

On ethics, from norms to vigilance

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Abstract

Ethics may be approached on two bases: either on the basis of norms and indignation (how people should behave), or on the basis of etymology (ethics is to be traced back to ethos in Greek, which means mere behavior (how people do behave), as well as in Latin: mores also means mere behavior). As an indomitable consequence, the most comprehensive understanding of ethics concerns the relationship between norms and behavior.

When people approach ethics on the unique basis of norms, they will most often, if not systematically, accuse those who are supposed or who were supposed to behave a certain way and did not. This is all the more evident and radical when people believe that action may be totally under control. If people are supposed to master what they do, and fail, they will automatically be considered as being guilty for their errors and failure, for they did not all what they should to master their actions and operations. Whereas when people are not supposed to systematically master their action (due to the changing environment, to global complexity, to uncertainty), they will not be systematically accused not to have done the right thing on real time when acting, operating a system or making a decision. They will of course be considered as responsible if not accountable for their actions, but a general learning process is then implicitly able to start from the observation of previous deviations.