objectives (business, strategic, ethical etc.) and its awareness of the environment (social, civic and ecological). A certain internal and external consistency must be developed, serving as a guide for action and the unifying factors: the emergence of corporate values is now one of the keys to solving the problem posed by the loss of community in organisations. “The values of a society are those that underlie the cohesiveness of a human group and its desire to live together at the deepest level ... Values are that which seek to do what is right and are largely agreed upon. This is the basis of social consensus” (Antoine cited by Claude, 2001, p. 65). Once again, to avoid any attempt at manipulation, these values must be jointly established so that they may be fully accepted, shared, and most importantly, embraced by the various participants within the organisation (at all levels). That is why building engagement based on values does not mean making a list of words that are carefully selected and put in order by an outside communications agency. On the contrary, it is an internal process which requires talking and listening on the part of the employees and directors who wish to work together to build bridges between actions (including business initiatives), external communication, relations with suppliers, production, the organisation, internal operating rules, management, and most importantly, guidelines for behaviour at all hierarchical levels in an effort to increase cohesiveness across the company. Here, we can see that “from an instrumental point of view, organisational ethics defines the way in which the company integrates its key values in its policies, practices and decision-making process” (Mercier, 2004, p. 6).

To sum up, in my view organisational or institutional ethics:

- ◆ means having an organisation or institution make a projection about what its members consider to be *good practices*;
- ◆ means making employees, managers and executives co-authors of their own ethics;
- ◆ is a model that may help align internal and external communication, a corporate and leadership strategy;
- ◆ helps build shared values (which come to guide everyday action in a meaningful way). This can be referred to as an ethical climate (Barel et al., 2017, p. 19).

Professional ethics is also situated, meaning it is unique to each organisation or institution and its environment, and is personalised (in both senses of the word: it meets individual expectations as well as the needs of organisations). It must not be rigid, but constantly evolving and fluctuating as the environment changes. If it is genuine (and not orchestrated), it becomes a valuable decision support tool, and can even inform important strategic decisions. Lastly, it can only exist if it is rooted in everyday action and must emerge through an exemplarity effect.

Professional ethics as an innovative form of social empowerment

We have just discussed organisational ethics to provide concrete applications of ethical approaches, and to show that spaces exist which could give rise to collective reflection aimed at renewing the way we work. At a time when reflecting on what decent work means is more important than ever (Guichard, 2017; Guichard et al., 2016; Kozielska et al., 2020), I believe that professional ethics has a key role to play in these professionalisation processes, which may therefore be viewed as innovative. I have made a habit of quoting Monceau when introducing my work on ethics: “Professional ethics now ensures the quality of a profession which is trying to free itself from the control of its practices by other professionals and/or by regulatory requirements” (Monceau, 2006, p. 57).

I have observed growing interest in professional ethics, and the term *ethical competence* is used to describe professionals who act in a *responsible* and *autonomous way*. I suggest, however, that this interest arises in a world in search of meaning and values, the world prone to loss of control, where the ground is shifting under our feet (Bauman, 2006). As such, “ethics (...) is a matter for autonomous professionals in a profession which is itself becoming more autonomous by producing its own benchmarks for its practice” (Monceau, 2006, p. 57).

Ethics is therefore practiced in pursuit of improvement, in a society where we are seeing ever more complainants, where there are evaluations left, right and centre, on platforms fostering competition between individuals (and organisations), and at a time when digital technology can make or break reputations (and careers at times). Users (customers, as well as beneficiaries, patients, consultants, interns, students etc.) no longer hesitate to dispute, evaluate left, right and centre, and may even go so far as to expose matters on social media that only courts should deal with. We are living in a world of social insecurity. Amidst economic crisis, the gig economy (Bourdu et al., 2019), instability and mass redundancies exacerbated by the pandemic, the contract between People and Work is suffering.

Establishing professional ethics is therefore a path for guiding professionals to reflect before taking action or to define what are sometimes called *good practices* for specific situations (Prairat, 2009, p. 20). More importantly, this also ensures that individuals are not left on their own to face increasing responsibilities. But beyond that, professional ethics helps create a space for co-construction, reconciliation between decision-makers and non-decision-makers for a return to *just institutions* (to cite Ricœur once again).

For a long time now, we have been witnessing a decay of institutions (Dubet, 1994, 2002), a loss of control over policies for needed adjustments to the changing world of work (see the recent interest in ethics and Artificial Intelligence, ethics and digital technology etc.). In our age of alienating acceleration (Rosa, 2012), it seems that the world of work is changing so quickly that groups no longer have time for the reflection required for the institutionalisation of new forms of work. In

response to these changes, the world of work has resorted to individualisation and injunctions for accountability, instead of collective forms of reflexivity at work.

The recent Covid crisis has brought to light the adjustments needed in our society and people-oriented professions (this may be expanded to include many professions) to respond to our changing health and social circumstances. But it has also shed light on just how deeply attached individuals are to the values underpinning their professions – values that allowed them hold on, take risks and set aside avaricious goals when it came time to work for the community. Neoliberal excesses, which are often criticised, have at times forgot the humanist principles that allow our world to exist (I am thinking about France and its budget cuts in hospitals), make it possible to create habitable spaces and co-construct workplaces enabling people to work in just institutions. In such an environment, relying on “professional ethics is therefore both a form of social regulation of work, and an organising principle for professions and professional fields, which allows participants to *re-identify* with shared guidelines and values. Professional ethics thus contributes to defining the professionalism of those who practice a given profession in addition to providing a way to regulate the action of members of the professional group.” (Jutras et Labbé, 2014, p. 106).

As such, in recent years, ethical issues have been given consideration in the world of education and interpersonal professions. For example, teachers’ status no longer ensures recognition and their ability to demonstrate their skills *in situ* in increasingly complex situations is constantly called into question. Ethics therefore also represents a *commitment*. By guiding professionals in difficult situations, amidst a loss of legitimacy of the educational institution, professional ethics helps offset this loss of recognition and becomes a “crutch for regulating behaviours that are less and less defined institutionally” (Prairat, 2009, p. 112).

In light of the changing work landscape, more responsibility awaits professionals, and *responsibility* implies allowing oneself to act, “with everyone aspiring for empowerment, which means gradually become responsible, as one’s own co-author, through forging social ties” (Ardoino, 1994). As such, “ethical rules, and more broadly ethical charters or codes of conduct, are a form of social regulation and a way to organise a profession, in particular by offering practical solutions to concrete professional problems (...). [They therefore] play an identify-affirming role as they contribute to defining a profession and declaring its own values” (Prairat, 2009, p. 52). In this respect, we see ethical reflections as endogenous professionalisation processes (Labbé & Vidaller, 2019; Vidaller et al., Soumis; Labbé, 2021); professionalisation that is longer imposed by outside forces, but proposed from within, by the members of the profession themselves.

But while creating these reflective, autonomous and empowering spaces is a source of innovation, the question of ensuring the long-term sustainability of the proposals and institutionalisation of the new norms will quickly arise (Marengo, 2020; Labbé, 2021, p. 217). Monceau views professionalisation as the continuous

process for the institutionalisation of professional groups, “a process that is constitutively contradictory, made up of changing internal and external tensions and conflicts” (Monceau, 2006, p. 56). He therefore makes a strong connection between ethics and ideology in that “ideologies weigh on professionals’ judgments and practices at the very time when they are called on to raise ethical issues in the reflective analysis of their practices (...) Ethics and ideology appear in the professional landscape as two dimensions of the same entity being created: the profession” (pp. 67-68). We will continue our work in this theoretical direction in attempting to respond to the problem raised by Monceau: “professional ethics as a substitute for or incarnation of professional ideology?” (Monceau, 2006, p. 30)

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