# 2b

Comments on Jeurissen: Organization and moral complexity

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Introduction

Jeurissen (in this volume) has attempted in "Moral complexity in organizations" to map the applications of ethics to organizations. What results is a four-part classification of organizational ethics, which I have (below) summarized in a Greimasian semiotic square (Greimas 2002). While some of the relations that are revealed are worked out in Jeurissen's original text, some are not. The 'move' of putting the analysis in this form is my responsibility. Jeurissen has introduced the concept of 'moral complexity' to describe the interactions between the four types of ethics in organizations which he has identified. I wish to develop this concept further, adding a complexity-theory interpretation of it. Jeurissen has assumed a common sense understanding of 'complexity' and 'organization'; I will complexify this.

Classification of ethics in organization

RULES   STAKEHOLDER

VALUES   SOCIAL DIALOGUE
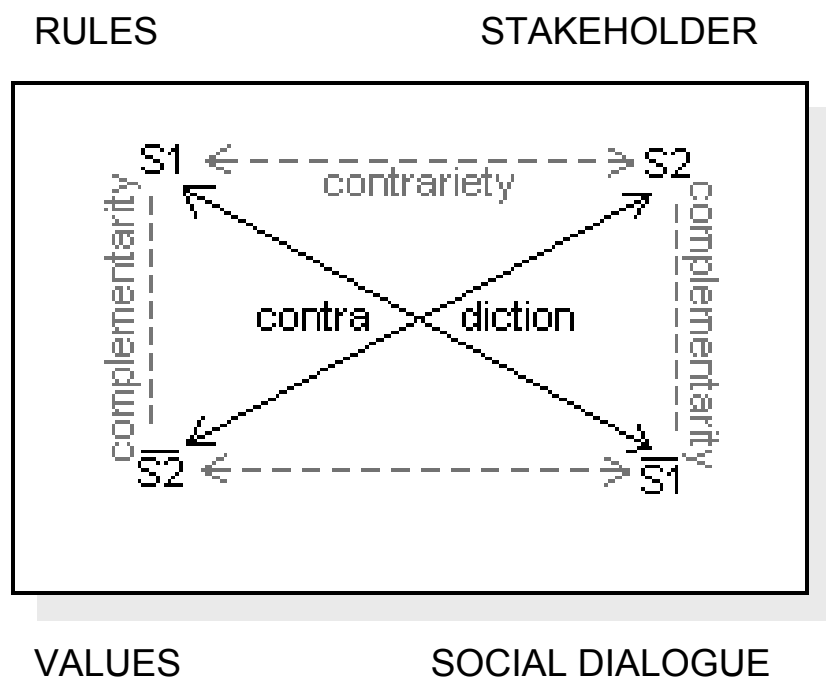
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For Jeurissen the standard form of ethics in organizations is that of 'rules'. The distinction is based upon the difference between 'rules' and 'values'. As rendered above both 'rules' and 'values' share the assumption that basic ethical norms can relatively unproblematically be identified. In a regime of 'rules' it is assumed that a clear action agenda can be defined; and in a regime of 'values' it is assumed that actual action points are increasingly difficult to determine. The difference is in the difficulty of operationalizing the ethics, not in the assumed clarity of the ethical choices. If one can move easily from principle to action, 'rules' suffice. If it is difficult to move from ethical consensus to action, then 'values' are more appropriate. It is worth noting that a pragmatic approach to ethics holds sway here. One could argue that one should always choose for 'values', if possible, above 'rules'; for instance, because 'values' involve more consciousness of action and self-reflexivity. But Jeurissen makes no such choice. His criterium of selection is organizational performance - if 'rules' deliver fail-proof results, then they are preferred. If the uncertainties of operationalization demand adaptation, flexibility and tailored measures, organizational ethics can best be based on 'values'.

Jeurissen notes that the 'rules'/'values' dichotomy leaves out some crucial eventualities. What do you do if the 'rules' are as such, potentially clear enough; but you are confronted with a multitude of contradicting possible 'rules'? Stakeholder dialogue is proposed as the answer. As the semiotic square reveals, this may (or may not) work as a pragmatic solution, but it most certainly sacrifices the sense of 'values'. Ethics is reduced to a negotiated result that the stakeholders can live with. But this can easily be, in terms of values, a 'lowest common denominator'.

Yet more ambiguous, ethics and action possibilities can both be problematic – social dialogue is introduced as the response. Here, the logic of 'rules' does not apply, and 'value' clarity is 'missing'. Value consensus has to be found or defined. Social dialogue looks like stakeholder analysis, but in reality it answers to a far more philosophical agenda. Social dialogue presupposes that the 'truth' of ethics is unclear. While stakeholder analysis offers a political solution to organizational ethics, social dialogue opts for a 'coherentist' solution. (Bonjour 2000; Lehrer 1990; 2000) 'Coherentism' defines 'truth' in terms of what the members of the community can accept as true, while in principle respecting what they already recognize to be true. Social dialogue is focused on 'values', but it acknowledges the living community and the processes of its activity. Social dialogue is minimalist qua 'rules' – the only prerequisite is openness to examine, consider and evaluate the situation. Obviously, in social dialogue there are strong echoes of Habermas, and in its organizational ethics of Deetz (Habermas 1984; Habermas and McCarthy 1985; Deetz 1992).

Jeurissen proposes a contingency approach to the four ethical strategies. But a contingency solution is anything but ethically neutral. It involves, de facto, the reign of 'performativity'. But why should organizational or economic efficiency and effectiveness take precedence over more socially ethical criteria, such as justice or human flourishing?

Complexity theory and organizational ethics

The progression from rules to values, onto stakeholder dialogue, and to social dialogue, follows a logic of complexification. Jeurissen's definition of 'complexification' is framed in terms of complicatedness. In complexity theory the distinction is made between 'complicated' – that is, constituted of many elements; and 'complex' – that is, characterized by increasing levels of evolutionary development.

Complexity theory is an evolutionary theory – it addresses the growing evolutionary or historical density of human existence. It speaks to the growing involvedness of the interrelated networks of living processes. Complexity addresses the changes, for instance from atom to molecule, compound, amino acid, one-cell life, higher levels of life, conscious life, society etcetera. At each level (new) properties emerge that could not be predicted on the basis of the properties at the lower preceding level. Complexity theory studies emergence, or the heart of the developmental progression from the most primitive life form to much more multifaceted organization, and onto contemporary society. As Edgar Morin, the sociologist of complexity theory, has argued, organization emerges out of disorder (Morin 1981). The principle of organization works in direct opposition to entropy – organization constantly absorbs more and more energy, in order to become ever more dense, dynamic and productive. Organization has become, in the last century, ever more complex – creating more levels of administration, more layers of meaning, increased technological sophistication and greater than before cultural differentiation. More and more 'difference' has been drawn into the structure(s) of organization – that is, into companies, multinationals, nations, cultures and globalization. The destruction of 'otherness', inherent to the making of organization, costs energy. Humanity has invested much of its will and passion, innovative capacity and dynamism, into creating ever more complex organization. But if this is 'good' is an altogether other matter. Sociability has become ever more complex – but as everyone from Foucault to Elias and from Serres to Morin has made clear, this is at a price. In nature, disorganization – emptiness, the undefined, the chaotic – is the rule, and order is the exception. Order, rationality and structure are always temporary – all advanced order dies; beginning with the humans themselves and including all that they create. Thus, the ontology of organization is itself paradoxical. Ever more powerful and performative levels of structure are built – the one above the other – and human energy is invested at a tremendous rate in ordering, structuring and the making of organization. And all of this perishes, and is overcome by emergent change and evolution. Organization is not something self-evident – it is a vast powerful human creation, which humanity has to invest energy to create and maintain. The 'human productive systems' that are necessary to maintain organization are mainly not experienced – it is only when there is a power failure that electricity is 'experienced'. Organization disappears into the 'black box' of the assumed and pre-reflective. The products and effects of organization are often more visible than their source in organizing.

Given that organization is ontologically, radically manmade, how should we think about its moral complexity? Organization consumes human energy – it sustains itself by taking much of what mankind is capable of, and internalizing that creativity, passion and ability, into itself. Human emergence – that is human resourcefulness, potential and vigour – is to a large degree absorbed by organization. In complexity theory, organization is a creation of evolution; but in management studies, organization determines evolution. 'Management studies' pretends that organizations can, via strategy, mission and tactics, determine events. But evolution has produced, and is producing, the ever more complex networks of interaction that provide the higher levels of control and order. Organization evolves. 'Business studies' portrays evolution as linear, rational and under control. But in reality, organizational and economic change are emergent. The technological and economic boom of the 1990s was not planned or predicted, nor was its end intended or foreseen. The technologies that drive economic growth, and the inefficiencies that create recessions, are all

emergent. Complexity theory is the theory of emergence. Complexity theory acknowledges that change is non-linear, often unexpected, and frequently has unforeseen effects. Thus for a complexity-informed theory of organizational ethics, organizational ethics has to be social dialogue or it is nothing. Only social dialogue can acknowledge the relativity and difference inherent in the complex networks of our society. And only social dialogue can deal with the ethical problem of organization. Organization is not 'good' – it is complex, multifaceted and thoroughly saturated by 'will' and power. We all know that its possibilities are enormous, but so is its repressive potential. If organizational ethics assumes organization, and then fills in the ethics, it has reversed cause and effect. One needs to start with the human experiential level, and then move onwards to organization, as a complex human creation. The one thing we know for sure is that emergence will occur. Organization changes. Our need to assess the significance and import to us – as individuals and as communities – of that change, remains. Only social dialogue has the ability to acknowledge complexity, and what it signifies for organization.

Conclusion – Returning to the semiotic square

Social dialogue has the potential to be coherent in its answer to emergence. Any regime of fixed positions or 'rules' has to deny change to remain valid. This denial of complexity vitiates the 'rules' of lived authenticity. The 'rules' remain imposed absolutes – 'laws' that deny living organization and the principles of human evolution. 'Values' leave some crucial space for social processes, but are far too anthropomorphic. Again the radicalness of emergence is denied – human identity, manmade institutions and organization are all (more or less) self-organizing. That is, they evolve and change from a dynamism that is outside human understanding or control. Stakeholder determination reduces complexity to a political process of negotiation between pre-existing forces, positions and interests. But what complexity is all about is that emergence makes changes in the physical, natural, cultural and socio-economic order. An underlying acceptance of the fundamental power of the human life-force to create but also to alter organization, to make human projects possible but also to frustrate them, to define pockets of predictability but also to embrace unexpected change, is a prerequisite for a complexity-based ethics. Emergence is a guarantee of change and activity – it ensures that there will be indeterminate situations to examine and possibilities for multiple courses of action. Emergence defines the necessity of ethics – but a complexity-bound ethics.

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