

Risk is not Ethics

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It has been claimed that educational programmes on risk provide an ethical strand to an engineers formation. What follows is a brief rejoinder to the claim.

Ethics is a field of inquiry concerned with good and bad and the corresponding evaluation of actions and their outcomes. Practical ethics is concerned with individual actions, their circumstances, the deliberation that leads to action and the analysis that may follow. Practical ethics includes issues such as the limited time available for deliberation, the lack of agreement on what is significantly good and bad and the capability for action.

Anyone coming to a firm conclusion about the desirability of an outcome as part of their actions may need to persuade or coerce others to act in a way consonant with the outcome. Components of practical ethics are therefore skills in persuading others to act in a particular direction and in deflecting, or at least challenging, attempts at persuasion by others.

Often an “ethic”, in the singular, labels a code of conduct or a list of principles against which actions are to be judged

To behave ethically has come to mean to behave with the intention to avoid harm, but although people may undertake lengthy inquiry and deliberation, occasionally the outcome will not be the one that they intended. Unethical behaviour may therefore be attributed to unethical intent, faulty reasoning, misguided principles, ill-directed action, carelessness, misinformation or erroneous assumptions about the world including its people. Some of these may be considered to render the actor as blameworthy.

Risk is used as a term to indicate that something bad may or may not occur during an otherwise normal and harmless sequence of events. Risk is attached to undesirable consequences and use of the term “risk” always implies some uncertainty about the outcome. Thus any outcome perceived to be impossible or inevitable falls into the margins of the discourse on risk.

For the ethicist, talk of risk is to be welcomed since

“Determinations of risks are the form in which ethics ... is resurrected ... in business, the natural sciences and the technical disciplines.” [Beck, p.28]

Talk of risk makes it evident that the industries and organisations in which engineers work are producers of “bads” as well as “goods”.

The term “risk” is employed in naming a number of techniques such as “risk assessment” or “risk management”. In these technical contexts, risk is frequently associated with a calculus that attributes numerical probabilities to actions or events leading to a bad outcome that can be aggregated to create a numerical likelihood for the ultimate misfortune. In some cases, numerical values are also attributed to each identified risk in an enterprise in order to calculate an overall assessment of risk and to identify the major contributors.

In any practice there will be an unending list of risks and the victim of the bad outcomes attached to each risk may be different. The seriousness of each potentially bad outcome may therefore be assessed differently by different individuals and those differences are also liable to depend on circumstances and who is making the judgement — wartime risks, for example, may be judged differently from the same risk in peacetime. Probabilities too, particularly for infrequent events or events that have not yet occurred, are mere estimates. Thus the “hazardousness of risk ... is based ... on ... speculative assumptions, and moves within a framework of probability statements whose prognoses of safety cannot even be refuted ... by actual accidents.” [Beck, p.29]

But courses on risk often focus on the risk calculus and thus evade some of the practical and political questions surrounding ethical practice including an ability both to speak and to listen to a variety of audiences and an ability to act according to the urgency of the situation [Latour, pp.238–

242]. “Risk assessment” exercises and “risk management” practices delegate to specific groups or institutions the task of identifying risks, attributing probabilities, reasoning and defining levels of acceptability and may even delegate the authority act while “social movements raise questions that are not answered by the risk technicians at all, and the technicians answer questions which miss the point of what was really asked and what feeds public anxiety”[Beck, p.30].

Thus risk can be seen as a valuable component of ethics, but in its common technocratic form cannot be the whole story.

References

Ulrich Beck, Risk Society, Sage, London, 1992

Bruno Latour, Pandora's Hope, Harvard University Press, 1999

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